



Secret Voices from the Forest: Thoughts and Dreams of North American Trees - Volume Two: The Midcontinent

Laura J. Merrill

Laura J. Merrill, Illustrator

Brian R. Mitchell, Contributor

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This personification of wise trees offers spiritual insight into leading a peaceful, satisfying life.

As a wildlife book, *Secret Voices from the Forest* is a deep breath of fresh air. Trees are the main characters in Laura J. Merrill's book: a box elder, a staghorn sumac, a black walnut, and many more. They all provide commentary on human life, but their actions speak as loudly as the trees themselves do not. Simply by being, these trees support a rich variety of wildlife that comes to life in these beautifully illustrated pages.

It is easy to love this book merely because it is easy on the eyes. The brightly colored pencil drawings not only help to visually describe trees and other wildlife, but they also decorate the book as borders and backgrounds. The visual aesthetic works so well with the text that it's fair to say that the words are not more powerful than the pictures.

Secret Voices from the Forest strongly evokes magic realism in that it both relates opinions and advice from trees and delivers real information about the ecosystems that surround them. This combination of fact and fantasy results in a refreshing new perspective on the natural world that lingers long past the last page. The ideal place to read this book is within a natural environment, like on a hike or in an overgrown park.

The trees' thoughts on humanity are parentlike and overall more positive than one might expect, considering how often human beings chop trees down. Trees encourage endurance, urge the human race to slow down and savor their lives, and encourage humanity to ponder its potential. The advice of the plum tree is a particularly uplifting example: "You have the ability to conquer death. You do it by breaking through the veil of time, but it happens in your mind."

Supporting facts about "companions," the plant and animal species that live with each type of tree, ramble through brief histories, Native American folklore, general description, and medicine. They flow with the easy pace of a conversation with a park ranger over the course of a long nature walk. Though these companion vignettes aren't likely to be useful as scientific nature guides, their artistic value and coziness augment the book's inherent friendliness and will leave even non-nature lovers with warm feelings toward prairie dogs and sneezeweed.

Plant enthusiasts and lovers of nature will relish in this short but highly rereadable volume. Their friends and family will also appreciate the print edition for its potential value as a holiday gift. Anyone who picks it up will have a hard time putting it down, if for no other reason than the renewed sense of wonder it infuses into the natural world.

ANNA CALL (September 18, 2014)

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