

# Zero Carbon Harrogate Book Club - Review

## 'The Man Who Planted Trees'

Jean Giono, 1953

This autumn, we are reading *'The Man Who Planted Trees'* (French title: *L'homme Qui Plantait des Arbres*). It is a short story published in 1953 by Jean Giono. An allegorical tale, it tells the story of one shepherd's long and successful, single-handed effort to re-forest a desolate valley in the foothills of the Alps in Provence, throughout the first half of the 20th century. It was written in French, but first published in English.

The story begins in the year 1913, when a young man, the narrator, was travelling alone on a hiking trip through Provence, France, and into the Alps, enjoying the relatively unspoiled wilderness. He meets a 55-year-old shepherd, Elzéard Bouffier who, after being widowed, decided to restore the ruined landscape of the isolated and largely abandoned valley by planting acorns and cultivating a forest. He makes holes in the ground with his straight iron staff and drops into them acorns that he has collected from miles away. He is also growing beech and birch saplings.

The narrator leaves the shepherd, returns home, and later fights in the First World War. In 1920, he returns and is surprised to see the forest taking root in the valley, and new fresh streams of water running through it. The healing power of the natural world touches him, and he spends time recovering there.

The valley itself receives official protection after the First World War, with the French authorities mistakenly believing that the rapid growth of the new forest is a bizarre natural phenomenon, as they are unaware of Bouffier's selfless deeds. Over four decades, Bouffier continues to plant trees, and the valley is turned into a kind of Garden of Eden.

By the end of the story, the valley is vibrant with life and is peacefully settled, with more than 10,000 people living there, not knowing they owe their happiness to Bouffier. The narrator tells one of his friends, a government forester, the truth about the new forest, and the friend also helps to protect it. In 1945, the narrator visits the now very old Bouffier one last time, and in 1947 in a hospice in Banon, the man who planted trees peacefully passes away.

This story has been called a 'humanistic parable'. Religious and biblical dimensions are here, both in the references ('now Lazarus was out of his tomb', referring to the biblical episode; 'the land of Canaan' is the biblical name of a region in the Middle East, corresponding roughly to Israel and Palestine) and in the figure of Elzéard Bouffier, the 'creator'. Symbolically, the tree links the earthly world with the heavenly world, and the forest itself thus holds a certain degree of spirituality.

If you would like to join a Book Club discussion this month, it is taking place online on Tuesday 16 November. A face-to-face group will be set up in the future, soon – please do register your interest. The book is available at your regular online supplier and at some local bookshops. Please contact Christine Jack ([cajack1@gmail.com](mailto:cajack1@gmail.com)) for further details and any help with purchases.

November 2021