

How a Forest Really Grows

Marius Mason

2022

a review of

Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest by Suzanne Simard. Alfred A. Knopf, 2021

I was hanging out in the dayroom of the Federal Correctional Institution at Danbury, Conn. late last year. It was noisy with the sound of the guys playing cards and Scrabble, when a friend brought a book with an intriguing cover to the table. It was Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree*, and it jolted me back to another place and time in my life, when so much of my world was about saving the trees from destruction. Her book is full of the wisdom gleaned from decades of careful and loving observation.

Simard shows us, in elegantly structured experiments, just how much we are missing of the constantly changing chemical messages/exchanges happening below the surface. The key to understanding how a forest really grows is in seeing how mutual aid, more than competition, is the predominant way all plants interconnect to help each other thrive. Interconnecting to the extent that forests constitute an actual community with constellations of mother trees sending out communications via chemical signals.

Their success is interwoven with the health of other species around them. It is a radical assertion, but it is carefully built upon powerful evidence. And, the implications are huge, forcing us to reconsider what constitutes sentience. This falls well within a biocentric perspective and felt incredibly affirming for my own part as an environmentalist.

Simard's book is also a frank memoir of a woman well ahead of her time, caught up in self-discovery as she changes her relationship with family and her vocation—so much warmth is in these pages, and always guided by a deep love of the natural world. Her compelling work was known to the writer, Richard Powers, who based a character on her in his novel, *The Overstory*. In fact, one could speculate that it is Simard's research that drives the story Powers tells in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

Don't be put off by the science, as Simard does a masterful job of making her insights very accessible to non-botanists. Read this book and you will see the world differently.

Marius Mason is housed in the men's unit at a federal prison in Danbury, Conn. In order to proceed to the next level of F-T-M transition, he must live in the men's unit for one year.

Mason stays active writing, reading, studying for two different educational certificates, and serving as mentor to fellow inmates. Letters are welcome. supportmariusmason.org.



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