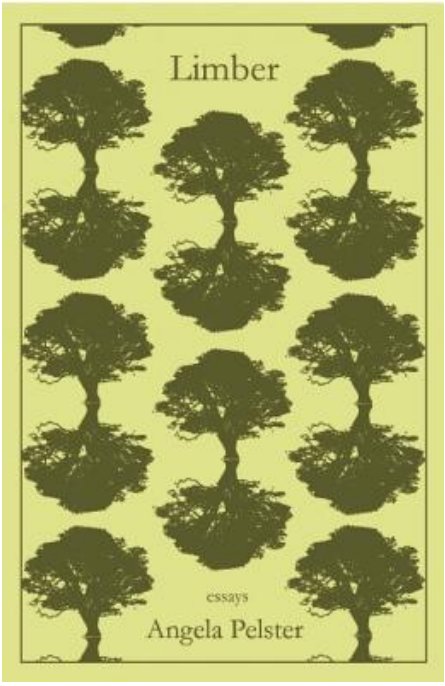

Limber: Essays

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"What a strange and unexpected treasure chest this is, filled with all manner of quirky revelations, all about the mundane sublime and the ineffable extraordinary. Most extraordinary of all, perhaps, through, is the haunting perfection, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, of the writing itself. Who is this Angela Pelster and where has she been all our lives?"-Lawrence Weschler

Angela Pelster's startling essay collection charts the world's history through its trees: through roots in the ground, rings across wood, and inevitable decay. These sharp and tender essays move from her childhood in rural Canada surrounded by skinny poplar trees in her backyard to a desert in Niger, where the "Loneliest Tree in the World" once grew. A squirrel's decomposing body below a towering maple prompts a discussion of the science of rot, as well as a metaphor for the ways in which nature programs us to consume ourselves. Beautiful, deeply thoughtful, and wholly original, *Limber* valiantly asks what it means to sustain life on this planet we've inherited.

Angela Pelster's essays have appeared in *Granta*, the *Gettysburg Review*, *Seneca Review*, the *Globe and Mail*, *Relief Magazine*, and others. Her children's novel *The Curious Adventures of India Sophia* won the Golden Eagle Children's Choice award in 2006. She has an MFA from the University of Iowa's nonfiction writing program and lives with her family in Baltimore, Maryland, where she teaches at Towson University.

Limber: Essays Details

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Author	:	Angela Pelster
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From Reader Review Limber: Essays for online ebook

Michelle Lancaster says

Limber
By Angela Pelster
Sarabande Books, 154 pgs
From the publisher
Rating: 3.5 of 5

The first line of Limber is "It is still winter." Indeed. This is the wintriest spring I can remember in west Texas. Persephone is lingering in the warmth. But I digress.

Limber is Angela Pelster's debut collection of seventeen heedful and often elegiac essays, meditations at the juncture of the natural world and language. I made a point of reading this slim volume outside, under an elderly just-budding mesquite tree. Some will deride this tree as not a tree but a large shrub. It's what we have. The author has many more and larger trees: poplar, redwood, mango, mountain ash, acacia, and the eponymous limber pine, among others.

There is the Burmis Tree, a local landmark in Burmis, Alberta, Canada, a limber pine, so named "...for the ways they bend in the harsh winds and grow in curves around it; they slither their roots along rock faces until they find cracks they can slip into and drink from." There is the Tree That Owns Itself, a white oak, in Athens, Georgia, that the purported owner loved so much that he deeded the tree and the land surrounding it to it. There are the Moon Trees, sprouted from seeds that orbited the moon with astronaut Stuart Roosa of Apollo 14 fame. There is L'Arbre du Ténéré (The Loneliest Tree in the World), an acacia, the only tree for 250 miles in the Sahara, northern Niger. My favorite essay is "How Trees Came to Be in the World" (pg 135). I don't think I've read a more accessible account of evolution anywhere, truly.

I enjoyed this collection, although I was confused by a few of the essays that either don't seem to fit even the broad theme or are so nebulous as to seem to be about, well, what exactly? Maybe these essays do belong in this particular collection and I'm not seeing the connection. Believe me, that's entirely possible. Now that's out of the way and we can focus on the good stuff. Pelster does not romanticize nature, which is refreshing and a relief. Romanticizing shouldn't be necessary. She is angry when anger is called for, magnanimous when capable, always empathetic. Pelster's gift of description is powerfully evocative. On the collapse of a mountain from decades of mining blasts: "The falling rock created a sucking wind. It inhaled the mud of the river bottom with a gulp and spit a wave of violence before it." On the humidity in a redwood forest in northern California: "...the air was so wet you could suck the rain from it with your lips." A metaphysical observation in the same forest:

"The signs also said that the tallest tree in the world is a redwood in California. It was the land of giants, I thought, and difficult to know where the myth began and the truth ended. Ask a poplar if it believes in redwoods and it might start talking about faith."

When the Burmis Tree finally gave up the ghost to rot it was propped up again with steel and chains. When the Tree That Owns Itself succumbed to a storm the Son of the Tree That Owns Itself, grown from an acorn, replaced it. When the Loneliest Tree in the World was mowed down by a drunken truck driver the trunk and limbs were glued back together and placed on display. Our willful illusions will not suffice. We cannot leave well enough alone.

"A tree ring marks a year of growth, but it isn't marking it for humans. The rings are a memory of what the seasons brought and what the tree made of it. The widest rings are the good years, recorded in thick dark circles of brown, and the hungry years are narrow and pale and hard to read."

After the countless blows inflicted to the body of our mother, what story will the trees tell about us?

Angela Pelster’s essays have appeared in Granta, The Gettysburg Review, Seneca Review, The Globe and Mail, Relief Magazine and others. Her children’s novel The Curious Adventures of India Sophia won the Golden Eagle Children’s Choice award in 2006. She lives with her family in Baltimore and teaches at Towson University.

National Arbor Day is April 25th. Click here to find out what you can do.

Limber arrived with a thoughtful gesture: a seed-embedded leaflet that you can plant and flowers will grow. I'm gonna go do that now. My mesquite needs company.

Jennifer Pullen says

Gorgeous and surprising.

Rachel Smith says

3.5 stars

Jeff Jones says

Had to abandon on p. 55 (ILL book due). Wide-ranging but so smart and controlled in their structure and delivery. Really stunning how much Pelster packs into each short essay.

Melanie Page says

A whole book of essays about trees; how is that even possible? Angela Pelster makes it happen in her sleek collection containing 17 essays, usually around 5 pages each. With titles like “Temple” and “Ethan Lockwood” and “Artifacts,” you may not immediately get the connection to trees. More so, you may not have a sense of direction with the content. But Pelster leads readers along and takes us to unknown territory that opens up like the door through which Dorothy crosses from black-and-white into a color-filled world in Oz.

In a number of Pelster’s pieces, I forgot she was behind the scenes pulling the marionette strings, which left me space to take in the information unimpeded. In the essay “Burmis,” the author describes the now-gone town of Frank, a place where people continued mining despite the dangerous work. The land has a long history of forcing people to leave. But the miners just wouldn’t–not even when a landslide took out part of

the town: “The survivors on the safe side of town continued to live alongside the dead, as if their neighbors and their neighbors’ houses beneath the limestone existed in a secret other world, as if they still hung bed sheets to dry on the clothesline below ground, swept floors, cooked dinner in the dark.” Though Pelster must have researched the history of Burmis, Alberta, her authorial link is seemingly transparent, and she knows when to be “out of the way.” Occasionally, she weaves in personal experience, but with the exception of the essay “Rot,” it’s subtle.

The way Angela Pelster teaches readers about trees is enough to make those who read Limber change their minds about the very subject. Did you know that the apostle Paul apparently ate figs on his trip to Cyprus, planting trees from the remains of the fruit on his way? That the pigment Indian Yellow was supposedly made from the urine of cows that were only fed leaves from the mango tree? That in 1832 William Henry Jackson deeded a tree to itself? That tree seeds were taken by Apollo 14 to the moon, later presumed dead, then planted and grew? These are but a few of the topics that Pelster uncovers in her essays, exploring them in a way that shows readers that she’s conveying stories about living organisms that are fundamental to humanity and its history. She gives statistics and anecdotes to support her ideas.

The essays don’t read like a textbook of either science or history, though. The attention to each individual word is enormous. Some lines are lyrical and reflect the curling shapes of leaves while others are straightforward and make readers snap to attention. On finding bones in the desert sand: “Overnight, the wind reburies what took the paleontologists hours to unearth, and the desert rearranges itself, tucking its children back into bed while they sleep”–lyrical. As rot chronicles the decay of a squirrel’s body outside her window, Pelster notes how we are programed to do as much: “Scientists call this autolysis: self-digestion. It comes from two Greek words meaning ‘self-splitting.’ As if bodies carry inside themselves the potential to undo themselves.”–straightforward. Both methods appear in every essay, combining unique, factual information with a fiction writer’s eye for pleasing word arrangement and choices.

I discovered that it was easy to get lost in these essays, to block out the noise around me. The works becomes like dreams. The collection explores nature in a way that made me care deeply about it, not just metaphorically or in a way that makes me hate technology for a day or two. The reading experience was much like a gentle, shallow river that made me appreciate the life of individual trees and the experiences they record in their bodies and the way those experiences can educate me.

This review was originally published at Grab the Lapels.

Lisa says

“To the great tree-loving fraternity we belong. We love trees with universal and unfeigned love, and all things that do grow under them or around them – the whole leaf and root tribe.”
? Henry Ward Beecher

When it comes to wide-ranging framing devices, it’s always practical to look to the building blocks of the natural world: elements, weather, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field; *all things spring wherefrom* and such. And along those lines you can’t go too wrong with trees—“trees of life” having been relational allegories of choice throughout most cultures’ mythology, the Bible, and Charles Darwin, to name just a few sources. Trees as metaphors, trees as real objects, trees as ideal states of being—they’re pretty unobjectionable. So the question becomes, how do you use the fact of them in a dynamic way?

Angela Pelster has put together a series of essays, loosely grouped around the subject of trees, in her recent collection, *Limber*. It's a fine idea, essays that relate to each other from a central concept much in the same way that trees branch up and out from a root system, and in the way that we are connected to nature—and nature is connected to us—in forms both massive and tenuous. Pelster's essays range from tales of actual trees—"The Loneliest Tree in the World," austere in the Sahara; the tremendous Moreton Bay figs of Australia; or the limber pines of the book's title, which grip rock faces by slotting their roots into cracks—to highly personal essays in which people take center stage, and the trees are incidental, such as "Portrait of a Mango," a meditation that encompasses Vermeer, the color yellow, and her connection to her mother.

Nature, predictably, has a starring role in many pieces, and these are some of the book's strongest. Pelster knows how to showcase the natural world in all its hot and heavy glory:

It was the kind of place with redwoods large enough to drive a van through, and where families of six would try to hold hands around a trunk but couldn't. Everything smelled of rotting plants, of bursting spores and red dirt and moss. Mushrooms, big enough to sit on, bloomed from the sides of trees and the air was so wet you could suck the rain from it with your lips.

In fact, *Limber* is strongest when it's engaging straight on with the forces of the world, spores and wind and heartwood—the strangely alchemical substance at the core of a tree. Decay, as it should, has a certain pride of place in the collection, and as she points out, "Sometimes rot is gracious."

As soon as an animal's heart stops beating, the chemicals in its body change and so its pH levels change and so its cells lose their structural integrity. They sway and crash like an old house in the wind. Cellular enzymes spill free from the wreckage and begin to eat away at the other cells and tissues, releasing more enzymes, more crashing, more destruction. Scientists call this autolysis: self-digestion.

There are engaging meditations on mining, evolution, Bartholomäus Traubeck's tree ring music, and a wonderfully unexpected turn on nuclear fallout in Russia; also some pieces that make you wonder why, exactly, they were included. An essay about a boy in a group home, presumably where Pelster once worked, is moving but doesn't seem to quite fit, and another, "Inosculation," feels like a stand-along short story. She covers a lot of ground here—a lot of forest. And while there are some compelling overriding themes, such as her interrogation of the religion she was raised with, which she clearly both values and questions, and her shifting thoughts on fate, the center doesn't always hold. If we're going to keep on with the metaphor, the book is all branches and no trunk; it's often a struggle to keep in mind that this is a themed set of essays.

At the same time, the strongest pieces resonate. And if a reader is obliging enough to look at the collection as an ongoing inquiry into the constantly shifting places that nature, man, and God occupy, the book takes on a certain curious breadth. Pelster explains:

I collect the signs like a doctor tapping on a patient's body, looking into ears, pressing on a spine, drawing blood from the unseen places. It is difficult to know when one of these will come to something, when some bit of evidence will be made luminous in the beautiful light, when the world will bend and let slide a little secret from its corner.

Not all the signs reveal what she's aiming for. But many of the essays are quite beautiful, and spark some interesting trains of thought. Pelster is a fine writer, and a tighter collection might have thrown her thoughts into sharper relief.

Some books, like wines, want pairing, and I'd love to see *Limber*—with its lovely rorschach-y tree drawings

that separate each chapter—matched up with Thomas Pakenham's *Meetings with Remarkable Trees*, a marvelous photo-illustration-essay collection that celebrates the things themselves, and their ineffable personalities. Even on its own, though, *Limber* is an often quirky, sometimes profound ramble through some interesting and diverse woods. Not to drag out the metaphor too far, that is. As Pelster notes,

[…] but who needs another tree metaphor about change and weathering the storms and remaining beautiful through it all? A tree is not a metaphor. A tree is a tree, and we are both only one strong wind away from falling.

Liz says

Short intriguing essays that often left me confused.

John Bellinger says

A tremendous little book of well-written essays, most of which are connected to a history of trees. A wide-ranging book by a very talented writer.

Kacey says

Loved this book, especially the twists of autobiography that crept in half way

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Sara Dovre Wudali says

The writing in this is amazing. Here's my favorite sentence, from an essay which touches on the author's time at a Bible college. She's sneak-reading in the college library, an act of sexual rebellion against the expected role as good wife: "All those Bible concordances watching on with greedy eyes, moans pressed between their pages like dried flowers."

John LaPine says

collection of essays each about a tree in some (sometimes roundabout) way. beautiful, engaging, lyrical, informative. one of the best collections I've read

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Laura says

I started Limber last night and the first essay blew me away. The writing reminds me how in The Writing Life Annie Dillard may seem to wander off point in the course of an essay but, once you finish each piece,

you realize there is nothing there that doesn't belong. Each detail and thought is intentional. I am reading along expecting thoughts on trees and all the sudden I am deep in a mine shaft or playing street hockey on a freakishly warm winter night. But always the trees are there ready to support, to grow, to rot, to feed, to spear.

Reading Limber also brings to mind one of my favorite books, "Pine Island Paradox" by Kathleen Dean Moore and a poetry collection by Tanis Rideout titled "Arguments with the Lake" which is essentially an collection of stories in verse arguing for saving our lakes and rivers. Very engaging and unusual work.

Anna Rohleder says

A weird, wonderful and inspiring blend of poetry and essay...

Charles Dee Mitchell says

Do not come to the book looking for spiritual lessons brought to you courtesy of trees. There are some lessons here for those who want them, although they might be lessons in evolutionary theory or the realities of foster home care. And there are trees, either planted squarely in the center or along the property line of each short piece,

This short book is wide-ranging, but Pelster states her method within the context of an essay on mangoes.

> I suppose none of it really comes to anything, but I pay attention anyway. I collect the signs like a doctor tapping on the patient's body, looking into ears, pressing on a spine, drawing blood from the unseen places. It is difficult to know when one of these will come to something, when some bit of evidence will be made luminous in the beautiful light, when the world will bend and let slide a little secret from its corner.

Tiffany Reisz says

Such an odd and lovely book. A meaning of life as seen through the branches of various trees.
