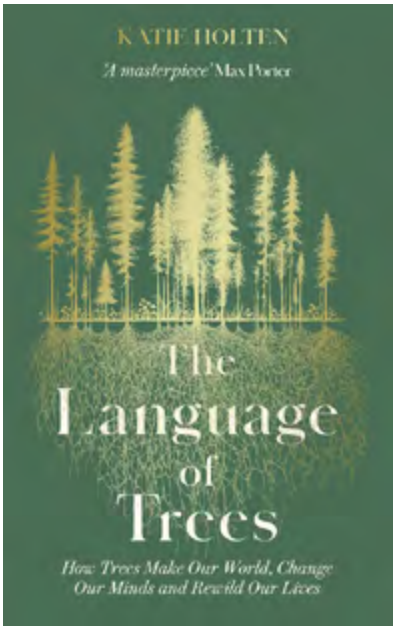
A Visually Unique Look at Trees

Pavel Mezei



The Language of Trees: The Rewilding of Literature and Landscapes by Katie Holten, Fulbright Scholar to Cornell in 2004.

The Language of Trees forces the reader to consider how poetry, short stories, history, and science reflect our relationship to trees and forests. Over 69 scientists, poets, journalists, craftspersons—including novelists Ursula Le Guin and Zadie Smith, US poet Laureate Ada Limón, science writers Elizabeth Kolbert and Robert Macfarlane, the rock band Radiohead, and Plato along with numerous biologists and scientists—have all contributed to this visually unusual book. At the beginning of the book an alphabet consisting solely of trees is presented.

Important, surprising insights appear in every chapter. Biologist Brian Enquist notes that trees have to deal with "taking in as much resources such as light, water and nutrients as possible, while transporting resources within the plant with as little work as possible" (30). The Chilean-Spanish-American author César Hidalgo offers a good approximation of entire tree physiology in just a few sentences: "A tree in New England reacts to the length of the day, running a different program in the summer than in winter" (45). Winona LaDuke, Native American economist and activist, writes how her tribe distinguishes the seasons of the year: "In the Anishinaabe world, and the calendar of our people, there's nothing about Roman emperors like Julius or Augustus" (3) and she tells us they have months with names like "Freezing Over Moon" for November or "Hard Crusted Snow Moon" for March.

They do not have four seasons, but six. In "They Carry Us With Them," Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder points out that while trees cannot run from their enemies or outrun danger, they are often able to defend themselves against insects, pathogens, or grazing by what could be called "tree migration" (246), movement by seed dispersal.

We also learn, for example, that the US Constitution was written with an ink made of galls. These are created by insects in the branches and twigs. You will find the recipe for that ink in the book. And there are several other recipes throughout, such as Acorn Bread, Sun Tea, or Conifer Seasoning Salt. We learn that the orange never would have existed if humans hadn't put together the pomelo from the tropics and the mandarin from the more temperate zone (81).

The Language of Trees acknowledges the pressing issue of climate change, emphasizing its impact on forests and their ecosystems. Some chapters touch on the degradation of forests because of farming or rubber harvesting, and some very technical or physiological details, for example the role of oxygen or carbon dioxide, are described in an understandable way. Tree mortality caused by other living organisms, such as the Dutch elm disease, is mentioned although from a different angle. An elm tree had to be chopped down to make way for a "sidewalk with a short wall" (60), a puzzling case to think about, especially when 40 million elm trees had already been killed by the disease in North America. Despite the challenges, there's hope. For example, Pulitzer-Prize winning author (and Fulbright Scholar) Elizabeth Kolbert depicts an experiment with nature reserves in the Amazonian region which consists of several preserved patches of intact forests, creating something like an "archipelago of Amazonian islands" (113). We encounter other positive examples from around the world, showcasing efforts to mitigate climate change and protect our green spaces.

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Whether you choose to skip around or read sequentially, you'll discover a variety of ways to immerse yourself in the world of trees and forests. Reading this beautiful book was like traveling on a high-speed train—you look out the window and enjoy seeing the passing trees.

Katie Holten, *The Language of Trees. A Rewilding of Literature and Landscapes*. Portland, Oregon: Tin House, 2023, 304 pp, $39.

BIOGRAPHY

Pavel Mezei graduated in Forest Ecology at the Faculty of Forestry at the Technical University in Zvolen, Slovakia. He worked in the Muránska Planina National Park and then earned his PhD at the Faculty of Ecology and Environmental Sciences (Technical University at Zvolen) studying the drivers of bark beetle population dynamics in mountain forest ecosystems. He conducted a study stay at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences in Vienna, Austria. He was a Visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University of Montana and at the University of Nevada (Reno) where he studied the tree mortality of whitebark pine caused by bark beetles. He is now a researcher at the Institute of Forest Ecology SAS (Slovak Academy of Sciences). He can be reached at mezei@ife.sk