



Book Club Guide

Two Trees Make a Forest

By Jessica J. Lee

About the Author

Jessica J. Lee is a British-Canadian-Taiwanese author, environmental historian, and winner of the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction, the Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature, the Banff Mountain Book Award, and the RBC Taylor Prize Emerging Writer Award. She is the author of two books of nature writing: *Turning* (2017) and *Two Trees Make a Forest* (2019), which was shortlisted for Canada Reads 2021. She has a PhD in Environmental History and Aesthetics and was Writer-in-Residence at the Leibniz Institute for Freshwater Ecology in Berlin from 2017-2018. Jessica is the founding editor of [The Willowherb Review](#) and teaches creative writing at the University of Cambridge.

Retrieved from: <https://www.jessicajleewrites.com/bio>

About the Book

An exhilarating, anti-colonial reclamation of nature writing and memoir, rooted in the forests and flatlands of Taiwan from the winner of the RBC Taylor Prize for Emerging Writers.

A chance discovery of letters written by her immigrant grandfather leads Jessica J. Lee to her ancestral homeland, Taiwan. There, she seeks his story while growing closer to the land he knew.

Lee hikes mountains home to Formosan flamecrests, birds found nowhere else on earth, and swims in a lake of drowned cedars. She bikes flatlands where spoonbills alight by fish farms, and learns about a tree whose fruit can float in the ocean for years, awaiting landfall. Throughout, Lee unearths surprising parallels between the natural and human stories that have shaped her family and their beloved island. Joyously attentive to the natural world, Lee also turns a critical gaze upon colonialist explorers who mapped the land and named plants, relying on and often effacing the labor and knowledge of local communities.

Two Trees Make a Forest is a genre-shattering book encompassing history, travel, nature, and memoir, an extraordinary narrative showing how geographical forces are interlaced with our family stories.

Retrieved from: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/623184/two-trees-make-a-forest-by-jessica-j-lee>

Discussion Questions

1. What observations are made in the book? Does the author examine economics and politics, family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food?
2. What is different from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand?
3. Describe a place or physical space that is important to you. Why does it carry so much meaning?
4. What is the value in being able to speak another language? What new language would you like to learn and why?
5. What advice would you give to someone who has lost a loved one?
6. What is a place that you have never visited that you would like to travel to? Why is visiting this place important to you?
7. Genealogy websites are among the most popular sites on the internet. Why, do you think, are genealogy and family history so important to so many people?
8. This book examines the idea of home, belonging, and identity. Did your views on any of these ideas change after reading the book?
9. If you could ask the author anything, what would it be?
10. How does the book's title work in relation to the book's contents? If you could give the book a new title, what would it be?

Retrieved from:

<https://www.londonpubliclibrary.ca/sites/default/files/Two%20Trees%20Make%20A%20Forest.pdf>

Author Interview

Scott Helman (SH): Hi, I'm Scott Helman. I am championing the book *Two Trees Make a Forest* by Jessica J. Lee on *Canada Reads*. I'm honoured to have Jessica here with me now, and I have some questions for her. Hi, Jessica!

Jessica J. Lee (JL): Hi!

SH: We've already spoken and I've read your book and I'm in love with it. I continue to open it up and just let the words make my day. I have a bunch of questions for you. The first question I have is simple — why did you write *Two Trees Make a Forest*?

JL: I wrote this book because I had to. I felt like I had been carrying around this longing to write about my grandparents' lives for about a decade before I wrote this book. I was in my late 20s. I was living in Germany and I moved a lot.

I was struggling to make sense of my own connection to my family's heritage, to being mixed race, to making sense of the languages that were important to me and important in my family. And I didn't feel like I had a space or a time or a medium through which to process that. And that went into the book.

It's a book that simultaneously tackles family history and my own connection to nature and place and landscape — and also being mixed race, being of Taiwanese heritage and being part of that diaspora.

That's a long-winded way of saying I wrote it because I had to write it. I needed to process that stuff.

SH: That's a really good answer. I feel very connected to that as an artist. There are some times when you make things where you feel like you're doing it for the sake of doing it. And then there are some times where you make things because it feels vital to your survival.

So this is a very personal book. It talks so much about your family history. What was it like digging into your family's past and going back there?

JL: It was a delicate process, in some sense, because I had to ask questions and step back and say, "Who were my grandparents as people?" With grandparents, you idolize them in a way. But what I was missing was a sense of who they were as people, and as actors in the world, agents in the world who took part in wars, in migrations and colonization. It added a layer of complexity to that very simplistic narrative of my lovely grandfather and my lovely grandmother, who I loved.

SH: Yeah. That must be really tough. Especially when you know that there's this daunting work ahead of you.

JJL: I knew I had to be as honest as I could in the book and put my perspective in the book. But I also didn't want to disappoint my mother and my family.

There's not a lot of records that they lived. And so this, for me, was producing that record and wanting to be faithful to the period they lived through and the history they lived through, while also not completely trashing their lives. It was a balancing act.

SH: I relate to that so much. My latest record was dedicated to my grandfather. But there was a song in particular that I dedicated to him. It's called *Papa*, which is about him and about him passing away. I remember when he passed away, I spent about three months knowing that I had to write a song about it. How could I write about anything else, when this is so big in my life? But I couldn't do it. No song gave it justice.

I felt like I was letting my mom down, in this weird way. I wasn't accessing the most true thing. So when I was finally able to write that song, it was when I was the most emotional, the most true to who my grandfather was. That took emotional research, thinking about who that person was in reality, how they affected me truthfully. It's a hard feat. It's a really hard feat.

JJL: Yeah. It's that challenge of saying, when do I stop? When is it complete? When have I done enough? It's a challenge. I don't envy you doing that in a song. I feel like it would be very hard.

SH: I think it's way crazier to do it in a book. This book examines the idea of home, belonging and identity. Why did you want to write about those specific themes?

JJL: As I said earlier, it was unavoidable for me. I think home is a theme that I've come back to again and again in my work. I feel like it's been on my mind my entire life, being the child of two immigrants, who grew up in Canada. And then I moved around a lot.

I moved to the U.K., I moved to Germany, I've moved back to the U.K., I moved back to Canada. I've been all over the place. So that question has always been at the top of my mind. I'm hoping my next book won't be about home. It is one of those things that, until very recently, felt unresolved.

In writing this book, I was able to say I have a multiplicity of identities, I have a multiplicity of homes. And that's my conclusion. It's not about narrowing down one home and making myself feel rooted to a single place, but rather giving myself permission to be connected to multiple places and multiple homes.

I think probably a lot of immigrant kids might resonate with that, a lot of mixed race people might resonate with that — that sense of not being any less because we're stretched over multiple places, but rather being able to say that's our magic.

SH: Your book is divided into sections based on elements. I thought that was really interesting. What was also very interesting is how the story, the linear storytelling, takes a back seat to the themes that you're describing and the things that you're talking about.

It seems you focus more on theme and sentiment rather than story in a traditional sense. In other words, you don't seem chained to linear time. Why is that?

JJL: One of the things I felt it was important to capture in this book was so much of it is based on my grandfather's letter that we found after his death. It was a memoir of his life that he'd written as he was developing Alzheimer's. That was the text that had no linear progression. It was all over the place. It looped around. It would stop mid-sentence. It would sort of stop and repeat things. There was a sense of being unmoored, in a way.

I realized pretty early into working on the book that needed to be reflected in the text. Memory sometimes interrupts our linear experience of time. Past moments, they don't stay in the past. Not just in personal life, but in the history I was telling.

The book is also a history of Taiwan, in a way. Our experience of land and a place is never just linear. There are layers where you are experiencing histories that are 100 years old or 50 years old or 300 years old, just as you move across a single trail.

SH: If someone could take away anything from *Two Trees Make a Forest*, what would you hope that it would be?

JJL: The big thing is to really understand that our family lives, our personal lives, our individual lives are entangled with much wider stories. People say, "Why is this a family memoir and a nature book at the same time? Why is this a book about the environment and about politics and place when it's the story of your grandparents' lives?"

For me, it was a way of saying that those things aren't separate. Politics, environmental change, migration, all of those things happen at large scales because of the smaller scales. Telling that intimate story was part of pointing toward the ways all of our lives are entangled with bigger themes like environmental change and migration.

I hope that readers will reflect on that in their own lives to think about their own family histories, to think about their own implication in and wider forces.

SH: How does it feel to have your book on *Canada Reads*?

JJL: It's really scary. I'm primarily a nature writer and an environmental historian. I've never seen what I do as mainstream nonfiction. The idea of having so many readers is quite terrifying right now, if I'm honest.

But it's super exciting. And I'm so grateful for the book to make its way into the hands of so many people. I think it's super cool. But I'm quite nervous.

SH: Any tips for me for championing your book on *Canada Reads*?

JJL: I think your strength is your understanding of the core stuff that goes into making art. I really think if you lead with that, lead with matters of craft and of narrative and of theme and storytelling, I feel like that will serve you really well. And, as you said, even though thematically it's so specific, it's so applicable to most people. And I think that as a songwriter, you get that because so often you're speaking in broad brush strokes.

It might be very specific too, but it obviously gets conveyed to a much wider audience. And people get to connect. Really leading with that is a brilliant strength of yours. I wouldn't discount that.

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Other Links and Resources:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-magazine-for-september-27-2020-1.5735476/in-taiwan-s-lush-landscape-jessica-j-lee-found-a-deeper-understanding-of-her-family-s-turbulent-history-1.5729728>

Taiwan Documentary <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQku6EY8rv4>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: