

Trees, Woods and Literature – 28

Hatsue found herself walking in the woods later that afternoon. It was getting on toward the end of February, a time of only bleak light. In spring great shafts of sun would split the canopy of trees and the litter fall of the forest would come floating down – twigs, seeds, needles, dust bark, all suspended in the hazy air – but now, in February, the woods felt black and the trees looked sodden and smelled pungently of rot. Hatsue went inland to where the cedars gave way to firs hung with lichen and moss. Everything was familiar and known to her here – the dead and dying cedars full of punky heartwood, the fallen, defeated trees as high as a house, the upturned root wads hung with vine maple, the toadstools, the ivy, the salal, the vanilla leaf, the low wet places full of devil's club. These were the woods through which she had wandered on her way home from Mrs. Shigemura's lessons, the woods where she had cultivated the kind of tranquillity, Mrs. Shigemura had demanded. She'd sat among sword ferns six feet tall or on a shelf above a vale of trilliums and opened her eyes to the place. As far back as she could recall the content of her days there had always been this silent forest which retained for her its mystery.

There were straight rows of trees – colonnades – growing out of the seedbed of trees that had fallen two hundred years before and sunk and become the earth itself. The forest floor was a map of fallen trees that had lived half a thousand years before collapsing – a rise here, a dip there, a mound or moldering hillock somewhere – the woods held the bones of trees so old no one living had ever seen them. Hatsue had counted the rings of fallen trees more than six hundred years old. She had seen the deer mouse, the creeping vole, the green-hued antlers of the white-tailed deer decaying under a cedar. She knew where lady fern grew and phantom orchids and warted giant puffballs.

Deep among the trees she lay on a fallen log and gazed far up branchless trunks. A late winter wind blew the tops around, inducing in her a momentary vertigo. She admired a Douglas fir's complicated bark, followed its grooves to the canopy of branches two hundred feet above. The world was incomprehensibly intricate, and yet this forest made a simple sense in her heart that she felt nowhere else.

From *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson (chapter 14, pp 178-179). Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1995. *Snow Falling on Cedars* won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1995. Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

Guterson's novel is set in San Piedro Island, off the Washington Coast in the Pacific North West in December 1954. Hatsue is a 31-year-old Japanese-American and wife of Kabuo Miyamoto who is accused of the murder of a fellow fisherman. While the novel is essentially a murder mystery, it is interwoven with sub-plots that concern the lives of people on the tiny island who are struggling with survival, identity and love. It is set against a backdrop of post Second World War suspicions and mistrust between islanders and the Japanese community, mainly fuelled by the hysteria that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

The extract looks back to when Hatsue was 18 years old and in love with Ishmael Chamber, the local reporter who is now covering the trial some 13 years later.

Hatsue had visited the woods to help her make sense of her world and identity. Beneath her outwardly serene countenance, she is in turmoil having had an argument with her mother who reprimands her for a pro-American outburst. Her mother has employed Mrs Shigemura to teach her Japanese customs with the intention that she *would not forget that she was first and foremost Japanese*. Hatsue however identifies with western culture, but at the same time Japan ... *pulled on her and lived inside her despite her wishes to the contrary; it was something she could not deny*. The forest not only provides her with the solitude to confront these conflicting emotions but is also where she meets Ishmael in secret. This is the last time they meet as lovers; shortly after Hatsue and her family, along with thousands more Japanese-Americans are rounded up and interned after the bombing of Pearl Harbour.

Guterson meticulously researches his books to understand and bring to life the landscape and the characters that frequent his novels such as loggers, fishermen and – in the case of *Snow Falling on Cedars* - the Japanese-American people. He carried out many interviews with Japanese-Americans to know how it was to have lived during the 1940s, especially in the internment camps. (Some 110,000 Japanese-Americans were interned during the Second World War. The US government formally apologised to Japanese citizens in 1988 for this wrongdoing.)

Guterson was born in Seattle in 1956 but has had a strong affinity with the forests, mountains, rivers and canyons of Washington State where his novels including *East of the Mountains* and *Our Lady of the Forest* are set. As a student he worked with the US Forest Service where he says he spent his time burning slash in clearcuts, piling brush, maintaining trails and fighting wildfires. He now lives in Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound. Guterson's landscape will have resonances for Irish readers, especially foresters, timber growers and tree breeders who have visited Washington or who have planted trees which originated in the region.

(Selection and note by Donal Magner)