

Author and Activist Jay Griffiths

'What Passes for Normal is Not Normal'

Jay Griffiths wants to rewrite the world. Her books are a lyrical rebellion against the existing order, where we have lost our wildness and freedom is under siege. Journalist Annerieke Goudappel traveled to Wales to spend two evenings by the hearth, engaged in deep conversation with Griffiths.

Annerieke Goudappel

The station has a single platform leading to a country lane, and along that lane, a distant orange car approaches. Jay Griffiths, the writer for whom I travelled eight hours by train from the heart of Rotterdam to the heart of Wales, steps out of the orange car. She hands me a bunch of daffodils and says, 'I thought you could use some flowers.' Along the way, we have to stop twice to let the engine cool and top up the coolant, the hills are just a bit too steep for the car's condition, but we make it to her door. In the attic of this four-century-old house, she crafts her sentences every morning, much like the clay sculptures in the living room. Here we will spend two evenings by the fireplace. 'I write with a soft pencil so that the sentences remain malleable, on paper everything appears slow, changeable, and fluid.'

She goes out to buy a bottle of wine. I am left in the kitchen with her old cat, Otter. On the wall, she has pasted small papers with quotes. Above the light switch is 'Do nothing that crushes your soul.' The quote fits her like a glove. She does nothing that could crush her soul. She resists everything that restricts her freedom and not just her own freedom, but anyone's freedom.

I first encountered this limitless resistance last year when I read her book *Why Rebel*. Extinction Rebellion activists blocked the A12 in The Hague for the 35th time to protest fossil fuel subsidies. In *Why Rebel*, I found a passionate justification for the actions. I immediately ordered almost all her other books. In them there is always an urgent undertone of resistance against the state of the world and the threat to the freedom to shape life according to one's own insight.

In *Why Rebel*, she outlines what is at stake: nothing less than 'the collapse of civilizations, the extinction of species, and the survival of humanity.' She cites UN estimates of the annual global death toll from climate disasters—315,000 per year—and notes that the message still hasn't sunk in. Not with politics, not with business, and not with the masses. 'The rebellion is designed to block business as usual, because what passes for normal is not normal and cannot continue. So while the juggernaut of our current way of life is bearing down on us, XR will stand in its way.'

Burning Umbrella

She returns with a bottle of Chianti. We sit by the fire, sinking into the cushions on the sofa. This is not just an interview, but a reunion with a kindred spirit, even though I only know her from her books. We both admire Isabelle Eberhardt, a Swiss adventurer whom I followed for my book *Vagabond*. Disguised as a man, Isabelle Eberhardt travelled through the Sahara when Algeria was still a French colony. Jay Griffiths, like her, ventured far from our regulated Western lives. They accepted danger and hardships.

The fireplace plays a central role in her latest book, *Nemesis, My Friend: Journeys through the Turning Times*. She wrote it during the pandemic, cut off from the outside world. On the cover is a young woman in a white transparent dress, up to her hips in water, with dark clouds gathering above her. She carries a black umbrella with flames bursting from it in all directions. The umbrella

represents the atmosphere, the flames the greenhouse gases. Jay Griffiths' books are filled with such metaphors, giving wings to her stories about the dire state of our planet.

In her father's bookshelf, there was a copy of *Seven Years in Tibet* on an unreachable shelf. She stared at it every day until she found the courage to climb the bookshelf and take it down. 'That book ignited my hunger for the world. I couldn't wait to leave my stifling social environment behind and couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't be curious about the mountains and the desert. I also felt from a young age that many things in the world were wrong. I couldn't stand injustice, like so many young people.'

When her mother read to her as a child, she thought books existed like the trees in the forest, until her mother told her they were written by someone. That must be a kind of god, she thought. It was the beginning of her writing career, but she kept the desire to write to herself for years. 'I want to be a writer' still sounded like 'I want to be a god.' After studying English literature at Oxford, she spent four years writing a novel that never came to life. 'It was a dreadful book, never published, but it taught me that I was in the wrong place and cared more about the ideas in the book than about the characters and the plot.'

Rewriting the World

Griffiths dislikes calling her work non-fiction because it then becomes a denial of something else: the not-being of fiction, apparently the standard. Fiction writers should come up with a better term for their work, she believes, because writing is writing. 'For me, the desire to rewrite the world is the most important thing. It's possible to imagine a better world, even if only between the covers of a book, a world where humans and nature are in harmony.'

Rewriting the world is accompanied by a raging anger at what she—with capital letters—calls the Dominant Culture. In her view, it endangers everything of value and leaves a trail of destruction in the most vulnerable places on the planet. 'In a world where humans and nature are in harmony,' says Griffiths, 'we do not stand against nature but understand that we ultimately destroy ourselves if we continue to destroy nature. That doesn't mean we have to abolish our culture, but that we must see with all our cultural refinement how to bring human nature into harmony with the rest of nature.'

She has no illusions about the influence of her books on the world's course, but sees them as part of a growing counter-movement challenging the status quo. 'It's about doing what you can, about the choices you make. Just as I am the curator of my books—by choosing what's important to include and what's not—so we are the curator of our lives and our souls: you decide what you allow in and what you don't. I passionately believe in the influence you can have on your own environment. If you teach, change how things go at school. If you design factory systems, make them greener and better. If you run a polluting company, ensure it pollutes less. It's about changes where you are.'

Last Wilderness

At the end of the evening, she draws two routes through the hills around the village on a piece of paper, one to the highest hill and one to the woods. The next morning, while she writes her new book, I follow the routes on the paper. The first route ends on a farmyard with a 'private property' sign. I meet no one except the red delivery van of the postwoman. I recognise her from earlier in the day when she pushed a leaflet through the letterbox of my Airbnb. She waves. I wave back. In Rotterdam, no postwoman ever waves at me.

When Griffiths is not travelling, she walks through these deserted hills. Gentle slopes, fields with fences around them, a babbling brook, a sleepy village in the valley. For her book *Wild*, she spent seven years far from here searching for the last wilderness on Earth. On long solitary journeys, she explored the world of the former European colonisers. The distances posed great dilemmas for her. She now limits herself to at most one flight a year, but for *Wild* she flew to the farthest corners of the Earth to find indigenous peoples who had retained their wildness or had lost it through contact with the Dominant Culture. She roamed with sea nomads along the Thai coast, drank ayahuasca with a shaman in the Amazon, and went whaling with Inuit in the northernmost tip of Canada.

In *Wild*, she searches not only for wildness and wilderness in mountains, deserts, oceans, jungles, and ice regions but also for the wildness within herself. As in all her writing, the words and meanings in *Wild* tumble like swallows through the air, lyrical and poetic. At the same time, she draws from many sources; the bibliography covers no fewer than eighteen pages. 'Yet the book is primarily political. Not the politics of parties and parliaments, but of the deep undercurrents that determine how things go in the world, connected to prevailing narratives and the meaning of words. The European colonisers called the nature in the lands across the ocean 'wilderness', while people had lived there for centuries for whom nature was not wilderness. It was their home, where they lived in intimacy with other life forms, an intimacy that has almost disappeared outside those areas. For the colonisers, calling their land 'wilderness' was a kind of carte blanche to do whatever they wanted with it.'

Freedom Fighters

For *Wild*, she also flew to the former Dutch colony of New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean. The western half of the immense island is now called West Papua and was annexed by Indonesia in 1962. Multinationals extract mineral resources there, leaving gaping wounds in places where the indigenous Papuans lived intertwined with the rainforest for centuries. In the middle of the country lies the world's largest gold mine and third-largest copper mine.

The mines are located on the over four-thousand-metre-high Grasberg, which is sacred to the Papuans. The Indonesian-American company Freeport Indonesia makes billions in profits that, along with the gold and copper, largely disappear from the island, while the Grasberg erodes further and the chemicals from mining poison the rivers. Around the Grasberg, violence repeatedly flares up between the Indonesian army and freedom fighters who have been fighting for independence for years. Griffiths sought them out deep in the jungle. Here, nature was at its wildest, its most beautiful, its most exuberant.

Indonesian soldiers guarded the mines and loitered around her hotel, but she passed them by with a smile. 'That is the best strategy: just act as if it is normal for them to be there. What did those soldiers see? A slender woman with nothing but a notebook and a disarming smile against their weapons.' In that place, where a people forgotten by the rest of the world were being oppressed and killed – she cites Amnesty International with a death toll of 100,000 since the Indonesian invasion – she travelled through the jungle with people who laughed so often and so hard that they lay on the ground as a precaution. 'Nowhere in the world have I met people with such an intense sense of freedom, in one of the least free areas of the world. The Papuans I spoke to hold on deep in the jungle to their land and to the idea of freedom that comes with it.'

The Big Lie

She didn't just want to get a story for her book in West Papua. She wanted first of all to act as a messenger from the Papuans to the outside world. 'Indonesia controls the narrative about West Papua, just as rulers everywhere control the narrative and silence others. I wanted to give the

Papuans a direct voice, from their mouths to my pen, to the black notebook, to my book, to the readers.' The Papuans who speak in *Wild* are inspired with the realisation that life is only truly life when you are free. 'That realisation is under pressure everywhere from the Dominant Culture that sells itself as the culture of freedom. That is a big lie. Even in the West, people are increasingly losing their mental sovereignty, nowadays mainly due to the big tech companies. They harvest and trade our attention as a commodity. Being glued to your phone or computer all day is the most visible symptom, but the problem runs deeper. Mental sovereignty means being able to focus your attention on what you find important: to read books that matter to you, to investigate things that fascinate you. I find it very sad that so many people never experience this.'

Suppressed Wildness

In her attic room and on her travels, she manifests the mental sovereignty she describes: moulding words and images for hours, wandering through the hills of Wales for days, travelling for months to rewrite the world. 'Mental sovereignty is a prerequisite for creating art, essential for artists and an absolute birthright of everyone. It is the right to say: at this hour of the day I focus on painting a worm or practising the C minor on my guitar.'

In *Wild*, she follows a similar reasoning about the wildness that has been suppressed in modern people but is just as necessary for them as it is for indigenous peoples to be fully human, a wildness that goes against the restrictions of society. 'By wildness, I don't mean an unrestricted hedonism where anything goes. The limit is always where it becomes harmful to others. That is an important difference from that grotesque libertarianism where individual freedom is the measure of everything. Libertarians think that freedom means you can do whatever you want. That is freedom for bullies. Freedom for the powerful, which is harmful to those with less power.'

The next day I push open her front door – she lives in a village where the door doesn't need to be locked – and leave behind the jar of Himalayan herbs she lent me to combat the cold. I listen, but hear nothing. Writing with a pencil makes no sound.

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About the Author

Jay Griffiths is the author of eight books in which she turns conventional meanings of everyday and political topics on their heads. She debuted in 1999 with the book *Pip Pip. A Sideways Look at Time*, in which she dismantles our concept of time as a natural phenomenon. Long before she wrote the book *Why Rebel* in 2021 and stood trial for her involvement in a *Extinction Rebellion* action, she was already writing about the consequences of the climate crisis. For *Wild. An Elemental Journey*, she received the Orion Book Award and the Barnes & Noble Discover Award for best new nonfiction writer. She lives in an old village in the middle of Wales with her cat Otter.