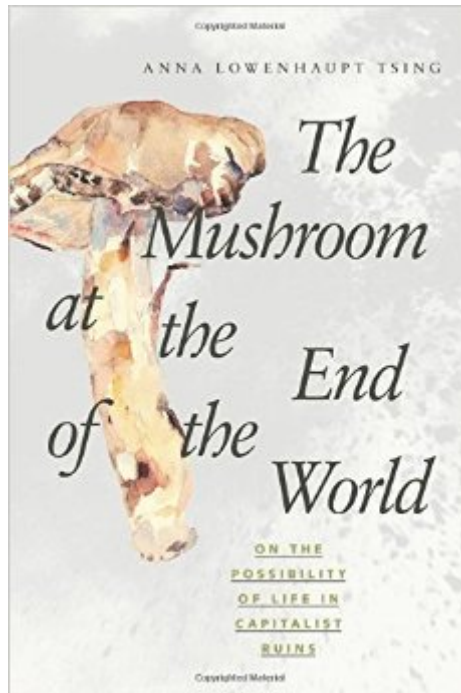


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# The Mushroom At The End Of The World: On The Possibility Of Life In Capitalist Ruins



## Synopsis

Matsutake is the most valuable mushroom in the world--and a weed that grows in human-disturbed forests across the northern hemisphere. Through its ability to nurture trees, matsutake helps forests to grow in daunting places. It is also an edible delicacy in Japan, where it sometimes commands astronomical prices. In all its contradictions, matsutake offers insights into areas far beyond just mushrooms and addresses a crucial question: what manages to live in the ruins we have made? A tale of diversity within our damaged landscapes, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* follows one of the strangest commodity chains of our times to explore the unexpected corners of capitalism. Here, we witness the varied and peculiar worlds of matsutake commerce: the worlds of Japanese gourmets, capitalist traders, Hmong jungle fighters, industrial forests, Yi Chinese goat herders, Finnish nature guides, and more. These companions also lead us into fungal ecologies and forest histories to better understand the promise of cohabitation in a time of massive human destruction. By investigating one of the world's most sought-after fungi, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* presents an original examination into the relation between capitalist destruction and collaborative survival within multispecies landscapes, the prerequisite for continuing life on earth.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Many of us who study human/plant relationships have been waiting eagerly for this book, and I at least am not disappointed. Anna Tsing is a fine writer, a superb ethnographer, and an insightful and original thinker, and this long and detailed book shows off her skills perfectly. It's a worldwide survey of gathering, trading, and selling matsutake mushrooms, the gourmet mushrooms that currently run

over \$50 a pound in markets. They are prestigious in Japan, and necessary or nearly so for high-end gifts, and the world has caught on. The most interesting ethnography herein is of the matsutake pickers in Oregon--a mixed lot of southeast Asian hill people, Latin American migrants, and Anglo-Americans who want to live far out in the woods--many of them Vietnam vets. Tsing takes us also to Japan, Finland, and Yunnan (southwest China). In addition to the ethnography, Tsing is thoroughly grounded in the science of mushrooms. In dramatic contrast to those political ecologists and critical thinkers who make it a point of pride not to know any science, Tsing not only knows it but is sharply insightful into what really matters, and shows her usual skill at telling the reader. She starts with basics but goes into some real detail, e.g. on matsutake taxonomy. The take-home messages of the book include a focus on assemblages--transient or long-term linkages of people, environments, plants, and policies--and on ruined landscapes. In Oregon, matsutakes grow in overcut, undermanaged conifer land that went to lodgepole pine (on whose roots they grow as symbionts). In Japan, similar mismanagement long ago led to matsutake forests, but now those forests are what is wanted, and management is trying to restore them from overgrowth. In China, mismanagement is threatening forests in general.

#### The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins Anna

Lowenhaupt Tsing • When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom. • So begins the Prologue of a very well-researched and equally well-written book about matsutake mushrooms. And I mean everything about matsutake. Well, not so much the science • though that's in there too. Mostly about the love affair (fanaticism? addiction?) that many have, especially in Japan, for this unassuming-looking mushroom. (It's even got a • common name, simply: pine mushroom.) I should state right up front that while I really loved this book, and learned a LOT, The Mushroom at the End of the World is no mere mushroom fact book or desk reference familiar to mycophiles, mushroom mavens, and weekend wild mushroom foragers. If you're looking for a quick read with pretty photos of • matsutake and recipes, this book is not for you. The Mushroom at the End of the World is dense. The Prologue sets the tone: the world is changing; our populations are changing; our forests are changing. The Japanese were the first to revere the matsutake: everyone could look for them in the forests during the season; everyone could enjoy them. The forests changed; the matsutake became rare; then valuable; then a commodity. (• Individuals who buy matsutake are almost always thinking about building relationships. •) Gunboat diplomacy opened the door to Japan (if only a crack) to Western ideas and trade; the end of World War II

ripped the door off its hinges. Japanese society changed dramatically, with peasants moving from the farms to the cities. The forests, scoured of firewood and edibles, went fallow.

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