

# The Gentle Genius of Trees

Author/Illustrator  
**Philip Bunting**



## Synopsis

Trees are important to the planet, and important to all living creatures who share the earth with them. In this clear, funny, and informative look into the slow yet fascinating life of trees, Philip Bunting shares with us how and why they are so important. Bunting explains in an easily understood and entertaining fashion how trees gain energy, their role in the planetary life-cycle, and some lesser-known facts about their growth and existence as part of a linked community of vegetation. Fascinating and fun, *The Gentle Genius of Trees* is itself a gentle exploration of these vegetative companions who inhabit our earth with us.

## About the Author/Illustrator

**Philip Bunting** is an author and illustrator. His books have been translated into multiple languages, and published in over 25 countries around the world. Since his first book was published in 2017, Philip has received multiple accolades, including Honours from the Children's Book Council of Australia, and making the list for the Kate Greenaway Medal in 2018.

## Themes

Key Themes include: Trees; ecology; vegetative respiration; woodland life cycles; humanity; strength and resilience; and photosynthesis

## Writing Style

Written in the third person, Bunting brings to this clear and informative non-fiction tale the same distinctive style found in his earlier works, both fiction and non-fiction. Sentences are simply structured, and convey information in unambiguous yet accurate terms making it accessible to the youthful audience. Humour is present throughout (as in all of Bunting's work), and helps to engage and maintain the readers' interest. Explanations are brief and comprehensible, while still being complete. Bunting will

at times explain something in multiple complementary ways to ensure understanding, and makes good use of the visual narrative within the textual narrative to this end. The Gentle Genius of Trees is well suited for both reading independently or for reading aloud.

### Illustration Style

Created using a palette of soft natural woodland shades, the artwork in *The Gentle Genius of Trees* consists of a mixture of double page spreads, single page spreads, multi-panel spreads, vignettes, diagrams, and several varied illustrated diagrammatic explicatory pages. Human and animal figures are for the most part drawn realistically. The various trees shown throughout are depicted as having both eyes and personalities, while still being recognisably mostly realistic trees. The visual narrative is an intrinsic part of the narrative structure overall, and at times Bunting inserts small comic strip style scenes within a larger illustration or scene. Rather than simply paralleling the textual narrative, instead the text and illustrations work together at all points in the story to enhance reader understanding, and add to the overall narrative progression with the textual and visual narratives building on and improving each other throughout

## TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can learn about the story from them. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
  - What does the image on the cover show?
  - What does it mean to be gentle?
  - What is a genius, and how might it be gentle?
  - What type tree do you think the pictured leaf might come from?
  - How does looking at the cover artwork make you feel? Why do you think this might be so?
  - What do you think the story might be about and why?
  - What do you hope to learn from this story?
- 2) How many plants and other objects in the illustrations have eyes?
  - Make a list of everything in the illustrations that has been drawn with eyes, and divide it into two groups: things which really have eyes, and things which don't really have eyes.
  - Can you think of any inanimate objects that you have seen in real life which look like they have eyes even if they don't really?
  - Why do you think the author chose to draw eyes on so many things?
  - How does seeing eyes on an image of an inanimate object change how you feel about the picture?
  - Draw a picture of a plant, building, vehicle, or other inanimate object of your choice, and give it eyes.
  - Share your picture with the class and discuss how you think drawing eyes on the object changes how you perceive it.
- 3) What is your favourite type of tree, and why? Paint a picture of your favourite tree or type of tree, and create a border for your artwork by writing all the reasons why you like this tree so much around the edge of your page.
- 4) Plant a native tree in your schoolyard. Be sure to think about how much space it will need once it is grown, and how much sun and rain it will get where you plant it! Research the care of native trees, and make sure to plant it in the right kind of soil, and to give it plenty of water until it has grown large and strong. If you do not have enough space in your schoolyard for a whole tree, you can try growing

native bushes around the edges of the yard, or even start a window box garden of native herbs and flowers for your classroom.

- 5) Create a terrarium in a bottle, and observe a plant growing in a closed environment.
  - Cut the tops off two 1.25L plastic soft-drink bottles, or other clear plastic bottles of a similar size.
  - In one cut-down bottle plant a small seedling in a small amount of fresh potting mix.
  - Water your seedling well, then carefully place the cut-off bottom of the second bottle over the top of your baby plant to create a domed roof for your terrarium.
  - Use duct tape or electrical tape to seal the two half-bottles together with an airtight and watertight seal.
  - Place your terrarium in a sheltered corner of the classroom where it will get some sun every day, and observe what happens daily.
  - Can you see the plant growing? You may need to measure it daily to find out!
  - What might it mean if there is condensation on the inside of the bottle? Where might the water vapour have come from?
  - As a class discuss your plants, and what they are using to help them grow.
- 6) What types of trees and plants do you have growing in your local area? Go for a walk around the school or local neighbourhood, and record the names and descriptions of all the different types of trees, shrubs, and bushes that you see. Next to your description sketch the tree, or take a photo of it and its leaves and branches.
- 7) As a class create a dance routine that you feel shares the essence of what is important about trees. You can set your dance to a piece of music that you already know, or you might even like to compose a class piece just for the dance. Practice your dance and perform it at assembly or for another class.
- 8) Research the trees, bushes, shrubs, and flowers that are native to your local area. Choose one to research in more depth. Some things you might like to find out about your chosen tree are:
  - Which parts of Australia does it naturally grow in?
  - What climate does it prefer?
  - What aspect does it prefer (i.e. does it like shade, sunlight, dry soil, clay, sheltered areas or exposed areas etc.)?
  - How long does it take to go from a new sprouted seedling to a full grown mature plant?
  - How long does the tree live?
  - How does it propagate - how does it reproduce and make new baby plants? Does it have seeds, berries, runners, cones, nuts or something else?
  - How have Indigenous Australians traditionally made use of the different parts of the plant?
  - Is the tree (or some of its parts) edible?
  - What native wildlife or insects eat the tree, or lives in its branches or roots?
- 9) Use fallen leaves to create beautiful artworks. You can:
  - Carefully arrange some leaves on your table or desk, and place a piece of paper over the top of them. Holding them down firmly, use the side of a crayon to make a crayon rubbing of each leaf. Once you have finished, paint over the crayon using a mixture of food colouring and water. Be sure to choose a colour of food dye which contrasts with the crayon you used. (Hint: light coloured crayons and bright dyes work well for this activity.)

- Carefully paint some leaves with white or light acrylic paint, and then gently place them paint-side-down on black card or paper. Peel them off being careful not to smear your leaf-print image. Once the paint has dried, use felt tip markers to add touches of colour and highlights to your prints.
  - Create a collage using leaves, twigs, and other bits of foliage found underneath the trees around your school. You can choose to leave the found materials as they were in nature, or you can paint them or dust them with glue and glitter to create an otherworldly scene.
- 10) Write a short story of your own featuring a tree as the main character. Your story might be fully fictional, or it can be more realistic. Use some of the things you learnt while reading *The Gentle Genius of Trees* to help you create your main character and their story. Illustrate your story and share it with the class.
- 11) What is the most interesting fact you learnt from the book? What is the most exciting fact you learnt? What do you find interesting and exciting about these facts? Choose one fact from the book, and use it to make an A4 sized illustrated informative poster for the wall of your classroom or school.