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Daniel Lewis. *Twelve Trees: And What They Tell Us About Our Past, Present and Future*

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024.
ISBN 978-1398518841 (PB), 304 pp.

aniel Lewis's *Twelve Trees* takes the reader from the bristlecone pine to the baobab, from California to the Congo basin, from very old trees to very large ones. Covering twelve trees that Lewis says were picked as one picks one's friends (p. xii), this book is both an appreciation of trees and an argument for paying greater attention and care to them.

The human impact on trees provides an important backdrop to these stories. For the bristlecone pine and the longleaf pine, fires – both natural and those set by humans – shape their stories. The coast redwood, the longleaf pine, the bald cypress, the sandalwood and the forest ebony are all trees that have been harvested by humans, often in ways that come to threaten the very survival of their species. These trees, like the olive (Chapter 9), are entangled in human arts and cultures in deep ways: we build our houses from trees, play instruments made from them, enjoy their fruits and use their scents in religious rituals. The centrality of these trees to human culture can help them, as in the case of olive trees cultivated on small farms that encourage biodiversity, or harm them, as with the sandalwood, which is 'threatened with extinction across much of its range' due to overharvesting (p. 103).

PLANT PERSPECTIVES 2/2 - 2025: 461–464
DOI: 10.3197/WHPPP.63876246815911
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Trees are not only part of a general human story but also are interwoven into Lewis's own life story. He tells us about the tsunami that hit Hawai'i when he was a young boy, connecting this personal episode to the story of *Sophora toromiro* on the island of Rapa Nui (pp. 46–47). His search for *Ceiba pentandra*, a tree of great height found in Amazon forest takes place during a bachelor's trip for a close friend. Alongside the explorations of trees, we meet others whose lives have significant arboreal entanglements: for example, David Frank, who directs the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research in Tucson, Arizona (Chapter 1); Jesse Wimberley, who helps private landowners learn and practise prescribed burns (Chapter 5); and Scott Paul, the Director of Natural Resource Sustainability for Taylor Guitars (Chapter 7).

Lewis's work at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens also informs his inquiries. An important theme of *Twelve Trees* is the ability of wood and other parts of the tree to function as archives, and this emphasis is connected to Lewis's position as a curator at The Huntington. Through dendrochronology, we can better understand the history of droughts and fires. Through the amber of *Hymenaea protera* (Chapter 4) we gain insight into the plants and insects of times past. The afterword, titled 'In Praise of Recording, Reporting, and Remembering', lauds those who have created written records of trees and their environment, whether through fieldwork or the maintenance of libraries and collections. Lewis encourages the reader to 'be a documenter' and to 'keep track of the world' (p. 239).

Although entertaining and filled with interesting details, *Twelve Trees* often left me frustrated. To begin with, the trees themselves often retreat into the background. Take, for example, the chapter on the olive tree: early in the chapter we learn that olive trees grow to a mature height of between ten and forty feet, that they have 'lance-shaped leaves, dark green on one side and silvery on the other' and that they are often characterised by a 'gnarly trunk' (p. 162). In contrast to the brevity of this initial description, there are pages of delicious detail on olive oil grading and tasting. The olive tree itself returns in the closing pages, when Lewis turns to the threats posed by insects and fungi. Likewise, the chapter on Central African Forest Ebony treats the role of ebony in the music industry at great length. With the emphasis on how people have used trees, there is a decidedly anthropocentric tilt to *Twelve Trees*.

The throughline of the book is also difficult to discern. Why these twelve trees? The subtitle adds 'And What They Tell Us About Our Past, Present, and Future', but almost all trees could fit this description. The passage closest to an answer comes in the preface: 'I've chosen twelve trees that have been on long journeys, have many accomplices as well as enemies, and need our help to survive' (p. xii). That certain trees may need special human intervention to survive seems the most compelling candidate for selection, but it does not apply to all trees discussed. For example, *Hymenaea protera* is long extinct. For the other eleven trees, all facing various threats, the questions around how humans are intervening could usefully be emphasised to a greater degree. (And, writing from a state once covered with chestnut trees, a chapter on *Castanea dentata* would have fit very well with this theme.)

Daniel Lewis is a committed arboreal optimist. Many chapters end with a call to action based on what we learn from trees: 'Trees continue to school us, even as we help them. If the longleaf could speak, it would ask us to be patient, to accommodate, to value our communities' (p. 99). Like tech optimism – the view that technology always improves the world – Lewis's arboreal optimism may need more nuance than is found in these brief chapters. This is particularly clear in the chapter on blue gum eucalyptus. Lewis describes the controversies around the tree, which stem from its non-native status and its flammability. Following the 1991 Oakland fire, in which eucalyptus provided considerable fuel, many called for their removal. Lewis is clearly pro-eucalyptus, tying those in California who are against the Australian tree to other types of nativism. He scolds those 'outraged by the blue gum' to take a 'long look in the mirror' followed by a litany of figures related on environmental degradation to show that we, as an 'invasive species' ourselves, have little standing to argue against other invasives (p. 143). I do not think this follows: knowing how species from other places can alter complex ecosystems should at least mean reflecting on those changes. Lewis writes about the planting of eucalyptus trees as windbreaks and for aesthetic purposes, to ornament 'otherwise featureless landscapes'. He notes that before the eucalyptus the Central Valley of California was 'decidedly untreed, despite beautiful rivers and wetlands' (p. 144). However, these landscapes without trees were not barren; they were simply different types of ecosystems. When Lewis declares that 'all trees are good' (p. 158), it sounds like he is privileging certain kinds of plant life over

others. Lewis questions human ability to judge the integrity or health of ecosystems (p. 157) in the present, but Californians in the early twentieth century did not even get this far. Eucalyptus trees have been in California long enough that they are a part of new ecosystems – witness the monarch butterfly – but this does not erase the loss of earlier ones.

Lewis is clearly aware of the many relationships trees have with insects, fungi, birds and people. A significant disadvantage of trying to cover twelve trees with roughly twenty pages each is that the complexity of connections between trees and their environments cannot be fully addressed. *Twelve Trees* is a lively introduction, but will likely leave readers already familiar with our arboreal companions wishing for more.

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