

REVIEW

A Review of “*Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest*”

Review Reference

Suzanne, S. (2021). *Finding the Mother Tree: Uncovering the Wisdom and Intelligence of the Forest*. USA: Alfred Knopf Penguin Random House; UK: Allen Lane, Penguin Random House, 2021

Review Author

Bronwyn Davies 

Melbourne University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
Email: daviesb@unimelb.edu.au

Simard’s book is not only a gift to the reader, it is an extraordinary gift the world, if only the world will listen.

This is an absorbing and heart-warming story, braiding together Simard’s childhood growing up among foresters, and her later love of, and life in, Canadian forests. Integral to this life in, and love of the forest, is her work, first as a researcher within the forestry industry, and later as an academic at the University of British Columbia. Her research story reads like a detective story: “I poured everything I knew into becoming a sleuth of what heals the natural world” she writes. There were new and urgent questions to be asked, and new ways of coming to understand the forest, which she was intent on finding.

Her book is a book of adventure, and a tale of survival. There were foresters and policy-makers who blocked her way, dismissing her research — refusing, or unable, to listen to her with an open mind. To listen would have meant re-thinking their forestry practices, and they were not able, or willing, to do that; it was easier to pour scorn and contempt on a woman who dared to think she could interrupt their life-as-usual, and have the cheek to ask them to consider global warming.

And it is also a tale that is true to its subject — it is collaborative; just as a tree is not a tree alone, but a being in intimate relation with other beings, linked by their shared mycorrhizal network into a forest, so Simard’s story is one of collaborating with her familial and collegial networks to produce ground-breaking research.

Forestry had ceased being the industry it was when Simard was growing up. Her family had worked *with* the forest, always taking trees selectively, that is, in such a way that the forest could recover itself; new trees could grow in place of those that the foresters had taken, *because the forest itself had been allowed to survive*. It was the forest itself that seeded and sheltered and cared for the growth of the younger members of the forest, connected to each other through their mycelial networks. With the current practice of clearfelling, in contrast, the capacity of the forest to regenerate itself is destroyed. The earth is scraped bare, removing the mycelial and fungal network that sustains the forest, and it is poisoned, through killing all the plants that are mistakenly seen to be in competition with the wood cash crop.

Although clearfelling has been practiced around the world for some hundreds of years, the emergence of clearfelling, or clearcutting, as mandated forestry practice is more recent, and may

be defended, as Wohlleben (2021) documents, with extreme violence. In clearfelling *all, or most*, trees in a specified area are uniformly cut down. From the 1970s and 80s, neoliberalism has emerged throughout the global world, advocating, as it does, that financial profit is the single (and I might add, singularly idiotic) value to be brought to bear on forestry industry policy and decision-making. Globally, forestry has become a cut-throat industry, ignorant and at war with the very forest that offers the foresters, and so many others worldwide, shelter and livelihood.

When New South Wales was colonised in the late 1700s and early 1800s, farmers were granted blocks of land to farm, on condition they cleared all the trees off and fenced their land. It was backbreaking work back then (Davies, 2021), and little thought was given to the harm our ancestral colonisers were set upon doing to a land that had flourished without such practices for thousands of years. Indigenous people have been robbed of their homes and their livelihoods by both the colonial and the more recent neoliberal forestry policies and practices. Colonists everywhere brought with them a peculiar kind of human hubris, which assumed that whatever they wanted they should be able to take — without end.

In the present day, Simard's science is up against the neoliberal greed and profit motives, which are based on similar assumptions.

When clearfelling became standard forestry practice, and “sustainability” the buzzword that suggested all that destruction was nevertheless under control — clearfelled forests were to be replaced with new forests starting with rows of small seedlings. But the new seedlings are inclined to be weak and sickly. With the underground forest infrastructure having been destroyed, there is nothing or no-one to support the small weakly seedlings. What healthy re-growth needs is the mycelium and the fungus that run for thousands of miles underground bringing water to trees when they are dry, and vital energy and chemicals to the building of older trees and the nurture of the smaller, weaker ones. This they do in return for which the trees bring chlorophyll to them in a mutually supportive and collaborative network.

Simard found herself caught in a pincer squeeze between the need to have her work published, in order to be taken seriously in her workplace and also by those working in forestry, and the imperative to do the kind of research she found that she must do if she would open up new insights into the relational, interactive life of the beings of the forest: “I soon learned that it was almost impossible for a study of the diversity and connectivity of a whole ecosystem to get into print. *There's no control!* The reviewers cried at my early papers.” But she persevered, with an intense belief in the significance of her work. “Somehow . . . I have come full circle to stumble on some indigenous ideals: Diversity matters. And everything in the universe *is* connected—between the forests and the prairies, the land and the water, the sky and the soil. The spirits and the living, the people and all the other creatures.”

One of the most exciting parts of this book, (apart from the fact of course that Simard's research shows us how forests can save us from global warming, and from our all too human, competitive, individualised selves), is that her thinking and her research practice break through the positivist stranglehold that had held the forest's power and intelligence hidden from her. For those of us who developed qualitative research methods, and who have worked with them all these years, it is incredibly exciting to see qualitative research taken up in the fields of forestry and ecology; but more, that the burden that weighs on our current lives, the fear, that is, of global warming and all the harm it will do before the end comes, can actually be solved if only we learn to listen to the forests.

It is still the case that some foresters continue on their destructive path, hastening global warming, and refusing the insight that, if treated properly, the forests have the wisdom and intelligence both to satisfy human desire for wood *and* to care for the earth, averting global warming. I write this review in the hope that her ideas will be spread more broadly by everyone who reads it.

It is essential reading for those who are studying and researching in the field of environmental education. It teaches us the necessity of endurance and hard work in pursuit of new insights into,

and respect for, the natural world; it teaches us the centrality of ethics in our work, an ethics grounded in relationality, and it offers us the possibility of hope, which we desperately need if we are to keep faith with the earth and its inhabitants.

References

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Author Biography

Bronwyn Davies is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Melbourne, and Emeritus Professor at Western Sydney University. Her PhD was from The University of New England 1980. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate at University of Uppsala, 2008. She has published more than 20 books and 100 papers. See bronwyn@bronwyndavies.com.au for further details.