

# The mystery of mushrooms



Review written by **Nick Holdsworth** AUGUST 4, 2021

If your only experience of a **mushroom** talking to you was that time as a student when you ate a few **psilocybin** ‘magic mushrooms’, Marion Neumann’s delightfully eccentric *The Mushroom Speaks* will open a whole new conversation for you.

Fungi are an amazing species – they have intelligence, can communicate, regenerate, and occupy places that would be fatal to most other organisms. As the world feels like it is falling apart, Neumann goes in search of answers from the fungal kingdom.

There is both serious science and intent enquiry in Neumann’s film, but it carries its erudition lightly, criss-crossing the world in search of answers from those deeply entwined in a world of **mycelium**, spores, and wonderment.

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## Sensory intelligence

Mushrooms have been around for a billion years and of the nine million species we share this planet with, it is estimated that five million are fungal. Only one percent of those have been named. Mushrooms are masters of evolution, learning to live and thrive in the most inhospitable of ecological niches: *cladosporium sphaerosperum* appeared in **Chernobyl** after the nuclear power plant meltdown there in 1986; it is unaffected by radiation and Neumann ponders its potential for creating space suits of the future. The first living organism to appear after the atomic bomb was dropped on **Hiroshima** in 1945 was a mushroom – fungus emerging from the horrific mushroom cloud that man’s evil had created, «using radiation as a digestive».

Neumann is not joking by calling her film *The Mushroom Speaks*. The lifecycle of fungus is an incredible story of sensory intelligence that can tell when someone approaches and knows how far it extends. It has created the largest living organism—a mass of fungus of an unknown extent estimated to have that of three blue whales.



*The Mushroom Speaks, a film by Marion Neumann*

## Enthusiasts

Neumann's commentators – who speak from Japanese village forests where prized edible mushrooms are being reintroduced after all but disappearing in the post-war trend for forestry monoculture, [Canada](#), the Pacific Northwest of the USA, Germany's Black Forest and many other places of both marginal wasteland and rich forest—are a delightful bunch of highly educated enthusiasts.

Ursula Weiner, a mushroom gatherer from the Black Forest, who as an 11-year-old ate a psilocybin by mistake and had a dreamy our of body experience, explains she is not a witch because she does not ride a broomstick or do evil. But if a witch is a woman who stores and communicates communal knowledge about what plants and mushrooms are safe and how they can help humanity then, yes, she does not mind being called a witch.

Peter McCoy is a US fungal activist, author of *Radical Mycology* and a teacher at Mycologor, a school of mycology, where students and teachers experiment in finding oil and toxic waste resistant strains of fungus that can be used to clean up polluted industrial wasteland.

Vanja Palmers is a [Zen](#) priest, intrigued by the symbiotic character of mushrooms—many species enable others to live, dying when their host dies.

Neumann is also serious when she asks whether mushrooms can help save the world, at a time when all seems to be falling apart. The answer is—yes—they can be part of the answer, particularly in creating medicines and in evolving to digest oil-based products such as plastic or absorbing heavy metals.

*The Mushroom Speaks, a film by Marion Neumann*

## How many can you name?

The film is an introduction to both the mystery and science of mushrooms. How many mushrooms can you name? Champignon, white tops, oyster, shitake, psilocybin, puffball..... Neumann lists a few – many of them familiar from forest walks, but unknown as a named species: Birch Polypore, Turkey Tail, Reishi, Chaga, Bird's Nest Fungus, Porcini...

There are some entertaining asides—the tasty forest mushroom that, in season, will make a man impotent without affecting his (female) partner. Often used in the past by wives who had borne too many children, Neumann remarks.

And there are some serious experiments—Swiss researcher Franz Xaver Vollenweider's study of brainwaves of those who have ingested psilocybin, searching for applications as an anti-depressant.

There are many levels here and this is a film that would repay repeat viewings.