TEMPLE GROVE  
a novel  
By Scott Elliott

*Reading Guide*

TEMPLE GROVE is about a young part-Makah man named Paul, who loves Olympic National Park. He spends hours on the trails, and off the trails, learning about the place that has so thoroughly captured his heart. When he becomes concerned about the future of a stand of unprotected very old trees near the park, Paul makes a point to protect them, perhaps with disastrous consequences.

But this is also the story of his mother, Trace, who faces every day the heavy weight of her past and the secret that she has kept from her son.

And it's the suspenseful story of what happens when Paul discovers a gyppo logger threatening the majestic trees that he has committed himself to saving.

This is a book about redemption, place, identity, and roots. It's about the collision of worlds. It’s about the ways in which community shapes us. It’s a beautifully written novel about a beautiful place and about the beautiful, fragile love people carry for one another.
Selected Praise:

“Just as axes find the oldest wood, so does the novel find its characters' oldest secrets....A roaming third-person narration allows many back stories, current desires and preoccupations to form a robust canopy in the novel. This makes the climax not just a single moment of action or revelation, but the playing out of each character's story, their confrontations with themselves and each other, secrets at the fore, no more illusions.”—The Oregonian

"Like Alan Heathcock and Benjamin Percy, Scott Elliott writes from that place where the old myths and the new stories collide. In Temple Grove, he reminds us of what it means to be lost to everyone and everything we have ever loved...and to be found again. It is a story of longing, cruelty, forgiveness, and redemption, shot through with intimate descriptions of a land on the cusp of ruin that will break your heart with their beauty."—Kim Barnes, author of In the Kingdom of Men

"Tribal culture, environmental concerns, and the need for work in a land where beauty won’t put food on the table lead to adventurous encounters, dangerous forest pursuits, and questions that mothers will take to their book clubs to discuss."—Hungry for Good Books

“Paying homage to Washington State ecology, history, and Native American culture, Elliott...joins the ranks of Jim Lynch, Jonathan Evison, Tim Egan, and Annie Dillard. Like these accomplished authors, Elliott shows a reverence for the state’s rugged physical beauty, using poetic language to convey its appeal and connection to each of the novel’s principal characters.”—Library Journal
Author Interview:

How do you write? Do you chart a course or let the story unfold as you go along?

For a novel I’ve come to believe in writing the scenes that feel “warmest,” moving from one spot that feels warm in a narrative sense to the next while keeping alive, in the back of one’s mind, an inchoate sense of the whole shape of the thing without dwelling on it too much, so there’s room for deviation and surprise. Working in this way, one keeps alive in the background the sense of a charted course and some good progress along this course, while most of the immediate writing energy goes toward furnishing the details necessary, line by line and scene by scene, to convince the reader he or she is experiencing these moments.

What inspired this novel?

This novel arose from a lifelong love affair with the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. My maternal grandparents settled in Port Townsend in the mid 1930’s, and I grew up spending a significant portion of each year out on the Peninsula. Sensual experiences of the region—the mountains, the rain forests, Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the ocean beaches—began registering in me from a young age. These experiences, in addition to stories my relatives told about the place in its early and developing days, in addition to a mythic sense of the place—exaggerated tales my grade school classmates told about loggers beating up Hells Angels, for example—accumulated a great deal of energy and were calling out to be incorporated into a larger story. The place came first, and a story commensurate to the place that could help me sing the place and some of its tensions, the way it forms its people, came later.

Do you prefer novels or stories, as both a reader and a writer?

From the perspective of a reader I’d have a hard time answering. It’s like trying to choose a favorite child. I like them both equally and for different reasons. I appreciate the feeling of settling into reading a novel, the knowledge that it’ll be there for me for a while and that it’ll cut a wide swathe and tie together multiple strands. But I also appreciate the way in which stories raise the hair at the back of the neck for a smaller investment of time, the way in which they are, as Flannery O’Connor has said, short in length and long in meaning. In some ways, I’m in awe of the economy of great short stories, which is similar to the split-the-atom power of lyric poems in which a teaspoon can weigh a ton.

As a writer, I feel I’m naturally built for the novel more than for the short story. To borrow a figure from my former teacher Michael Cunningham, sometimes when I attempt to paint on the smaller canvas of the short story with minute deft strokes, I find my whole arm moving in grand sweeping strokes, the scope widening out to include this and this and also this, rather than zeroing in on a single, revelatory moment.
How has being a teacher of writing affected your own creative process?

I work at Whitman College with great undergraduate students, many of whom write wonderfully innovative stories. We also have a creative thesis option, so sometimes I work with the most talented of them on collections, novellas, or portions of novels. I’m inspired by the work they do and by the conversations about craft that arise in class, which often focus on obstacles to effective stories. In this way and in others, in some cases by seeing what doesn’t work, teaching brings one into a starker awareness of certain pitfalls to avoid and other things that work very well. Teaching also provides a kind of useful pressure not to feel like a charlatan, a drive to write at the highest level and to publish so that you feel you’ve earned the right to lead a class of talented writers.

What do you hope that readers will take away from reading this novel?

I answer this question with some trepidation, as my primary goal whenever I write is to transcend my own limited ambitions and what I think it’s about in order to enter the exquisite logic of the subconscious mind and enter a zone where an order beyond myself holds sway. I hope to court in the writing a rich, multilayered correspondence— or to quote Henry James “an immense, exquisite correspondence”— with life, one that confounds easy paraphrase. I hope readers feel they are experiencing in these pages a world teeming with life and equal to its complexities, ironies, and paradoxes. Without prescribing any one way to read the novel, I hope there’s a quiet, implicit current in these pages that might carry a reader to an enriched wonderment at the natural world and an appreciation for the wonders of this beautiful corner of the country. The novel is equally as much about human relationships as it is about the natural world. It’s about being a mother, being a father, being a son, coming of age, and about how to negotiate a complex hierarchy of power. It’s also about the ways we try to make a living and live with ourselves and much else. One of the most gratifying responses I’ve had from readers so far is that the novel has helped them appreciate a different worldview, to identify with a character they hadn’t expected to credit at the outset. I’ll be happy if the novel makes a little less intransigent the boundaries that separate people. In this way the novel is about transcending easy categories, and understanding one’s own position in terms of lots of intersecting identities. Another thing I love to hear is that the novel has surprised some readers, engaged them in ways they didn’t expect.

What common themes are there in your writing?

It’s fascinating as a writer to come into contact with your major themes, your obsessions. Often, they surprise you, or only come into focus when someone else points them out to you. This surprise is one of my favorite aspects of the writing process—discovering what you were really writing about when you thought you were writing about something else. Some themes that might be counted as my obsessions include: loss of innocence; guilt and atonement; possibilities for redemption; ecological degradation and repair; the mythic; finding the good life against the odds, the best life for oneself and for the planet; wonderment at the natural world and its complex processes; others I’m not listing here but which I hope smart readers will remind me are there….
What’s next?

The most pressing project for me at the moment is a collaboration with my paternal grandfather, who ran a hamburger stand and a restaurant in Western Kentucky. Before he died, he recorded on a “jambox” we gave him a kind of memoir based in stories. He was a natural story teller, and in this collection, titled for the moment “The Wheelbarrow Man Stories,” I’m taking the seeds of stories he provides in the oral accounts and taking some license in trans-mediating them into works of literary fiction. In some cases his natural penchant for exaggeration manifests in the stories I’m writing as a gentle magical realism. The final product will be a collection of interlinked stories and one novella that will read in its entirety like a novel. Beyond this project, I have an idea for another novel. I’ve also begun writing some stories set in Walla Walla, the Eastern Washington town at the base of the Blue Mountains where I live whose name is good for a fiction writer in that it doesn’t sound like a real place.


**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the significance of Tracy’s nickname being Trace?

2. In what ways do worlds collide in TEMPLE GROVE?

3. Discuss the presentation of the loggers’ views and the views of the environmentalists.

4. Worlds begin and end in TEMPLE GROVE. Discuss how.

5. How important to the plot are secrets?

6. Does this novel make you think about worship and faith—what it means, how we practice it, and how we treat others whose perspective may be different than ours?

7. Who in this novel is redeemed? Who is forgiven?

8. Was Bill “born again” when he emerged from the crevasse?

9. Can this novel be classified as environmental fiction?

10. In the end of the novel, Paul finds his voice. Could he have done this without chasing his father through the Olympics?

11. How integral is place to identity?

12. Could this novel take place anywhere else?

13. There are at least three, arguably four, fathers to Paul in this novel. How does this novel present fatherhood?

14. Discuss the use of music in this novel.

15. Did you have favorite lines in this novel? Which lines did you underline? How do those reflect the major themes of the story?

16. What role does the octopus Pishpish play in the story?

17. What is the significance to the step-father’s job? What is the significance to his melt-down?

18. What does this book say about wisdom and certainty? Quoting page 148, “A guy could make it to thirty-eight - an age at which you thought when you were still a boy you’d have everything figured out and the world on a string – and still feel
you didn’t know a god-damned thing. All ages must be like this once you reached them – dim husks in comparison to the glowing prospect for wisdom and certainty they’d presented when you were young.” (Contributed by Trina from Hungry for Good Books.com)

19. Discuss Trace as a mother and how she encouraged Paul’s wonder and curiosity. On page 75 when Trace tells Paul about eons and says “So many you couldn’t count that high – even if you counted for the rest of your life.” He walked ahead of her, erratically counting the numbers he knew, and she wished him time enough to count an eon.” (Contributed by Trina from Hungry for Good Books.com)

20. What does this book say about loyalty?
About the Author:

Scott Elliott grew up in Louisville, Kentucky and on Washington State’s Olympic Peninsula. His first novel *Coiled in the Heart* (BlueHen/Putnam, 2003) was a Booksense 76 Selection, a Literary Guild alternate selection, and a finalist in two award categories for The Texas Institute of Letters. The novel was featured on NPR’s Morning Edition with Bob Edwards and was chosen for the 2005 American Library of Congress sponsored One-Community-One-Campus-One-Book celebration in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Scott’s essays and short stories have been published in several literary and other journals including the *Antioch Review, The New York Times, the Louisville Review, Juked, Mayday, Forklift Ohio, Hawk and Handsaw, the Writer’s Chronicle*, and elsewhere. His collection of short stories *Return Arrangements* was a 2009 finalist for the Flannery O’Connor Award for short fiction.

In 2011 he was awarded the G. Thomas Edwards Award for Excellence in Teaching and Scholarship at Whitman College, where he is Associate Professor of Creative Writing and English. In 2012 he founded the Walla Walla Whitman Imaginative Writing Partnership, which places talented Whitman undergraduate writers in public schools. He lives in Walla Walla, Washington with his family.

His website is [http://www.scottelliott.net/index.htm](http://www.scottelliott.net/index.htm)

His publisher’s website is [http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/](http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/)