

Listening to the Trees

A Metareflection on Design Considerations During the Creation of a “Trees and Forests” Literary Thematic Package

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Abstract

From Winnie the Pooh’s Hundred Acre Wood to the Ents in *The Lord of the Rings* and Truffula Trees in *The Lorax*, trees have long had a central place in stories told to children. This article reflects on the creation of a tree- and forest-centered literary thematic package through the lens of community, kinship, and agency. Rooted in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), this collection of picturebooks, novels, videos, digital resources, and artwork reframes trees as more than passive materials for human use and invites students to reflect on their connections not only with other humans but with the plants, animals, and more-than-human beings who share this planet. Designed as a resource for K-12 educators, this work discusses the creation of the package, selection criteria, and possibilities for developing future collections, offering practical guidance and inspiration for educators seeking relational, story-based thematic approaches to climate literacy.

Keywords

Interconnectedness, collective action, ecosystem services, biodiversity, trees

in times like these...
it's necessary to talk about trees.
-Adrienne Rich

Introduction

Pause and consider for a moment your relationship with trees. Throughout history, trees have helped people build homes, collect food, create medicines, and, most importantly, breathe. This is not only true for humans but for a host of other Earthlings. From Māori tales of Tāne-mahuta to Tolkien's Mirkwood, Geisel's *The Lorax* to Applegate's *Wishtree*, trees and forests have played a deep and complex role in our cultures, traditions, and histories.

This role continues today, reflected in recent scholarship. Topics exploring tree communication (Dordel & Tölke, 2021; Simard, 2021; Wohlleben, 2016), the legal rights of trees (Epstein, 2023; Kozłowski & Song, 2022; Stone, 1972), and Indigenous arboreal science (Fishel, 2023; Kimmerer, 2013; Steinauer-Scudder & Seifert, 2024) can be seen throughout environmental humanities research. Children's literature scholars, too, have called for renewed relationships with trees, arguing for stories that cast trees in the role of protagonists (Höing, 2022; Nitzke and Braunbeck (2021), consider the parallels between trees and mothers (Duckworth, 2022), and break down humanity's separation from nature (Sakrisson, 2020).

Through recent books such as Peter Wohlleben's (2016) *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Suzanne Simard's (2021) *Finding the Mother Tree*, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass*, we see, too, that trees have their own stories to tell. They communicate, interact, make choices, protect, support, and nurture each other—much like humans do. How, then, might stories of trees and forests help build reciprocal relationships between students and the world around them?

This question is at the heart of the following metareflection examining the creation of a K-12 literary thematic package exploring trees through the lens of kinship. A literary thematic package is a collection of literature centered around a common theme, in this case, trees and forests. Other key climate literacy themes might include topics such as water, food systems, communities, biodiversity, and activism—just to name a few. Pairing story-based learning with hands-on experiences, if possible, helps further students' connection to themes.

The trees and forests theme discussed in this paper is grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)—holistic understandings of community that recognize agency among the more-than-human and kinship between all beings (Barnhard & Kawagley,

2005; Kawagley, 1998; Kimmerer, 2013; Salmon, 2000; Tom et al., 2019). This approach aligns with both the goals of climate literacy to “[develop] values, attitudes, and behavioral change aligned with how we should live to safeguard the Earth’s integrity” (Oziewicz, 2023, p. 34), and Khupe’s (2020) call for “teachers to engage students in interpretive exploration of different knowledge systems and ways of coming to know” (p. 458).

Designed to complement tree-oriented climate literacy instruction across grades K-12, the picturebooks, novels, videos, websites, games, and artwork selected for this thematic package illustrate a reframing of how trees are positioned in human understanding, imagination, and story as “they weave a web of reciprocity” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 20)—reminding us that the work of climate literacy is about more than sustainability. It is about recognizing the Earth’s gifts and giving back “in equal measure” (Kimmerer, 2017, p. 372).

The next section outlines design considerations educators can adapt when creating their own thematic packages. This is followed by a preview of selected works and concluding thoughts on future possibilities for relationally based thematic packages.

Why a Thematic Package?

Effective thematic packages create valuable opportunities for students to connect concepts across multiple literary formats, genres, and perspectives. Thematic learning has been shown to increase student engagement, knowledge transfer and application, and more effectively accommodate learning styles (Nurlaela et al., 2018). By comparing and contrasting information across a theme, students practice synthesizing content and recognizing patterns, making learning more useful and relevant and increasing the likelihood information is retained over time (Lipson et al., 1993; Nurlaela et al., 2018).

Developing the Theme

A key factor in developing an effective theme is to be clear on the intended outcome of the package. In my case, the overall goal was for students to reflect on their relationships with trees and examine their responsibilities as human Earthlings in a wider ecosystem. When developing the package, I started by exploring tree-centered literature while asking the following questions: How are trees depicted in the story—as relational beings or resource providers? Are human or nonhuman characters prioritized? To what degree does the story recognize a sense of community among trees, humans, and more-than-human beings? Other considerations for this thematic package included balancing a diversity of age ranges, formats, genres, characters, and settings.

Selecting the Literature

With these questions in mind, I prioritized literature that portrayed trees and forests in meaningful relationships with the other characters in the story. To sort through the many available resources, I created a Google Sheets document to track publication details, format, age recommendations, short summaries, and links to YouTube read-alouds when available.

I also categorized each piece of literature based on whether it depicted trees as community builders or as providers, adopting the following icons to represent each category: 🌳 for trees as community builders and 🍄 for trees as providers. The final package includes 13 picturebooks, two graphic novels, one chapter book, one middle grade science reader, two games, three videos, and two websites. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) feature in four picturebooks as well as the website *Honoring Trees* (Open Space Institute, 2024). An important note here: While Indigenous stories can offer valuable insights into building closer connections with nature, engaging students with IKS is reliant on the ability of educators to honor the relational and story-based teachings as foundations for climate literacy while resisting appropriation of specific practices. Clear recognition of any Indigenous story's source, including specific Nation or Tribal affiliation, is essential along with a classroom culture that does not trivialize or exoticize the content.

Introduction of Selected Works

The following section takes a closer look at four select works offering students a chance to reflect on and discuss their relationships with trees as well as their role in a wider, interdependent planet-wide ecosystem. In addition, chances to move discussions beyond the literature are important as well. Building in opportunities to spend time with trees as part of the thematic package, if possible, helps connect the literature to students' own lives and experiences, making the learning even more meaningful.

A Place to Start

The complete "Trees and Forests" collection can be found on the [Climatelit.org Resource Blog](https://climatelit.org/resource-blog). However, since space does not allow for a review of the entire package, this next section suggests a few works for getting started. A good place to begin is with Tera Kelley's (2022) [*Listen to the Language of the Trees: A Story of How Forests Communicate Underground*](#). Using kid-friendly language and easy to follow illustrations, this picturebook explores the systems of tree communication. A giant Douglas fir (what

Simard would call the ‘mother tree’), is shown interacting with its forest neighbors, providing food and safety for both animals and the young seedling at its base. When beetles attack, the fir sends out distress signals and other trees respond by sharing nutrients to keep the tree healthy. In this way, the story addresses scientific topics such as the wood wide web, mycorrhizal fungi, [ecosystem services](#), and [biodiversity](#) as well as opens up dialogue around [interconnectedness](#) and collective action. Middle and high school students might also enjoy Peter Wohlleben’s (2019) *Can You Hear the Trees Talking?: Discovering the Hidden Life of the Forest* or the graphic novel version *The Hidden Life of Trees: A Graphic Adaptation* (2024).

Looking for More?

Introducing tree communication as an entry point for the package can shift the image of trees from silent, solitary, and separate to relatable, agentic beings who shape, nurture, and defend their communities. This presents a scaffold for new stories to be brought into the conversation that offer additional avenues for building kinship and community. The following three titles foster connections between humans and trees, opening opportunities for students to reflect on their own relationships with nature.

The Trees

In Victor Steffensen’s (2023) *The Trees*, readers take a walk through an Australian forest. There, they learn about the special relationships between trees, land, and communities that have been nurtured over thousands of years by the Aboriginal First Nations People. This story positions trees as wise community Elders with unique talents working together with human and more-than-human beings to maintain a healthy balance. Centered in Indigenous voices, this story is a reminder that while the practice of being in reciprocal relation with trees may be new to

Western science, it has been a part of Indigenous Knowledge Systems for thousands of years. This picturebook works well for sparking classroom dialogue around collective action, [deforestation](#), reforestation, [biodiversity](#), [ecosystem services](#), Rights of Nature, Indigenous animism, and arboreal imaginaries, which is described by Nitzke & Braunbeck (2021) as a “shaping or reshaping [of] humanity’s relationship to a vegetal organism that—like no other— supports and accompanies human lives” (p. 346).

Call Me Tree / Llamame árbol

Written in both English and Spanish, Maya Christina Gonzalez's (2014) *Call Me Tree Llamame árbol* celebrates the many similarities and connections between humans and trees. In the story, both children and trees stand, reach, sing, and dream. They come in many shapes and sizes, from many different places, and they all belong. This is an affirming story of kinship between humans and trees as well as a declaration of respect and acceptance. Conversations might center around special connections students have with trees, other similarities they see between trees and humans, and ways they might bring these to life through art, music, and writing.

Wishtree

Katherine Applegate's (2017) chapterbook, *Wishtree*, reenvision the relationship between humans and trees through the voice of Red, a wise oak tree who narrates their experiences with a host of resident animals and various neighborhood humans. When Samar, a young Muslim girl, and her family face racism, Red becomes a spark for connection and change in the community. Told exclusively from Red's point of view, Applegate recenters the narrative and invites readers to see the world through a tree's eyes focusing on the agency and wisdom of trees while highlighting kinship and acceptance between human and more-than-human beings. *Wishtree* works well as both a read aloud and literature circle book integrating conversations around [interconnectedness](#), [ecosystem services](#), collective action, [biodiversity](#), Rights of Nature, Indigenous animism, and arboreal imaginaries.

Conclusion

Thematic teaching can do more than just help students connect ideas across resources and disciplines. As seen in this paper, relationally focused thematic packages can invite students to reflect on their connections not only with other humans but also with the plants, animals, and more-than-human beings who share this planet. Future ideas for packages might explore relationships with plants such as native flowers or grasses, as well as with animals, insects, landforms, elements, or even the Earth itself—following the example of Brian Selznick's *Big Tree* (2023). Relational themes such as these foreground Indigenous Knowledge Systems and illuminate what a relational thematic study can offer students: new ways of seeing and interacting with the more-than-human world and a recognition that we are just one piece of a much larger community.

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