



The Giving Tree

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For the TV episode, see [The Giving Tree \(Friday Night Lights\)](#). For the American band, see [The Giving Tree Band](#).

The Giving Tree is an American [children's picture book](#) written and illustrated by [Shel Silverstein](#). First published in 1964 by [Harper & Row](#), it has become one of Silverstein's best-known titles, and has been translated into numerous languages.

This book has been described as "one of the most divisive books in children's literature" by librarian Elizabeth Bird; the controversy stems from whether the [relationship](#) between the main characters (a boy and the eponymous tree) should be interpreted as positive (i.e., the tree gives the boy [selfless love](#)) or negative (i.e., the boy and the tree have an [abusive relationship](#)).

Background [\[edit \]](#)

Silverstein had difficulty finding a publisher for *The Giving Tree*.^{[1][2]} An editor at [Simon & Schuster](#) rejected the book's manuscript because he felt that it was "too sad" for children and "too simple" for adults.^{[1][2]} [Tomi Ungerer](#) encouraged Silverstein to approach [Ursula Nordstrom](#), who was a publisher with Harper & Row.^[1]

An editor with Harper & Row stated that Silverstein had made the original illustrations "scratchy" like his cartoons for [Playboy](#), but that he later reworked the art in a "more pared-down and much sweeter style".^[3] The final black-and-white drawings have been described as "unadorned ... visual minimalism".^[4] Harper & Row published a small first edition of the book, consisting of only 5,000–7,500 copies, in 1964.^[5]

Plot [\[edit \]](#)

The Giving Tree



The cover, depicting The Giving Tree offering an apple to the Boy

Author	Shel Silverstein
Illustrator	Silverstein
Genre	Children's picture book
Publisher	Harper & Row
Publication date	October 7, 1964 (60 years old)
Pages	64
ISBN	978-0-06-025665-4
Followed by	<i>Who Wants a Cheap Rhinoceros?</i>

The book follows the lives of an [apple tree](#) and a boy, who develop a relationship with each other. The tree is very "giving" and the boy ages into a "taking" teenager, a young man, a middle-aged man, and finally an elderly man. Despite the fact that the boy ages in the story, the tree addresses him as "Boy" throughout his entire life.

In his childhood, the boy enjoys playing with the tree, climbing her trunk, swinging from her branches, carving "Me + T (Tree)" into the bark, and eating her apples. However, as the boy grows older, he spends less time with the tree and tends to visit her only when he wants material items at various stages of his life, or not coming to the tree alone [such as bringing his girlfriend to the tree and carving "Me +Y.L." (her initials, often assumed to be an initialism for "young love") into the tree]. In an effort to make the boy happy at each of these stages, the tree gives him parts of herself, which he can transform into material items, such as money from her apples when the boy is a teenager, a house from her branches when the boy is a young man, and a boat from her trunk when the boy is a middle-aged man. With every stage of giving, "the Tree was happy".

In the final pages, both the tree and the boy feel the consequences of their respective "giving" and "taking" nature. When only a stump remains for the tree, the boy returns as a tired elderly man to meet the tree once more. She mentions she cannot provide him shade, apples, or any materials like in the past. The man tells her that all he wants is "a quiet place to sit and rest", which the tree, who is weak being just a stump, could provide. With this final stage of giving, "the Tree was happy".



The Giving Tree Garden

Reception [\[edit \]](#)

Interest in the book increased by [word of mouth](#); for example, in churches "it was hailed as a parable on the joys of giving".^[1] As of 2001, over 5 million copies of the book had been sold, placing it 14th on a list of hardcover "All-Time Bestselling Children's Books" from *[Publishers Weekly](#)*.^[6] By 2011, 8.5 million copies of the book had been sold.^[2]

In a 1999–2000, [National Education Association](#) online survey of children, the book was ranked 24th among the "Kids' Top 100 Books".^[7] In the 2007 online "Teachers' Top 100 Books for Children" poll by the National Education Association, the book came in third.^[8] It was 85th of the "Top 100 Picture Books" of all time in a 2012 poll by *[School Library Journal](#)*.^[9] *[Scholastic Parent & Child](#)* magazine placed it #9 on its list of "100 Greatest Books for Kids" in 2012.^[10] As of 2013, it ranked third on a [Goodreads](#) list of "Best Children's Books".^[11]

Interpretations [\[edit \]](#)

The book prompted a diverse scope of interpretations from several critics. These can be summarized:^[12]^[13]

Religious interpretations [\[edit \]](#)

Ursula Nordstrom attributed the book's success partially to "Protestant ministers and Sunday-school teachers", who believed that the tree represents "the Christian ideal of unconditional love".^[14]

Environmental interpretations [[edit](#)]

Some have interpreted the tree as [Mother Nature](#) and the boy represents humanity. The book has been used to teach children [environmental ethics](#).^[15] An educational resource for children describes the book as an "allegory about the responsibilities a human being has for living organisms in the environment".^[16] Lisa Rowe Fraustino states that "some curricula use the book as a what-not-to-do role model".^[13]

Friendship interpretations [[edit](#)]

One writer believes that the relationship between the boy and the tree is one of friendship. As such, the book teaches children "as your life becomes polluted with the trappings of the modern world—as you 'grow up'—your relationships tend to suffer if you let them fall to the wayside".^[17] Another writer's criticism of this interpretation is that the tree appears to be an adult when the boy is young, and cross-generational friendships are rare.^[17] Additionally, this relationship can be seen from a humanities perspective, emphasizing the need for helping each other.^[18]

Mother–child interpretations [[edit](#)]

A common interpretation of the book is that the tree and the boy have a mother–son relationship, as in a 1995 collection of essays about the book edited by [Richard John Neuhaus](#) in the journal *First Things*.^[19] Among the essayists, some were positive about the relationship; for example, [Amy A. Kass](#) wrote about the story that "it is wise and it is true about giving and about motherhood", and her husband [Leon R. Kass](#) encourages people to read the book because the tree "is an emblem of the sacred memory of our own mother's love".^[19] Other essayists put forth negative views. [Mary Ann Glendon](#) wrote that the book is "a nursery tale for the 'me' generation, a primer of narcissism, a catechism of exploitation", and [Jean Bethke Elshtain](#) felt that the story ends with the tree and the boy "both wrecks".^[19]

A 1998 study using [phenomenographic](#) methods found that Swedish children and mothers tended to interpret the book as dealing with friendship, while Japanese mothers tended to interpret the book as dealing with parent–child relationships.^[12]

Political interpretations [[edit](#)]

Christopher Westley, writing for the [Mises Institute](#) (an [anarcho-capitalist](#) think-tank), describes the tree–boy relationship as similar to a [socialist](#) or [communist](#) government that extracts far too much from its citizens while not providing anything back in return. He describes this unsustainable and parasitic relationship as something toxic and ought to be avoided at all costs, regardless of whether on an individual level, such as two lovers, or a parent and child, or on the level of voter to their government.^[20]

Interpretation as satire [[edit](#)]

Some authors believe that the book is not actually intended for children, but instead should be treated as a [satire](#) aimed at adults along the lines of *A Modest Proposal* by [Jonathan Swift](#).^{[21][22]}

Criticism and controversy [\[edit\]](#)

Elizabeth Bird, writing for the *School Library Journal*, described *The Giving Tree* as "one of the most divisive books in children's literature".^[23] Criticism revolves about the depiction of the relationship between the boy and the tree.^[24]

Totally self-effacing, the 'mother' treats her 'son' as if he were a perpetual infant, while he behaves toward her as if he were frozen in time as an importunate baby. This overrated picture book thus presents as a paradigm for young children a callously exploitative human relationship—both across genders and across generations. It perpetuates the myth of the selfless, all-giving mother who exists only to be used and the image of a male child who can offer no reciprocity, express no gratitude, feel no empathy—an insatiable creature who encounters no limits for his demands.

Winter Prosapio said that the boy never thanks the tree for its gifts.^[25] In an interview with *Horn Book Magazine*, Phyllis J. Fogelman, an editor with Harper & Row, said the book is "about a sadomasochistic relationship" and "elevates masochism to the level of a good",^[3] which mirrors [Mary Daly](#)'s analysis in *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism*.^[26]

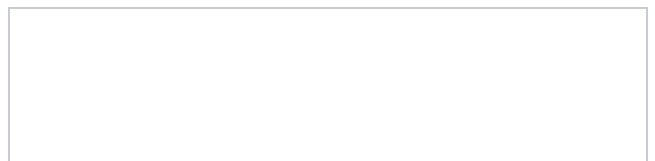
One college instructor discovered that the book caused both male and female [remedial reading](#) students to be angry because they felt that the boy exploited the tree.^[27] For teaching purposes, he paired the book with a short story by [Andre Dubus](#) entitled "The Fat Girl" because its plot can be described as *The Giving Tree* "in reverse".^[27]

Ruth Margalit further relayed the damaging message that mothers sometimes have by receiving *The Giving Tree* as a gift; she quotes children's book author Laurel Snyder who said, "When you give a new mother ten copies of 'The Giving Tree,' it does send a message to the mother that we are supposed to be this person."^[28]

In 2020, playwright [Topher Payne](#) released an alternate ending for the book, which he called *The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries*, with art in the style of the original. In Payne's version, after the boy requests that the tree give him her branches so that he can make a house, the tree explains that "proper boundaries must be established for a healthy relationship." The boy and the tree remain friends, and eventually go into business together, with the boy selling apple pies made from the tree's fruit. Payne subsequently explained that he had found *The Giving Tree* problematic ever since reading it as a child, "because the boy was such an unlikeable character."^[29]

Author's photograph [\[edit\]](#)

The photograph of [Silverstein](#) on the back cover of the book has attracted negative attention, with some people finding it frightening.^{[23][30][31]}



Cultural influences and adaptations [[edit](#)]

Other versions [[edit](#)]

A short animated film of the book, produced in 1973, featured Silverstein's narration.^{[32][33]}

Silverstein also wrote a song of the same name, which was performed by [Bobby Bare](#) and his family on his album *Singin' in the Kitchen* (1974).^[34]

Silverstein created an adult version of the story in a cartoon entitled "I Accept the Challenge".^[35] In the cartoon, a nude woman cuts off a nude man's arms and legs with scissors, then sits on his torso in a pose similar to the final drawing in *The Giving Tree* in which the old man sits on the stump.^[35]

University of Illinois Springfield professor Jacqueline Jackson and Carol Dell (1979) wrote an "alternative version" of the story for teaching purposes that was entitled "The Other Giving Tree".^[21] It featured two trees next to each other and a boy growing up. One tree acted like the one in *The Giving Tree*, ending up as a stump, while the other tree stopped at giving the boy apples, and does not give the boy its branches or trunk. At the end of the story, the stump was sad that the old man chose to sit under the shade of the other tree.^[21]

In 2010, two parodies were published by different authors, *The Taking Tree* and *The Taking Tree: A Selfish Parody*,^{[36][37]} that use comedy to change the story and its message. And later, writer Topher Payne came up with an alternate ending by modifying the second half of the book, calling it "The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries".^[38]

Cultural influences [[edit](#)]

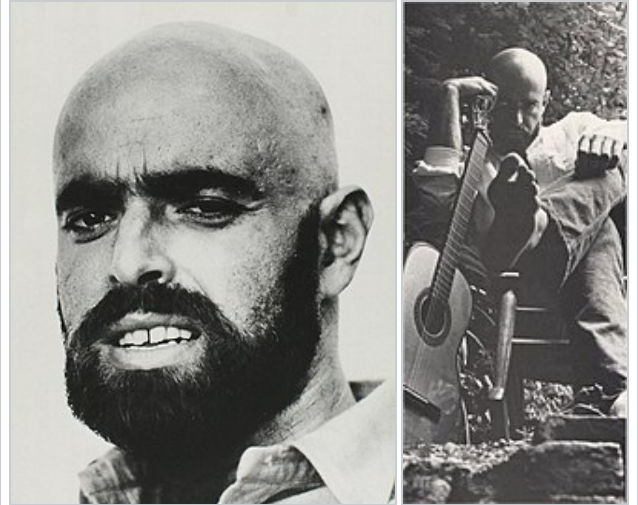
[The Giving Tree Band](#) took its name from the book.^[39] [Plain White T's](#) EP *Should've Gone to Bed* has a song "The Giving Tree", written by [Tim Lopez](#). The 2010 short film *I'm Here*, written and directed by [Spike Jonze](#), is based on *The Giving Tree*; the main character Sheldon is named after Shel Silverstein.^[40]

See also [[edit](#)]

- [Children's literature criticism](#)

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Photograph of [Silverstein](#) that is used on the back cover of the book

Photograph of Silverstein that is used on the back cover of *[Where the Sidewalk Ends](#)*

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V · T · E		Shel Silverstein	[hide]
Books	Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book · Lafcadio: The Lion Who Shot Back · The Giving Tree · Don't Bump the Glump! · The Missing Piece · Runny Babbit		
Poem collections	Where the Sidewalk Ends · A Light in the Attic · Falling Up		
Albums	Freakin' at the Freakers Ball · Twistable Turnable Man · Where the Sidewalk Ends · A Light in the Attic		
Songs	"25 Minutes to Go" · "Boa Constrictor" · "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan" · "Big Four Poster Bed" · "A Boy Named Sue" · "The Cover of 'Rolling Stone'" · "Marie Laveau" · "The Mermaid" · "One's on the Way" · "Sylvia's Mother" · "Carry Me Carrie" · "The Unicorn" · "Wrong Ideas"		
Film soundtracks	Ned Kelly (1970) · Who Is Harry Kellerman and Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me? (1971)		
Screenplays	Things Change (1988)		

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