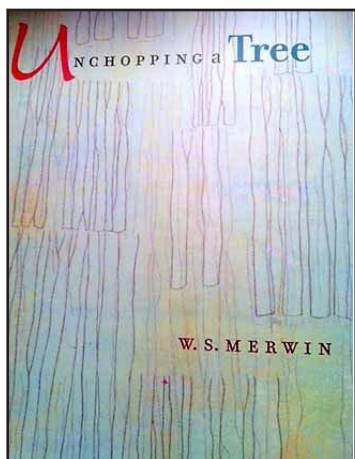


## Book Review

### Small Book - Big Thoughts: W.S. Merwin



*You won't look at those magnificent trees along Burnt Mountain Road quite the same way after reading this book.*

**By David R. Altman**  
Books & Writers Editor

Looking for a great “gift book”? You might try this one (but don't give it away too quickly).

W.S. Merwin, the former U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner, has written an unusual little book called *Unchopping a Tree*. It explains - literally and figuratively - how to put a tree back together that has been cut down.

Its readable-in-one-sitting length of 45 pages, beautifully illustrated by Trinity University professor and artist Liz Ward, basically begin with a tree's “... sawdust crushed bark chips” and then leads the reader to retrace the steps to rebuild it.

Sounds simple enough, right? Not so fast.

Here's how the book begins: “Start with the leaves, the small twigs, and the nest that have been shaken, ripped, or broken off by the fall; these must be gathered and attached once again to their respective places. It is not arduous work, unless major limbs have been smashed or muti-

lated.”

Merwin's eloquent prose, nearly Biblical in its simplicity and its depth, gives us a sort of resurrection of the tree. You learn how complex its life had been as you struggle with how to restore that life. He takes you through the ‘steps’ necessary to “unchop” this great tree and to put it back (where it belongs?). And he asks us, as readers, how it makes us feel along the way.

This little book, which looks like one of those small gift books you might buy as an impulse item while standing in line at a bookstore, is as powerful as it is sensitive. It is packed with imagery and emotion. It might make you think differently about trees - but even more about yourself, and the feeling you may have once you have finished the rebuilding. If you can be honest with yourself (easy to say, hard to do) his prose will engage your insecurities and push you toward acceptance of some basic truths about our environment.

Merwin, who grew up in Pennsylvania and has been a practicing Buddhist in Hawaii for more than 40 years, is also remembered in literary circles for donating his Pulitzer Prize winnings to the anti-war movement back in 1971. Merwin has had a life-long interest in preserving our environment - most specifically our rainforests.

Believe me, even if you are not a tree-hugger, you won't look at those magnificent trees along Burnt Mountain Road quite the same way after reading this book. You might buy it as a gift, but I bet you will read it first before giving it to a friend.

Merwin's compelling little book will leave you feeling exhausted. Not from reading the 45 pages - most of which are but a paragraph long - but from the almost mystical journey you travel to put back what should never have been taken away.