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# Why Willows Weep

Contemporary Tales  
from the Woods

Edited by Tracy Chevalier

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Indie***B***ooks

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# Why the Ash Has Black Buds

William  
Fiennes

The trees have always had some idea of what happens to them when they die. In forests they saw their neighbours toppled by wind or age and rot into earth, and their roots sent up descriptions of peat and coal in vast beds and seams. Later, when humans came along, trees saw the stockades, the carts pulled by horses, the chairs and tables set out in gardens, and quickly put two and two together. Trees growing beside rivers saw themselves in the hulls and masts of boats, and trees in orchards

understood that the ladders propped against them had once been trees, and when men approached with axes to fell them, the trees recognised the handles.

Trees often wondered what their particular fate might be. Would they subside into the long sleep of coal, or blaze for an hour in a cottage grate, or find themselves reconfigured as handle, hurdle, post, shaft, stake, joist, beam – or something more elaborate and rare: an abacus, a chess piece, a harpsichord? And out of these dreams a rumour moved among the trees of the world like a wind, not quite understood at first, it was so strange – a rumour that when they died, instead of being burned, planed, planked, shimmed, sharpened, many trees would be pulped. This was an entirely new idea to trees, whose self-image was all to do with trunk, sturdiness, backbone, form. But trees are good at getting the hang of things, and soon they understood that from pulp would come the white leaves humans called *paper*, and that these leaves would be bound into books, and after a short season of anxiety in which conifers shed uncharacteristic quantities of needles, the trees came to terms with this new possibility in the range of their afterlives.

Yes, the trees recognised themselves in paper, in books, just as they recognised themselves in all the other things that hadn't been thought of quite yet, like bedsteads and bagpipes and bonfires, not to mention violins, cricket bats, toothpicks, clothes pegs, chopsticks and misericords. Men and women would sit in the shade of trees, reading books, and the trees, dreaming of all that was to come, saw that they were the books as well as the chairs the men and women sat in, and the combs in the women's hair, and the shiny handles of the muskets, and the hoops the children chased across the lawns. The trees took pride in the idea of being a book: they thought a book was a noble thing to become, if you had to become anything – a terrible bore to be a rafter, after all, and a wheel would mean such a battering, though of course the travel was a bonus, and what tree in its right mind would wish to be rack, coffin, crucifix, gallows...

One tree was more excited than all the rest, and that was the ash. The ash has such an inviting, feathery shade: when men and women first had books to take into the shade of trees, they often chose the shade of an ash. The ash would look down at these people reading and see that they were discovering new regions inside themselves,

and notice how when they stood up and left the jurisdiction of its branches they had changed as if buds inside them were coming into leaf, and the ash saw that this change was a property of the marks on the paper, and that paper was the only leaf with worlds in it. Soon ash trees were discussing this phenomenon all over the place, whispering about books in Manchuria and Poland and the Pennines, passing information from grove to grove, until ash trees across North America and the Eastern and Western Palearctic were sighing and swaying with thoughts of words and pens and poems and printing presses and Odysseus and Scheherazade and the *Song of Songs*...

So ash trees dreamed of becoming books themselves one day, even though they would be much in demand as firewood, and prized as material for oars, hockey sticks and the chassis frames of Morgan motor cars. Sometimes, dreaming ahead, they saw men and women sitting beneath them, writing – writing in notebooks and diaries, writing letters of love and consolation, writing stories. And the ash tree wanted to be that, too – not just the book, but the writing in it, the words that carried the worlds. They saw the men and women holding their pens, and the ink that came out of them onto

the paper, and although they didn't have hands, they tried to curl their branches into fingers that **might** hold pens, and they dreamed it so vividly **that** the tips of their fingers turned black with ink as they waved against the blank white page of the sky, trying to write on it.

Look closely: the ash tree has black buds, and the branches bend upwards at their tips, towards the whiteness.

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# The Quaking of the Aspen

James  
Robertson

The aspen is known in Scottish Gaelic as *an critheann* (the trembling tree) and in Scots as the *quakin esp* or *quakin ash*. Mythology associates it, like the rowan, with the netherworld of the fairies: it was believed that the aspen had magical properties that could encourage eloquence or even restore the faculty of speech...

The Laird of Logie took himself a wife, and she was the Laird of Kittlespindie's daughter. Now Kittlespindie was a wealthy man, and Logie was not, so there was policy in Logie's wooing of her but little else. Perhaps the girl suspected this and,