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Book Review: Jared Farmer (2022). *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees*. NY: Basic Books.

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Book Review

Jared Farmer (2022). Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees. NY: Basic Books.

Book Review

Farmer, J. (2022). Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees. NY: Basic Books.

Without exaggeration, in evolutionary, pre-historical, and historical terms -- presently, and in the foreseeable future -- trees were not only central to our survival but also served as a convenient metaphor for our existence: their nearer-to-human, for the most part, life-long and size scales, their utilitarian-prosaic and religious significance, their transformation into seafaring vessels and our most cherished dwellings. For most people's burials or cremation ceremonies, the wood of trees is the very substance that marks the end of our lives.

Mostly a binary choice -- cut down and use, or let be -- also betrays our real intentions or suggests the kind of relationship that trees impede and/or facilitate between agent and environment, intrinsically or by metaphorical extensions: friend-foe, poisonous-medicinal, transient/seasonal-durable/perennial, or ornament-orchard.

While more extensively dealing with similar foci, Jared Farmer's "Elderflora" is a scientific and historical examination of the role that trees have had and continue to have on our human evolution. It includes both detailed scientific information and cross-culturally noteworthy data. In the telling of these complex relationships, Farmer shares relevant information about forestry and ecology (human ecology). His narrative is meant to educate, maintaining throughout the book an accessible but scholarly voice.

An "average tree" has a vertical trunk distinguishable from its branches, reminiscent of a person standing, but unlike animals, it remains stationary, sentinel like. In this fashion, trees also inhabit a liminal existence between animals, other plants (shrubs and grasses), and fungi.

Their liminal nature is perhaps what leads Farmer to note three nuanced 'paradoxes' about long-lived trees (*elderflora*) and people:

"... [1] elderflora benefit from the absence of care as well as caretaking ... [2] Caring for elderflora does not track with eldercare. Because gnarled trees possess personhood without bodily mortality—and because they embody oldness without elderliness—they elicit wonder and esteem, unlike hunched bodies of old people, object of pity and contempt ... [3] Elderflora are objects of cross-cultural respect and subjects to intercultural violation. In periods of conflict, people may uproot the oldest things of their antagonists—even if their own scriptures prohibit such acts." ... (2022: 12-13)

All chapters in Farmer's book are comparably revealing (informative, interesting, and thought provoking), weaving as he does a multidisciplinary and chronologically rich timeline best elucidated by a historian. He does and he is that. For example, even to readers habitually informed by the history and fate of giant sequoias, his Chapter V (Sylvian Spectacle--Healthy Extinction--Talkative Tree Rings--Unstable Chronologies—America Mortality) shares not commonly known details, these turned into unexpected introspective reflections on the content and quality, not only of a "western mind," but also of an "American mind."

Farmer's "Elderflora" would be a great companion book and story to John Vaillant's (2005) The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness, and Greed. The former is an ambitious treatment of the variety of interrelationships summarized and signified as people-trees-culture-history. The latter is a more intimate, in-depth look, and examination of symbolic and material relationships of a rare and exotic tree, the complex and contradictory psychology of one man, and three clashing cultures and their incongruent interests and desires; the sacred and the profane made indistinguishable, or irrelevant.



Vaillant, J. (2005). The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness, and Greed. NY: W.W. Norton & Company.