H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dana Lyons. *The Tree.* Bellevue, Washington: Illumination Arts Publishing Company, 2002. 26 pp. $16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9701907-1-0.

Reviewed by Tom Leskiw (Freelance Writer and Naturalist)

Published on H-Nilas (May, 2003)

A Tree's-Eye View

A Tree's-Eye View

I hesitate to term Dana Lyons's tale *The Tree* a children's book. Although the sumptuous artwork and short length are consistent with books targeted for children, it definitely deserves a wider audience. Based on a song written by the author, the story is told through the eyes of an 800-year-old Douglas fir. The tree illuminates the wonders that it has seen: wind, fire, fledgling owls, wolves, grizzlies, and the annual return of the salmon. The mention of wolves and grizzlies is noteworthy, as it raises the question, When did wolves and grizzlies disappear from the Pacific Northwest? Historical events in the region, now nearly forgotten by humans, would seem like just last month to a being like a Douglas fir that's lived for 800 years. By seeing the world–even if for a short time–through the tree's eyes, we cannot help but develop empathy for its plight.

Author of the hilarious, politically imbued song "Cows With Guns," Lyons takes a more serious tone here. In the foreword, he discloses that this story was inspired by a big Douglas fir in the Quinault River Valley of Washington State. Even without this information, readers immediately sense that they are engaged in an authentic, place-based tale, written by someone who *has been there*. The tree recounts what it has experienced: idyllic moments spent watching a family of owls fledge and eagles fishing the river, interspersed with powerful, stochastic events, such as lightning-caused fires and blizzards. David Danioth, the illustrator, has done a wonderful job of drawing us into the sunlight-dappled realm of forest and river. The tree's-eye view of a grizzly marking its territory by clawing the tree's furrowed bark is especially evocative.

But, times being what they are, the tree's recollections are cut short when it hears approaching bulldozers. Sensing its impending mortality, the tree asks, "Who will house the owl? And who will hold that river's shore? " At that moment, the tree hears the sound of children running. It feels them lock hands, circling its trunk. "People are holding on to my branches, so the wind may always carry my song." The message here is clear: individuals and bands of like-minded people *can* make a difference.

Now, some minor negative observations. I wondered how the children were able to climb the tree when the illustration shows an absence of limbs to a height of twenty-eight feet. Also, several aspects of the salmon (adipose fin, base of tail, and overall girth) are not accurately depicted.

These small criticisms aside, the tale of *The Tree* was–rightfully–deemed inspirational enough to have merited forewords penned by such luminaries as Pete Seeger, Dr. Jane Goodall, and Julia Butterfly Hill. Whether or not you agree with the politics of tree sitters such as Ms. Hill, they appear to be here for the long term. I live just a handful of miles from Luna, the ancient redwood that Ms. Hill spent two years defending by living on a platform atop its branches. As I write these words (April 2003), over twenty-tree sitters have populated a nearby arboreal village of protest against the unsustainable liquidation logging of a Houston-based corporation. As someone who has been dedicated to salmon restoration for better than twenty years, I grow weary of the timber wars, the punch and counter-punch. Ideally, we will continue to move toward a solution that might best be described as "education, not litigation." By enabling us to empathize with an 800-year-old tree, this book deftly educates us and I highly recommend it.

However, until garish greed is exposed for the antisocial behavior it is, and regulatory agencies put those resources entrusted to them first, we will continue to muddle forward. *The Tree* has posed a valid question: "Humans, what is your place in the world? " For a myriad of reasons, we must find the time to formulate an answer.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas

Citation: Tom Leskiw. Review of Lyons, Dana, *The Tree*. H-Nilas, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7566

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.