

## Sacred Trees of the Finns in the Past and Today

**Tuija Hovi**

Reetta Ranta 2025. *Pyhät puut [Sacred Trees]*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. 160 pages. ISBN 978-951-858-696-1. ISSN 2323-7392.

Green plants are of great importance to humans in many ways. Human life would not even be possible without them. They produce oxygen, serve as food, and are used to produce goods, build houses, make clothes, and so forth. In addition to that, plants also hold significance for human spiritual life, playing various roles in religious thought. Thus, trees have held important roles across different cultures. *Pyhät puut* delves into the spiritual and cultural significance of trees in the Finnish tradition.

Reetta Ranta is a Finnish storyteller, author, media entrepreneur, and coach whose work bridges the wisdom of ancient traditions with modern storytelling. Ranta is best known in Finland for her diverse contributions to the acclaimed TV series *Metsien Kätkemä (Back to Nature Finland)*, which has attracted interest in multiple countries across Europe, Asia, and North America. (See Ahlback Agency.) She has compiled the material for her book on sacred trees in Finland from archival sources and interviews, constructing a fascinating account of what trees have meant and continue to mean spiritually to Finns, both in the past and today. The author has drawn inspiration from the interest in her own cultural roots and the revival of traditions as a response to modern humanity's estrangement from nature.

Nowadays, nature, trees and forests attract new interest, for example due to climate issues and a new nature-oriented spirituality. Peter Wohlleben's book *Das Geheime Leben der Bäume (The Hidden Life of Trees. What They Feel and How They Communicate, 2015)* sparked a whole movement in nature writing. My own worldview was profoundly altered years ago when Wohlleben's book was published in Finnish (2017). The resilience, diversity, adaptability, and slow power of trees are simply astonishing. In contemporary fiction, several authors have explored the intersection of nature and science in many ways. Trees play a central role, for example, in Richard Powers' novel *Overstory*, which touches on the history of botany, and in which the life stories of the characters are intertwined with the fate of different tree species.

*Pyhät puut* is a non-fiction book that draws on folklore, religion and scientific research, as well as personal experiences and memories. In her foreword, Ranta reminds readers of the over 300-million-year history of trees and their significance to humans and all living beings, including their contribution to health. It is no wonder that many trees have evoked notions of sacredness, a phenomenon that appears to be universal.

The book does not present an analytical perspective or a specific research question *per se*, but rather summarises previous research findings and freely introduces examples of popular beliefs based on the material. The sources include the rich archival materials of the Finnish Literature Society, interviews conducted by the author herself, and her own memories and experiences, as well as the well-known collection *Finnish Folklore Atlas* (*Suomen perinneatlas*, 1994/2009) compiled by cultural anthropologist Matti Sarmela.

The introductory chapters briefly discuss the importance of trees to human life and introduce the universal myth of the world tree. These chapters are not particularly comprehensive analytically but serve their purpose as an introduction to a non-fiction work. The chapter “Sacred Groves in Finnish Cultural Heritage” revisits the meanings that have historically been an important part of the spiritual life of Finno-Ugric peoples. Individual trees have also held significant roles and meanings. Ranta pays attention to sacrificial trees, healing trees, the bear skull tree associated with hunting culture, as well as the trees linked to death, such as memorial trees and grave markers. In Finnish cultural tradition, the functions of sacred trees in everyday life encompassed both economic and health-related thinking. Prosperity and health were sought, for instance, through offerings to trees, and the memory of the deceased was honored with memorial trees.

Ideas of the sacredness of trees have persisted into the present day, even though the terminology and belief systems may have changed. Ranta also presents non-religious memorial trees and reflects on trees as intergenerational vessels of memory. In this way, a tree concretises the connection between the past generations, the otherworldly, and the present. Felling such a tree can, indeed, cause a collective shock. The book also includes reflections on contemporary urban planning and the emotional well-being it should consider, which is demonstrably promoted by greenery and especially the presence of trees. The author’s own experiences and memories of trees and forests are reflected as well to the traditional material, lending the text a strong personal tone. The interview material brings in the thoughts and experiences of contemporary Finns of various ages regarding trees and forests—for instance, feelings of energy and calm, but also anxiety over logging.

The majority of the book consists of species-specific descriptions of 16 different trees that grow naturally in Finland, and the beliefs associated with them. These beliefs combine Christian elements with folk traditions. Even though the birch is not the most common tree species in Finland, it is the most familiar one to many Finns, symbolising a home, being associated with many positive emotions. The birch is also the world tree of many Finno-Ugric peoples. As a curiosity, Ranta highlights prehistoric birch tar “chewing gum.” Alongside this, the significant modern Finnish innovation *xylitol*—the birch sugar that promotes dental health—would also have deserved a mention. The oak and ash, which thrive mainly in southern Finland, represent a shared Nordic heritage and have also gained status in mythological epics, such as the oak as the tree that covers the lights of the sky in the *Kalevala*, and the ash as the Scandinavian world tree *Yggdrasil*.

An interesting perspective is the gendered relationship to trees in Finnish folklore. While sacrificial trees were more associated with women’s lives, the rituals involving the bear cult and memorial trees for the deceased were the responsibility of men. The book also presents other intriguing perspectives that remain at the level of ideas or mentions and do not develop into deeper analysis. Nevertheless, Ranta’s text is engaging and piques the reader’s interest. Interviews and other experiential material are used to reflect traditional material against contemporary people’s relationship with nature, particularly the significance of trees in their lives. The book emphasises in many ways how trees and forests remain a significant spiritual resource for Finns. Both individual trees and experiences of the forest hold personal meaning, often formed in childhood.

Reetta Ranta’s *Pyhät puut* is an entertaining and informative non-fiction book. It is compact yet versatile in its presentation of traditions associated with Finland’s native trees and what trees can mean to people today. It also illustrates how tradition lives and evolves with the values of its time. This is an important observation. The preservation and renewal of tree-related traditions reveal much about Finnish identity, and give a reminder of connections to the Finnic peoples and their cultures.

At the end of the book, the author’s agenda is revealed: a mission of protecting nature and promoting carbon neutrality. Ranta takes a strong stance in favour of forests and biodiversity, linking this to the cultural loss caused by, for example, the destruction of traditional sacred groves. The book concludes with systematic guidance on the protection of trees and old forests.

The charming illustrations throughout the book are created by designer Riikka Haro. In places, they evoke the work of famous Finnish artists Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Pekka Halonen, although the style does remain distinctly personal.

## **AUTHOR**

PhD (title of docent) Tuija Hovi is a scholar of religion specialised in religious experience, personal narrative and everyday religiosity. She also serves as a guide in the Botanical Garden of the University of Turku.

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