

Reading and Writing with Trees

by Mandy Haggith

James has mental health problems, and after a long period in hospital he is now living in a half-way house, aiming for an independent life. Along with a group of fellow residents he goes weekly to the nearby community woods, where he walks, watches birds, works on path building and spends time in the woodland classroom doing creative activities. One time they go out for a walk with someone who wants them to take particular notice of holly trees. Beside a beautiful holly they stop and are given little pieces of paper with titbits of information and poems about the tree on them. They take turns to read them out and as they do, James becomes really excited. This tree is just right for him!

The holly tree is covered in shiny green leaves all year around. Close to the ground, where deer attack, they are prickly. Higher up, the tree knows its leaves are safe and they are smooth and not prickly at all. The group talks about the stigma they suffer as mental health patients and how they also get prickly when they have to deal with strangers. One piece of paper points out that there is probably as much root underground as there is visible tree above ground. James knows that this is true of him too – most of what he has inside him is never seen by people.

In folklore, the holly is all about protection. There is a story about how in summer the Lord of the Woods is oak, and birch is his Lady of the Woods. But when oak's leaves fall, the birch goes off to spend the winter with holly, who is the Lord of the Woods through the months when the sun is low in the sky. They talk about why it is

traditional to bring holly inside at midwinter. James is hugging himself with the discovery that this big glossy tree is the guardian of everyone through dark times.

The group starts discussing how our society seems to have forgotten that we have seasons. Everyone is expected to behave the same all year round, work 9 to 5 regardless of the time of year, and ignore the rhythms of the natural world. As examples flow, from tides to the phases of the moon, even to patterns of sunspots and ice-ages, James realises that all around him nature is cycling from one state to another, just as he periodically swings into depression and back to times like now, when he is full of ideas and energy. And here is the holly tree, which will be there for him next time he finds himself in another dark patch.

After the walk, the group returns to the woodland classroom and they are invited to write down any words or phrases that come to them that the holly has meant to them. Catherine does not want to write. 'Can I draw?' she asks. Of course! She sets to work drawing holly leaves. One of the group asks Catherine to draw her a leaf so she can write her holly words around it. They radiate out from the prickles and berries: 'protective, green, smooth, sharp, happy, Christmas'. Now everyone wants a leaf to write around. One makes a crown of thorns saying 'Hail, King of Winter'. Another writes about standing still, and unconditional love. Another writes about duality. One puts down 'presence, protection, persona, prickly, pests, photosynthesis, perfect, peace.' James writes rhyming couplets. 'It would give you a fright/ if it took a bite.'

I like running writing workshops that involve getting to know a particular tree, and I find that everyone learns something and most get genuinely inspired. The folklore and poetry about trees is such a rich seam of ideas; there is such a wealth of

knowledge, beauty and well-being wisdom to tap into. In Scotland and Ireland, there is an ancient traditional link between trees and writing, the Gaelic Tree Alphabet, with every letter of the pre-Latin script, or Ogham, having an associated native woodland species. Trees are gentle beings, fascinating and non-judgemental, and time spent in their company is a good preparation for creative activity.

I have been surprised, sometimes, by the emotional depths that can be plumbed when writing about trees. When I was poet in residence at Edinburgh Botanical Gardens, sometimes even the most light-hearted events, like tree-hugging tutorials, or single-sense walks (touchy-feely, smell etc) would lead people to express how helpful they find trees, in dealing with grief, for example, or coping with a disability.

Poetry about trees is a wonderful way into tree lore, because so many poets have absorbed old wisdom and recast it in a form that makes it meaningful for today, or given it an emotional resonance and a personal context. Even people who think they don't like reading poetry enjoy having it read to them, particularly, I have discovered, in unusual places, like in woods and gardens. A woodland walk with folklore and poetry thrown in provides that magic combination of good books and fresh air: what could possibly be more healing?

Some dos and don'ts for a woodland words walk

- Don't forget to check people's mobility issues beforehand and have a plan B if your walk won't suit everyone.
- Do share folklore or ecology titbits on little bits of paper so everyone can participate in an easy way by reading out (see the A-B-Tree website below for lots of titbits).

- Do explicitly encourage people to use all their senses, not only to look but also listen, smell, taste and touch trees.
- Do give out leaf-shaped pieces of green paper and encourage people to write just one word or phrase. This is a good way to get people's words flowing, and even poetry-phobes don't find it intimidating to write a single word. Gather up everyone's words and you may well have a collective poem (poetree!).
- Do focus on a particular species of tree. Going deeply into one thing is more satisfying than a superficial skim over a lot of different species.
- Don't worry if participants go off on tangents and write about something different.
- Do worry if participants wander off in different directions. Try to keep sight of everyone so nobody gets lost.
- Don't force people to read out what they have written. Invite everyone to read out but do not demand, and don't let peer pressure from the rest of the group intimidate someone who is not ready to share.
- Do allow time when you're not talking, for people just to be there experiencing the woods.

Some tree lore and poetry sources

Tree lore titbits on my website: <http://mandyhaggith.worldforests.org/a-b-tree.asp>

Trees for Life website: <http://www.treesforlife.org>

Into the Forest: An Anthology of Tree Poems, Mandy Haggith (editor), Saraband Books, 2013

The Scots Herbal, Tess Darwin, Mercat Press, 1996

Tree Wisdom, Jacqueline Memory Paterson, Thorsons, 1996.

The Tree Ogham, Glennie Kindred, publisher unknown.

A' Craobh (The Tree), Dornoch Studio, 2000.

Treasury of Tree Lore, Josephine Addison and Cherry Hillhouse, Andre Deutch Ltd, 1999
Gaelic Names for Flowers and Plants, Douglas Clyne, Cruisgean, 1989
Celtic Tree Mysteries, Steve Blamires, Llewelyn Publications, 1997
Celtic Wisdom of Trees, Jane Gifford, Godsfield, 2000.
Flora Celtica, Birlinn Books, 2004.