

## Enchanted Forests: The Poetic Construction of a World before Time

**Boria Sax**

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Boria Sax's *Enchanted Forests* spurs the imagination with its wide-ranging examination of literature, folklore, and visual art related to forests and their creatures.

This engaging, scholarly volume summarizes how, throughout history, human beings have conceptualized and portrayed forests in written and visual art. Suggesting that our ideas and mythology about a forest's "ambiance" are as important as its "biological composition," the book cites a stunning variety of creative work, ranging from the Epic of Gilgamesh to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Sax notes, for instance, that biblical stories portrayed the wilderness as an indeterminate landscape where prophets and saints were tormented or achieved communion with God. In the medieval era, legends about King Arthur and Robin Hood associated the forest with lords, knights, and other royalty, with dramatic accounts of hunting parties pursuing stags. German fairy tales portrayed the forest as a place of both terror and hope, a feminine domain inhabited by witches and other powerful spirits. Early American art, including the works of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School, depicted the wilderness as a pastoral Eden to be subdued and conquered. And although the focus is on Europe and North America, the book also touches on forest images in Asian and African civilizations.

This rich and accessible book considers an astonishing array of ideas. The overall effect is provocative and sometimes overwhelming. For instance, a two-paragraph description of Michael Foucault's ideas about man's assertion of power by naming natural objects could easily have merited several pages, as would the discussion of how the folksy image of Paul Bunyan promoted the clearcutting of Great Lakes forests.

*Enchanted Forests* is a brilliant introduction to the art and literature of the forest, examining how people conceive of the wilderness beyond the edges of civilization.

KRISTEN RABE (November / December 2023)

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