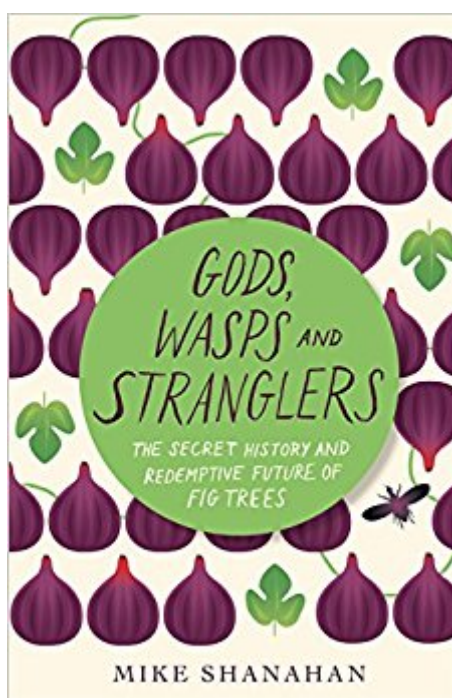


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# Gods, Wasps And Stranglers: The Secret History And Redemptive Future Of Fig Trees



## Synopsis

They are trees of life and trees of knowledge. They are wish-fulfillers | rainforest royalty | more precious than gold. They are the fig trees, and they have affected humanity in profound but little-known ways. *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers* tells their amazing story. Fig trees fed our pre-human ancestors, influenced diverse cultures and played key roles in the dawn of civilization. They feature in every major religion, starring alongside Adam and Eve, Krishna and Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. This is no coincidence | fig trees are special. They evolved when giant dinosaurs still roamed and have been shaping our world ever since. These trees intrigued Aristotle and amazed Alexander the Great. They were instrumental in Kenya's struggle for independence and helped restore life after Krakatoa's catastrophic eruption. Egypt's Pharaohs hoped to meet fig trees in the afterlife and Queen Elizabeth II was asleep in one when she ascended the throne. And all because 80 million years ago these trees cut a curious deal with some tiny wasps. Thanks to this deal, figs sustain more species of birds and mammals than any other trees, making them vital to rainforests. In a time of falling trees and rising temperatures, their story offers hope. Ultimately, it's a story about humanity's relationship with nature. The story of the fig trees stretches back tens of millions of years, but it is as relevant to our future as it is to our past.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Choice Reviews- "Fig trees are found throughout the tropical world with over 800 species in the

genus *Ficus*. Many figs have an elaborate pollination system in which tiny wasps mate inside of the fruit. This book considers the biology, ecology, natural history, and the historical/cultural importance of this interesting plant. An especially fascinating aspect of fig trees is that they are utilized in forest restoration efforts. For example, in Central America and Africa, scientists have planted mature fig tree branches to use as 'instant trees' in deforested areas. The fig trees attract animals and promote biodiversity in the immediate area. The author highlights how edible figs have been discovered in archaeological sites that date back to 13,000 years ago. The author also devotes several chapters to specific historical eras and notes that in the Bible, Adam and Eve used fig leaves to serve as clothing. The book contains many fine-quality line drawings to illustrate principles, such as how a wasp enters a fig and the natural variation in the morphology of figs.

Summing Up: Recommended. All readers.

Shelf Awareness, Starred Review- "Mike Shanahan's *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees* is a deceptively brief account of the *Ficus* genus of trees in history, emphasizing but not limited to their relationship with humans. Shanahan brings the expertise of decades of ecological fieldwork and a bubbling enthusiasm to a topic clearly close to his heart. He makes a strong argument that his readers should be attuned to and excited about fig trees, too. The plant figures into the origin stories of cultures all over the world. Fig trees have provided food, shelter, medicine and materials to humans for as long as humans have existed: figs predate us by nearly 80 million years. Because of their contributions as keystone species in ecosystems around the world, figs offer distinctive services in reforestation efforts and the mitigation of climate change. They have contributed to the theory of evolution, the birth of agriculture and possibly humans' development of opposable thumbs. The story of the fig is inseparable from that of fig wasps, numerous tiny insect species that have evolved to pair respectively in symbiosis with individual species of fig. Shanahan relates all this and more in a joyous voice with occasional lyricism, as when 'the Buddhist monk's robe sang out loud saffron over the rainforest's muffled tones of brown and green and grey. Mythology, biology and hope for the future combine in this highly accessible story of the family of fig trees, with its profound ecological relevance. A joyful, celebratory world history of the fig tree and its ecological impact.

Booklist- "Fig trees, with their 'sinuous aerial roots,' hidden flowers, wondrous pollinators, and nourishing fruits, have sustained diverse ecosystems and civilizations for millennia. In this lively and mind-expanding mix of personal adventures, myth, religious history, and science, rain-forest ecologist and award-winning journalist Shanahan traces the intricate connection between humans and *Ficus* species. He cogently illuminates how fig trees were held sacred by various spiritual traditions around the world, including those of ancient Egypt

and Greece, along with the fig tree's place in the Buddha's story and the Garden of Eden. He profiles intrepid fig-tree experts and vividly explains how tiny fig-wasps burrow into figs, lay eggs, and reemerge to distribute pollen, allowing the planet's 750 Ficus species to thrive and feed 1,274 species of birds and mammals, including humans. Scientists now recognize that fig trees are "keystone resources" essential to sustaining life and foresee their playing a central role in forest restoration as we struggle with the consequences of environmental decimation and global warming. Shanahan's spirited celebration of the fig tree as symbol and life force is richly entertaining and truly enlightening.

"In his insightful book, *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers*, Mike Shanahan combines poetry and science, history and humanity, to tell a story not only of the fig tree but of life on Earth in all its beautiful and astonishing complexity. In doing so, he reminds us of what a remarkable place we inhabit and how much we should all want to protect and preserve it."

--Deborah Blum, director, Knight Science Journalism Program, MIT; author of *The Poisoner's Handbook*

"Surprising, engrossing, disturbing and promising, *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers* combines masterful storytelling and spellbinding science. This is a beautifully written and important book about trees that have shaped human destiny."

--Sy Montgomery, author of *The Soul of an Octopus*

"The complex web of ecological connections between fig trees, tropical forest animals and plants, as well as people and human culture is nothing short of a marvel. *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers* is a page-turner and a revelation: You will never again think of a fig as just something to eat. There is no better way to introduce the complexity and wonder of nature and our intricate relationship with it. A must read."

--Thomas E. Lovejoy, University Professor of Environmental Science and Policy, George Mason University; fellow, National Geographic Society

"This book concerns the stunningly versatile and ancient family of fig trees now being used as a framework species to restore damaged tropical forests. Figs are not only considered the keystone species in forests but are perhaps the world's most perfect tree—they provide highly nutritious fruits with health-giving and medicinal qualities. They attract birds and animals. They grow very rapidly and produce abundant fruits in a few years. They make shade and shelter, their deep powerful roots can break up compacted soils, they draw up water, they prevent erosion, and they have important spiritual qualities. The tree in the Garden of Eden was very likely not an apple but a fig."

--Annie Proulx

"In *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers*, rainforest ecologist Mike Shanahan charts a lifelong love affair with figs, one that has taken him from India to Kenya, through temples and rainforests, all in search of a deeper understanding of what he describes as

“Humanity’s relationship with nature. The fig becomes a tasty lens that reveals not only the fruit’s cultural and biological significance but our relationship to that which most deeply nourishes us.”—Simran Sethi, author of *Bread, Wine, Chocolate*  
“A real labour of love, concisely and elegantly told.”—Fred Pearce, author; environmental consultant for *New Scientist*

Mike Shanahan is a freelance writer with a doctorate in rainforest ecology. He has lived in a national park in Borneo, bred endangered penguins, investigated illegal bear farms, produced award-winning journalism and spent several weeks of his life at the annual United Nations climate change negotiations. He is interested in what people think about nature and our place in it. His writing includes work published by *The Economist*, *Nature*, *The Ecologist* and *Ensi*, and chapters of *Dry: Life without Water* (Harvard University Press); *Climate Change and the Media* (Peter Lang Publishing) and *Culture and Climate Change: Narratives* (Shed). He is the illustrator of *Extraordinary Animals* (Greenwood Publishing Group) and maintains a blog called *Under the Banyan*.

Bought this for my mom and she absolutely loved it --- she’s now reading it over again. Of course, she is crazy about figs and nature in general.

Fascinating - I loved it and purchased another copy for friends. Read a notice a few years ago that you were working on this book and have been looking forward to it. Congratulations!

Opens up a whole new understanding of terra forming. Fascinating and informative.

My son-in-law appreciates this book. Thank you.

I enjoyed this book much more than I thought I would! I am into gardening and have even had a few fruit trees now and again, but never figs. I do enjoy eating figs tho’ and hoped it would be at least an amusing read. Wow! It surpassed all my expectations! What an extraordinary read this was! Well, researched, interesting and entertaining! Who knew a fig could be so intriguing? Great read if you enjoy growing things. Make a great gift for gardeners or orchard growing friends, too.

Just finished reading this excellent book, what an adventure story! It is beautifully written and the

author has obviously had some unique study opportunities in rain forests throughout his career. I really appreciated his respect for local people's and their myths. I found it a very educational yet entertaining read. I had known a bit about the role of fungus and mushrooms in forest development but was inspired to find out about the central role of the fig tree. I hope we can collectively use this knowledge to ultimately save ourselves!

If you are a geeky biologist looking for a traditional (a.k.a. boring) text book to learn about scientific classifications of fig trees then this is not for you. If you are someone who is looking for a fiction written without a great deal of research and fact checking, then this is not for you either. What the author has done is introducing, what I can comfortably call a revolutionary way of writing - which beautifully blends science, history, ecology, social norms and beliefs to teach us about these amazing species of fig trees that have shaped our civilisations since the dawn of history. As you read the book, you will experience this magical feeling where you travel through time, and wander around the forests of Borneo, Indonesia, India and Papua New Guinea in Asia and from the heights of Mt Kenya to the low lying deltas of the Nile Basin in Africa. **WARNING:** do not read this book if you are on the train. There is a very high chance that you will end up missing your stop.

Really enjoying this book. Besides the fact that I have a favorite fig tree of my own and cuttings from a tree in my mother's yard that is well over 60 yrs old. Great history and a better understanding of the "connectedness" of everything. Thanks for all your hard work!

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