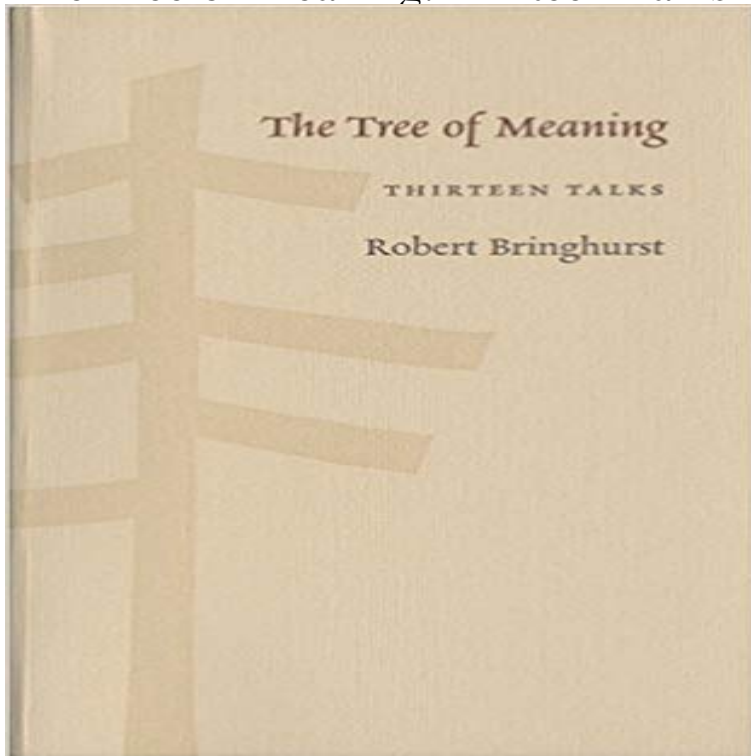


## The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks



The Tree of Meaning is a collection of thirteen lectures given by internationally-renowned poet, linguist and typographer Robert Bringhurst. Together these lectures present a superbly grounded approach to the study of language, focusing on storytelling, mythology, comparative literature, humanity and the breadth of oral culture. Bringhurst's commitment to what he calls ecological linguistics emerges in his studies of Native American art and storytelling, his understanding of poetry, and his championing of a more truly universal conception of what constitutes literature. The collection features a sustained focus on Haida culture (including the work of storytellers Skaay and Ghandl, and artist Bill Reid), on the process of translation, and on the relationship between beings and language. Spanning ten years of lecturing, *The Tree of Meaning* is remarkable not only for the cohesion of its author's own ideas but for the synthesis of such wide-ranging perspectives and examples of cultures both human and non-human. These thirteen lectures draw together a highly personalized and active study of Native American art and literature, world languages, philosophy and natural history. To each subject Bringhurst brings an ecologically conscious, humanitarian approach and an enthusiastic interest in the world around him. When the border guards ask, I say I'm a writer, remarks Bringhurst. If they ask still more, I'll say I write both poetry and prose. That's usually enough; they'll shake their heads and wave me on. I wouldn't attempt to tell them the truth, which is that writing is just a disguise. I do my work by talking to the air. Sooner or later the talk is disguised as writing and printing, because those are the simplest, least obtrusive ways of miming something spoken. For poetry at least, speaking also seems to me a better delivery method than writing. Doing readings pays better than publishing books of poems. It

reaches a wider audience too. It allows for nuances no typographer can match. And speaking is much older and more universal than writing. It seems to me a better venue, much of the time, for the evanescent, mutable agelessness that is apt to distinguish a poem. So poems, where I come from, are spoken to be written and written to be spoken. The Tree of Meaning is a book of critical prose composed in the same way. The book has several themes: the nature of language; the nature of meaning; the destruction of the earth as we have known it, occurring side by side with the evident persistence of poetry and meaning. And the book has an agenda connected to these themes. That agenda is learning to read and understand a few significant examples of Native American oral literature: works preserved often by accident, often in damaged form, which have, I think, a lot to teach us all. In cultures that have writing, the usual way of capturing oral literature is to write it down and put it in a book. We've done that with the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Beowulf; we do it now with the works of Cree and Crow and Haida storytellers, phonetically transcribed in the past century and a half. It makes good sense to me that a book about oral literature should be spoken before it is written, and written to be spoken, not just read.

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