The Man Who Planted Trees

James Clarke offers an appreciative look at Jean Giono's Nature writing classic

At the Jardin botanique in Montreal, Canada you'll find The Frédéric Back Tree Pavilion. Appropriately, in light of *The Man Who Planted Trees*, the pavilion encourages ways to foster connections with Nature and deepen knowledge of the place of trees in our lives. We'll return to Frédéric Back a little later. But first let's focus on *The Man Who Planted Trees,* a modestly scaled story with a mighty reach.

Published in 1953 and written by Jean Giono (1895–1970), *The Man Who Planted Trees* enjoys the status of a classic. Giono spent much of his life in Manosque, Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, and the resonances inherent in being richly connected to a place, and knowing its rhythms and forms, suffuse his story.

The American novelist and literary critic Edmund White made a fruitful connection, in the 5 June 2014 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, between Giono and the American Nature writing tradition, observing that Giono "loved [Walt] Whitman's all-embracing egalitarianism and his pantheism". Whitman's expansive, openhearted writing reverberates across Giono's story, and that spirited generosity of the book was partly shaped by the impact of the second world war on Giono, a pacifist.

The Man Who Planted Trees tells the story of a man named Elzéard Bouffier who, in middle age, begins planting trees across the windswept landscape of southern France. The story charts its narrator's friendship with Bouffier over several decades, before and after the first world war. The violence of the war serves to accentuate Bouffier's project, as the narrator attests: "[Bouffier] showed me some beautiful birch plantations dating from five years back – 1915, when I was fighting at Verdun. He'd put them in all the low-lying places, where he had rightly suspected there was dampness just beneath the surface of the soil. They were fresh and tender as youths, and full of the will to live."

The friendship between Bouffier and the narrator is the lens through which ideas and images of Nature as both a teaching and a healing power in our disrupted, distracted and fractured lives is celebrated. The contrast between peacefulness and violence is marked early in the story when the narrator addresses Bouffier's mindset: "As he told me, and as I could see for myself, he had taken no notice of the war and gone on imperturbably planting trees."

The image-rich, Nature-centric descriptions and situations that feature throughout *The Man Who Planted Trees* affirm its literary pleasures. Fascinatingly, they also lend it well to the language of cinema.

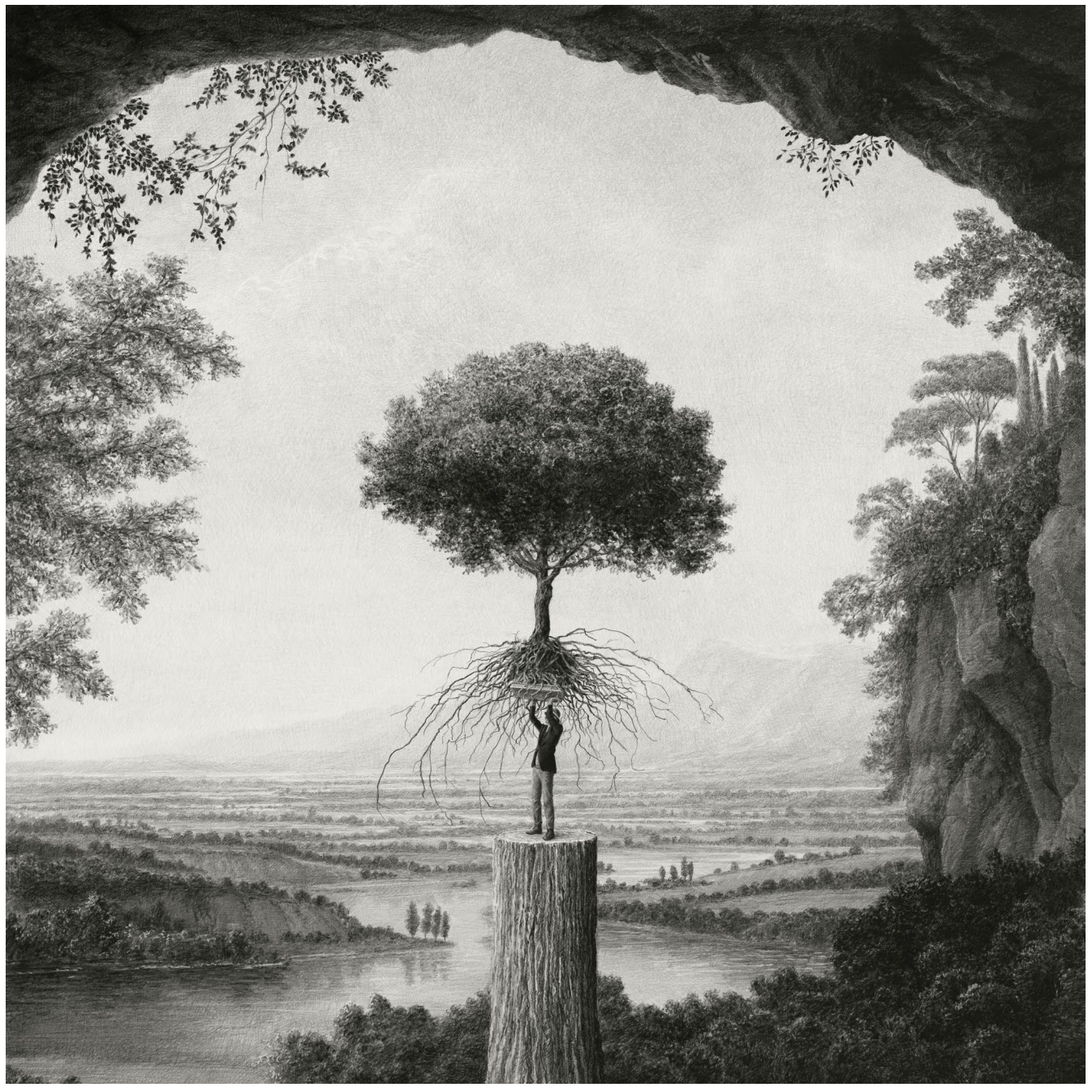
There's joy in how stories care for us by being there to remind us about what matters

In 1987, an animated short film adaptation of Giono's call to action was released. Directed by illustrator and animator Frédéric Back (1924–2013), the film has endured and inspired. A naturalist and an environmentalist, Back finds space in his film adaptation to express the mountain silence that's so present in Giono's writing. It's lyrical and elegant filmmaking, demonstrating how potent animation can be in depicting Nature's movement, life and energy. In the decades since its original release, Back's film has connected with audiences globally.

Notably, Back's work has influenced Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, whose own work is rich with depictions of a reverence for Nature's knowable and numinous powers. The films *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Princess Mononoke* have found an appreciative, global audience of young people. Indeed, the ebb and flow between age and youth is where *The Man Who Planted Trees* explores acting hopefully.

A call for peaceful life and a concentrated piece of Nature writing, *The Man Who Planted Trees* has proved immense in its reach, encouraging and reminding

The Interloper by Ethan Murrow, acrylic on panel (122cm x 91cm) 2021
Collection of the Cahoon Museum of American Art



The Surgeon by Ethan Murrow, graphite on paper (122cm x 122cm) 2024
Private Collection. Both images courtesy of the artist and Winston Wachter Fine Art NYC

readers to consider how the individual relates to their community. There *is* such a thing as society, after all.

With its vindication of the effort involved in striving to live in a gentle and nurturing manner against the pulse of an angry and selfish world, Giono's story echoes the American folk story of Johnny Appleseed. Indeed, two other stories that might fit with Giono's are Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* and J.L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*.

As the late Barry Lopez noted, there's joy in how stories care for us by being there to remind us about what matters. In this way, they find their longer life. There's joy, too, in how we, as readers and thinkers, can move from one branch of the storytelling tree to another, in doing so making connections and new paths through words. *The Man Who Planted Trees* registers how acting locally, in seemingly small ways, can flow outward and make new pathways.

Attentiveness to Nature is a mark of the language of Giono's story, placing it inside a wide and deep tradition of fiction as a place that can animate our feelings and our thinking in relation to Nature. Elzéard Bouffier encourages us to remember how we can each connect with our communities – looking always to Nature as our prompt and our guide. R

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A pension for trees...

The custodians of healthy trees that reach the milestone age of 75 in the Haryana state of Northern India are being given an annual pension of Rs 2,750 (about £26) to help take care of them. The novel initiative, known as the Haryana Pran Vayu Devta Pension Scheme, excludes trees that are fallen, hollow, dead, dry or diseased, and will be reviewed in 2028.