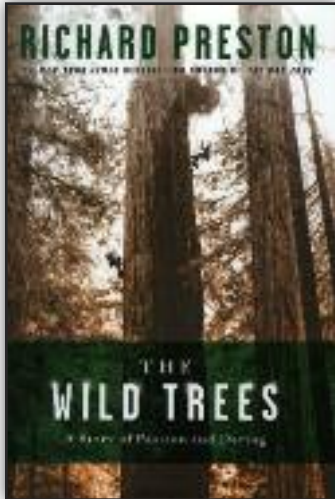


# SB&F

## BOOK | CLUB | GUIDE



### *The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring*

*Richard Preston. Random House, 2007*

#### What's it about?

Imagine the Hollywood film *The Right Stuff* and the story line of that history of the beginnings of the American space program. Now substitute test pilot Chuck Yeager and the first Project Mercury astronauts with a group of men and women who sought the tallest trees (Yeager's Mach 1) and determined to climb them. Then imagine the small band of growing professional astronauts (from Friendship 7) reincarnated two to three decades later as a small band of about the same size who pioneered the climbing of tall trees. Both stories are "high" adventures, both took intestinal fortitude, both would see death amongst the practitioners, and both would continue to tackle their respective Everests with ever-improving equipment and methods. In *The Wild Trees*, author Richard Preston introduces us to, at first, just a few intrepid adventurers, untrained in botany (or, for that matter, any science), who sought to both discover and climb the tallest coast redwoods in Northwestern California (the primary area in which this species is to be found). As their fascination with the venture grew, so did their desire to get advanced degrees in the plant sciences and to learn the ways of the biology of the trees—especially the astonishing new world of the temperate rain-forest canopy: The astronauts' Moon was hardly as unknown as forest canopies, redwood or otherwise. From the 1970s onward, the techniques of tall-tree climbing—the rope systems, the tools, the tricks of the trade—are all here, carefully laid out in a historical study. This is less a history of science or a book purely about science—although we do learn a lot about canopy architecture, some of its denizens (the lichens that inhabit Sequoia sempervirens, for instance, and a bit of other biology—than it is a book about adventure. Although Preston (well known for his hit 1994 book *The Hot Zone: The Story of the Ebola Virus* does not write in the same manner as, say, William Beebe (admittedly of an earlier time and style), *The Wild Trees* cannot but help put one in mind of Beebe's *Half Mile Down*.

Preston tells a similar tale of adventurers 300 feet up, oftentimes tethered by a single, slender thread not unlike Beebe beneath the seas—and just as much in danger—as "canopy science" entered its beginning age. Anyone who can't put down Beebe—or Tom Clancy, for that matter—must pick up Richard Preston's latest book and discover the characters. Preston is a master in telling us about the people who founded tall-tree climbing and how they taught themselves to climb the trees (much more demanding than you might imagine). It is indeed a story about "passion and daring."

#### Who is this book for?

This book can be read and enjoyed by anyone from high school students and above.



## Who wrote it?

Richard Preston is the bestselling author of *The Hot Zone*, *The Demon in the Freezer*, and the novel *The Cobra Event*. A writer for *The New Yorker* since 1985, Preston is the only nondoctor to have received the Centers for Disease Control's Champion of Prevention Award. He also holds an award from the American Institute of Physics. Preston lives outside New York City.

## Why should we read it?

Author Richard Preston's popular science books are infectious page-turners. In line with all the other great books by Mr. Preston, *Wild Trees* is a true-life adventure tale that you don't want to miss! The book reads more like a novel than a nonfiction science book. Making it perfect for in depth and interesting book club discussions.

## What can we talk about?

The oldest giant redwood trees can be over a thousand years old. Do you think there is much for scientists to still discover about them?

Describe how *The Wild Trees* tells a story. Is it like other nonfiction books you have read?

How are the characters in *The Wild Trees* like characters in a novel?

Do you think *The Wild Trees* has a theme? What is it?

Where were the parts of the story that were suspenseful or dramatic?

Was the author's point of view apparent in the telling of the story?

Does the fact that this is a true story make it more or less engaging to you?

What other kinds of "true" stories do you think can be told in this way?

Describe what is known and what is yet unknown about giant redwoods.

Discuss the role of hard work, imagination, and chance in the work of the researchers that study giant redwoods.

Describe the ecosystem that is found on the redwood tree canopies. What was surprising about some of the things that the researchers discovered?

## What are some other books like this I might like?

- ◆ Explore other books by author Richard Preston. His <http://www.richardpreston.net/index.html> (website) will introduce you to some of his other titles.
- ◆ *Remarkable Trees of the World*. Thomas Pakenham. (W.W. Norton, 2002)
- ◆ *Tree: A Life Story*. David Suzuki and Wayne Grady. (Greystone Books, 2004)

## Where can I find out more?

The <http://www.savetheredwoods.org/> (Save the Redwoods League) site contains a wealth of information about redwood forests and efforts to restore and protect them.

They can use <http://www.humboldt.edu/~sillett/redwoods.html> (Redwood Photo Tour) on Stephen Sillett's site, to find pictures and descriptions of the organisms that live on these trees.