

The Man Who Planted Trees - Discussion Group Notes

There are several different English translations of this book. All page references included in the notes below are taken from the following version: *The Man Who Planted Trees*, written by Jean Giono. Published by Peter Owen, London (copyright 1985) - several impressions are available.



What makes Elzéard Bouffier so special/unusual?

Confidence and self-belief

- He doesn't doubt himself or his actions, even if others aren't able to share or appreciate his vision.
- Willing to take risks (e.g. that all his work would be destroyed, as the land was not his.)
- Elzéard is described as having great assurance in the validity and worth of his actions. How often do we experience this and where does that assurance come from?

Quotes

'...one felt that he was sure of himself, and confident in his assurance.' (p10)

The storyteller isn't able to share Elzéard's vision and understand the potential that lies in his actions. 'To tell the truth, the thing itself had made no impression upon me; I had considered it as a hobby, a stamp collection, and forgotten it.' (p21)

Acceptance

- Although he has the courage to change the world around him, Elzéard also demonstrates a great acceptance of things that are outside of his control.

Quotes

'Creation seemed to come about in a sort of chain reaction. He did not worry about it; he was determinedly pursuing his task in all its simplicity...' (p25)

Perseverance

- Continues in spite of challenges (in some versions of the book it mentions that Elzéard spent a year planting over 10,000 maples that all died.)
- Is willing to adapt to make his vision a reality (e.g. swapped from shepherding to beekeeping because the sheep were damaging the trees.)

Quotes

'But the transformation took place so gradually that it became part of the pattern without causing astonishment...That is why no one meddled with Elzéard Bouffier's work. If he had been detected he would have had opposition. He was undetectable. Who in the villages or in the administration could have dreamed of such perseverance in a magnificent generosity?' (p26)

What was Elzéard Bouffier's motivation in planting the trees?

- We are told in the book that more than 10,000 people 'must owe their happiness' to Elzéard, but is this what he set out to achieve?
- Did Elzéard Bouffier give up his life to plant trees, or gain his life by planting them? Did the act of creation sustain him and give him life, even as he gave life and sustenance to the trees he was planting?

Quotes

'It was his opinion that this land was dying for want of trees. He added that, having no very pressing business of his own, he had resolved to remedy this state of affairs.' (p19-20)

'Creation seemed to come about in a sort of chain reaction. He did not worry about it; he was determinedly pursuing his task in all its simplicity...' (p25)

'Peaceful, regular toil, the vigorous mountain air, frugality and, above all, serenity of spirit had endowed this old man with awe-inspiring health.' (p30)

The Importance of Hope

- How important is hope? What role does it have in people's lives and what happens when it is no longer present?
- Is hope essential in enabling us to change our lives, or the lives of others?
- Are there any places barren enough (literally or metaphorically) to be beyond hope and without potential? What implications does this have for life? What analogies can we find in our own society and perhaps in our own lives – are there spaces/people that we possibly discount as being 'barren' or without potential?

Quotes

Description of the charcoal villagers: *'Their condition had been beyond hope. For them, nothing but to await death – a situation which rarely predisposes to virtue.'* (p34)

Description of Vergons, once the forest had grown: *'Vergons bore evidence of labour at the sort of undertaking for which hope is required. Hope, then, had returned.'* (p34)

Happiness

- The author implies that Elzéard Bouffier had discovered 'a wonderful way to be happy' (in some translations it says 'the recipe for happiness'). Do we agree?
- What other images of happiness and unhappiness/despair are described in the book?

Quotes

'...my very youth forced me to consider the future in relation to myself and to a certain quest for happiness.' (p20)

(p30) *'He's discovered a wonderful way to be happy!'*



Sophistication/Simplicity

- We are told that Elzéard was uneducated and unaided, yet he created so much with so little. This is in stark contrast to the destruction caused by the technology of warfare and the inefficient sophistication of the government officials.

Quote

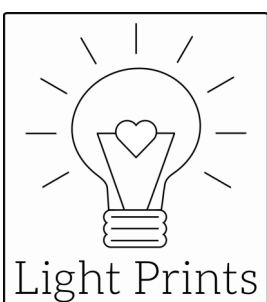
'When you remembered that all this had sprung from the hands and the soul of this one man, without technical resources, you understood that men could be as effectual as God in other realms than that of destruction.' (p25)

Inspiration

- Jean Giono wanted to inspire people to plant more trees. In one sense, an 'acorn' is planted every time a copy of the book is read.
- Does this book inspire us? If so, how? If not, why?
- Are there other stories/experiences that we have encountered that inspire us, or restore our belief in our ability to change our own lives and the lives of others?

Quotes

'When I reflect that one man, armed only with his own physical and moral resources, was able to cause this land of Canaan to spring from the wasteland, I am convinced that in spite of everything, humanity is admirable.' (p39)



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