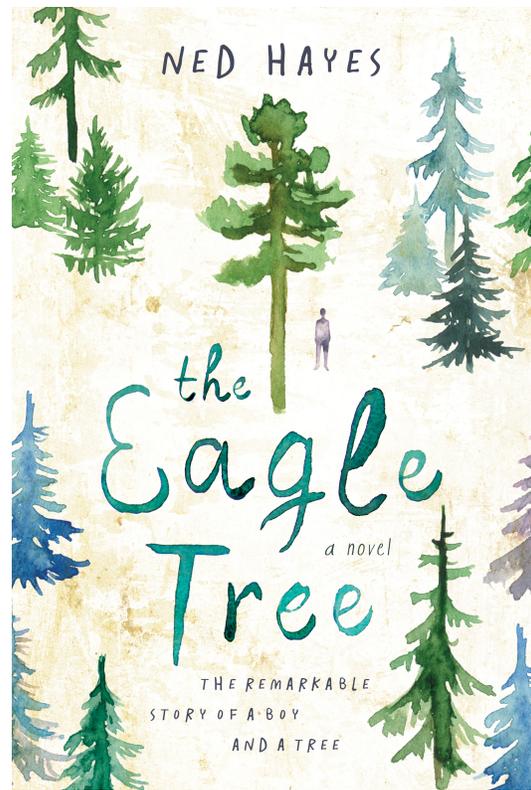


THE EAGLE TREE
by Ned Hayes

Little A Books 2016

STUDY GUIDE

Fourteen-year-old March Wong knows everything there is to know about trees. They are his passion and his obsession, even after his recent falls—and despite the state’s threat to take him away from his mother if she can’t keep him from getting hurt. But the young autistic boy cannot resist the captivating pull of the Pacific Northwest’s lush forests just outside his back door.



One day, March is devastated to learn that the Eagle Tree—a monolithic Ponderosa Pine near his home in Olympia—is slated to be cut down by developers. Now, he will do anything in his power to save this beloved tree, including enlisting unlikely support from relatives, classmates, and even his bitter neighbor. In taking a stand, March will come face-to-face with some frightening possibilities: Even if he manages to save the Eagle Tree, is he risking himself and his mother to do it? Intertwining themes of humanity and ecology, *The Eagle Tree* eloquently explores what it means to be part of a family, a society, and the natural world that surrounds and connects us.

EDITORIAL REVIEW

To see the world through the eyes of someone else is one of reading’s greatest powers. *The Eagle Tree* carried me, with sensitivity and grace, into the mind of an autistic teenage boy—one who would rather climb tall trees than meet his mother’s gaze.

In this unconventional and uplifting story, the young narrator learns that a beloved ponderosa pine near his Olympia, Washington, home will be cut down. Panicked, he gathers an unlikely group of allies to save it from destruction. He must overcome numerous barriers to convince his mother, his uncle, a grumpy neighbor, and reluctant politicians to help him with his fight. I found myself moved by the boy’s determination and awed by his resourcefulness.

I can’t recall a story that pulled me so deeply into the inner workings of its protagonist’s extraordinary mind. But the novel does more than capture perfectly the unexpected and powerful voice of autism. *The Eagle Tree* also explores what it means to be part of a family and connected through our hearts and minds to the natural world that surrounds us.

– Carmen Johnson, Editor, LITTLE A

ENDORSEMENTS

“Every human experience is unique, but *The Eagle Tree* provides insight into one distinctive and uniquely important perspective. The descriptions in climbing the Eagle Tree gets deep into the mathematical pattern-based sensory world of a person with autism. The experience of navigating a tree climb is described in detail with mathematical and sensory detail that seems very authentic to me.”

—**Temple Grandin, Ph.D., author of *Emergence: Labeled Autistic***

“*The Eagle Tree* is a gorgeously written novel that features one of the most accurate, finely drawn, and memorable autistic protagonists in literature. The hero of the book is like a fourteen-year-old Walt Whitman with autism, seeking communion with the ancient magnificent beings that tower over the landscape around Olympia, Washington. Ned Hayes plays with the conventions of the unreliable narrator so that you end up feeling like March is a very reliable narrator of glorious and terrifying aspects of the world that neurotypicals can’t see. Credible, authentic, powerful. A must-read.”

—**Steve Silberman, author of *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction.**

“A wonderful read! To say that the narrator’s mind is unusual would not be correct. His mind is simply and marvelously unique like yours and mine. Or rather, like yours and mine *could* be if we lifted the eyes of our hope to the crowns of trees and listened to the voice of our neglected spirit. *The Eagle Tree* will remind of the beauty and truth you may have forgotten.”

—**Francisco X. Stork, award-winning author of *Marcelo in the Real World***

“*The Eagle Tree* portrays a teenager that is believable and lovable. March, the main character, is a living, breathing person with significant challenges who is so realistic I feel I know him. I have not enjoyed an autistic novel as much since *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. *The Eagle Tree*’s beautifully written narrator is a real joy—March Wong is an unexpected leader, who remains true to himself and prevails. *The Eagle Tree* will leave an indelible mark on your heart.”

—**Susan Senator, author of *Making Peace with Autism***

BOOK GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions for readers:

1. How is March Wong, the main character, different in his perceptions from you? How would March describe these differences?
2. The main character, March Wong, is entranced by a tree in the first paragraph of the story. Why does the author introduce this obsession so early in the story?
3. What is the relationship between the main character's parents? How do we know about this relationship?
4. How reliable a narrator is March Wong? Are there critical pieces of information that are left out of the story? How is this information communicated to the reader?
5. If your family were friends with March Wong's family, what might you or your children think of March? What would your interactions be like with him on a daily basis?
6. Which characters serve as mentors to March? Which characters see themselves as helping March? Which ones are seen by March in that capacity? Is there a difference in perception?
7. The author has stated that the story is a "Romance," and has talked about romance novels as a model for this story. If the story is a romance, then who are the "lovers" in this romance and who do they love?
8. To continue the romantic theme, many romances involve complications that separate potential lovers. What are the complications in the book?
9. Do other characters see these events or activities as complications, or as necessary parts of March's experience in the world?
10. The author has stated that he does not want to characterize the main character as "autistic". Why would that be the case? What does the author gain from this position? What does the book gain or lose?
11. What role does the work and writings of Annie Dillard play in the story?
12. Christianity and theological perspectives inform the story in the book. How does March's perspective in the book differ from a "standard" perspective on Christianity? How is his perspective different?
13. The book is set in Olympia Washington. What critical information do you learn from this book about the area of Olympia? What important information about Olympia does March not share with you?
14. At the beginning of the book, March pointedly refuses to use metaphors or symbolic language to describe events in the book. By the end of the book, March is using metaphorical language in different situations to describe events. Why is this?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Author Ned Hayes has published multiple novels, including *Sinful Folk* and *Coeur d'Alene Waters*. His most recent novel, *The Eagle Tree*, is his first national bestseller.

How did the idea of THE EAGLE TREE come to you?

Years ago, I taught a variety of children who were not neuro-typical. This means they had a variety of unique and interesting perspectives on the world. One young man especially stayed in my mind for many years. I was inspired by his unusual point of view and the very hard work he undertook to control what he saw as distracting or destructive behavior and to connect with people around him. I admired him greatly, and I hope a little of his voice is here in this book.

Just two years ago, a writer friend of mine here in Olympia introduced me to the real life “Eagle Tree” back in the woods, and the idea of this solitary, amazing tree came together in my mind with the young man I knew years ago. The story emerged organically from that catalyst.

“The idea of this solitary, amazing tree came together with the young man...

The story emerged organically from that catalyst.”

— Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

The real-life “Eagle Tree” exists, then. How much of the story is grounded in your real life in Olympia, Washington?

Well, it’s worth noting that for the sake of the story, I moved the real life Eagle Tree all the way across town from the Evergreen State College, where it is really located, to the east side of Olympia where I live. But there are many wooded areas on this side of town as well, and I think the Eagle Tree could easily be located here. So the geography of the story is somewhat misaligned with reality, but only slightly.

However, the story is very grounded in the Olympia I know and love. That’s why I made sure to include Olympia institutions like “The Procession of the Species,” the United Churches (a real church here in town), and a unique school we have, the Olympia Regional Learning Academy (ORLA). In my story, March attends ORLA. In real life, he probably would be in a mainstream classroom at a public school, but again, for the sake of the story certain changes were made to the fabric of reality.

What about the LBA Woods? You mentioned in your author’s note that the LBA Woods is a real place.



Right, one critical fact I didn’t change is that the LBA Woods here in Olympia were in fact slated to be bulldozed for a housing development. I wrote this novel when this was still on the books as a development. The woods were going to go.

Yet a group of local citizens came together and just this past year convinced the city to reserve the area as a wooded reserve. This wonderful group also pushed forward a local parks initiative which will expand and preserve wooded areas in the city of Olympia. I take a walk in the woods nearly every day, and I am so grateful to this dedicated group for their tireless efforts. I had to include these woods in the story, and I am so glad that fiction became reality.

I think March Wong would be very happy as well!

“March is a human being, with the complexities and complications of our shared humanity...I don’t think it’s helpful to apply some sort of label to a person.”

— Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

In the novel, March, your narrator, is called “aspy” by someone who is bullying him. Later in the story, the newspaper states he is a “disabled young man.” How would you describe March?

March is a human being, with the complexities and complications of our shared humanity. I believe I’ve accurately reflected how some people would see March. But I don’t think that’s an accurate reflection of how March sees himself.

I do think it’s likely that March is on the autistic spectrum, but I know many people who are either on the spectrum or have other atypical behavior, and I don’t think it’s helpful to apply some sort of label to a person. He may be different from many people, but that’s not to say his perspective is not equally valuable or equally valid.

I think it’s enough to say March Wong is a human being, and let people discover for themselves how much they identify with his experience or find his perspective new and different.

“I think it’s enough to say March Wong is a human being, and let people discover for themselves how much they identify with his experience or find his perspective new and different.” — Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

There’s one difference you never explicitly name. March is a young Asian-American man. Why didn’t you specifically emphasize this identity as a plot point?

Again, March Wong is a human being. That’s his primary and most important identity.

March happens to be focused on trees and his attempts to find a place in his community and that’s the story I’ve told. Another writer might have told a different story about March Wong.

Sure, March is an Asian-American young man, and he’s explicitly choosing the more “Asian” part of his name as his public identity. That’s part of the story: March is discovering and naming who he is in relation to other people.

But like most people in the United States, March doesn’t spend all his time thinking about his particular skin color or national origin. Like most people, March has concerns and a life that goes far beyond national origin or cultural identity.

“People who are not of European origin do not exist on the margins of the American story – They are the American story.”

— Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

I think it’s vital to create fiction that has fully embodied human beings of various national origins and skin colors and identities. It is often through fiction that we see ourselves most clearly, and we need to start hearing all voices and all lives as fully embodied, rather than stereotypical “cultural activists.” People who are not of European origin do not exist on the margins of the American story – They are the American story.

If we don’t do this – if we just create and emphasize Eurocentric white characters – we do a disservice to our readers and we fail to enrich our culture and understand our national story.

The story is about March’s self-discovery and maturation. In that regard, it is a classic coming-of-age story. How did you find a new approach to that classic form?

I’d like to think I’ve been honest to March and shown respect for his unusual perspective, and this point of view gives us a radically different set of insights into that time of change. Many classic coming-of-age stories, from J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* to *WONDER* by R.J. Palacio to Jim Lynch’s *The Highest Tide* have times of introspection and explanation to the reader about how important and meaningful the changes are to the main character and what it all means. In fact, *Catcher in the Rye*’s title is taken from just such a reflective and contemplative section.

March’s story, in contrast to that type of introspective story, contains almost none of that “explanatory” material. That’s because March himself doesn’t overtly explore himself in that way. By removing the explanation of what happens, I think I’ve followed the even-more-classic writing dictum of “show don’t tell,” and I’ve been true to March’s natural predilection to experience reality and not indulge in flights of fancy or flights of imaginative exploration. He tends to stay grounded in a certain reality. And since you mostly just experience what he experiences – even on the last page – readers must draw their own conclusions about what March is experiencing and what it all means.

It may be a coming-of-age novel, but how that works and what it all means is left as an exercise for the reader.

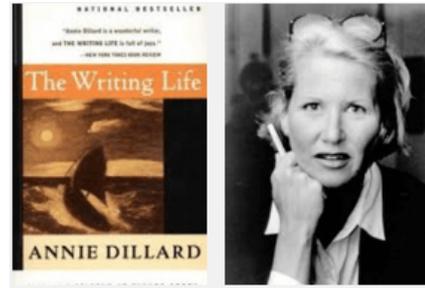
“*The Eagle Tree* may be a coming-of-age novel, but how that works and what it all means is left as an exercise for the reader.”

— Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

The experiential nature of the story is clear, but you do reference at least one imaginative artist, Annie Dillard. Tell us more about why Dillard’s words are included.

In the 1990s, I immersed myself in Annie Dillard’s work. In fact, when I applied to graduate schools, I chose Western Washington University in Bellingham because she taught at Western for some time, and she had also published several books set in Bellingham. I wanted to follow in her footsteps.

What Annie Dillard does so marvelously is to reflect on the beauty of nature and the mysteries of science without either softening the edge of the transcendent nature of our experience or dumbing down the science.



Pastor Ilsa in my book is a reflection and communicator of Dillard’s vision in her life. Because March is not that reflective on an overt level, Ilsa is my way of reflecting on March’s story and demonstrating that this very human ability to transcend is very much a part of March’s reality.

I know that March himself would not seek out Dillard – she is not by nature his kind of writer – but I felt that giving him access to her perspective might wake up a new approach or a new desire in him. And in fact, it did, and March took action based on that reading of Dillard.

I don’t know if I’ve followed in Dillard’s footsteps here, but I hope I’ve honored her work and influence in this story.

Now that March’s story is published, what other stories do you plan to tell? What other characters will you be bringing to life?

I have a habit of challenging myself to tell stories that are removed from my personal experience and that stretch me as a reader and as a writer.

My previous novel *Sinful Folk* was written from the viewpoint of a cross-dressing woman, who is living in the 14th century as a serf. *THE EAGLE TREE* is, of course, written from the point of view of a fourteen year-old who is not neurotypical. I think voices from other times, places, or worldviews show us ourselves in a new light and allow us to grow from that experience.

I’ve been writing first drafts of several different stories recently. We’ll see which one blossoms and grows into a new novel. But you can rest assured I’ll keep writing stories that provide unique and different perspectives.

“I think voices from other times, places, or worldviews show us ourselves in a new light and allow us to grow from that experience.”

— Ned Hayes, author of *The Eagle Tree*

THE EAGLE TREE by Ned Hayes, now available in print, e-book and audiobook.