

The Ents Among Us: Trees in Literature, Myth, and Imagination

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Photos by Cheryl Ames



For as long as people have told stories, trees have been more than scenery. They have served as meeting places, sources of wisdom, symbols of life, and even characters in their own right. Across cultures and centuries, writers and storytellers have imagined trees as beings with personalities, memories, and intentions. While modern society often treats trees as infrastructure, landscaping, or natural

resources, our stories suggest a different understanding—one in which trees are fellow participants in the world around us.

Why do humans so often imagine trees as living presences? And what might these stories teach us about our relationship with the natural world?

Ancient and Wise

Trees are among the oldest living organisms people encounter in everyday life. A large oak may have witnessed centuries of human history. Ancient redwoods and giant sequoias can live for thousands of years. Even a neighborhood maple may outlive several generations of the same family. Because trees endure while human lives pass quickly, cultures around the world have often associated them with wisdom and memory.

Many mythologies feature sacred trees that connect heaven and earth, symbolize knowledge, or serve as guardians of important places. In Norse mythology, the great world tree Yggdrasil holds together the cosmos. In numerous Indigenous traditions, particular trees are regarded as elders, teachers, or relatives rather than simply resources. These stories reflect a common intuition: trees seem to exist on a timescale larger than our own.

Trees in the World View of Northwest Indigenous People



Long before modern conservation movements, the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest understood forests as communities of living relatives. While each tribe has its own distinct traditions, many share a worldview that emphasizes respect, reciprocity, and gratitude toward the natural world. Among the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, and Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, trees have long provided shelter, canoes, tools, medicines, baskets, and ceremonial materials—not simply as resources to be taken, but as gifts received with care and responsibility. Traditional teachings often encourage taking only what is needed, expressing gratitude, and ensuring that the forest remains healthy for generations yet to come. These perspectives remind us

that forests are not merely collections of trees but living communities to which we also belong—a way of seeing that echoes the enduring wisdom found in both Indigenous traditions and the stories that imagine trees as ancient, watchful beings.

When Trees Become Characters

Perhaps no literary trees are more famous than the Ents in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The Ents are ancient tree-like beings who speak slowly, remember long histories, and act as guardians of the forest. They are not merely part of the landscape—they are individuals with personalities, emotions, and agency.

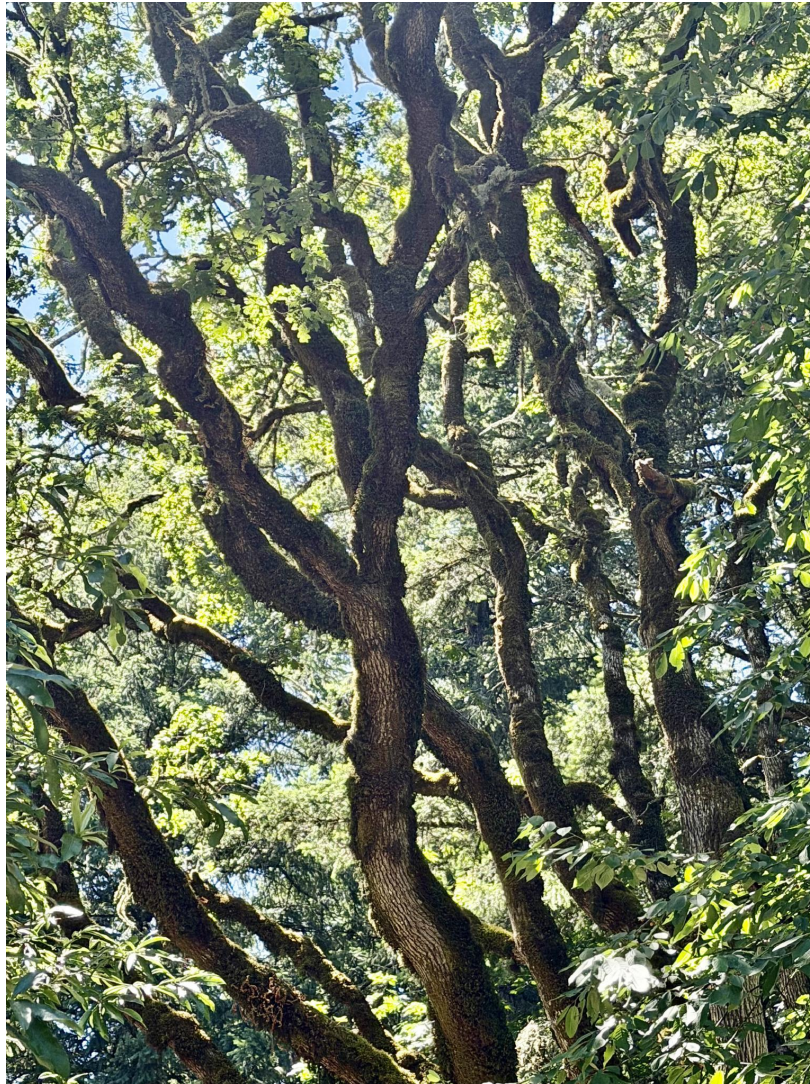
Tolkien's Ents have resonated with readers for generations because they embody qualities many people already sense in real forests: patience, endurance, and quiet strength.

Other authors have also transformed trees into characters. In L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy encounters living apple trees that argue and defend their fruit. In numerous fairy tales and folk traditions, enchanted forests contain trees that speak, guide travelers, or offer warnings. These stories invite readers to imagine what the world might look like if trees were not objects but neighbors.

Trees Through a Child's Eyes

Children's literature frequently gives trees voices, feelings, and personalities. In Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*, the tree serves as a devoted companion throughout a boy's life. In *The Lorax*, trees become symbols of ecological responsibility and the consequences of environmental neglect. Stories such as these encourage children to view trees as living beings worthy of care and respect. Even books that do not feature talking trees often portray forests as places of mystery, wonder, and relationship. Young readers learn that trees are not simply background scenery, but important participants in the stories unfolding around them.

Long before children learn about photosynthesis or ecosystems, many have already learned to care about trees through stories.



Why We Personify Trees

Psychologists have long observed that people naturally assign human-like qualities to animals, objects, and even landscapes. Giving trees personalities may be one way our minds help us relate to living things that are otherwise very different from ourselves.

Stories create emotional connections. When readers identify with a tree character, they begin to see trees less as objects and more as fellow living beings. Empathy follows.

This may explain why storytelling can be such a powerful conservation tool. Facts can inform us about trees, but stories help us care about them.

Research in environmental psychology suggests that people are more likely to protect what they feel connected to. By giving trees names, voices, and stories, literature encourages readers to imagine the world from a perspective beyond their own.

From Characters to Communities

Modern science has revealed that forests are more interconnected and dynamic than previously understood. Trees communicate through chemical signals, respond to environmental changes, and form relationships with fungi and other organisms. While trees are not literally talking to one another as they do in stories, they are far from passive objects.

In some ways, scientific discoveries are bringing us closer to ideas that storytellers have explored for centuries. Forests are not simply collections of separate trees; they are living communities filled with relationships and interactions.

The old stories may not have been scientifically precise, but they captured something important: trees are active participants in the ecosystems they inhabit.

Seeing Trees Differently

Stories shape perception. They influence what we notice, what we value, and what we choose to protect. When literature portrays trees as wise elders, steadfast companions, or guardians of the land, it invites us to see them differently in the real world. The maple in a neighborhood park, the Douglas-fir along a trail, or the oak planted by a previous generation may begin to feel less like scenery and more like fellow travelers through time.

Perhaps that is why stories about trees endure. They remind us that the natural world is not merely a backdrop for human life. It is a community of living beings with whom we share the landscape.

And once we begin to see trees as characters rather than objects, caring for them becomes a much more natural response.

Resources and Further Reading

Mark Bekoff, *Why Trees and People Form Mutually Beneficial Relationships*, Psychology Today, February 2, 2023, [psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com).

Melissa Breyer, *Trees Form Friendships and Remember Their Experiences*, April 28, 2023, [treehugger.com](https://www.treehugger.com).

Indigenous Beliefs About Trees and Their Connection to Them, May 25, 2024, silvotherapy.squarespace.com.

Gustavo Nascimento, *Trees: Bridges Between Past, Present, and Future*, Smithsonian Gardens, April 22, 2025, gardens.si.edu.

Richard Schiffman, *Are Trees Sentient Beings? Certainly says German Forester*, Yale Environment 360, November 16, 2016, e360.yale.edu.

Key Examples of Personification in Literature

John Fowles, *The Tree*. A tree is depicted as a character with emotions and experiences, reflecting on its existence.

A. E. Housman, *Loveliest of Trees*. Cherry trees are described as “wearing white for Eastertide,” showing their human-like qualities.

Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*. The Lorax speaks for the trees, emphasizing their voice and importance in the environment.

Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*. The book showcases a tree that selflessly gives to a boy throughout his life.

Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Life of Trees*. While nonfiction, it personifies trees by discussing their communication and social networks.