

From the Giving Tree to the Whomping Willow: The 9 Best Trees in Literature

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Trees -- what are they good for? In real life: food, shade, houses, paper. In literature: so, so much more. From Middle-Earth's talking "Ents" to the car-destroying Whomping Willow, we're taking a look at the most famous trees in fiction. With Earth Day behind us and summer around the corner, these sturdy creatures -- by turns generous, beautiful, ugly, and seductive -- give us new reason to love (and fear) plants.



1 The Giving Tree

Charitable to a fault

Probably the most famous tree in all of children's literature, Shel Silverstein's arboreal creation takes loving (though ultimately self-destructive) joy in providing for her human friend, Boy. As a child, Boy wants only to play innocently with the tree, climbing her trunk and swinging from her branches. But as he grows older and his needs become more urgent, his requests demand greater sacrifices: the tree's apples for money, her branches for a house, even her trunk for a boat. The conclusion of *The Giving Tree* is a bitterly sad one -- but, as in all of Silverstein's works, it's a good, soul-enriching, life-lesson-imparting kind of sad.

2 Siddhartha

Shade for the enlightened

In his classic novel about the life of Siddhartha Gautama (a.k.a. Buddha), German writer Hermann Hesse harks back to the foundational scene in which Gautama, circa 500 B.C.E., meditates for 49 days and eventually attains enlightenment under a Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya, India. "There was a tree against the river bank," Hesse writes. "Siddhartha leaned against it.... He looked down and was completely filled and was completely filled with a desire to let himself go and be submerged in the water."

3 Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

A magic tree in need of chill pills

It's hard to decide whether the Whomping Willow -- an animate, lethal, and somewhat oversensitive tree on the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry -- is a friend or foe. We first encounter it in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Ron and Harry (driving the former's flying car) narrowly avoid getting crushed; later, it destroys Harry's broomstick. But in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, we learn that the Willow hides the entrance to a secret passageway the Marauders used during their time at Hogwarts.

4 To Kill a Mockingbird

A symbol of generosity -- and hate

In Harper Lee's classic novel, an oak tree outside of Boo Radley's house acts as a symbol for friendship, and the ways in which kindness can thrive despite adverse circumstances. Reclusive and rumor-haunted Boo begins leaving small presents in a knothole in the tree for Scout Finch and her older brother Jem -- a gesture that speaks as much to Boo's generosity as it does to his loneliness. But later, when Boo's brother fills the knothole with cement, the tree comes to symbolize another force in the novel: closed-mindedness, intolerance, and fear of the unfamiliar.

5 The Bible

Sinfully delicious

A list of arboreal-centric literature would be incomplete without the trunk and branches that started it all -- the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. To be fair, it was actually the snake *in* the tree that encouraged Eve to pick the apple (which, in turn, led to hers and Adam's expulsion from Eden). But the Tree got caught in the crossfire nonetheless -- and became a universal symbol for human hubris and greed.

6 A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

If the tree can do it, so can I

In Betty Smith's novel about a poor multiethnic family living in the tenements of Williamsburg, Brooklyn in the early twentieth century, a tree called the Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) sprouts up in the yard of an apartment building. The tree's determination and resistance to extermination efforts provides a symbolic parallel to the protagonist Francie Nolan's own effort to rise above her family's limiting circumstances.

7 The Ancient One

Save a tree, save history

T. A. Barron's *Fern Gully*-esque fantasy novel concerns a young girl of conservationist persuasion, Kate Gordon, who attempts to save a forest of ancient redwoods from a band of opportunistic loggers. In the process, she's mysteriously catapulted 500 years into the past, where she becomes engaged in yet another struggle over the same area of land. *The Ancient One* is just one example of how Barron fuses concerns over the natural world with fantasy lit. Look to his Great Tree of Avalon series for more epic tales set in the wilderness (and starring beautiful, endangered trees).

8 The Lord of the Rings

When bark talks

Did J.R.R. Tolkien inspire Grandmother Willow in Disney's *Pocahontas*? It's entirely possible, given the importance placed on Ents, talking tree-like creatures, in his Lord of the Rings series. Acting as guardians of the forest, the Ents are headed by a leader named Treebeard, who purports to be the oldest creature in Middle Earth.

9 The Little Prince

Roses and baobabs

So far this list has focused on trees that are helpful, attractive or, at the very least, serve a purpose. But not all trees are welcome in literature. Indeed, the baobab tree in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is as fearsome and antagonizing as any "bad guy." As the prince tells the narrator, the baobab trees have a tendency to overrun the surface asteroid from which he (the prince) has descended, posing a constant threat to the rose plants he so adores. Critics plumbing the historical significance of *The Little Prince* have gone as far as to suggest the evil baobab trees symbolize Nazism.