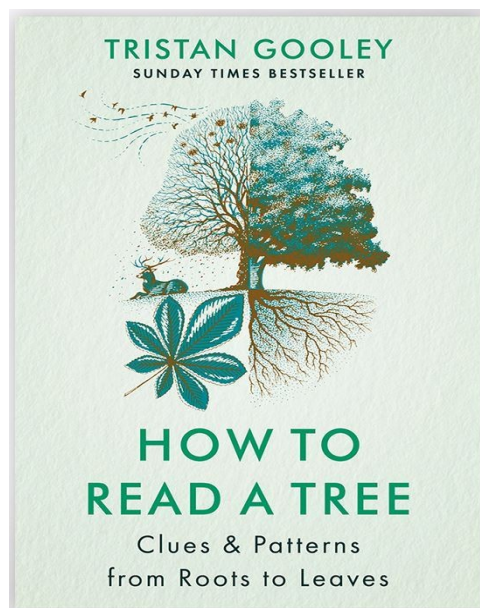


Book Review

How to Read a Tree by Tristan Gooley (Hodder Press)



We have probably all been lucky enough to have grown up with so many trees dotted through our environment that we have also grown up taking them for granted. Pests and diseases in more recent times have taken, and are taking, some of our favourite species out of our countryside, parks and gardens whilst concerns with climate and carbon capture have generated a much wider appreciation of the value of every single tree.

This interesting book encourages us to look more carefully at every single tree to try to 'read' its origin, its growth pattern and all the influences on that growth pattern and what this can tell us about light, temperature, soil, other trees and – here was the new bit for me – direction.

Living in Cumbria with strong prevailing westerly winds I am used to seeing brave hawthorns along higher field margins leaning away from the wind as if someone is directing a hair dryer at them and, from that, judging fairly easily where the prevailing wind has blown from for all of their life. Tristan Gooley, widely travelled and widely researched and observational has built up a whole wayfarer's guide to indicators of direction that trees can give us once we know how to look at, or 'Read...' them. Not just whole trees either. The characteristics of leaves, arrangements of twigs, twists and turns in branches, roots and even stumps are not arbitrary but full of information.

Tristan Gooley takes the reader through detailed but readable threads of both science and observation and invites him to try 'using' this enhanced observation to navigate a walk from one place to another. The characteristics of the trees within a given environment are used as a subtle compass bearing. In our modern age of SatNav, i-phones (forget maps!) and Just3Words, I suspect some of us would not 'see' a tree until we bumped into it, much less be so aware of it as to be able to use it for navigation. It is an interesting concept for whenever there is time in our busy lives to 'just be' and 'just look'.

Historically, meetings were often arranged by significant single trees or spinneys, without the use of maps, and perhaps the public outrage at the pointless destruction of the Sycamore Gap tree is a subconscious reaction to a relationship with trees that we have nearly lost.

This book gives the reader an opportunity to rebuild some of that relationship and to add to our reasons to value every single tree.

I've enjoyed trying out some of his ideas (though not navigating unknown routes as yet) and looking again at trees I've seen a hundred times to 'read' a bit more about their story.

Coralin Pearson