



Understory: a life with trees

Inga Simpson

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A journey of staying on once place, told through trees.

Each chapter of this nature-writing memoir explores a particular species of tree, layering description, anecdote, and natural history to tell the story of a scrap of forest in the Sunshine Coast hinterland - how the author came to be there and the ways it has shaped her life.

In many ways, it's the story of a treechange, of escaping suburban Brisbane for a cottage on ten acres in search of a quiet life. Of establishing a writers retreat shortly before the Global Financial Crisis, and losing just about everything.

It is also the story of what the author found there: the literature of nature and her own path as a writer.

"I see the world through trees. Every window and doorway frames trunks, limbs, and leaves. My light is their light, filtered green. My air is their exhalation."

Understory: a life with trees Details

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From Reader Review Understory: a life with trees for online ebook

Cass Moriarty says

The attached photo of the cover of Inga Simpson's latest book, *Understory: A Life With Trees* (Hachette Australia Books 2017), doesn't really do justice to the actual cover, which features the veined leaf in a stunning coppery-gold that shines from the understated green background, reminiscent of the sudden pops of colour that burst randomly from forests and woods. And so it is with the story – a memoir – which provides unexpected jolts of emotion against a background of contemplation and introspection.

Inga's love for nature, and her skill as a nature writer, are clearly evident throughout this work. In fact her knowledge, her environmental compassion, and her ability to articulate aspects of the natural world in a way both interesting and impassioned, inspires a curiosity that is infectious. Even if, like me, you read this book with a painful awareness of just how little we know about our native flora and fauna, Inga nevertheless manages to write a fascinating story that captures our interest and holds it fast. She is explanatory without being supercilious, and she shares her story in a way that encourages the rest of us perhaps to lift our game and to develop more of an inquiring mind into the world about us.

Like all memoirs, *Understory* is subjective: it is Inga's memories and feelings about the life she has lived so far, the places she has occupied, the land for which she has felt an affinity, the people she has loved, and the practices and regulations that have frustrated her. We see snatches of her childhood, growing up on a large property, and we see how that laid a crucial, almost primal desire for her love of nature. *Understory* tells how Inga and her partner, N, escape from city living and office politics to settle for a tree change lifestyle in a cottage on ten acres in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. Sounds idyllic, right? And parts of the story are just that. Idyllic. The beautiful, mostly undisturbed bushland; the native birds and animals that make it their home; homemade treats, made from foraged ingredients, enjoyed by log fires; long walks in the forest; the space and privacy and quiet to write and to dream. Inga and N even purchase the property next door and open a writers' retreat, where like-minded artists gather to create words focussed on nature and the Australian landscape. And for a time, it is sort of perfect.

But the unrelenting hard work of living on the land – the weed clearing and native tree planting and water gathering – along with the day-to-day distractions, annoyances and sometimes even dangers of dust, fire, storms, logging, deforestation, habitat destruction and the capricious vagaries of council and developers, all of these combine with the sudden impact of the Global Financial Crisis to create a perfect storm of insurmountable problems. Too much money has been borrowed, too little income is being generated, city jobs – necessary for the cash they provide – intrude into the escapist lifestyle, and always, always there is the bush, relentlessly encroaching on their small circle of tamed land, with the weather and the environment often threatening to tear apart all they have carefully built up.

Inga and N don't remain together, and despite their collaboration on the writers' retreat, the story when looked at as a whole is all about Inga: her feelings about nature and her place in it; her respect for Australia's indigenous people and their enviable relationship with the land; her soul-searching for the best way to live in the world and to be true to herself while still fulfilling social obligations and financial necessities. It is a strongly environmentally-themed work, and her views on past (and present) land practices are fierce and clear. She is steadfastly determined to achieve certain ideals in her small section of country, but she is also open about her ignorance and vulnerability about certain issues; she shares what she has learnt along the way, and emphasises that she is still learning, that the trees themselves continue to teach her.

For the book, as its title suggests, is mostly about the trees. Each chapter begins with a particular species or type of tree or vegetation, and we are given scientific and anecdotal information about the trees that surround us. True nature lovers will appreciate the care she has taken in describing the trees; those readers less knowledgeable will enjoy the feeling of painless education, as the information leeches into us almost by osmosis. As in the often-referenced *The Lord of the Rings*, trees take on a mystical, magical quality; they are

depicted not only physically but historically and emotionally as well. If trees do speak – to each other, even to us – this book gives us hints of how that might happen.

This is also the story of Inga's path as a writer – the book begins before she is published, when she is so lacking in confidence (in writing) that she cannot even bring herself to commit to a writing course. But by the end of the book, she has published three novels (all with environmental themes) and is much more at home both in her world of trees, and in her writing world, where she is able to express her admiration for the miracles of nature.

There are many messages we can take from this book: the glory of the Australian bush; the steadfastness and beauty of trees; the remarkable capacity of our flora to recover and regenerate; the threat of environmental vandalism and over-development, or inappropriate land use. But two messages stood out for me. Firstly, the sheer bloody-mindedness required to live amongst nature in a symbiotic way, and the admiration we should show those who respect the land and have learned to live within it in peaceful cohabitation. And secondly, the absolute necessity for us to continually strive to do that: to provide safe harbour for native plants and animals, to creatively find ways to live alongside the land, to inhale the scented air, to stop and be still in order really to see the minute details of our surroundings, and to walk barefoot on the earth, leaving only the lightest of footprints.

This is an intimate story by a writer who is a keen observer of the world around her and her place in it. It leaves a strong impression of nature, and a vivid sense of place.

Susie Griffin says

Loved this memoir.

Dan Phillips says

I want to read this book more slowly to take it in, but can't stop! It will have to be a read again book. Inga has given me a new awareness of the trees in my life. The story is to me much more relatable than Peter Wohlleben's 'The Hidden Life of Trees', and although Inga's trees are less anthropomorphic I still feel closer to them. I feel there was more room in Inga's narrative for the European use of trees in the oppression of Queensland's aborigines, however I couldn't fault her for this, it is not an easy thing to reconcile, and concurrently reading Timothy Bottoms' 'Conspiracy of Silence' has made me look at any history as inadequate.

Jonathon Hagger says

There are flashes of brilliant writing and there are some threads which don't quite fit. What started out as an exciting and interesting read exploring Australian flora and fauna, much like the forest, tended to shoot off in different directions. Personally I would have preferred if the author focused on one key thread rather than jump about but this book is a memoir and in life, as in nature, there are few straight lines or continuous narratives. Overall an enjoyable book indeed.

Suzie says

Achingly beautiful

Michaela says

I came across Inga Simpson at Adelaide Writer's Week. My interest was piqued after listening to her read an excerpt from her novel *Where The Trees Were*. I fell in love with that novel, have now devoured *Understory* and certainly plan to make my way through her first two novels. *Understory* is the tale of Simpson's tree change from suburbia to a cottage in the forest and interweaves the stories of her life that shaped her path as a writer.

Part of what I love about *Understory* was that I found Simpson so relatable. All the anecdotes, the passing details are so familiar to my own life that I couldn't help but feel comfortable in her world. Gardening in your undies, finishing the day with a beer, the love for wine, good food and solitude. It was all too easy to picture and immerse myself in. I also loved the continuous references to *Lord of the Rings* and in particular the Ents. I adore *LotR* and loved reading about the parallels she found in her life in the forest.

Understory is not just a memoir of Simpson's life, but of the trees in the forest too. The reader visits the canopy, the middlestory and the understory. When reading this book be prepared with a device for googling images of the trees. While Simpson's descriptions are vivid and beautiful I also enjoyed a visual representation. Each chapter within each part is the story of that tree, the reader learns all about it, where it fits in the forest and hear a story from Simpson's life that relates back to that tree. This is not your typical memoir told in chronological order detailing life from infancy to present. This is something different, more personal, the reader understands just how intertwined Simpson's life is with the forest.

If you are ecologically-minded I highly recommend picking up *Understory*. If you aren't ecologically-minded I still recommend picking up *Understory*. I love the approach to life, the relationship with nature, the lessons learned all contained within this memoir and already know it is a book I will return to again and again over the years. In fact, I immediately went out and purchased Simpson's first novel, *Mr Wigg*, before I had even finished reading *Understory* after reading about the inspiration and process of writing it. I believe Simpson is becoming an important voice in Australian literature and highly recommend picking up something of hers if you have not yet. We can all do with a little reminder of just how much we influence our environment and what we can do to protect it. I give *Understory* four strong trees of the forest.

Paul Andrew says

If you want to learn the language of trees, read this book - slowly, sensitively, openly - and allow yourself to be taken places beyond the superficial chatter of what we call 'civilisation', into the deep woods. An Australian *Walden*, Inga's forest home teaches us who we should be as people, helps us learn to live in the

silences, grow back our interconnectedness to the land, and listen to the deep knowledge of the trees. And for those sceptics, the memoir is so authoritatively and meticulously researched there is no argument to be made against it - we get to hear the trees speak in a language we slowly learn.

This memoir is a palimpsest of Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*, or rather, reveals the understory of that novel, goes beyond and through classification to an intuitive sense of connectedness to the forest she inhabits.

Loved the Tolkien vines creeping through the story.

And that is just on my first reading. I am going back into those dark woods again for more...

Jenny Esots says

I wrote a review of this memoir not long after reading and it has disappeared. My recollections now are of an author trying to make sense of her life.

The relationships, the new business, the loves, the jobs, the losses, the writing. Writing is a job where a person is paid to bare their soul, but often this is hidden in many other fictionalized stories. Having read all of Inga Simpson's books I can see echoes of her life in her book creations.

The book is divided into chapters on trees. As trees are a central motif to the writer's sense of place, history and belonging. Inga has a gift for simple but descriptive prose on flora and fauna. This is interspersed with her own development as a writer. The ambitions and aspirations of being able to write for a living. The conflict between having to make a living and wanting to have a life is one of the central dilemmas played out.

Sometimes I found the tree imagery getting in the way of the memoir. I wanted more of Inga's own personal recollections. Memoir is a hard genre to reconcile when the people involved are very much still with you in some way. Perhaps there is a hesitancy to not fully open all those doors.

Here is a tale of how to be a writer and what succeeded and what unravelled. Everyone has their own path to writing. It does take courage and the reader is rewarded in hearing of these struggles. It is like all memoirs, a type of therapy.

Special mention must go to the most beautiful cover artwork. The gold leaf is transformative image.

Cheyenne Blue says

It was pretty much a given that I would love this book, as it combines two of my favourite things: nature and rural living, with the writing life. Three things, if you add in that this memoir is about Inga Simpson's time living in the Sunshine Coast hinterland in Queensland, where I lived for a while, and still continue to live a short distance from its northern end.

Simpson combines her love and exploration of nature and nature writing with the joys and disappointments of life in subtropical Queensland. As the title and cover beautifully portrays, Simpson talks about trees: tallowwood, spotted gum, wattles, palms, and my favourite tree, the bunya bunya pine. She talks about weeds too: lantana mainly, and as anyone who has ever lived rural in SE Queensland or the Northern Rivers of NSW knows, lantana will take over your land in an ever-increasing thicket, swallow your animals, make tracks in the forest impassable, and generally break your heart. It also stinks.

Simpson is foremost a nature writer, and her keen and quiet observations of trees and landscapes is so delicate to read, so beautifully and vividly drawn. She also talks about the birds, wildlife, and the problems they face in an increasingly populated area. She is also a good observer of people (and this led to one of my small discomforts with the book). The writing is careful and glorious, and it's easy to be caught up in a dream realised—and then lost.

She and her partner, N, and N's two children moved to the hinterland, to Landers Chute, between Palmwoods and Eudlo on the Sunshine Coast. It's an area I know well; it's famous for landslips, the earth slumping down from the Blackall Range rim above in muddy hummocks. If the Montville-Palmwoods Road is open as I write this, it won't be for long as the wet season is here and it will close again soon. Bet the house on that one.

Simpson and N were both writers (I don't know who N is, or if I know her writing,) and while the house and acres were their dream, it was a struggle from the start. See, acreage is a lifestyle, but few people realise the work involved until they get there. Know how long we spend each week trying to keep weeds at bay on our two acres? Five or six hours each week. It's not sufficient to wander around with a backpack of Roundup every few months. A timber house to maintain, access roads, insects, pests, snakes, other wildlife, and mould. Mould. So when Simpson talked about leaving for a week and coming back to a house where everything is covered in green mould... Well, I sympathised.

My point for telling you all this is to say that many people don't know about these things before they move to acreage in the subtropics. Simpson and N soon found out the hard way. Understory (and oh, don't I love the clever wordplay in the title) details hardships, and small pleasures of a life's dream realised and then given away. It should be required reading for anyone with an acreage dream.

They also opened a writer's retreat, and battled again—more physical work, more struggles, more land to care for, a relationship, a family, a job in Brisbane, and this time the added marketing, promotion, and work associated with the retreat.

My one quibble about this book is one I have about many memoirs, and that is the small and casual cruelties that can be said about other people. It's the memoirist's decision to bare her soul; others don't have that choice. There were a couple of little moments, no more than a sentence or a paragraph, when Simpson talked about other people in a dispassionate way that was rather piercing. It made me uncomfortable.

All the same I loved this book and will be seeking more of Inga Simpson's work. 4.5 stars rounded up.

Helen King says

Absolutely beautiful - a lot to take in, and I found I could read in small snatches because I wanted to think about what I'd read before moving to the next part. A wonderful way of weaving a life narrative into a nature narrative - I haven't quite read anything like this before.

Kellie Hoffman says

Clever! I'm not sure what I was expecting when I started reading but it certainly wasn't that my own connections to nature would intensify in the way they did. I've always loved trees, the bush, birds & the outdoors but I started observing these things around me in even more detail; paying attention to colours & leaves & bark & trees in my everyday. We went for a brief road trip whilst reading this & I found myself consciously observing how the trees grew & changed as the kilometres rolled by.

I love the way this story is composed & how it gradually unfolds to reveal the realities of a life in the Australian bush & the realities & hardships of life in general. I realised that so much of Inga's writing is based on autobiography, even when writing fiction, & wonder how true this is for other authors?

The writing is easy & enjoyable to read and I felt engagement & connection with her story.

I read this book on the back of Brooke McAlary's book, *Slow*. It was such a perfect follow-up & both books have changed the way I think & operate in my everyday. As far as memoirs go, this is cleverly designed & a memorable read. I totally enjoyed it & would recommend to anyone interested in writing, learning more about nature or considering a sea-change.

Carol - Reading Writing and Riesling says

My View:

I am a fan of the Inga Simpson's previous works - *Nest* and *Where the Trees Were* (I have yet to read *Mr Wigg* - a book which has garnered much praise). I now have a little understanding of where those narratives came from, yet I was surprised to discover the depth of passion that Inga Simpson has for the environment. I don't think I have ever met anyone with such passionate views, with such determination, with such a strong bond with the landscape they live in, a landscape that has determined so much of Inga Simpson's life and lifestyle; quite amazing!

Every chapter of this engaging memoir connects the reader to a particular species of tree, the memories it evokes, personal anecdotes shared, the chaotic life of a writer juxtaposed against the solidness, the strength and longevity of the tree... what a unique way of looking at and presenting, Inga's world to her readers.

A unique and special memoir.

Michael Livingston says

Beautifully written memoir, capturing the hardships and joys of a life lived in sub-tropical semi-wildness. Simpson writes about nature as well as anyone, and here she also captures something heartbreaking and true about life. One of my favourites of the year so far.

Jan says

Accomplished nature writing. There have been, or are, only a few who have reached this standard in Australia.

An ideal for presenting this writing genre would be an online format that better permitted visualisation of the various plants, especially trees, that are described.

Marianne says

“Each year this brush box ent reaches closer to the glass, towards the map of Middle-earth beside me. He filters my light green. I imagine his closest limb stretching out, kinking down through the open window while my back is turned, and exploring my wooden desk - a distant relative, perhaps - searching for what it is I do all day, as slow-moving as a tree. I would like to place my fingers against his just for a moment, to hear what he would say, and to convey all that I feel.”

Understory: A Life with Trees is a memoir by prize-winning Australian author, Inga Simpson. It details over nine years of Simpson’s life in a cottage in the sub-tropical forest of the Sunshine Coast hinterland. “We wanted a simple life. A writing life – a life that revolves around writing, rather than squeezing it into the cracks.” The tree change came sooner than expected, and Simpson is candid about the financial and other pressures the move causes. She details the pros and cons of intimacy with the local wildlife, the problems associated with commuting from a remote location where public transport can be erratic, as well as dealing with neighbours whose attitude towards the forest is less benign, with power companies and councils whose attitude is downright malignant.

With her partner, she decides to buy a neighbouring property to fulfil the long-held dream of opening a writers’ retreat, a decision perhaps based more on wishful thinking than sober facts. She is honest about successes and failures, about debt and selfish, thoughtless guests. But also about the inspiration for novels she drew from her surroundings: “Living among trees, amid the green, has allowed further regrowth. I came here to look after them, but the truth is, they look after me.” Mentions of arborglyphs, copper sculptures and treehouses will resonate with readers of her novels.

Many of the chapters are titled with tree names (common and botanic) and Simpson often notes the indigenous name if it is known. Her extensive research and her love of the forest is apparent in every paragraph. Despite her wonderfully evocative descriptive prose, a section with photographs or watercolours of botanical drawings of the plants and their parts, which would, doubtless have added significantly to the printing cost, would have enhanced the text immeasurably.

Faced with many challenges, a relationship breakdown and a business failure, Simpson nonetheless remains positive: “...I remember that night, that feeling, of first finding my way in my new home, my new life – how excited, confident and full of wonder I was. Nothing has turned out how I imagined, and I am no longer that person, but I am at home in this place, and I have it to thank for who I have become.”

“It dawns on me that this is the language of the forest. I may not yet be fluent, but I’m literate; I can hear, see, smell and feel it. I read scratches on these trunks left by koalas, goannas and sugar gliders – they write their own stories. This forest is part of me now, and I’m part of it. My eyes, which have little colour of their own, are more green.” A fascinating read.
