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[ENGL 3050 Literature & the Environment](#)

20 April 2015

Hill, Julia Butterfly. *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to save the Redwoods*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000. 258 p. ISBN 0062516590

Fighting Deforestation and Capitalism:

How a Woman's Refusal to Leave a Tree Helped Preserve the Redwoods

"I live in a tree called Luna. I am trying to save her life.

Believe me, this is not what I intended to do with my own."

The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods, an autobiographical story written by Julia Butterfly Hill, chronicles the author's experiences as she endeavored to bring attention to the issue of forest decimation. To prevent the Pacific Lumber Company, a major logging operation in Humboldt County, California, from further attempts at clear-cutting, a timber industry practice in which an entire area is cleared of the majority of its trees, Hill took up residence in a redwood tree in the mountain forest for nearly two years. Suffering through the forces of the elements and attempts of subterfuge and sabotage by the Pacific Lumber Company, she refused to leave the tree until an agreement to save the forest could be reached. Her tenacity inspired millions and put a new face on the issue of activism. *The Legacy of Luna* is a triumphant and inspiring story, and proves that one person can have a lasting and significant impact.

The Legacy of Luna begins with a detailed account of the mudslide in Stafford, California that inspired Julia Hill to become an environmental activist. Located on the south bank of the Eel River three miles southeast of Pacific Lumber's town of Scotia, the only remaining company town in America, Stafford was subjected to the same environmental onslaughts as its neighbor to the north. Clear cutting had recently taken place in Scotia and Stafford, leaving the lands vulnerable to the forces of the weather. A series of heavy rains had rocked the region in December of 1996, and Stafford's residents became concerned that the slope of the mountain above them would fail and cause the remnants of the land above to slide into their homes. According to Mike O'Neal, a Humboldt County resident who was affected by the tragedy, a series of large, snapping cracks on the afternoon of December 31, 1996, prompted him to look towards the lands behind his home. O'Neal noticed that the nearby culvert, a drain that ran under the street to prevent the water from backing up into the roadway, was completely dry. He knew this meant that something was damming the water. He also noticed that trees were falling, one after another in succession, causing a wall full of trees, rocks, and stumps the width of a football field to head towards his house. Mike moved quickly and warned his neighbors, sparing their lives, but the incident destroyed their homes. The entire area where their houses were once located turned into a graveyard of debris in a matter of minutes. Stafford's residents became homeless and without recourse, as Pacific Lumber refused to accept responsibility for the incident. A cry of public outrage brought media attention, a swell of activist efforts, and a seemingly thorough governmental investigation into the tragedy ("Prologue" xi-xii).

Three days after the slide, California's Governor, Pete Wilson, took an aerial trip over the affected area in Stafford. After seeing the level of devastation firsthand, he appointed University of Michigan professor of civil engineering, Donald H. Gray, to investigate the cause of the

mudslide. In his report, Professor Gray declared that timber harvest sites, like the clear-cut region in Stafford, have higher incidents of slope failures compared to natural, undisturbed areas. Despite this finding, the California Department of Forestry approved a plan to clear-cut the slope adjacent to the slide. This area was home to a tree that would later be known as “Luna,” and that is where Julia Butterfly Hill’s story begins (“Prologue” xiv- xv).

In August of 1996, at the young age of twenty-two, Julia was involved in a car accident that changed the course of her life. While behind the wheel of a Honda hatchback, she was rear-ended by a Ford Bronco and the impact nearly folded her car in half. Although she was wearing a seatbelt, preventing her from being thrown through the windshield, her head was thrust backwards into the seat by the force of the collision. She was also flung forward into the steering wheel, and the force pushed her right eye backwards into her skull. Hill suffered brain damage as a result of the crash and had to attend physical therapy for a year. The accident took a toll on Julia physically, but the near-fatal collision inspired her to live a completely different life. She writes, “It became clear to me that our value as people is not in our stock portfolios and bank accounts, but in the legacies we leave behind” (5). With that belief in mind, Julia began a soulful search for her life’s purpose (5-6).

After her doctor cleared her for travel, Julia and some friends embarked on a road trip from their home in Arkansas to the wilderness of Humboldt County, California. Located on the far north coast of the state and two hundred miles north of San Francisco, the region is home to a large old growth redwood population. In a desire to see the trees firsthand, Julia befriended several environmental activists who were willing to conduct a covert operation and smuggle her onto Pacific Lumber property. The company owned the majority of the trees in the area and had made immediate plans to clear cut the region. Various members of Earth First spoke with Julia

about the mudslide that had occurred in Stafford, California. In a collective desire to prevent further acts of destruction brought on by thoughtless clear-cutting, activists had begun organizing protest efforts called “tree sits.” To draw attention to the dangers of haphazard tree removal, members of the organization took turns living on platforms that had been mounted in the redwoods. As governmental safety policies required that no clearcutting take place within two-hundred feet of a person, the activists’ presence within the trees prevented the company from working in the region. As there were tree sits happening all over the forest, Earth First organizers gave each tree a name by which to keep track of the various protest efforts. After standing in front of a large redwood tree the group called “Luna,” Julia began to feel that she had found the purpose she was seeking (1-13).

. After returning home to dispose of her belongings, Julia headed back to California with a new mission in mind. She contacted the Environmental Protection Information Center and offered her assistance to the activist movement to save the redwoods. Julia accepts a daring proposal and accompanies Almond, a seasoned activist – one trained in the methodology behind “tree-sitting,” and moves into the tree called Luna. Acting on faith that she acquired through the course of her life, Julia settled in for the long haul. Assuming that the sit would only last a couple of weeks, but ready for whatever the fates threw her way, she spent her time in Luna becoming educated on the great dangers of deforestation. Reading books and articles that were sent up with her usual provisions, she amassed a host of knowledge on the environmental movement and on the practices of Pacific Lumber, who had previously been cited for infringement of policy and for dangerous practices (68, 155).

When her partner in crime, Almond, had to leave the tree sit for personal reasons on January 4, 1998, just one month into their excursion, Julia was left alone for the remainder of her

stay. Through onslaughts of storms that wracked her body and mind, and the repeated efforts of Pacific Lumber employees to thwart the success of her mission, Julia persevered and became an aggressive defender of the redwood trees. She recorded the misgivings and policy violations of Pacific Lumber with her camcorder and reported her findings to the appropriate agencies. Using the “two-hundred foot” policy as her guiding principle, and as Pacific Lumber did not want to risk the bad press that injuring an activist could cause, she was able to remain in the tree until an agreement could be reached that would protect Luna and the surrounding forest (“Embodying Love,” “Under Siege, ” 63-115).

As her story gained national attention through news and media outlets, Julia’s mission gained the support of celebrities, such as Woody Harrelson, Bonnie Raitt, Joan Baez, and Mickey Hart. After a significant number of exchanges between Julia Hill and The Pacific Lumber Company, the company agreed to lifetime protection for Luna and her surrounding environment in exchange for Hill’s expedient exit from the forest (230). On December 23, 1999, after living in Luna for seven-hundred-and-thirty-eight days, Julia Hill placed her feet back on California soil (246). A regular human “Lorax,” she spoke on behalf of the members of our environment who could not speak for themselves. The lasting impact of her actions can still be seen in Humboldt County, where Luna is now protected by The Sanctuary Forest, a non-profit organization committed to the preservation of the redwoods.¹

As Julia Butterfly Hill is not an accomplished writer, and this is simply a collection of her thoughts and experiences, it is hard to gauge *The Legacy of Luna* in terms of literary content. Written in a child-like and simple voice that feels a bit corny at times, she has a clear message and purpose for writing that outweighs any faults that may lie within the writing style. In the book’s dedication, Hill writes, “This book is dedicated to the essence of Luna: strength,

¹ Further information can be found at <http://www.sanctuaryforest.org/programs/land-conservation/luna/>.

endurance, commitment, and love.” She further notes, “Also, to the magic of the Earth under our feet, and the power in individuals committed to living their truth.” This illustrates the tone of the book, the sentiment that lies behind her words, and the passionate tenacity that enabled her to remain in the wild for nearly two years. Hill’s desire to write about her experience stemmed from her wish to give attention to the dangers of deforestation. In key parts where additional information was necessary, she included historical information pertaining to Pacific Lumber, Earth First, and the Headwaters Agreement. The Headwaters Agreement, signed by Bill Clinton in 1997, was a three part deal that Julia Hill was adamantly against. It provided public funds for the purchase of the redwood reserve, proposed a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), and allowed limited logging on the remaining 211,000 acres of Pacific Lumber Company timberland. Believing that protecting a few trees while slaughtering others was not enough of a concession, Julia vowed to take her efforts to the next level and called via cellphone, from the top of Luna, to personally object to the deal (152). She uses a passionate and introspective voice when writing these histories and her personal assessments of them, and her vivid use of language gives her story an inspiring character.

Hill chose to include photographs and personal memos, such as bits of poetry and other notes, that she wrote while perched in Luna. The first of many of these personal additions is a photograph of the tree itself, taken from the ground looking up, that gives the reader a sense of just how high up one-hundred-and-eighty feet, the location of her platform, was (27). From her perch in Luna, she witnessed deforestation firsthand and photographed the surrounding areas that had suffered from clearcutting. After these areas were cleared, Pacific Lumber dropped napalm gas and diesel fuel on the land to prevent regrowth. In a chapter called “Inspiration,” Hill displays a photograph of what the gassing process looked like from atop Luna and draws

attention to the destructive nature of these practices (216). Other photographs show Julia in Luna at various times throughout the years, and several highlight the items that she kept in the tree with her. She also has one photograph of her “children,” a pair of flying northern squirrels that she had befriended (140).

Her poems are short and simplistic, and tend to describe her time in the tree or her mental state at different points during her two year stay. In one poem, she writes, “At moments like this / Doubt creeps into my mind” (108). While most are positive and seem to illuminate the fact that she was young and starting out in life, a couple shed some light on the complex thoughts that entered Julia’s mind while she was fighting for the forest. These writings and images add a touch of charm to the story, and make her message more personal for the reader. As it is impossible for a person who has never participated in a “tree sit” to completely comprehend what she endured, Julia’s inclusion of visual aids augments her tale in a way that writing often fails. It made the book more personal, emotionally charged, and inviting, while still being informative and educational.

The last line in this book is a telling one and sums up Julia’s mission, purpose, and vision. “Yes, one person can make a difference. Each one of us does” (238). *The Legacy of Luna* is heartwarming and complex. It illuminates Julia’s journey in a beautiful way, and it is a joy to read. Wrought with personal details, mementos, anecdotes, and thoughtful quotes, her story will inspire both young and old for generations to come.