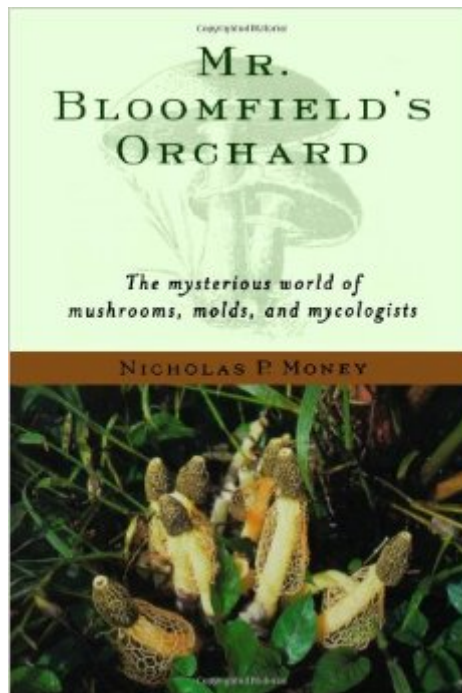


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Mr. Bloomfield's Orchard: The Mysterious World Of Mushrooms, Molds, And Mycologists



Synopsis

Stinkhorns, puffballs, the "corpse finder," deadly galerina, Satan's bolete, birch conks, black mold, the old man of the woods--the world of fungi is infinitely varied and not a little weird. Now, in Mr. Bloomfield's Orchard, Nicholas Money introduces readers to a dazzling array of fungi, from brewer's yeast and Penicillium to the highly lethal death cap. This is an entertaining book that also provides a solid introduction to the biology of fungi as well as much insight into how scientists study fungi in the lab and in the field. Readers will be intrigued by the many exotic fungi discussed. One fungus in Oregon, for instance, covers 2,000 acres and is now considered the world's largest organism. We learn of Madurella, which can erode bones until they look moth-eaten; Cordyceps, which wracks insects with convulsions, kills them, then sends a stalk out of the insect's head to release more infectious spores; and Claviceps, the poisonous ergot fungus, which causes hallucinations (the women charged with "demonic possession" in Salem in 1691 may have been victims of ergot consumption). Money also showcases the lives of famed mycologists--including Reginald Buller who wore horse blinders as he walked to work, the better to study luminescent fungi in his dark lab, and Charles Tulasne, the Audubon of fungi, whose illustrations of specimens border on art. And he recounts his own childhood introduction to fungi in Mr. Bloomfield's orchard, where trees and fruit were devoured by a rogue's gallery of bitter rot, canker, rust, powdery mildew, rubbery wood, and scab. Told with a refreshing sense of humor, Mr. Bloomfield's Orchard will fascinate anyone interested in the natural world.

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Customer Reviews

This is a charming personal take on what most people think of as a charmless subject — fungi. The author teaches in a university botany department. These days it's clear that fungi are actually more closely related to animals than they are to plants, but they have always been thought of as a vampirish offshoot of the plant kingdom, so to botany departments they go. This is not really a primer on fungal structure and function, but it does manage to quickly give us a feel for the basics. Fortunately, it is possible to get to the fungal forefront, as it were, relatively quickly. These are fairly simple creatures, as creatures go. (Of course, the simplest cell is complex beyond our most complicated machines.) They are more colonies (or rugged individuals) than multicellular beasts, and most of the action centers in figuring out how they reproduce, and the cocktail of chemicals they use to go where no fungus has gone before. In this book the author talks about a range of topics, such as human and animal fungal pathogens, how the different kinds of fungi make a living, sexual fungi, poisonous mushrooms, and so on. But he also profiles some of the more eccentric (and productive) researchers in the field. In the course of the book, in many ways, he profiles himself as well. Our author turns out to be a thoroughly engaging sort, humanistic and unpretentious. You'll like him, and learn something about mushrooms, molds, and mycologists.

The fungus world is all around us, like the world of bacteria. Several books have been recently published on these strange organisms and each has a slightly different slant on them. Actually the very term "fungus" has undergone an evolutionary change over the last few decades. Once part of the plant kingdom, fungi, minus several groups like slime molds and chytrids (although all are still covered in classes on mycology), now enjoy the status of their own kingdom. And a very weird kingdom it is indeed! Nicholas Money from the Department of Botany at Miami University in Ohio has, in his book "Mr. Bloomfield's Orchard," produced a fascinating set of essays on these organisms and the people who study them, from Ingoldian spores to John Webster and the phallic fungi. As a former resident of Gainesville, Florida, I was quite interested in his chapter on "Angels of Death." In it Money writes that he found *Amanita virosa* growing near Cedar Key in an area I used to frequent during my days as a graduate student. The destroying angel is a very dangerous mushroom that should be avoided at all costs as it usually kills anyone so unfortunate to eat it. Money's description of these and other fungi that produce nasty toxins certainly gives one pause. Other topics include the rather bizarre sex life of fungi, and the numerous fungal parasites and symbionts associated with humans. Finally the author gives us an equally fascinating

description of Mr. Bloomfield's orchard, an untended apple orchard consumed by fungi. If you think that fungi don't matter, Money will change your mind, but if you are a bit put off by the subject don't read this book or your curiosity just might hook you into the Alice in Wonderland world of these "simple" organisms! In any case I recommend this book with only minor stylistic reservations. I slightly prefer Hudler's "Magical Mushrooms, Mischievous Molds" for style, but this is just personal taste and has little bearing on content.

Wow! I never thought I'd enjoy a book on fungi this much. Parts of it are not a particularly easy read, but the information it contains is mind blowing. Forget terrorists; if fungi and mold decided to take out the human race it would be no contest. We tend not to think of fungi as being a very important part of our world. We might occasionally have mushrooms on pizza or steak, we might notice fungi growing on an old tree or on something that has been kept too long in the refrigerator, but that's about it. In fact fungi has a vast influence in our world, from breaking down fallen trees in the forest to making our bread and beer. Have you ever wondered how dandruff was formed? Guess what plays a major role. The writer, who presents often bizarre information with wit and style, reminds us that one fungi, covering 2000 acres in Oregon, is thought to be the world's largest living organism. Even the more prosaic information comes to life in this book - I enjoyed his description of the speed a spore is catapulted from a gill. Some of the most interesting sections are the mini-biographies of scientists who have researched fungi and added to our knowledge of them. There was Buller, for instance, a professor whose students called him Uncle Reggie, and Ingold who found a totally unknown kind of fungus in water. There are now over 300 species of Ingoldian fungi known and in fall you can find about 20,000 of them in every litre of brook water. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the natural world. You'll need to expend a little effort reading the more scholarly parts of it, but you'll learn some amazing stuff about fungi, mold and the scientists who discovered them.

This book is one of the best tours of fungi I have ever encountered. I have read it twice already and will refer to it again and again. The author writes in an informative style, with wit and seemingly unlimited knowledge of his field. This was a fun and educating read for sure.

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