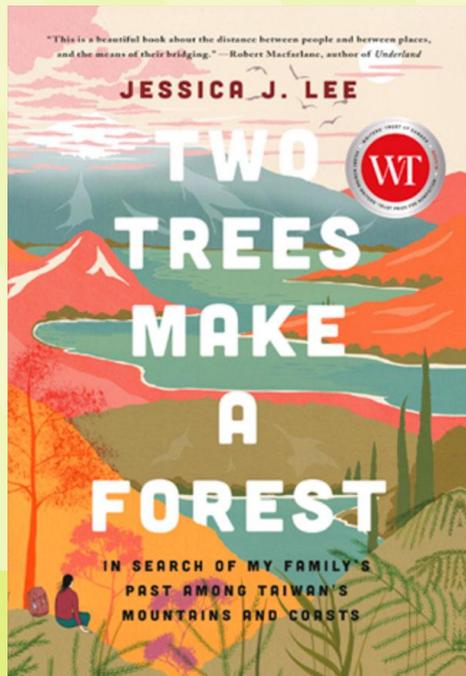


# Book backgrounder: **Two Trees Make a Forest**



*Two Trees Make a Forest* is a genre-shattering book encompassing history, travel, nature and memoir, an extraordinary narrative showing how geographical forces are interlaced with our family stories.

## **Note to teachers:**

***This document contains spoilers!***

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **Curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

*If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students. (You can find a PowerPoint version of this document on Curio.ca)*



Visit [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads) to read an excerpt from *Two Trees Make a Forest* and watch Jessica J. Lee discuss her book.



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### Acknowledgments

About the Book: Adapted from materials prepared by the CBC Books team  
Critical Thinking Questions / Inquiry Activities: Written by Jason Himsl  
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## **Book Description**

A chance discovery of letters written by her immigrant grandfather leads author Jessica J. Lee to her ancestral homeland, Taiwan. There, she seeks his story while growing closer to the land he knew.

Lee hikes mountains home to Formosan flamecrests, birds found nowhere else on earth and swims in a lake of drowned cedars. She bikes flatlands where spoonbills alight by fish farms, and learns about a tree whose fruit can float in the ocean for years, awaiting landfall. Throughout, Lee unearths surprising parallels between the natural and human stories that have shaped her family and their beloved island.

## **LITERACY STRATEGY**

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Joyously attentive to the natural world, Lee also turns a critical gaze upon colonialist explorers who mapped the land and named plants, relying on and often erasing the labour and knowledge of local communities.

Lee divides her book into four sections: “Island,” “Mountain,” “Water” and “Lin” (having two translations: ‘Forest’ or ‘A group of like persons’).

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In this [CBC Books interview](#), the author describes what inspired her to write the book:

"I only knew my maternal grandparents the way a grandchild knows grandparents. It was hard to get to know them. My grandfather was a quiet and private man. He didn't speak a lot, but he was incredibly warm and incredibly kind.

"My grandmother was a bit more difficult. I always had a sense that she had gone through great difficulty in her childhood and growing up.

"For my grandparents, everything they went through — moving from China to Taiwan, then onward to Canada, with everything they lost and left behind — it really strained things. They met in Taiwan. By then,

my grandmother had already left behind much of what she'd grown up with. She'd grown up very wealthy in Nanjing.

"They left behind the opportunity to see their families ever again. To even communicate with them. It was impossible for many decades. There's not really a way to quantify those losses. It's even hard to list.

"I had been sitting with my grandparent's story for about 10 years before we found [my grandfather's] letters. I hadn't been able to find a way to tell their story before this. It was like a key that suddenly fit the lock. It was this thing that I had been waiting for and just didn't know it."

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## **Primary Characters**

### **Jessica J. Lee (her Chinese name Jie-ke) –**

The narrator; British Canadian Taiwanese author and environmental historian Jessica returns to her mother's homeland of Taiwan to get to know the landscape that shaped her family and her. Not knowing the language, Jessica relies heavily on the landscape and natural space.

### **Jessica's grandfather ('grandfather' in Chinese: "Gong") (Chinese name: Tsao Chung-chin) –**

He had moved from China to Taiwan – unable to return to the mainland – and then to Canada. He was a pilot, a Flying Tiger in World War II and a colonel in

the Taiwanese Air Force. Jessica describes him as always being “quiet, reading, caring for his plants, and a janitor [in Canada].” He suffered from Alzheimer's and had forgotten entirely who Jessica was at one point.

### **Jessica's grandmother ('grandmother' in Chinese: "Po") (Chinese name: Yang Kwei-lin) –**

Jessica describes her grandmother as an “always irascible, difficult grandmother.” She didn't talk much to her husband or to Jessica's mother, but spoiled Jessica and her sister with chocolates.

**Jessica's mother** – Jessica's mother returns to Taiwan with Jessica, and "return" is explored and what that means for immigrants. Taiwan was close to Jessica's

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mother's heart. Returning to Taiwan, there is a change in Jessica's mother's comportment. In Taiwan, she feels at home, comfortable and like she belongs. In Canada, Jessica noticed her mother's lack of sense of directions, not liking to go out nor doing things on her own.

## Key Themes

 **MIGRATION** – Jessica's grandparents moved from China to Taiwan after the Civil War ended in 1949. After living in Taiwan for four decades, her grandparents and Jessica's mother – at the time, a young woman – moved to Canada.

 **GAPS** – The issue of gaps is the central theme: between fault lines, languages and within families.

There are some gaps in Jessica's grandfather's letters. They are written as fragments; partly as his writing style, and partly due to having Alzheimer's. There are gaps in the map of Taiwan, and in some of the experiences Jessica has in Taiwan, due to language barriers. She then relies heavily on the “plants, history, landscape,” and nature of Taiwan.

 **MIXED-RACE IDENTITY** – Jessica was the only half-Chinese student in her classroom at Saturday Chinese school. When she was eight, she stopped going, and her language skills faded to very basic. When she visited Taiwan, Jessica was conscious of her position as “Taiwanese diaspora but also as a Westerner and as white passing.” Her position

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shaped her experience and movements in and through Taiwan. She was not really seen as ‘belonging,’ thus, impacting “how she was received and what she had access to”.

 **MAPPING** – There is a colonialist mapping of Taiwan and its land – colonized land and colonized space. The idea of Taiwan, as Jessica refers to as “lithic, living, and forgotten,” can be found in maps and what they include, but also what they leave out. Throughout the book, Jessica is “conscious of the historical relationship of mapping and politics in Taiwan and how she fits in a contemporary frame, as she moves across the landscape”. What Jessica tries to get at most is that Taiwan’s maps are a “tangled mystery” because of all these factors.



**LANGUAGE/TRANSLATION** – Jessica never learned Mandarin (her mother’s tongue), which, throughout her life, has created a gap when it came to communicating with her grandparents and her family and understanding her grandfather’s letters. That being said, this became an opportunity for her, too: to go back to Taiwan and learn a bit of the language as well as its landscape. Jessica relies on her mother to translate the letters. Although Jessica did not know the language, she knows the language of landscape (as an environmental historian), which she relies on heavily throughout her time in Taiwan. This offers her some connection in its own way. Jessica lets go of the “conceptual framework of language” and relies on the place itself – the physical, the natural – in order to understand Taiwan.

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**MEMORY** – Jessica wanted to understand her grandparents' lives and the things that brought them and others from China to Taiwan in 1949. She wanted to know the Taiwan that lived beyond her family's past, and she wanted to understand how Taiwan shaped her family and, ultimately, her. Memory is a key theme with Jessica's grandfather having Alzheimer's as well as his records being classified. There are gaps that Jessica needs to fill in and figure out.



Watch Jessica J. Lee discuss her book:  
[www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads)



## **About the Author**

**Jessica J. Lee** is an author, environmental historian and winner of the 2020 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction, the 2020 Boardman Tasker Award for Mountain Literature and the 2019 RBC Taylor Prize Emerging

Writer Award. She is the author of two books of nature writing: *Turning* (2017) and *Two Trees Make a Forest* (2019). She has a PhD in Environmental History and Aesthetics and was Writer-in-Residence

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at the Leibniz Institute for Freshwater Ecology in Berlin from 2017–2018. Jessica is the founding editor of *The Willowherb Review* and a researcher at the University of Cambridge. She currently lives in London, England.



## **Notable Quotes from Reviews**

One of:

- The *Globe and Mail*'s “100 favourite books of 2020”
- The *Guardian*'s “Best Books of the Year”
- CBC's “Best Canadian nonfiction of 2020”

“I want to go to Taiwan to experience the woodlands, the wetlands, the highlands, the lowlands, and the creatures in, above, and

underneath, as Jessica J. Lee does with all her senses, including that sense too many of us ignore—the inner self. Then again, she has taken me there with this splendid book.”

– Jack E. Davis, author of *The Gulf*, 2018 Pulitzer Prize winner

“[In] *Two Trees Make a Forest* . . . Jessica J. Lee shares her knowledge of linguistics and environmental history as she hikes the fault lines of her own family's story in sentences that make you gasp in admiration. . . . She sets a speedy narrative pace, like a trained guide with nightfall looming, but she knows the value of slowing her stride so readers can absorb the luscious vistas she is describing and the familial tragedy she is mourning. This book will haunt you.”

– 2020 Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize jury

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“Jessica J. Lee asks the reader to consider slippery definitions of family in her complicated but thoughtful memoir, *Two Trees Make a Forest*. . . . [An] elegance of language is ever present in the work; poetic and emotive, unfurling to reveal passages about her family, her pain, and her exploration of Taiwan’s myriad habitats, which arise from its delicate status as an island positioned between two tectonic plates.”

– The Los Angeles Review of Books

## **Other Books by Jessica J. Lee**

- *Turning*



## **CBC Links**

- Canada Reads Book page: [\*Two Trees Make a Forest\*](#)
- Canada Reads Author page: [Jessica J. Lee](#)
- [Jessica J. Lee searched for her family roots and unearthed her own identity — and wrote about it in her memoir](#)
- [In Taiwan's lush landscape, Jessica J. Lee found a deeper understanding of her family's turbulent history](#)



## **Other Links**

- [www.jessicajleewrites.com](http://www.jessicajleewrites.com)

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## Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Two Trees Make a Forest* found at [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads) and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. In an interview, Jessica J. Lee said “Even before we found my grandfather's letters and his story, I had been toying with the idea of writing my grandparents’ story for a solid decade. This was around the time my grandfather developed Alzheimer's, and I became acutely aware of stories being lost.” What is a story from your family that you think should be shared?
2. Describe a place or physical space that is important to you. Why does it carry so much meaning?
3. What is the value in being able to speak another language? What new language would you like to learn? Why?
4. What advice would you give to someone who has lost a loved one?
5. Read the excerpt of *Two Trees Make a Forest* at [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads). How does Jessica J. Lee draw you into the environment she experienced?
6. What is a place that you have never visited that you would like to travel to? Why is visiting this place important to you?

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7. Genealogy websites are among the most popular sites on the internet. Why, do you think, are genealogy and family history so important to so many people?
8. Part of the inspiration for Jessica J. Lee to write *Two Trees Make a Forest* came from the discovery of her grandfather's letters. How are you recording your memories and experiences? What will these records say about you in the future?



## **Inquiry Activities**

1. Students can research how an interviewer conducts an interview. They can extend this research and apply their findings by interviewing a friend or family member. Students might even try to capture one of their personal or family stories that they believe needs to be shared.
2. Students might investigate Alzheimer's disease. Students can pursue any aspect of the disease they find interesting, but might start with causes, treatments or the impact of Alzheimer's on patients and their caregivers.

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3. Students can research the field of environmental history. They can extend this research by discussing why environmental history is relevant to Canada and to their own lives.
4. Students can watch video clips about the relationship between Taiwan and China. Video clips can be found on websites such as [www.cbc.ca](http://www.cbc.ca) and [www.curio.ca](http://www.curio.ca). They can continue research into this topic and discuss whether Canada should change its relationship with Taiwan.



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