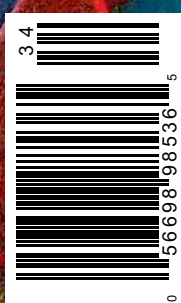


Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 48 TREES
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7

THOU SHALT NOT
DESTROY THY
FORESTS...





In Chicago's Westlawn Cemetery, Silverstein returns the favor.
Photo Dan Price.

GIVING BACK

YARA FLORES

The Giving Tree, an illustrated children's book of 624 words on fifty-two sparsely illustrated pages, tells the story of an apple tree ("she") and a human male ("the boy"). The tree, we are told, loves the boy. The boy claims to love the tree. He matures beneath her boughs and goes off to some sort of life (undepicted). The reader stays with the tree, which receives, over the years, a set of visits from her child/friend/loved, visits that amount to an allegorical sequence through the "ages of man."

At each of these glancing rendezvous, the boy (now young man, now family man, now lost soul, etc.) has a need (money, a house, a means of escape, etc.) that the tree finds a way to address ("take my apples," "cut off my branches and build a house," "cut down my trunk and make a boat," etc.). Along the way, the tree is reduced to a stump, and the boy to a broken old codger who in the end finds an ambiguous peace sitting on her severed remains. The story concludes: "And the tree was happy."

Interpretations range. On the one hand, there are serious commentators who see in the book a reverential depiction of radical love (maternal, divine, sado-masochistic). By contrast, there are equally

demanding critics who find in the text one or another monitory parable (about selfishness, egomania, environmental irresponsibility). So the theologian William Werpehowski can declare the tree's selfless "self-loss" a figure for the sacrificial ideal of Jesus Christ, whereas the distinguished ethicist and conservative legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon savagely résumés the same book as "a period piece—a nursery tale for the 'me' generation, a primer of narcissism, a catechism of exploitation."¹

On such matters the evasive author, the prickly and slightly frightening Shel Silverstein (a *Playboy* cartoonist who went on to write the runaway Johnny Cash hit "A Boy Named Sue"), mostly kept mum. He published *The Giving Tree* in 1964, and saw it translated into more than thirty languages, including Latin and Esperanto; it has sold nearly ten million copies, making it one of the most popular children's books of all times. One thinks for a moment of the many, many trees that have given their pulp to *The Giving Tree*—and thereby to crazy old Uncle Shelby (or, rather, "Evil Eye, LLC," the rights holder).

Silverstein died in 1999 at his home in Key West, one of his four residences.

¹ See "The Giving Tree: A Symposium," *First Things*, no. 49 (January 1995).