Between Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connections to Trees


Nalini Nadkarni, forest ecologist and author of Between Earth and Sky, has written a natural and social history of trees, a tribute to the strong and influential global inhabitants she dearly loves. As she writes in the introduction to Between Earth and Sky, “I love trees: how they look, how they behave, how they smell and sound, and how I feel when I am around them.” The first dedication of her book is to the “maple trees outside the front door, where this book began.”

Nine chapters exploring the relationship between humans and trees cover topics as diverse as “what is a tree”; tree goods and services; trees as shelter and protection; trees and health and healing; trees in play and the human imagination; trees and the expression of time; trees as signs and symbols; trees in spirituality and education; and trees and mindfulness. Woven throughout the chapters is scientific fact, personal reflection and narrative, and a variety of visual material.

It is a compelling combination. I found the generous sprinkling of tree quotes, poems and other passages particularly intriguing. Passages from Shakespeare’s Othello, Homer’s The Odyssey, and a Woodie Guthrie song. Poems by Wendell Berry, William Blake, John Clare, E. E. Cummings, Jane Hirschfield, Pablo Neruda, Li Po, Rumi, Christina Georgina Rossetti, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Rabindranath Tagore. Quotes by Hermann Hesse, Federico Garcia Lorca, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. One of my favourites is a line from The Power of Myth by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers: “God is the experience of looking at a tree and saying, ‘Ah!’”

Creative writings aside, the book contains no shortage of scientific and other facts. I discovered “arboreal soil” situated on large branches in certain forests, spaces that epiphytes, insects, earthworms, and spiders call home. I learned about “witness trees,” which bear permanent marks carved by settlers of forested lands to marks territorial boundaries. I was interested to read that the sacred architecture of Greek temples and Gothic cathedrals is thought to be inspired by sacred groves, and that Hindu and Buddhist temples are in fact associated with living trees.

Anyone who loves trees, who admires their steadfastness, who finds in their presence a certain peace and calm, will love this book. As Nadkarni writes in the introductory chapter, “When I place my own strong brown hand on the trunk of a tree, I feel connected to something that deserves my curiosity, care, and protection.” Reading Between Earth and Sky makes you want to rush outside and follow her example.

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