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Tree: One Life That Made a Difference

Norman E. Kjono
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"Those who genuinely know the universe and its ways understand that it is merely a functioning constant, on a cosmic scale, of the reality that what one puts out truly does come around," Norman E. Kjono writes. This is perhaps the key point in his novel, *Tree: One Life that Made a Difference*.

The book begins with a series of minor earthquakes that strike one small valley. The animals and plants who reside in this valley deliberate at great length on how to protect themselves. One tree stands quietly throughout the discussions, laying its roots deep into the hill on which it lives. When a great quake comes and destroys much of the land, this tree and its roots are able to hold the hill together. This inspires the inhabitants of the valley to adopt a new lifestyle, with each doing its part to make the valley the best it can be. They think of themselves as "lifes," individuals that are each an important part of their community.

For years the valley prospers and many visitors come to enjoy it. Then one day Owl asks what would happen if visitors brought their negativity and left it in the valley. This question leads the crows and jays to propose a toll program for all visitors. Many feel that this contentious proposal would do more harm than good. The heart of this book is the lessons learned by the valley inhabitants in the course of their discussions—chiefly that life must be lived in a way that focuses on positive energy and in doing the best that each individual can for themselves, their community, and the world beyond.

The author has taken on a monumental task—to supply the meaning of life. He contends that, "the overriding purpose for all was to grow together in spirit and then to help others do the same." The book is written as a philosophical discourse between valley inhabitants; but 300 pages of debate seems overly long. The author also includes a series of often awkward poems and songs to help illustrate his ideas. One verse of "Glory!" sung by the creatures of the valley reads:

> *What makes this great, this our good land,*
> *Is that we've learned to all hold hands.*
> *We understand that, rich or poor,*
> *We all must count, 'cause we're neighbors.*

Kjono bases his lessons on the belief that there is a creator with a divine plan and that everyone possesses an innate sense of what is right, a presupposition that may be difficult for some readers to accept. It is hard to believe that what works in this utopian valley could work as well in the real world, but Kjono's philosophy is quite beautiful. One tree does its best to take care of its world and in so doing inspires the entire universe to follow its example. Perhaps even in the face of war, political corruption, and corporate greed, each of us might do the same.
CATHERINE THURESON (May 18, 2010)

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