**Talking Wild Woods with Cressida Cowell**

**Karim Zeroual**

Hey everyone, I'm Karim and next, we have a very special podcast for you. I'm sure if you have read Cressida Cowell's books, you will know how important the landscape and the woods are in the stories. Woods and forests are packed with so much wildlife and they can feel like they are filled with mystery and magic. A good place for an adventure! So, let's join Cressida on a walk through the wild woods of her stories and see what unfolds.

**Cressida Cowell**

Hello, I'm Cressida Cowell, I'm the UK Children's Laureate and also the author and illustrator of the How to Train Your Dragon books and The Wizards of Once series. I'm delighted to be part of the Reading is Magic Festival, which is all based around my Children's Laureate Reading Charter, which you can read all about on the Book Trust website. Today, I'm going to be talking about point number 10 on the charter. I mean, all the points are important, but this is a particularly important one, which is that every child has the right to have a planet to read on. I'm going to be talking particularly about trees because I've always loved trees and trees have such a vital role to play in combating climate change in the future of our planet. I've always loved trees. I learnt about trees through walking with my father who knew all of their names and could point them out with his walking stick. He could tell you which one was which and he knew so many stories about trees that you might not know about. Things that we can't see even though the trees are growing all around us. Did you know, for instance, that trees can kind of talk to one another? There's a tree called an Umbrella Thorn Acacia tree and if giraffe's (they tend to live out in Africa, by the way, not in the forests in England, but in Africa) are eating the leaves of the Umbrella Thorn Acacia tree, it pumps its leaves full of toxins that are poisonous to the giraffes and then it will send out a gas to warn the other Umbrella Thorn Acacia trees. Uh-oh, giraffes are in the vicinity, you better put toxins into your leaves too. Isn't that incredible? Trees are extraordinary. If a tree in a wood is sick or struggling, other nearby trees of the same species will send the nutrients to help them through their roots. Some scientists even believe there are brain like structures that can be found in root tips. So if the roots of a tree meet something toxic or impenetrable stones, it can send a message to the growing tip, steering the root around problem areas. Trees can communicate with each other in a network underground that experts called the wood wide web. Those are just some extraordinary facts about trees. Talking to one another, sending out gases, doing things that we can't even see. It's so important that we look after those trees.

The rainforests of the world often called our lungs because they give us so much oxygen. UK's woods are home to almost half of all Bluebells in the world.

Woodlands are an incredible ecosystem. The UK's woodland has some of our richest habitats, providing homes for thousands of species, including many of our animals. Lots of research, provides evidence that would benefit our health. Studies have shown that patients with views of trees out their windows heal faster and with fewer complications. Children with ADHD show fewer symptoms when they have access to nature. My writing shed at the bottom of my garden in London, all around it, I've planted trees even though I'm in the centre of the city. I look out on Magnolia, Laburnum, Acer and Crabapple. Even the names are lovely. In Japan, they do something called forest bathing, which doesn't mean that they're swimming through the trees or treetops although that's a lovely idea. That just means walking in forests and it makes us happy. It's good for the immune system because we're meant to be connecting with the trees, with wind, with the wildness of the world that's what we've done for thousands and thousands of years.

Wizards of Once was inspired by walking through the forests of Kingley Vale in Sussex with my father, which was near where my grandmother grew up. And there were trees in that forest in Kingley Vale that had been growing for over two thousand years. When my father pointed that out, I just thought that was extraordinary. How amazing. How could there be things on this earth that have been growing for that long? And they'd grown in such a sort of twisted, amazing way that they looked like they had faces. I could see where the Ents in The Lord of the Rings, do you remember those tree people in The Lord of the Rings? I can see where that idea came from. Those trees, were what inspired my wild woods in Wizards of Once.

I'm going to read you a bit from the first book. Wizards of Once is set 3,000 years ago. Imagine this time when magic really existed. Of course it did. The wild woods in my books are inhabited by many, many amazing creatures, wizards and I mean, bears and things that you meet nowadays, and you're used to meeting them in the forest in Great Britain or a long time ago, back in the end of the Bronze Ages. But also werewolves and giants and creatures like that. This is the moment when Wish and Xar and Bodkin, who are the heroes of this story, get to the wizard encampment and you'll see how many trees are in this book.

The moon came from out from behind the clouds, and Xar got Ariel to point at the barbed mountain. (Ariel, this is his sprite, by the way, so Ariel can do magic.) To point at the barbed mountain of choking vegetation in front of them in front of Wish and Bodkin's astonished eyes, the brambles and branches slid out and through and over each other as if invisible fingers were unravelling a complicated knot from a fishing line. With a creek like the bending of ancient knees, the trees swayed and bent to left and right, and the vegetation flattened so that a clearing lay in front of them. The hairs stood up on the back of Wish and Bodkin's necks, as the quills might rise on a thorny hedgehog when they saw what lay inside the clearing. A truly gigantic circle of ancient trees, most of them giants: Yew, Birch, Rowan, Alder, Willow, Ash, Hawthorn, Apple, Poplar, every species you can imagine. The most important being the Oak, of course.

No sign of any human habitation but the sound of music and a smell of chimney smoke. Now that they were so far away from home and so deep in enemy territory, Wish was beginning to feel very, very frightened. Wish, by the way, is a warrior. She's not a wizard. So she's never come to the wizard encampment yet. You're about to see where it is in the trees. What if Xar held them to ransom? So, I had said that he would let them go the next morning, but Xar didn't seem very trustworthy.

'Where's your fort?', asked Wish sagely.

'Underground.', said Xar. Imagine a camp that has been sunk underground. Each one of those gigantic trees was hollow and drew light down into the rooms hidden underneath. Someone led them to the tree tower which housed his room. A great ancient Yew so wound round on itself that it looked as though in the tree's youth a giant had taken it gently by the top of its branches and twisted the trunk around in his hands as if the Yew were a piece of clay. They climbed a series of ladders and platforms and in through the window of Xar's room.

Now, the wizards live underground in the tree roots. A bit like if you ever look at a copy of Peter Pan, you discover that Peter Pan on Neverland lives in the tree roots. I always found that a very exciting idea. I loved climbing trees as a kid. I love the idea of also having a camp in the roots of a tree. And notice, I name all of those trees. The circle of trees. Back in those days, everybody knew what each tree meant. And Yew tree was a symbol of sort of knowledge and eternity because Yews, as I say, lived for so many thousands of years. But a Birch, if you notice, Xar, his spelling staff, he's the wizard, the young wizard who has a lot to learn, is made out of Birch. And there's a reason for that because Birch often represents the first because Birch trees are the first trees to grow in a new environment. Every spelling staff is made out of a different wood and it always means something.

Look up the meaning of all those trees. Why don't you? Rowan and Alder and Willow and Ash and Hawthorn? They all meant something. Every different type of wood meant something. And if you look at my spelling staffs, they're all made out of different types of woods so that they can do different types of spells with them.

Next time you walk through a forest, look out for trees, maybe that look like they've been twisted like a giant has twisted them like I just read in the story. There are trees like that, that look like somebody has takem them from the topmost branches and just twirled them around in their fingers and then put them down again.

Now, this is the moment in the third book when the Longstepper High-Walker called Crusher who belongs to Xar, is wandering through the forest, which has been set on fire by Wish's wicked mother because Wish's mother is a warrior and she wants to get rid of the wild woods to build her force and her fields and her new modern world. So she set fire to the forest. The awful thing is, that does still happen. People setting fire to forests so that they can build forts in their fields and their new modern world, still happens. But this is the moment when the giant comes across the trees and he is thinking in time to each giant gentle step.

I wonder if you could say that trees have brains? They certainly learn. And just because they learn in their roots, is that enough to say that they do not have brains like humans and giants do? And then he stopped suddenly, he put his ear to the nearest tree (he's nearly as tall as the trees, Crusher) and was faced with wondering lines like an ancient map, normally gently interested in the world about him, assumed a very concerned and grim expression indeed. Slowly, he bent down to his animal companions.

'Now, I do not want you to panic creatures of the forest,' said Crusher, 'but the trees are screaming. There are people who think that just because trees do not have mouths, they cannot talk. Those people are wrong, and they are often the kind of people who think that other people have to be exactly like themselves to count as people at all.'.

Trees speak to each other, just as you and I do. But you do have to have the right ears for listening. They send out messages on sound waves that giant ears can hear and send chemicals that giant noses can smell. And just because our tiny little human ears and noses are too small to hear or smell or detect them, this does not mean that those messages are not there.

As Crusher said, the trees were screaming and the message they were screaming with the crackling of their roots and every electrical and chemical signal they could muster was: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! It was very generous of the trees to scream that message really. But it was not a message that their fellow trees could respond to. Trees live life in the slow lane. So, although they can move their leaves in the direction of sunlight and they can grow their roots in the direction of water, this all happens very slowly. And what they cannot do in the face of the immediate, instant, quick destruction that is fire is wrench up their mud-clogged roots from the ground they're growing in and run as fast as they can for their lives. But the animals can and maybe these trees and more intelligent. We know that their species lives are eventually dependent on the other species all around them.

So, that's a bit from Wizards of Once: Knock Three Times and you'll have to see by reading the book whether Wish and Xar and Bodkin were able to get away from the forest fire.

By the time you reach the last book in the Wizards of Once series, Wizards of Once: Never and Forever, which I've just written. The forest is in deep trouble because not only are the warriors trying to chop it down and set fire to it, the witches have invaded and they're destroying it.

The forest was full of noises. I'm reading from Wizards of Once: Never and Forever now. The shriek of sword against talon, the screams of frightened people and creatures as they fled the army of advancing witches. Whole swathes of the wild woods had already been burned to the ground. Great trees were torn up by their roots, half-buried in the steadily falling snow. Many times, the Oaks seemed to have been deliberately defaced by witch's talons, their branches torn off and deep gouges scratched into their bark. And every time she saw this, little Bumbleboozle, who is one of Xar's sweet little hairy fairies burst into tears, beacause she dearly loved the trees and it was awful to see them targeted like this. What does a tree ever done to hurt anyone? A more innocent giant than a tree, you could not possibly imagine. And Crusher looked very grave as he put his hands on each suffering tree trunk to heal it.

Trees grow throughout children's books. One of my favourites as a child was The Lorax by Dr. Seuss.

The Once-ler, a blue-armed capitalist, was trying to chop down all the Truffula trees in this beautiful wood to make thneeds out of their tufts.

'Thneeds,' said the Once-ler, 'are something that everyone needs.'.

And every time the Once-ler chopped down a Truffula tree, out of the tree trunk would pop the Lorax, a tree spirit who is rather brilliantly portrayed as a little irritating and bossy, as well as a brilliant orator.

'I am the Lorax', he would say, 'I speak for the trees, the Truffula trees that swayed in the breeze.'

When the Lorax disappeared, leaving a small pile of rocks with one word, 'UNLESS', on it. It always made me cry, a bit little Bumbleboozle crying when the trees are defaced by witches, or indeed in the Obelix and Asterix books, every time a tree was cut down, Dogmatix would burst into tears. And that's how I always felt as a child. Think about Peter Pan, the Lost Boys live in a home under the ground and you get to that home through hollowed out trees. The Whomping Willow in Harry Potter is a crucial plot point in the story, as is the Forbidden Forest. I've always loved, as I mentioned before, the Ents characters in The Lord of the Rings, the ancient shepherds of the forest and allies of the free people of the Middle Earth. The main character of Patrick Ness and Siobhan Dowd's Young Adult book, A Monster Calls, is a tree who tells three stories. Even think about ancient fairy tales and Little Red Riding Hood. Trees are great at creating the mood of a story. They can be friendly home like Hundred Acre Wood in Winnie the Pooh, or give a sense of menace like the snowy forest in The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. They can be powerful symbols like cement-filled, dying tree in To Kill a Mockingbird. Trees change stories, are characters or give a glimpse into another magical realm.

The natural world connects us to our past, our stories, our language. It has a magic that goes beyond our understanding. But there is a disconnect between modern day children and nature that is not a good outlook for our planet or our environment. Because, of course, we human beings are not as in control of our environment as we like to think we are. We can circumnavigate the globe in a single day, a bit like Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream, but without Oberon's magic this time. We can go down to the bottom-most steps of the ocean. But one shrug of the Earth's crust and our mighty cities are shaken to the ground. One little hole in the ozone layer and the ice caps melt. So, the Wizards of Once is concerned with looking more closely at a time when humans were clear about their dependence on their close connection with the natural world and I'm hoping thereby to encourage adults to think about whether children of today are allowed enough unrestricted and unsupervised access to nature and wilderness.

I used to explore those trees and those forests in Kingley Vale completely unsupervised. Back in the 1970s, the adults just waved you off and said, 'Bye, kids. Be back in time for lunch.' I was climbing trees and in and out of forests and I hope the children of today have that same freedom because it's so important. There is so much to be done. But one of the many reasons writing for children is such an energising and enlightening experience is that children are focused on the essentials. So children know that number 10 on my Reading Charter is the most important problem facing it all the environmental challenges facing the world. And while adults often give up when faced with an impossible problem, it doesn't bother children and their belief in magic and the impossible just might make it happen. It doesn't surprise me at all that the current global coordinated action in this area is being spearheaded by a child, Greta Thunberg and climate change marches are being taken up by children. I'm going to end this podcast on a very positive note. I'm delighted to finish it by recommending that you look up the Woodland Trust, who are a wonderful organisation in the UK whose role is protecting our woodlands. They have a lot of information about woods. You can [learn] how to look after our trees in a special, new, young person's forest. We need new forests but we need old forests, too. Because the latest research shows that the older the tree, the faster it grows and the more carbon dioxide it absorbs. We need to allow our trees to grow. Old growth forests, like Kingley Vale, the woods that inspired the Wizards Of Once, where the trees are thousands of years old, big old trees that store carbon the best. You see, a picture book, The Lorax, ends with a very important message, joyfully: The mean old Once-ler who chopped down the Truffula trees in the first place has worried and worried and worried about it ever since. And he throws down to the reader of the story the very last Truffula seed of all. And he says:.

Plant a new Truffula.

Treat it with care.

Give it clean water.

And feed it fresh air.

Grow a forest to protect it from axes that hack.

Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back.

Because, unless, (remember that one word, unless, that the Lorax left in a little ring of stones), unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better.

It's not.

Follow the Woodland Trust and join in the tree magic.

**Karim Zeroual**

Thank you, that was magical. I would love to take a walk through a wood like that. Be awesome, right? Lots of people are lucky enough to live near a wood they can visit, but if you don't, then there are always amazing trees all around where you live. For example, in parks or maybe on the street. So, go and say hello some time and imagine who might live up there in the wild branches.

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