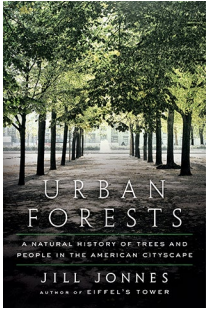


Elm Street, USA



Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees and People in the American Cityscape

By Jill Jonnes

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US\$32.00

These are good times for those of us who love books about trees. Stroll through the nature section of your local bookstore and you'll find entire tomes dedicated to single species, including the sequoia, mahogany, bristlecone pine, oak, ginkgo, American elm, longleaf pine and many others. Next, make your way to the photography section, and stand dazzled by Robert Adams's *Tree Line* and Rachel Sussman's *The Oldest Living Things in the World*. Swing over to science, and, if they are not already sold out, pick up a copy of David George Haskell's *The Songs of Trees* or Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*. And make sure you save plenty of time to browse through the literature, history and culture stacks. There you'll find Jared Farmer's *Trees in Paradise*, John Fowles's *The Tree* and Richard Higgins's *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*. Once you leave the shop and step out on your city's sidewalk, light wallet balanced by heavy bag of new books, spare a moment to look around. There's a good chance your eye will greet green leaves. Why? That is the story Jill Jonnes tells in her newest book, *Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees and People in the American Cityscape*, recently released in a paperback edition.

Jonnes is well suited to her subject. *Urban Forests* is her sixth book about city life, and with a decades-long career as a journalist, her tone and pacing are both light and brisk. She surefootedly takes her audience through two hundred years of America's fascination with ornamental city trees — from the introduction of *Ginkgo biloba* in the late eighteenth century to the 9/11 Survivor Tree (a Callery pear) — and she manages to do so while avoiding the overwhelming historical minutiae that characterize some of the classic, encyclopedic reference works on American forests. But Jonnes also has a PhD in history, and it shows in her research — it is clear that Jonnes has logged long hours

in the archives, and one of the pleasures of the book is watching as she unfolds one delightful, well-chosen sylvan detail after another. For instance, in the early twentieth century, a tree-crazy amateur historian named Erle Kauffman tracked down “every famous elm, oak, horse chestnut, and willow where [George] Washington had sheltered, tied his horse, held meetings, or eaten breakfast, from Valley Forge to Charleston to Cambridge.” And while Jonnes's method is to find colourful figures like Kauffman to help move her story along, it becomes clear, after a few chapters, that such devotion to trees has been a rather normal, constant feature of American urban life. One of the book's great strengths is that, by giving our everyday city trees deep histories, she makes them unfamiliar, new things that demand our renewed attention and appreciation.

This is an important moment for taking a long look at the trees on our streets. It's not just that trees scrub carbon dioxide from the atmosphere — although Jonnes writes that urban forests “can and should serve as one part of an obvious, low-tech solution” to the catastrophe of global climate change — but that trees make our lives better. We've long known this. Trees as guarantors of the good life go back thousands of years in different world cultures (think of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden), but Jonnes wants to celebrate the fact that, by the early 1980s, scientists were increasingly able to quantify the exact benefits to public health that trees could yield. This was the dawn of what we now call ecosystem services, and it's clear that Jonnes's heart lies with the likes of sylvan-named Rowan Rowntree, a scientist for the US Forest Service who eventually tabulated just how much urban trees could decrease surface water runoff, reduce urban heat islands and clean the air. In Chicago, Rowntree's team showed in their landmark report *Chicago's Urban Forestry Ecosystem: Results of the Chicago Urban Forest Climate Project* (Macpherson, E. G. et al., US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, 1994) that trees could provide US\$1 million per year in air-quality-improvement services. For Jonnes, this quantification is the key to a greener, healthier world that benefits everyone. After all, trees can help address issues of urban inequality (the greenest sections of a city tend to be the richest and whitest) and even heal injury: Jonnes reports that studies have shown that those hospital patients who can see a tree

from their window are released a day earlier than those who look out at a blank nothing.

And yet, as Jonnes details in the second half of her book, trees are under attack — literally, in the case of Chestnut blight, Dutch elm disease and emerald ash borer, pathogens that have destroyed billions of urban street trees. Furthermore, few trees can withstand the poor soil, road salt and general abuse of the urban environment. Add to this an aging urban forest that desperately needs expensive care, and it becomes clear that the very health of our cities is at risk. *Urban Trees*'s greatest strength is that, without veering overtly into politics, it patiently makes the case that the USA ought to summon the political will to fund research, plant trees and care for the country's urban forest. It's a work of gentle advocacy motivated by concern, founded on archival digging and presented in an even, non-partisan tone; a history in which hard scientists wielding crunched data play the role of hero. This is also the book's major problem.

One of the great difficulties in writing about trees is determining what story to tell and how to tell it, because everywhere you look in American history, you'll find a tree. Trees have historically provided most of the stuff of our daily lives (including false teeth, roads and mattresses), have filled our poetry and novels and music, have captivated our artists' eyes, have fired our explorers' imaginations and have compelled our scientists' attention. We use logic trees to help our decision-making and family trees to give us a sense of belonging. We plant memorial trees to honour loved ones. We use trees as markers of class. As whipping posts, trees have historically been used for places of punishment, and their noose-bearing branches have long been symbols of white supremacy. Trees are everywhere you look in the American past, and this makes it impossible to tell a complete sylvan history. An author has to choose which story to tell.

In choosing to present the history of urban trees as the unchecked march of progress towards hard, data-driven science, Jonnes elides much of the contentious history that accompanies anything of such cultural importance as a tree. For instance, race. Jonnes notes in passing that the inventor of Arbor Day, J. Sterling Morton, was an Abraham Lincoln-loathing defender of slavery, and though she writes that his 1872 invention of Arbor Day “brought out his better angels and a gentler kind of fame”,

Morton remained, until the end of his days, an unrepentant racist. Here he is, in his *Illustrated History of Nebraska*: “negroes are neither by nature nor by education, entitled to political nor social equality with the white race” (Jacob North and Company, Lincoln, 1905). Planting trees was a way to cultivate the right sort of nation, and for Morton, that nation was white.

Morton was not alone, and a strain of xenophobia has long accompanied urban forestry. As Jonnes is quick to point out, the ailanthus, one of the most successful urban trees, hailed originally from China, where it was known as ‘the tree of heaven’, but by the mid-nineteenth century, it was reviled as un-American, as overly ‘oriental’. This racism made its way into the Plant Quarantine Act of 1912, which was passed, in part, in reaction to the Japanese government’s gift of cherry trees to be planted in Washington, DC. Those trees turned out to harbour two kinds of pest, and so were destroyed. But the Quarantine Act’s fearful rhetoric about

foreign invasion mirrored that of the 1907 “Gentleman’s Agreement” between Japan and the US which eliminated Japanese immigration, and the 1924 Immigration Act which included the infamous Asian Exclusion Act. Together, all three acts “sought to manage human aliens in much the same way as plant aliens,” as historian Gayle Brandow Samuels puts it in *Enduring Roots: Encounters with Trees, History, and the American Landscape* (Rutgers Univ. Press, New Brunswick, 1999). The controversy continues to this day, as many historians and sociologists of science have pointed out that the rhetoric of conservation ecology as aimed at invasive species resonates uncomfortably with “America First” anti-immigrant nationalism.

To be fair, Jonnes is not interested in social criticism, and the light journalistic touch that makes the book an easy read also makes it difficult to dive deeply into the intellectual history of science. Her book is self-admittedly a celebration of “great city trees, and of the Americans—

presidents, plant explorers, visionaries, citizen activists, scientists, nurserymen, and tree nerds—whose arboreal passions have shaped and ornamented the nation’s municipalities”. In this age of burgeoning environmental despair, she wants to tell hopeful, happy stories. And she does this well. But the most important thing that trees have always offered us is our own reflection. Trees tell us who we are and where we have come from. They are our living links to the past, and that past has often been a violent one. We may very well need hope, but we cannot let hope blind us to the burden of our history. □

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Competing interests

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