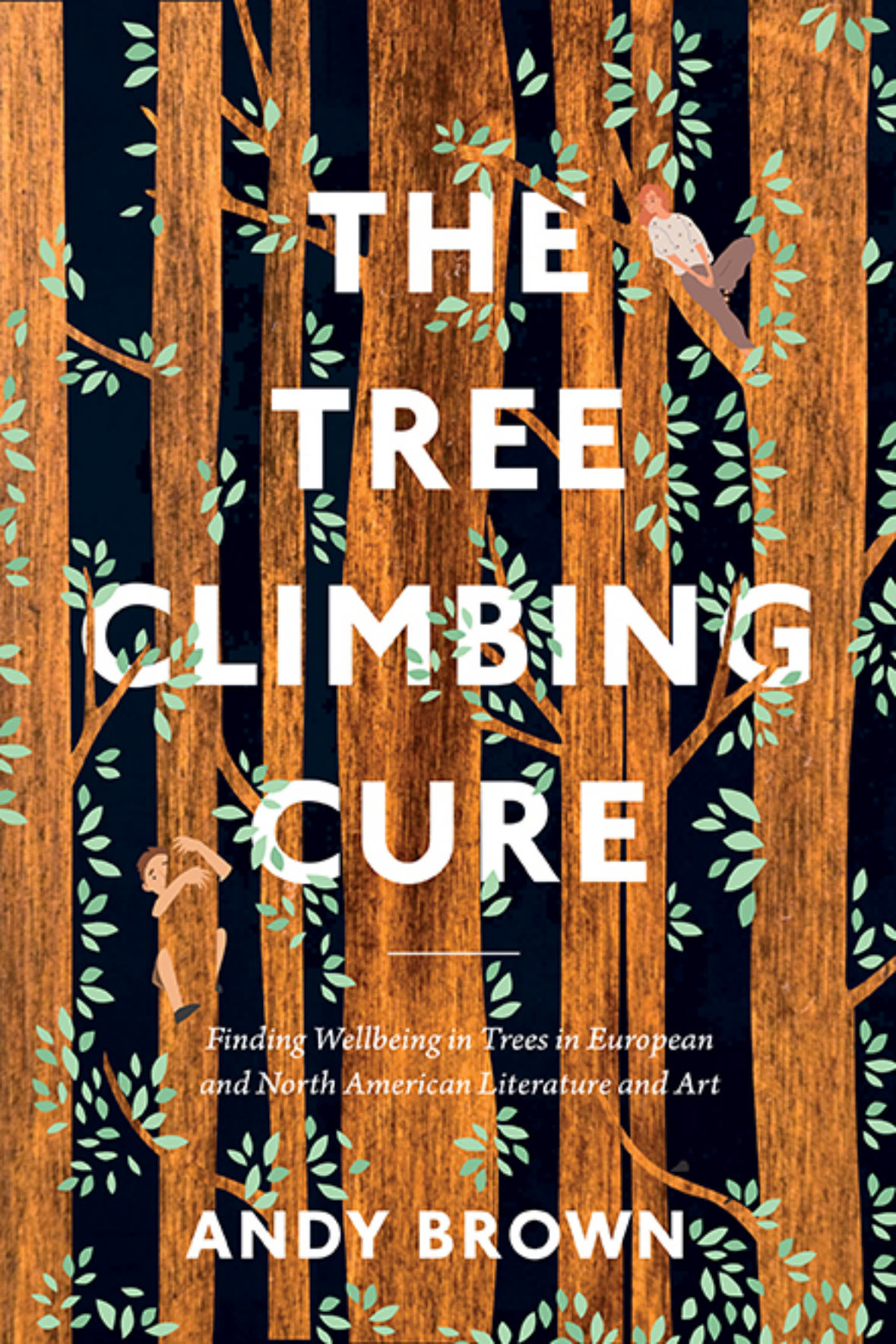
THE TREE CLIMBING CURE
Finding Wellbeing in Trees in European and North American Literature and Art
ANDY BROWN

The Tree Climbing Cure

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Introduction: #manintree

In March 2016, a young American man named Cody Lee Miller climbed an eighty-foot sequoia tree next to the well-known department store, Macy's, in downtown Seattle. Miller remained up in the tree for twenty-five hours, clinging to the trunk, throwing debris down on nearby buildings and passers-by, causing damage to the tree, to neighbouring property, and endangering onlookers. Responses ranged from supportive and caring, to derisory and hateful, with some journalists and members of the public laughing openly at Miller's expense on news broadcasts and social media. The subsequent news reports, live streaming and Twitter and Facebook responses caused the hashtag *#manintree* to trend.[1] Miller eventually came down from his perch and was arrested and charged. Given a history of mental health problems, however, he was found incompetent to stand trial. His treatment in the judicial system, and the media coverage of the incident, sparked extensive debate about the adequacy of mental health provision in the United States.

This book does not attempt to critique the ins and outs of the media coverage of Miller's case, nor does it involve itself with political debates concerning mental health funding in Europe and North America. Much of the political debate has already been recently handled, in the UK at least, in such books as Isabel Hardman's *The Natural Health Service* (2020), which discusses a small-p political manifesto for national mental wellbeing through therapeutic engagements with the natural world,[2] and Samantha Walton's *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure* (2021), with its balanced scepticism about the wellbeing benefits of such activities as wild swimming, gardening, walking in forests and mountains, therapeutic farming, recreational park use, and the pros and cons of accessing nature virtually through Apps and computer games.[3] What is of central focus in *The Tree Climbing Cure*, instead, is the act that Miller chose in his time of mental distress – that is, *he climbed a tree*. More specifically, *The Tree Climbing Cure* asks how such acts of tree climbing relate to literary and

artistic representations of tree climbers, and to the relationship between trees, climbing, and mental and physical wellbeing.

Cody Lee Miller described his own tree climb as a 'cry for help', having found himself constantly in and out of police custody and struggling with his own mental health.[4] In youth, he had been diagnosed with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), although his mother reported that her son's behavioural problems amounted then to little more than hyperactivity. As his behaviour intensified and he found himself in trouble with the police, Cody Lee Miller's mother tried repeatedly to get him help and medication. She had previously found knives hidden in the house, and sent him to live with his grandmother, whom he physically threatened. Following his climb, Miller was held at Western State Hospital and diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Eventually he was sentenced to two years of supervision and was housed in supported housing.

Cody Lee Miller's case prompts many questions, not least concerning the relationship between his tree climbing and his mental health. In her book *Holy Trees and Other Ecological Surprises*, Lucy Goodison writes, 'It is an idiosyncrasy of our culture that belief in an invisible supreme supernatural being is a respectable part of religious experience, while communicating with trees may be taken as a sign of mental disorder.'[5] Believing in an invisible god is universally acceptable, but adults who commune with, or take to the trees must be mentally disturbed, the everyday logic goes. In climbing his tree, Miller encapsulates this commonly held notion that only 'mad' people, or children, climb trees. As climbing specialist Jack Cooke notes: 'There seems to be a common perception that climbing trees is not at all respectable […] it's "just not what grown-ups do". Long labelled the preserve of children by the unimaginative, an adult in a tree is drunk, deranged, suicidal – or a combination of all three.'[6] Social norms seem to prescribe that 'normal', rational, balanced adults simply do not climb trees, unless it is for a job, or part of some organized recreational activity.

What then *is* the symbolic status of the relationship between tree climbing, mental health and development? What might Cody Lee Miller have been working through while he was up in the sequoia tree in downtown Seattle? Of course, one can never know for sure without his testimony, but it is the contention of *The Tree Climbing Cure* that a study of fictional tree climbers in literature and art can throw useful light upon tree climbing as a problem-solving strategy, as well as speaking to mental health and wellbeing as it relates to nature and, specifically, trees.

The Tree Climbing Cure, therefore, explores how tree climbers have been represented in poems, novels, nature writing, and works of art in Europe and North America, finding parallels between these representations and the real world of the recreational and occasional tree climber. The book argues for the curative and restorative value of tree climbing, examining when and why tree climbers climb, and what tree climbing can do for (and say about) the climber's mental health and wellbeing. Bringing together research

into poetry, novels and paintings, with the science of nature, wellbeing and mental health, *The Tree Climbing Cure* shows how, frequently, writers and artists depict their tree climbing characters in mental distress, at a point of conflict in their lives, or simply poised to make some change. People often climb trees, these poems, novels and artworks seem to suggest, at times of decision-making, psychological distress, conflict, protest, family breakdown and rebellion, just as much as they do in times of pleasure-seeking, or freedom-seeking, spiritual quest, childish regress, or simply taking some adventurous exercise. Time and again novelists, poets and artists represent their climbers in this 'conflicted' way. *The Tree Climbing Cure* addresses these conflicted representations and argues for the restorative value of tree climbing. Examining the notable congruity between climbing trees and the contented mind, this book proposes that while many tree climbers are commonly described as being 'mad', 'crazy' or (paradoxically) 'out of their tree', there are some very tangible benefits to be experienced in tree climbing. Engaging with myth, folklore, psychology and storytelling, *The Tree Climbing Cure* also examines the close relationship between tree climbing and imagination, and questions some long-standing, problematic gendered injunctions about women climbing trees, showing that the recurring image of the climber speaks of the long human journey from the trees towards enlightenment and intellectual, physical and psychological wellbeing.

For the first time, *The Tree Climbing Cure* casts a surveying eye across European and North American tree climbing literature and art and brings it together in one place, making it an original compendium of what might be imagined as 'tree climbing studies'. Other very recent collections of essays, such as Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione's 2021 comprehensive edition, *Trees in Literatures and the Arts: Humanarboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene*, bring together extensive materials on the relationships between humans and trees in the wider Arts, but in those pages the references to tree climbing amounts to only a couple of examples. *The Tree Climbing Cure,* instead, focuses on a great number of tree climbing episodes in poetry, fiction, non-fiction and art and, while it does not attempt to be a complete compendium of all literary and artistic tree climbers, it does aim to show through its selected examples that tree climbing (and time among trees more generally) is restorative in many ways: for the scientifically researched benefits of being outdoors in nature; restorative for the 'return to childhood' and physical benefits of childhood play and adventure; restorative for the physical and psychological benefits of climbing in adulthood, and for the transgressive and symbolic rebellion of the act of tree climbing. Climbing trees has the ability to reconnect people to the symbolic, the fairy-tale, and the archetypal, carrying mythic and spiritual connotations. It also offers a 'safe space' in the everyday flow of life and, more specifically, in traumatic and post-traumatic situations. It may play a role in, and serve as a metaphor for, the process of 'individuation' (the psychological process described by Carl Jung as the formation of a stable and integrated adult personality),

and may also be seen as an act of rebellion by eco-activists and women climbers, reclaiming an activity and relationship with nature that has been proscribed against since biblical times. At its most simple, tree climbing can offer an opportunity for the 'mindfulness' of being in the moment, absorbed in nothing more than what is happening right now, second by second, in the attentive art of climbing upwards. In discussing these themes, this book attempts a rooted and branching map of real-world, literary and artistic tree climbing: rooted in the science of nature and wellbeing, the chapters function as notional 'branches' of examples through which the reader may make their improvisatory climb.

Given the centrality of the tree to its concerns, *The Tree Climbing Cure* focuses solely on tree climbing, rather than the wider matter of climbing per se. In the broader field of climbing literature, writings about mountaineering and rock climbing abound. The celebrated North American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), was a well-known mountain climber and walker before he settled at Walden Pond,[7] while John Muir (1838–1914), the American activist, writer and founder of the National Parks, writes in detail of *The Mountains of California* (1894). More recently, Robert Macfarlane's *Mountains of the Mind: A History of Fascination* (2003) outlines a history of rock climbing and its literature, which includes books such as *The Living Mountain* (1977) by the Scots writer Nan Shepherd recounting her experiences of walking the Cairngorms of Scotland. The selected writings of American landscape writer Barry Lopez engage variously with mountain-scapes, while the contemporary British poet, climber and writer Helen Mort retells the forgotten and overlooked narratives of women mountaineers in *No Map Could Show Them* (2016). Books like Mort's build on a tradition of British poets engaging with mountain climbing, including such works as David Craig's 1987, *Native Stones: A Book About Climbing*, while a myriad number of technical books exist on the sport, techniques and philosophies of rock climbing. The more extreme end of the modern sport is captured in the 2018 Academy Award-winning documentary, *Free Solo*, about Alex Honnold, a young American free climber who climbed the 3,200 foot rockface known as El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, without the safety net of climbing ropes and harnesses. Other current writings on gender and rock climbing are challenging what Samantha Walton describes as 'the bravado of the sport, changing the face of mountaineering from a brute struggle' into a more 'thoughtful, even mindful enterprise',[8] while papers from the British Mountaineering Council indicate the positive mental wellbeing that can result from rock climbing, particularly for women, through the work of community groups such as *Vertigirls*.[9] *The Tree Climbing Cure* leaves this oeuvre of rock climbing on the ground and focuses solely on the matter of climbing trees.

Along with tree climbers both fictional and real who may be 'conflicted', such as Cody Lee Miller, there are also writers to be encountered in the tree climbing literature whose climbs are a response, in part, to the mental

health of others. American writer, naturalist and activist, Janisse Ray, was raised on a junkyard on the outskirts of a small town, Baxley, in Appling County, South Georgia. In her book, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray writes of the coastal landscape of the region around her home, one of original longleaf pine woods. But the junkyard itself was dangerous, strewn with metal and glass, with poisonous chemicals and oil. Mental illness ran in Ray's family – 'the mental illness that came streaking through bloodlines'[10] – in particular, her father and grandfather, both of whom were men with tempers and given to beating their children with belts and pole handles. 'Almost every night I wet the bed,' Ray writes.[11] Climbing trees was one of her ways of escaping from, and transcending, these perils. Ray describes how she climbed the tall chinaberry tree in the yard, where she would sit and wait, 'listening for something – a sound, a resonance – that came from far away, from the past and from the ground. When it came, the sun would hold its breath, the tree would shiver, and I would leap toward the sky, hoping finally for wings'.[12] For many climbers in literature, as in life, whether coping with their own mental health, or coping with the mental health of others, the climb can be one of these kinds of leaps towards the sky. In the cases discussed herein, family conflict will play a pivotal role.

There are, of course, lots of 'sane' and 'balanced' people who regularly climb trees for recreation and pleasure, and a large number who make their living climbing trees for work: arborists (tree surgeons), lumberjacks, arboriculturists in cultivated plantations, animal rescue workers, botanists, researchers, dendrologists and wildlife cameramen all climb trees. Fruit and coconut pickers ascend into the canopy freestyle to collect their harvest, sometimes aided by a simple strap tied between the ankles. Richard Preston's non-fiction book, *The Wild Trees*, recounts the stories of a group of daring professionals who climb California's coastal giant redwoods. Botanists, lichenologists, arborists and tree surgeons all populate Preston's book with tales of extraordinary adventurousness: the tallest redwoods are up to 380 feet in height – pushing close to a forty-storey building. At the top of the leader of one such redwood (the vertical stem at the top of the trunk), one of Preston's climbers finds himself warming his body in the sunlight: 'It was as if he were waking up from a sleep, as if his life up to then had been a dream, and this was real. He felt as if he had left time behind.'[13] Questions of 'dreaming', 'time', 'leaving things behind' and 'awakening' will recur in the reading of novels, poems and artworks in these pages, and yet, while *The Tree Climbing Cure* discusses one or two of these kinds of professional climbers, the more pertinent characters here are those *occasional tree climbers*, people who go up into the trees on a free climb – no ropes, no saddles, no carabiners – just bare feet and an urge to get up into the canopy. Like Preston's professional climber, many fictional tree climbers have personal awakenings, or spiritual epiphanies while up in the branches. Of course, the spiritual associations of trees are wide-reaching, as examples discussed here will show. Religious ascetics, such

as Indian sadhus, often live in tree hollows, just as Western 'Stylite Saints' stood on the top of symbolic 'tree' pillars for long periods of time, often years, as part of their regimes of spiritual endurance. In this contemporary age, however, discussions of spiritual endurance are more likely to be expressed in the more secular and everyday language of developing a centred and lasting sense of wellbeing. In a study of wellbeing and nature, the psychologist Joachim Wohlwill wrote that 'natural environments experienced in solitude seemed especially restorative to people who are mentally fatigued or socially stressed'.[14] In light of this, what does the natural, solitude-giving crown of the tree offer to the tired, stressed or conflicted climber, in reality, fiction, poetry and art?

In recent years, the numbers of recreational-technical tree climbers have expanded rapidly; climbers who do their climbing through registered tree climbing organizations, such as *Tree Climbers International*, founded by Peter 'Treeman' Jenkins in 1983, or *Tree Climbing Japan*, founded in 1997 by John Gathright, to help physically disabled people leave their wheelchairs and challenge themselves to climb. Recreational-technical climbers climb trees with ropes and helmets, harnesses and hammocks. Organizations like *The Global Organization of Tree Climbers* have formed and incorporated themselves as charitable, non-profit organizations providing training curricula and safe climbing guidelines worldwide. There are also recreational free climbers, who use no equipment at all, just the time-honoured tools of the human body – arms, legs, hands and, very often, bare feet. There are national tree climbing championships in the United States and several artists have climbed a tree every day for a year, including Todd Smith from Kentucky; Henrik G. Dahle, a self-confessed utopian environmentalist living in southern Portugal; Leo Murray, an animator, climate change campaigner and social entrepreneur; and artist Cecylia Malik in Poland. Malik's work in particular forms part of later discussions about women's tree climbing.

But there are also people who do not climb trees and who dislike nature. Who feel uncomfortable outdoors. Who have phobias about insects, spiders and birds. Who are sensitive to heat and sunlight. Who just don't like forests and trees, and who fear heights. According to Florence Williams in *Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative*, 'about 15 to 20 per cent of people just don't dig it'.[15] There are also a great many people who have no easy access to trees and green spaces. It is, therefore, by no means a given that all people will think of going into nature (nor even that they have adequate access to natural spaces) to help improve their sense of wellbeing, let alone climb a tree. Climbing a tree may simply be something for which a person has neither the inclination, time, nor access. And yet tree climbing bears fascinating relationships to questions of making time, snatching a moment from the busy pace of modern life and slowing time down. Tree climbing is exploratory; an improvisation. Or, to give that

word its other meaning, climbing a tree involves 'extemporization'. It takes the climber *ex tempore* … out of time. The world of work, responsibility, politics and news falls away. Time stops. The climber can concentrate on what they are doing in the here and now.

Wider questions about the human relationship to time recur in tree climbing images and narratives, as *The Tree Climbing Cure* will show. Trees live on an alternative timescale to people – their development is longer; their age of sexual maturity is much later. Their lifespan far exceeds that of a single human being, often running to at least several hundred years. Tree climbing enthusiast, Jack Cooke, thinks of a tree as 'a vegetable clock that keeps ticking to an alternative rhythm',[16] while Janisse Ray describes how forests are 'a slow-ticking biological clock' and their processes 'a centuries-long game.'[17] In his popular account of tree ecology, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben tells of a spruce tree in Dalarna, Sweden, estimated to be 9,550 years old.[18] Before the discovery of this spruce tree, bristlecone pines were considered to be the world's oldest living trees, at over 4,000 years old: one bristlecone, named Methuselah after the oldest-living biblical figure, stands in the White Mountains of Inyo County, Eastern California, and is over 4,850 years old. In his paean to Britain's vanishing ancient woodlands, *Oak and Ash and Thorn*, Peter Fiennes presents many of Britain's ancient yew trees, such as the Ankerwycke Yew that can be found in a meadow just across the river from Runneymede, where Magna Carta was signed. The yew had already been standing there for a thousand years as the signatories put their marks on that historic document. And there are other yew trees in Britain that were saplings as far back as Bronze Age Britain, when the totemic white horse at Uffington was cut into the rolling chalky hillside of Oxfordshire. Climbing yew trees as old as the Ankerwycke Yew can make a climber feel that they are not only climbing upwards in space, but backwards in time and, indeed, accounts in *The Tree Climbing Cure* show that many climbers report a sense of journeying through time: back into their childhood and, perhaps, even reconnecting in deep time with the ancestral arboreal hominids from whom humankind are descended. The British writer and naturalist, Richard Mabey, for example, grew up around cedar trees – on Cedar Road in fact – and recalls the giant specimens growing there: 'We went up them like lemurs,'[19] Mabey writes, describing how 'Two stories up in a cedar was like being in the loft of an abandoned barn […] We spent whole afternoons up them, posing on branches, gossiping, doing mindless things with pieces of wood, dreaming of the savage life.'[20] Such carefree memories of childhood climbing present the 'mindlessness' of tree climbing in its best sense – utterly in the moment, without preoccupations; a wholly relaxed form of attention. But these memories also evoke ideas of human evolution ('We went up them like lemurs') that place the moment of childhood tree climbing within the context of a far longer time span.

Another common reason tree climbers often give for their activities when asked, or a reason that is given in climbing poems and novels, is to find solitude, or to find what Rudyard Kipling calls the 'misty solitudes', in his 1910 poem 'The Way Through the Woods'.[21] It is in this 'solitude' that the subject matter of *The Tree Climbing Cure* begins: not only in sympathy with Cody Lee Miller's solitary climb and 'cry for help', but in the kinship of tree climbing, nature, poetry and the grateful feelings of solitude that the literature and art brings to the fore. It is a feeling foregrounded, for example, in a much later poem than Kipling's, 'Ash Tree', by the British poet Richard Evans:

> To squeeze in you must first stand sideways:
> drop in one leg. Then slide – jumper catching
> on the lip of the bark – to the charcoal dark of the hollow.
> Stillness. Silence. A continent's
> shift in time and place.[22]

Evans goes on to ask his reader to 'Hold on to this' when the modern world becomes noisy, when car alarms and traffic and the bin men clatter the waste bins early in the morning. 'Hold the liquorice dark of the wood; the musk and sea-shore smell,' Evans writes. Not only is it the solitude that is so solving of the cacophony of modern living, but it is also the shift in time back to a simpler childhood, away from the adult world of cars and bin men. And, for Evans, it is also the smell that is so crucial in people's encounters with trees, holding one of the answers to why being inside trees, or at least amongst them, is so good for health and wellbeing, as the scientific evidence encountered in the following chapter will elucidate.

One of the modern writers perhaps most associated with this kind of childhood nostalgia is the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas. Although there are no poems overtly describing tree climbing in his collected works, Thomas's poetry abounds in the language of children, birthdays and coming of age. Where this language *does* come together with the activity of tree climbing, however, is in his poem 'Being But Men' (1932), which begins with the line, 'Being but men, we walked into the trees / Afraid'. As adults, Thomas suggests, people are limited and fearful of the unexpected; of the dark 'rooks' the poem goes on to describe, with all their 'wings and cries'. Childhood for Thomas, on the other hand, is confident and fearless, qualities that are captured in the action of climbing a tree:

> If we were children we might climb,
> Catch the rooks sleeping, and break no twig,
> And, after the soft ascent,
> Thrust out our heads above the branches
> To wonder at the unfailing stars.[23]

Thomas's poem is a romantic countering of innocence with experience, echoing William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, in which that visionary poet wrote of 'the green woods' laughing 'with the voice of joy'.[24] In the twentieth century, Thomas's poem presents the woods of adulthood as fearful, but those of childhood as full of freedom and wonderment, qualities that Thomas describes as being 'the aim and the end' of life. But 'we' are adults, Thomas reminds and, as the poem's ending repeats, 'being but men, we walked into the trees'. Tree climbing is intrinsically child-like, Thomas suggests. It is informal and free. It is outside of adult mores and strictures. Climbing a tree as a child shifts perspectives and deranges the rules of the adult world: children hang upside down from branches, swing with their hair dangling down and laugh. Climbing a tree is a mild form of rebellion and of estrangement; it takes the dull, everyday world and it turns it on its head, making one see familiar things in a new light, from a different perspective. It also connects the climber to the green force of nature; an energy that Thomas writes of elsewhere as the force that 'drives the flower' up through greenery, and which also 'Drives my green age'. Climbing a tree as a child then, Thomas suggests in his poem 'Being But Men', makes the child understand and feel that the force responsible for growth in nature is intimately connected with the force that makes the child themselves grow.[25] This process of physical and psychological growth – of 'individuation' (Jung) – is that by which the child becomes a balanced and integrated adult, and is central to many literary and artistic representations of tree climbers. Thomas's poem offers the revelation and reminder, in the everyday drudgery of adulthood responsibility, to hold onto that living green force encountered in childhood, and to embrace the defamiliarization that tree climbing offers. Perhaps this is why tree climbing is celebrated in childhood, but is also commonly coloured with thoughts of immaturity, derangement and madness in adulthood, as media coverage of Cody Lee Miller's case attests.

Tree climbers, then, appear to be simultaneously trusted (when it is the right person – a child, for example – climbing at the right age and time, in the right place), but also deeply mistrusted. In the simple act of climbing upwards, of clinging to branches and overturning restrictive adult codes, the climber solves something practical in the physical climb, as well as solving something within themselves in the metaphoric inner climb. Through the discussion of poems, novels and artworks; interviews with practitioners; investigation into the scientific underpinnings of wellbeing in nature; explorations of gender and tree climbing; readings of myths, legends and fairy tales; evolutionary theory, and the occurrence of tree climbers in scenarios as diverse as arboriculture, tree protest and nest robbing, *The Tree Climbing Cure* offers some answers to why the simple image of a person climbing a tree both encapsulates and disturbs ideas of innocence, experience and wellbeing.

Notes

1 Jessica Lee. '#ManInTree: Why It Went Viral'. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/manintree-why-it-went-viral/
2 See Isabel Hardman. *The Natural Health Service*.
3 See Samantha Walton. *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure*.
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5 In Peter Fiennes. *Oak and Ash and Thorn*, p.153.
6 Jack Cooke. *The Tree Climber's Guide*, p.5.
7 In Samantha Walton. *Everybody Needs Beauty: In Search of the Nature Cure*, p.66.
8 Ibid, p.63.
9 2 February 2017. https://thebmc.co.uk/Positive-mental-wellbeing-through-rock-climbing.
10 Ibid, p.41.
11 Ibid, p.10.
12 Ibid, p.9.
13 Richard Preston. 'Nameless', in *The Wild Trees*.
14 In Florence Williams. *Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative,* p.145.
15 Ibid, pp.144–5.
16 Jack Cooke. *The Tree Climber's Guide: Adventures in the Urban Canopy,* p.204.
17 Janisse Ray. *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, p.156.
18 Peter Wohlleben. *The Hidden Life of Trees,* p.81.
19 Richard Mabey. *Beechcombings*, p.33.
20 Ibid, p.33.
21 Rudyard Kipling, 'The Way through the Woods', from the Kipling Society, http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_woods.htm.
22 Richard Evans, in Michael Mckimm. *The Tree Line: Poems for Trees, Woods & People*, pp.95–6.
23 Ibid, p.31.
24 William Blake. 'Laughing Song', in *The Complete Poems*, p.109.
25 Dylan Thomas. 'The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower', in *The Poems*, p.77.

1

A personal preface to this study: Cedars, oaks, maples, fruit trees and Covid-19

I should confess that, in my mid-fifties, I am not much of a tree climber anymore. I have a very bad back (the result of a scoliosis in infancy and accidents in my twenties) and I suffer from mild acrophobia – the fear of heights. My interest in tree climbing comes from climbing trees as a child and, later, working with trees as an ecologist, a teacher and a gardener, as well as from a lifetime's reading about trees, and the people who climb them. This personal preface offers a brief coverage of this climbing trajectory.

I was lucky to grow up surrounded by trees, in the suburbs of London, and within hearing distance of the M25 motorway. Back in the Second World War, our town, Watford, had been a 'countryside' site for children evacuated from central London; now it is virtually part of the capital. We faced the city and our backs were turned towards the parks and woods of Hertfordshire but, whenever I could, I would spin myself around to face the green belt instead. In doing so, I first learned the real benefits of time spent amongst trees.

We were privileged to have a good-sized garden. Beyond it lay Cassiobury Park – 190 acres of wooded grassland created from the estate of Lord Essex in 1909. At the garden's end there were iron railings, which our father loosened, so we could slip behind the boundary yew tree, lift a bar and escape into the park. We had been strictly instructed never to put the weird-looking yew berries into our mouths. Red and hollow with a dark nub inside, yew berries look frightening for a good reason: they contain alkaloid compounds akin to morphine and strychnine that can kill. My mother, enamoured with the family set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* also pointed out that yew trees

were sacred to Hecate, Greek goddess of magic, witchcraft and necromancy. And the railings? We weren't in prison – not by any stretch – but once the bars were lifted, we were free. It was the 1970s, and children used to play outside. 'Just be home in time for tea', was as strict as it ever got.

At the bottom of the park ran the River Gade, and the Grand Union Canal, beyond which stood Whippendell Woods – an ancient woodland and site of special scientific interest since the late 1950s – named from the Anglo Saxon 'Wippa denu', meaning 'Wippa's valley', possibly being 'Wibba', one of the Anglo-Saxon Mercian Kings from *c.*600 CE. To my childhood self, the woods were intuitively 'lovely, dark and deep', a phrase I would soon learn from the American poet Robert Frost.[1] Whippendell is rich in oak, beech, ash and silver birch trees, with hawthorn, hazel, holly and hornbeam aplenty. I frequently watched deer there and, at dusk, was transfixed by the flitting of bats and the lumbering sounds of badgers in the undergrowth. I learned to watch birds too: all the common wild and garden varieties, with jays, green and spotted woodpeckers, and sparrow hawks. And when I was home from the woods, I would lie in bed listening to the calls of tawny owls cutting through the hum of the M25 and the late-night trains rattling into London.

Cassiobury Park was blessed with some incredibly large Cedars of Lebanon, American pin oaks and many species of common domestic trees, but there were three trees that I was particularly attached to and often climbed. The first was a young cedar, growing right behind our house. It was small back then, perhaps just twenty feet tall, but is sizeable these forty-five years later. With distinctive black-brown, fissured bark, downy twigs, heady scent and dark grey-green needles, the young cedar tree was a sensory delight to climb. The branches of cedar trees hang in layers and, in a young specimen, make an easy scaffold. The lowest branches were within climbing reach, and you could gain a good height without much exertion. At the end of the branches the pinecones stood proud, barrel-shaped with flat tops and papery scales that oozed sap. They made fantastic 'grenades' that hurt when they hit you and left resinous smears on your clothes. The drier cones would explode on impact in a puff of scales and pollen dust. This was the first tree I learned to climb, and its balms – the cones, the scent, the easy climb and the great vantage point – outweighed the barked shins and the sticky stains on your clothing. What I didn't know at the time was that cedar wood oil has notable aromatherapeutic benefits – a warming effect on the skin; grounding and calming effects on the mood and reported aphrodisiac properties. Not much interest to me aged ten, but still. These properties form a significant part of the discussion in the following chapter of this book.

The second of my trees was an English oak tree – *Quercus robur*, the pedunculate oak – standing in the park's grassland a hundred metres beyond our garden. This oak tree – *our* oak tree, for surely nobody else knew about it – was an old specimen. Three of us couldn't link our hands around it to measure its circumference, making it at least a couple of hundred years

old. 'It is said that an oak tree takes three hundred years to grow,' writes naturalist Peter Fiennes, 'three hundred to stand still and three hundred years to die',[2] going on to catalogue the equal three hundred species that are said to subsist on the oak tree: deer, squirrels, moths, weevils, butterflies, bees, beetles, wasps, aphids, fungi, woodpeckers and jays, countless other birds, and larger mammals like badger and boar. Oak forests support more forms of life than any other native forest: a mature oak tree will support over 280 species of insect alone. Up in that oak tree, surrounded by squirrels, birds and the hum of insects, I appreciated that fecundity at first hand. But what made *my* oak tree special was neither its age, nor its great richness, but the perfect hollow in its trunk. Like the poet William Cowper's oak tree – the celebrated 'Yardley Oak' of his eponymous poem of 1791/2 – my oak tree was 'A shattered veteran, hollow-trunked […] a cave for owls to roost in.'[3] Once a friend or sister had bunked-you-up, you could slip a hand over the lip and pull yourself in. Inside the hollow – a cave, just as Cowper describes his oak – you could peer out like some wise old owl. The walls of the hollow were softly rotting and, pressing your fingers into the damp wood, out came the sweet, musty odour of decay. Underfoot, the floor of the hollow was also soft; the sound muffled and intimate. The rising musk of the oak's underworld graced your lips. We took turns. It meant you didn't get long inside the hollow but, what minutes you did have, you savoured.

My third climbing tree lay deeper in the heart of Whippendell Woods. These forty-five years on it is no longer there, but I remember this forked field maple standing at the entrance to an open area of wooded grassland known as Strawberry Fields, with clumps of birch and alder, and grassy rides of tormentil and wild strawberry. The setting was memorable, but the tree was even more so: some six feet above the ground, the trunk of this field maple forked, and lodged there at head height sat a large piece of Hertfordshire Puddingstone that the tree had hefted as it grew. Puddingstone is a sedimentary rock made of rounded flint pebbles fixed in a silica matrix, so named because the pebbles resemble plums in a pudding. To a child it was a wonder of the world, lifted to the light by the tree. With one hand on each of the risers, a foot lodged against the main trunk, a tug with both arms, some upward motion provided by the foot … you were in, with your friends smiling below you. And there, beneath your feet … a stone. Of the earth and, yet, somehow raised into the air by the vigour of nature – Dylan Thomas's green force again driving up the stone and driving 'my green age'.

Leaving these childhood trees behind, I went to study for a BSc in Ecology at Leeds University and later still, a postgraduate project at York University, where I published my first scientific paper. My research team was examining 'The Wildlife Amenity of Farm Woodlands' in the Vale of York since, at the time, the UK government was paying farmers to 'set aside' land from agricultural production and to put it, instead, into forestry plantation. I was responsible for researching how local 'islands' of woodland in a 'sea' of agricultural land could best be optimized, in terms of their shape, size,

connectedness and floral diversity – a science known as Island Biogeography. The aim was to unearth the wildlife benefits of different kinds of woodland 'islands', as well as for other aspects of their public amenity and recreation, and to make a planning model for policymakers. Wandering around those woods in the Vale of York, recording detailed inventories of their trees and vegetation, measuring their exact shape and size, I often found myself climbing the trees and sitting above ground to eat my packed lunch, or simply to take a break from research. Once I'd vanished upwards and stopped tramping around, the wildlife would return, and I enjoyed many lunch hours watching small mammals, deer and woodland birds of all kinds, at least until I made my noisy way back down again.

My first teaching post brought me to Devon where I taught in several primary schools, specializing in environmental work, often taking my classes out into nearby woodlands to learn, and to climb – the benefits of outdoor learning will be touched upon throughout the pages of *The Tree Climbing Cure*. I was also writing creatively at the time and began seeing my work published. My 'writing career' (if such a tenuous thing can ever be said to truly exist) started to take off and, following six years as a Centre Director of the Arvon Foundation's Creative Writing courses at Totleigh Barton in Devon, I moved to Exeter University where I established the Creative Writing Programme with Professor Helen Taylor. Throughout this time, I've tried to pursue literary interests that tie in with my origins in ecology, my experiences in teaching and my more recent interests in the medical humanities.

Throughout my adult life I have also been lucky enough to live in places where I've been able to plant trees. I've been particularly interested in planting local apple tree varieties and, when I ran the Arvon Foundation Writing Centre, we planted a small orchard of local varieties: Pig's Snout, Tom Putt and Slack-ma-Girdle. Such names. I've also planted fruit trees at my get-away in Brittany – apples, plums, pears, figs, cherries and the delicious local Claude Reine gages. At our new home in Devon, I've planted a couple of plums, a fig, a greengage and two apple trees to complement those already growing in the garden. It is in this garden that I now do my tree climbing.

The Tree Climbing Cure has been written while under lockdown during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic since 2020. Just before the outbreak, we moved into a new home on the edge of Dartmoor, having recently re-married. The garden has espalier pear and apple trees, and an established cherry – *Merton Glory*, an early-season variety, with large heart-shaped fruits that blush between yellow and light pink, sweet and delicious. There's a Victoria plum tree that took a hammering in winter winds and has needed surgery to save it, and an old apple tree that has been left to go wild by previous owners. Careful pruning these last two years has brought it back to shape and health. There's also a large damson tree that overhangs the end wall. Like the apple tree further up, it had been left to grow hopelessly