

Book Review

The tree collectors: Tales of arboreal obsession, A. Stewart. Penguin Random House LLC, New York, NY (2024). 304 pp ISBN 9780593446850

Though relevant to disciplinary specialists (arborists, foresters, horticulturists, botanists), *The tree collectors: Tales of arboreal obsession* will have broad appeal to an audience of tree-enthusiasts and the public-at-large. Written and illustrated by New York Times bestselling author Amy Stewart, *The tree collectors...* is comprised of 10 parts, each with descriptive titles commencing with “Healers” and closing with “Visionaries”. The 304-page hardcover book is informative, interesting, and personalizes the human experience of its interviewees as they detail their interactions with trees. From descriptions ranging from approaches to grafting, to private tree collections that are open to the public, to a list of surviving Olympic oaks, the book also stimulates interests in trees from innovative perspectives. The inside cover jacket states that the book is a “tribute to a devoted group of nature lovers making their lives – and the world – more beautiful one tree at a time”.

In the Introduction, the author endeavors to unearth the motivations for tree collecting, adroitly titling each of the 10 sections of the book accordingly (‘Healers’, ‘Ecologists’, ‘Artists’, ‘Curators’, ‘Educators’, ‘Community Builders’, ‘Enthusiasts’, ‘Seekers’, ‘Preservationists’, ‘Visionaries’). The author also gives a nod to larger-scale efforts to catalogue trees including Francisco Arjona’s efforts to inventory trees of Mexico City and Sairus Patel’s oversight of the Tree of Stanford project – a living, and historical, inventory of the trees of Stanford University’s campus. The final segment of the introduction outlines practical considerations, requisites, and barriers that relate to tree collecting including land ownership and seed availability; it also discusses the effects that humans experience as they spend time around trees, as found in the practice of forest bathing (shinrin-yoku).

The first section (‘Healers’) opens with 6 vignettes about individuals that have intermingled the art and practice of growing trees as part of recovery from periods of challenge. These range from experiences with persimmon trees and war, to memorial trees planted to commemorate loved ones lost – as well as times of celebration – to trees planted and grown for their therapeutic benefits for center residents. Upon experiencing these trees, one individual remarked that he “...didn’t know the world could be such a beautiful place” (p.15).

Through the installation of trees in arctic-like conditions, to the establishment of small-scale native (Miyawaki) forests, to the planting of unusual trees in vacant urban space, the following section – ‘Ecologists’ – features 4 stories about individuals who wish to influence their surrounding environment for the better, vis-a-vis the planting of trees. Though most people view trees positively, some of these efforts transpired in a rather clandestine fashion: “If I’d have moved in and planted a jungle, the neighbors would’ve reported me...I had to do it slowly and sneakily” stated one of the tree collectors (D. Mahoney, p.45).

‘Artists’ features stories from individuals who express creativity through trees. This section includes chronicles from those working with

bonsai, to a property artist creating distinct shapes and patterns in living trees, to an artisan borrowing from orchardists as he grafts several different fruiting trees onto a single specimen: “I have some varieties that are thousands of years old. That means that at least every fifty years, somebody’s taken a branch from one of those trees and grafted it onto another tree. You see yourself as a tiny blip in its existence.” (S. Van Aken, p63–64)

Further into the heart of the book, the section titled ‘Seekers’ features 4 vignettes from individuals that have travelled the globe in search of trees. This included an individual who collected an impressive 150,000 specimens, to someone who introduced over a dozen new plants to the commercial trade, to a couple that started a non-profit dedicated to collecting and conserving rare and endangered trees (Far Reaches Botanical Conservancy); they state that their work makes them feel like they’re “...contributing to the world...and making some very small atonement for the idiocy of the human race” (S. Milliken & K. Dobson, p.240).

The following section ‘Preservationists’ details 5 individuals working to protect and conserve trees. These include efforts by one tree enthusiast to conserve – and re-establish – American chestnut in the landscape, as well as an undertaking by another who was part of forming a nonprofit (Temperate Orchard Conservancy) to graft and propagate the thousands of apple varieties grown by a long-time orchardist in the Pacific Northwest. ‘Preservationists’ closes with a story about an individual who passionately pursued the planting of trees – including descendants from historic trees – on her own land conservancy, as well as on the common land at her homeowner’s association. “As a wine broker, we were importing wine from around the world...I wish I’d been on this tree path instead. It gives me so much pleasure” (V. Turner, p.268).

The book’s concluding section ‘Visionaries’, discusses 4 individuals with very distinct experiences – from an historic Olympic champion, to the founder of an arboretum in Korea (Chollipo Arboretum), to the chief arborist of a major global corporation – yet who also share a forward-looking perspective towards the environment and the trees that they tend. “If you don’t want to have a boring life, you might as well take on the biggest challenges there are out there. That’s what I’m doing with these trees” (D. Muffly, p.287).

In composing this work, the author writes “If this book accomplishes anything, I hope it inspires you to plant a tree. Or two. Or maybe a dozen” (p.xxiii). Readers should be assured that in this effort, author Amy Stewart has unequivocally succeeded. Novice or expert, *The tree collectors...* is indeed a worthwhile addition to anyone’s personal or professional library.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Richard W. Harper: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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