



Witness Tree: Seasons of Change with a Century-Old Oak

Lynda V. Mapes

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When our "witness tree" first rooted beside a low stone wall in rural Massachusetts, cars were just appearing on the roads. In the life of this one grand oak, we can see for ourselves the results of one hundred years of rapid environmental change. It's leafing out earlier, and dropping its leaves later as the climate warms. Even the inner workings of individual leaves have changed to accommodate more CO2 in our atmosphere.

Climate science can seem dense, remote, and abstract. But through the lens of this one tree, it becomes immediate and intimate. In *Witness Tree*, environmental reporter Lynda Mapes takes us through a year with the tree in the Harvard Forest. We learn about carbon cycles and leaf physiology, but we also experience seasons of change as people have for centuries, watching for each new bud, and listening for each new bird and frog call. Lynda takes us high into the oak's swaying boughs, cores deep into its heartwood, and digs into its roots and teeming soil. She brings us eye level with garter snakes and newts, and alongside the squirrels and jays devouring the oak's acorns.

Though stark in its implications, *Witness Tree* is a beautiful and lyrical read, rich in detail, sweeps of weather, history, people, and animals. It's an inescapable document of climate change, but also an environmental story rooted in hope, beauty, wonder, and the possibility of renewal in people and the world around us.

Witness Tree: Seasons of Change with a Century-Old Oak Details

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From Reader Review Witness Tree: Seasons of Change with a Century-Old Oak for online ebook

Gail Kennon says

i'm angry. when the author and/or editors realized that maybe 20 or so of the 224 pages were actually about the "witness tree"...it would have been honest and ethical to change the title to something like my fun year in the woods, the cool people i met, and my ramblings on climate change.

Laura Harrison says

Richly detailed, important book. Chronicles the life of one oak tree in the Harvard Forest. A must read for fans of The Hidden Life of Trees or anyone concerned about our environment and world. I hope that is many of us. 5 strong stars.

Correen says

The author spent one year observing, collecting information, studying and researching a 100+ year-old oak tree. She maintained a log, collaborated with other scientists, established observation capability, and built a valuable trove of information. With the help of another scientist, she built an electronic virtual observation capability so she could watch her tree even when away from her forest.

Her book is about her experience, collaborations, and her thoughts and feelings. I would have liked more scientific information--personal observations or data -- but that was not her purpose in writing The Witness Tree. This book is interesting to lay persons and would be helpful to another person who embarks on a lengthy observation/documentation project.

Karen Wyon says

this book was pivotal for me. i hope you will find a book about trees and read it. the author spent a year living near the tree examining the tree's surroundings and interaction with other trees. this tree in a forest studied by harvard was an ordinary one but each tree is important.

Denise Kruse says

There is no question that the author is knowledgeable about trees. The writing style is quite good. My review is based solely on what I like to read and I would have preferred more story, less science. Not sorry I read and I did enjoy it.

Elizabeth Erickson says

Interesting, but a bit disappointing.

Laura says

This book is:

- * A love story to trees
 - * An ode to the practice of phenology (the study of the change of seasons)
 - * Lovely nature writing
 - * Interesting and informative science writing (it is Lynda Mapes, after all) - I loved the descriptions of the many types of research she gets to take part in
 - * A recounting of how trees both show and are affected by climate change, and offer hope
-

David Meshoulam says

wonderfully engaging book about a year spent at the Harvard Forest, this is a story more than about just a single tree. mapes captures a story about our ecosystem and its constantly shifting and changing pieces. Through her story the landscape itself becomes alive. at times her story feels more like a collected set of news stories and the overall arch misses something to pull it together

Sara Van Dyck says

One personal year with one tree – the oak – at the Harvard Forest. One topic was fairly new to me: the chapter, “The Language of Leaves” shows researcher John O’Keefe studying phenotypes in the forest, the appearance of leaves. This means looking in exquisite detail how leaves develop through the seasons. What he does is low-tech science, kind of old-fashioned natural history, but it’s a means of finding patterns and changes that other methods might miss. How buds emerge, develop; how one tree differs from another of the same species; when trees color up in the fall. It sounds simple, but of course it takes knowledge and attention to see these details. And it has surprising value: it’s a clue to climate change, a look at trees in time, in our time. Mapes writes her book as a personal account of her year in the forest, so it’s very readable, although I find her rhapsodic prose wearing.

For a different view, just as enlightening and impassioned, try noted scientist David Suzuki’s book “Tree,” in which Suzuki follows a hypothetical Douglas-fir through the centuries, at the opposite side of our continent.

Liz says

I wish that there had been illustrations - especially photos.

Mark Valentine says

Here's the Hedgehog Challenge: Write a full-length book exploring the vicissitudes of a red oak tree over the span of a single year. No car chases or flame throwers here; instead, Mapes lassos all her skills as an environmental reporter in collecting information through interviews, readings, and personal explorations to show her tree as the fulcrum, the pivot point for all things connected in nature.

At first, I skipped merrily along--her writing style is light, personal and informative, but what really made it a strong reading experience was my encounter with her two final chapters: Carbon and In This Together. Here case is emphatic about climate change, yes, she did this well but now I wish she would write a sequel about what she believes we need to do to avert the impending disaster.

[cf. Isaiah Berlin's essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox."]

Merridy says

This is an important book to read as it deepens our understanding of how trees live and breathe and provide for us. Info on ecology, history, climate change, and modern techniques of phenology. Also, insights into the lives of forestry researchers.

Read this book along with *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and any book by Diana Beresford-Kroeger.

Gry says

This is a fantastic book. The author spent a year studying a century-old oak tree in the Harvard Research Forest, but this book is not only the story of the oak, but also its historical and natural context in great detail. The book is beautifully written in such a way that it makes you feel like you are there with the author soaking up the beauty of the forest. It'll make you want to go out hiking in the nearest forest regardless of the season! She does take on some pretty heavy issues. The chapter called "Carbon" deals with climate change, and truthfully, some of that stuff is pretty scary, but the book ends on a decidedly hopeful note. This book ought to be required reading for any politician making laws regarding our nation's stance on climate change. If you are curious about trees, ecosystems, climate change, or nature in general, or for that matter, if you are wondering why climate change is such a big deal, read this book!

Kay says

I was fascinated by everything from the omniscient squirrels (who can detect the presence of a weevil in an acorn with 92% accuracy by a quick shake of the head) to the results of many of the studies conducted in this forest--they have a lot to tell us about climate change and the ability of some trees to cope with it. Oaks like this one are now growing much, much faster than they used to, and faster than any other tree species, which may or may not be a good thing.

I loved reading about the amazing studies being conducted in the Harvard Forest, where this tree has been growing for 115 years. Turns out that many of us amateur gardeners and nature lovers are phenologists, which means that over the course of many years, our notes and garden journals, in which we record changes in bloom time, the arrival of birds, and the onset of winter, etc., contribute in a small way to the picture of climate change. By doing this, we at least remain in touch with the seasons--a sense many Americans have lost.

If you live in Maryland and you need to plant a tree, a red oak is a very good choice--at least until globalisation brings some deadly insect from Asia to attack it.

Erin says

This much appreciated advance copy from Goodreads and Bloomsbury of WITNESS TREE sent me on an intriguing journey of leafy discovery. I love trees. So, I was excited to tag along with author Lynda V. Mapes's intense scrutiny of a particular red oak in the Harvard Forest. The book covers Mapes' targeted tree study while it dips into the 1800's journal of a lady who ran a farm there and while it savors some cameo descriptions of local people and animals. Lynda was brave to hitch up into climbing gear to go to the top of her tree. One scientist she met used a drone to get his data in all seasons. A core sample of the tree's rings revealed secrets I'll never forget.
