

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors
by David George Haskell

Longwood Gardens Community Read, March–May 2022

The Longwood Gardens Community Read is a program designed to encourage reading for pleasure and start a conversation. Focusing on literature about gardens, plants, and the natural world, we feature an exceptional book annually (paired with a similarly themed younger readers' book) through a variety of programs, discussions, and lectures across all community partner organizations. For more information about the Community Read, go to longwoodgardens.org/community-read.

This guide was prepared by Longwood Gardens Library and Information Services staff for anyone interested in hosting a book discussion (or another program) of the Community Read book.

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Hello Community Readers,

Every year one of the first questions asked about the Community Read is the question, “Why this book?” This year there is very quick answer that comes directly from our featured title, *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors*,

“Because life is network, there is no ‘nature’ or ‘environment,’ separate and apart from humans.”

This quote, for some readers, at first may appear to be a somewhat surprising statement. When one conjures an idea of nature, perhaps the beautiful, pristine images of nature come to mind. The beauty of such images might tempt us to think about the Earth with its richness of flora and fauna apart from humanity. In reality that idea is an illusion. Humanity has interacted and shaped life on the planet in profound ways for a very long time.

We as humans everyday are interacting with the flora and fauna in both positive and negative ways. In ways that enrich human culture and sometimes ways that are detrimental to the Earth's overall health. Mr. Haskell's book leads us away from the notion of separation between humans and pristine nature. He directs us toward an exploration of trees and humans in closeness and connection through the act of listening. Yes... listening to a trees' perspective.

What would a tree tell us if we just took the time to listen? That's one of the essential ideas we encourage our Community Readers to explore in 2022. Trees are nature's great connectors and help us gain insight into ourselves and our place in the world. Trees represent growth, peace, and nature while teaching us how to plant deep roots and reach for the sky. In *The Songs of Trees*, journey around the world with David Haskell as he repeatedly visits 12 trees and shows how human history, ecology, and well-being are intimately intertwined.

The Longwood Community Read team first became aware of David Haskell with his 2013 Pulitzer Prize nominee *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*. (If you haven't read this title we strongly recommend it as well). Since that time we have been looking for a way to share his work as part of the Community Read. In 2022 Longwood Gardens is delighted to finally find that opportunity by featuring Mr. Haskell's second book, *The Songs of Trees*.

It is for all these reasons that we chose to share the book with our community, and we hope you enjoy this book as much as we do!

David Sleasman
Director, Library and Information Services
Longwood Gardens



Community Read
Read. Think. Engage.

QUOTES FROM *THE SONGS OF TREES* TO USE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA (post on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram using #CommunityRead), or to spark further discussion

“...Living memories of trees, manifest in their songs, tell of life’s community, a net of relations. We humans belong within this conversation, as blood kin and incarnate members. To listen is therefore to hear our voices and those of our family.” (Preface, p. vii)

“Because life is network, there is no ‘nature’ or ‘environment,’ separate and apart from humans.” (Preface, p. viii)

“The forest is the place where biological hubris dies: we live in profound ignorance of the lives of our cousins.” (Ceibo, p. 10)

“Amazonian peoples appear to agree on one thing: what Western science calls a forested ecosystem composed of objects is instead a place where spirits, dreams, and ‘waking’ reality merge. The forest, including its human inhabitants, is thus unified.” (Ceibo, p. 18)

“To claim that forests ‘think’ is not an anthropomorphism. A forest’s thoughts emerge from a living network of relationships, not from a humanlike brain. These relationships are made from cells inside fir needles, bacteria clustered at root tips, insect antennae sniffing the air for plant chemicals, animals remembering their food caches, and fungi sensing their chemical milieu...The forest, though, also includes humans, chickadees, and other nerved creatures. A forest’s intelligence therefore emerges from many kinds of interlinked clusters of thought. Nerves and brains are one part, but only one, of the forest’s mind.” (Balsam Fir, p. 40)

“When a being – a person, a tree, a chickadee – full of memory, conversation, and connection dies, the network of life loses a hub of intelligence and life. For those closely linked to the deceased, the loss is acute. An ecological analog of grief unfolds in the forest: for the other creatures that depend on living trees, death ends the relationship that gave them life.” (Green Ash, p. 96)

“Trees are the Platos of biology. Through their Dialogues, they are the best-placed creatures of all to make aesthetic and ethical judgements about beauty and good in the world.” (Redwood and Ponderosa Pine, p. 153)



“When human movement patterns start to realign with the patterns of other species – eagles, mayflies, geese, muskrats – our awareness rejoins the community of life into which we are born but which our built environments too often hide from us. In this unity of flow and bodily movement, belonging is no longer abstraction but is manifest through living choreography. The choreographer, though, is not an individual but the relationships among a multitude. The river is not a passageway for lifeless water molecules but is a life-form.” (Cottonwood, p. 176)

“We can have no deficit of nature; we are nature, even when we are unaware of this nature. With the understanding that humans belong in this world, discernment of the beautiful and the good can emerge from human minds networked within the community of life, not human minds peering in from outside.” (Cottonwood, p. 180)

“Wood is an embodied conversation between plant life, shudder of ground, and yaw of wind.” (Callery Pear, p. 190)

“Studies of the genetics of olive trees show that almost all the olive trees in the Mediterranean, whether in a ‘wild’ area or in an orchard, descend from cultivars. Trees whose genealogy has not intersected with the hands of humans are very rare. The well-being and persistence of humans and olive trees have been conjoined for thousands of years.” (Olive, p. 229)

“Like animal communities in Amazonian bromeliads, the roots of boreal fir trees, and Callery pears on Manhattan’s streets, the olive groves of the Levant depend for their vitality and persistence on stable relationships with other species. In the olive’s case, the most important species in the tree’s network is *Homo sapiens*. Severing these relationships kills just as surely as cutting individual trees.” (Olive, p. 238)

“Like olive groves, bonsai trees bring to the surface what is harder to discern elsewhere: that human lives and tree lives are made, always, from relationship. For many trees it is nonhuman species – bacteria, fungi, insects, birds – that are the primary constituents of the network. Olive and bonsai trees bring humans to the center, giving us direct experience of the importance of sustained connection.” (Japanese White Pine, p. 249-250)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Longwood Community Read team first became aware of David Haskell with his 2013 Pulitzer Prize nominee *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature*, in which he visits the same square meter of forest every day for a year to observe and understand the connections between its inhabitants. A *New York Times* review of that book states that Haskell “thinks like a biologist, writes like a poet, and gives the natural world the kind of open-minded attention one expects from a Zen monk rather than a hypothesis-driven scientist.” That same combination of science and poetic writing can be found in *The Songs of Trees*, in which Haskell visits and deeply observes a dozen trees repeatedly over several years. In *The Forest Unseen*, Haskell observed minute detail. In *The Songs of Trees*, he has a much bigger canvas to observe, and makes clear the importance of the myriad connections between trees and the rest of the natural world – especially humans.

We hope this discussion guide helps to spark your thinking and ignite a conversation. We also offer a selection of resources for further reading for those who want to continue their journey.

David Haskell explains in the preface that he has divided *The Songs of Trees* into three parts:

1. “Stories of trees that seem to live apart from humans” (in their native habitats)
2. “The exhumed remains of trees that have been long dead: fossils and charcoal”
3. “Trees that live in cities and fields. Humans appear to dominate; nature seems absent or in abeyance”

This guide follows that structure and provides suggested questions for each section to help initiate discussion or to help group leaders formulate their own questions.



Part One

In this section, Haskell describes his visits with the Ceibo (in the Amazonian rainforest in Ecuador), the Balsam Fir (in the Boreal Forest of Ontario), the Sabal Palm (on St. Catherine's Island, Georgia), and the Green Ash (near his home in Tennessee).

1. Haskell states that the native people in the area surrounding the Ceibo tree, the Waorani, were forced to start wearing clothing by Western missionaries. He asserts that "an unintended effect of this stricture was to reorient ears toward the self and away from the forest, partly closing the door to acoustic relationship with plants and animals" (Ceibo, p. 8).

Why is it important to have an acoustic relationship with the plants and animals that we live amongst?

2. Amazonian peoples think of the forest ecosystem as a place where "spirits, dreams, and waking reality merge" (Ceibo, p. 18). Haskell mentions a forest guide who says that Westerners would not only "...not believe his stories of spirits but we *could* not understand. We can hear, but the sounds will not penetrate. The resonance of understanding is not possible without lived, embodied relationship within the forest community" (Ceibo, p. 18).

What do you think are the factors that prevent Westerners from experiencing the rainforest community?

3. "Virginia Woolf wrote that 'real life' was the common life, not the 'little separate lives which we live as individuals.' Her sketch of this reality included trees and the sky, alongside human sisters and brothers" (Balsam Fir, p. 39).

Are most of us experiencing the "common life"? Why might Woolf assert this idea?

4. On pages 75-77, Haskell compares a list of the washed-up items Thoreau found on the Cape Cod shoreline in the mid-nineteenth century to what he found near the Sabal Palm on the Georgia beach in the twenty-first century.

What meaning do you find in the differences between what each society discarded?

5. In the chapter on a fallen, decomposing Green Ash, Haskell says that the death of this tree causes its network to "[lose] a hub of intelligence and life" (p. 96), yet the network doesn't end, it "instead feeds on the closeness of connections in the dead tree, increasing in vigor and diversity of expression" (p. 97).

What happens to human networks when someone dies? Do we similarly find new life and connections in the death of a loved one?



Part Two

In this section, Haskell interacts with ancient charcoal remnants of a Hazel tree in Scotland, and a Ponderosa Pine near a petrified Redwood stump in Colorado.

1. Haskell says that the European Hazel trees and people arrived in Scotland at approximately the same time: "At no point were these forests primeval, unpeopled wilderness. Modern forestry in the region is therefore a continuation of an interaction as old as the forest itself" (p. 115).

Why do you think this longstanding connection is important?

2. Comparing the Ponderosa Pine living through our current human-influenced climate change, and the Redwood petrified during natural climate changes centuries ago, Haskell gives this thought: "If we're a species made merely of atoms like all other species, no more and no less, it is a puzzle why we should believe that the human-caused climate change threatening ponderosa pines is an ethical calamity but regard the changing climate of the Eocene redwood forests as an ethically neutral phenomenon" (p. 146-147).

What differences do you see between the two climate changes? Should we have different ethical thoughts about them?

3. Haskell was struck by the excitement of a little girl in pink trousers as she listened to the "huge sound" of the Ponderosa Pine needles blowing in the wind. The girl and her family had an engagement with nature that seemingly gave him hope that we can recover from "cultural fracture and amnesia, [and gain] a more mature ability to understand what is deeply beautiful in the world" (p. 148).

What hope do you see in the world that we can reengage with nature?

Interlude

- Haskell measures the effects of water movement on the growth of twigs in Maple I, and he has turned those measurements into music. You can hear it on his website: dghaskell.com/the-songs-of-trees/the-trees/maple/.

Does the transposition of the scientific data into the more universally accessible artform of music help you to make a connection with the tree? Did it surprise you?



Part Three

In this section, Haskell visits a young cottonwood tree in Colorado, a Callery pear tree in Manhattan, an olive tree in Jerusalem, and a Japanese white pine bonsai tree in Washington DC.

1. The cottonwood tree, living near a river in an urban Denver setting, has learned to be a resilient part of its surrounding network of swiftly moving water, hungry beavers and often careless humans. Haskell indicates that the cities built by humans are part of nature, because humans are nature, as much as the trees and river and animals are (even though everything we do is not necessarily “wise, beautiful, just, or good” – p. 179).

Do you think that the role humans play in nature is equal to that of all other natural beings or greater? Do our higher abilities bring increased responsibility?

2. Haskell describes the Callery pear as the most resilient of all the street trees in New York. A street tree will generally fare better if it is “planted by its human neighbors” and “bears a tag naming it and listing its needs” (p. 203).

Why do you think that is? Do you have a unique bond with any trees? What makes that bond strong?

3. In the chapter on the olive tree, Haskell states that “Exodus of people from the land erases the embodied knowledge of a place...What remains is a network of life that is less intelligent, productive, resilient, and creative” (p. 238). There are countless examples throughout the world of native peoples being forced to flee at the hands of their oppressors.

How might the knowledge that those people carry become a part of the natural networks of their new homes?

4. In discussing the Japanese white pine bonsai tree that had been through the Hiroshima bombing, Haskell says that “...bonsai mirrors the nature of trees. A tree is the common life, a being that is multiplicity of conversation” (p. 252).

What do you think he means by this statement?

