

January 8th, 2021 – “Oh Christmas Tree!”, From Fairy Tales to Forests

This month we will go north to Canada and Germany and read about the protagonist at the center of our winter festivities, the fir tree. Plastic or real, this evergreen sentinel holds deep symbolic meaning since pre-Christian times. A fir tree also presides over the dynamic goings-on of the boreal forest, as we will see in the writings of the Forestry ecology professor and poet, George Haskell.

Readings from:

- Anderson, Hans Christian (1844). The Fir Tree.
https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheFirTree_e.html
- Haskell, D. G. (2017). The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors (pp. 31-40). Penguin.
*Although we will only discuss the first 9 pages, the rest of the chapter has been uploaded for those who would like to continue reading it.

Discussion Questions for Haskell, 2017:

1. David Haskell begins this book with the lines:

For the Homeric Greeks, kleos, fame, was made of song. Vibrations in air contained the measure and memory of a person's life.

To listen was therefore to learn what endures.

I turned my ear to trees, seeking ecological kleos. I found no heroes, no individuals around whom history pivots. Instead, 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. (p. ix)

Each chapter of this book attends to the song of a particular tree: the physicality of sound, the stories that brought sound into being, and our own bodily, emotional, and intellectual responses...

What kind of “song” is Haskell referring to? Do you agree that trees are no longer “heroes” in today’s society? Why does the author feel that it is necessary to emphasize that humans are part of nature’s conversation?

2. The author is both an award winning poet and a Forest Ecology Professor. He uses several poetic devices in his prose and pays special attention to evoking all of the senses: What examples can you find examples in the first two paragraphs of the chapter where he evokes the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch)?
3. In this epic, the chickadee is our guide (American members of the genus *Poecile*, or rather a group of North American “cincie”). Page 32 and 33 describe the chickadee’s inter and intra-species communication in detail. What assumptions does Haskell make about it?
4. On p. 34, Haskell calls chickadees a “social species”. Why?
5. What does the author mean when he says “Bird memories are therefore a tree’s dream of the future.”
6. On p. 36, Haskell writes “If we broaden our definition and let drop the arbitrary requirement of the possession of nerves, then the balsam fir tree is a behaving and thinking creature.” Do you agree? Does plant thinking exist? What about plant memory?

7. How is the soil like a street market? (p. 38).
8. How does Haskell interpret Virginia Woolf's "common life"?
9. How does Haskell describe the forest's "mind"?
10. Haskell guides the reader to his hypothesis that life is network by moving from the most familiar and easily understood elements (the chickadee, the fir tree...) to the less familiar and more abstract (the microbial network, the chemical cycles, the forest as a whole...). Is this an effective way of explaining forest ecology to a non-expert or does he oversimplify or anthropomorphize too much?

Discussion Questions for Anderson (1844)

- Both Anderson and Haskell build their story around a fir tree and the small vertebrates (birds and mammals) to create a connection and sense of empathy with non-human life and phenomena by making it more familiar. How are the authors' purposes the same or different? How is the final effect the same or different?