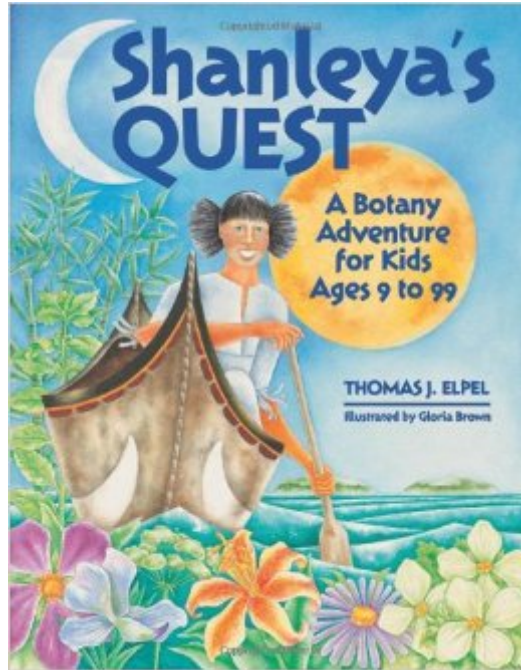


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# Shanleya's Quest: A Botany Adventure For Kids Ages 9-99



## Synopsis

In a mythical world where time is a liquid that falls as rain upon the land, young Shanleya paddles her canoe out to the tree islands to learn the plant traditions of her people. Each island is home to a separate family of plants and an unforgettable Guardian with lessons to teach about the identification and uses of those plants. Shanleya's Quest is a truly unique educational book that presents botanical concepts and plant identification skills in an easy and fun metaphorical format for children as well as for adults who are young at heart. The book begins with a creation myth that parallels evolutionary concepts, where life begins as bubbles in a puddle of soup under the radiance of Father Sun and the gentle glow of Mother Moon. The evolutionary tree of life becomes a literal part of the story, buried up to its branch-tips (the "islands") in an ocean of Time that just keeps getting deeper and deeper. This is the world that Shanleya explores by canoe, learning the essential characteristics of closely related plants on each island she visits. Readers young and old can join Shanleya's Quest, learning the patterns to correctly identify more than 45,000 species of plants to their proper families. The Quest will change the way you see the world, enabling you to experience nature in a new and magical way that you probably never imagined possible. Written by outdoor educator Thomas J. Elpel, author of *Botany in a Day: The Patterns Method of Plant Identification*. Wonderfully illustrated by Gloria Brown, who blended botanical accuracy with fantasy to produce artwork that both captivates and educates!

## Book Information

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Age Range: 9 and up

Grade Level: 4 and up

## Customer Reviews

I originally purchased this book to make the study of wild edible plants accessible to my children (ages 7 and 8). I was a bit dubious at first because I'd never bought a book like this before. Too, I was somewhat skeptical about my children enjoying the subject, much less the story. But when I sat down at bedtime with them, intending to read just a little, we ended up reading all the way to the end. My youngest was so into the story, he made it difficult to read at points because he kept asking questions and wanting to look at the book. Afterward, as I was tucking them into bed, they were already excitedly talking about the game of identifying plants and telling me what to look for. But to my surprise, it was also highly useful for me as an adult. New to the subjects of foraging and botany, I'm eager for any clear way to conceptualize the topic. Shanleya's Quest breaks down the edible plants by family: mints, mustards, grasses, roses, etc. Each family of plants resides on an island in this fictional story world, and each island is protected by guardians, some of whom are friendly and others less so. While the guardians and islands are certainly useful for children to wrap their brains around plant identification, they were also extremely beneficial to me. It's a lot easier to recall the picture of the mint guardian with his candy cane walking stick, square stem body, and hat of bergamot flowers than any specific passages of text to remember that mints have a square stem, opposite leaves, and a certain smell. The plant overview is very basic, but it provides a solid foundation for starting out when complexities can be a hindrance. I've read concerns that the creation myth at the beginning of the story might be offensive to some conservatively minded Christians. However, the myth deals with the creation of a fiction world, or perhaps a fictional analogue to our world. It takes out the complexities and smoothes the way for young minds to grasp that plants are related, but it's far from preachy about science or evolutionary theory. Honestly, I thought the metaphors used in the creation myth were quite ingenious, and my kids had no problems understanding that this is, like most of their stories, just a story. The book makes no effort at preaching any philosophy, and while evolutionary theory is clearly an underpinning of the story's setup, it would be difficult to present any botany text without some reference to evolution. To be honest, you would have to know and understand evolutionary theory to realize that the bubbles in the ocean of time signify cells and that the flaws in their multiplying refer to genetics and evolution. Rather, the myth evokes a flavor of fairy tale otherness that sets a nice tone to the story. Ultimately, though, the book emphasizes safety when it comes to wild plants, and as a parent, that is my first priority. The colorful

pictures, clear drawings of each plant family, and whimsical characters are all wonderful, but the basic facts to make foraging safe is what I value most. Overall, I highly recommend this book as a good start for children and as a way for a novice adult to begin conceptualizing and understanding plants. It will certainly stay on our shelves and be frequently read.

This is a work of pure genius. It's very rare for anyone with this depth of knowledge about his subject to be also able to weave such a complete and yet totally accessible story that transmits so much knowledge so perfectly. This book works so well on so many different levels that I'm going to describe different aspects of it one at a time rather than try to sum up the whole thing at once. Content and Story I've never studied the art of story-telling, but I've always been fascinated with the way knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation carefully woven into stories and myths. And this is a perfect example of that art. Thomas Elpel has crafted a complete creation myth, presented as a myth not as fact to leave room for children to extend the ideas presented, and has woven it into a wonderfully memorable story which holds a wealth, and depth, of highly relevant information and wisdom. The first island we visit with Shanleya is the mint island, and it's a perfect one to develop our identification skills. We learn to use all our senses and to look at the whole plant, not just the flowers. "Look for square stems and opposite leaves...and be sure to smell the plants. Most of them have a spicy, minty aroma." Shanleya identified several plants by smell alone, then checked that they did indeed also have the square stems and opposite leaves. The square-stemmed mint guardian is shown standing straight and square on the illustration, too, just to emphasise the message. On other islands, more emphasis is put on examining the flowers. For instance the mustard family flower is very consistent and easy to remember. Shanleya is challenged to put together a model of a mustard flower to reinforce her lesson, and the completed model is prominently displayed in the accompanying illustration so that we can check that she's got it right. Whilst on the mustard island, we learn that mustards thrive on barren soil, break the soil up for us, and have short life-cycles that are adapted to dry soil where the rain doesn't soak in. We also learn that there are 3,200 members of the family and that they are all edible. So this one page could, if the lessons are learned, potentially feed you wherever you find yourself in the world. The information is so well written in to the story that it's absorbed casually. We are simply observing Shanleya's adventures, and our own learning happens passively, with no effort. The art work on the front cover takes on a whole new meaning after you've read the book. Before you've read it, you see Shanleya paddling her canoe in sea of pretty flowers. Afterwards you see a mustard flower, and an aster, a lily, a parsley, a pea, a rose, a mint and a grass flower welcoming her into their worlds,

with some tempting islands in the background willing you to go back for a second look. As I turned the pages, I noticed that the sun appeared to rise, move left across the page, and then sink as Shanleya's journey progressed. I wonder if she lived in the Southern hemisphere? Or maybe the Earth's rotation changed when the Great Tree fell. Maybe we'll never know...

### Structure

The structure of the book amused me greatly as it appears to mimic the structure of a flower. First, the hard covers act to protect the book, like the sepals protect the unopened flower. When the book is opened, you find the highly attractive 'petals' of the introductory story, which guide you to the central parts where the real magic happens. The next part, where Shanleya visits the islands and talks with the guardians, represents the stamens, which yield vast amounts of information packed into tiny, easily absorbed pieces, all capable of pollinating fertile young minds and triggering them to grow. And then right in the centre of the book, like a pistil, the map of the whole plant world is introduced where the information gathered from the rest of the story can be taken and grown into a more complete understanding. I found the comparison highly amusing, though I have no idea if the author intended the pattern to be so similar. But then maybe the similarity reflects something a little deeper about the way all living creatures can be guided to find what we need.

### Depth of perception, dimensionality, and visualisation.

Generally when I find a children's book of this caliber, I regret not having found it sooner so that I could have read it with my son. This time, however, I was so convinced of the book's worth that I insisted on reading it to him, even though he's nearly twenty. He attempted to protest, but I know that he really loved every second of it, despite cries of 'Mum, mum - I found a plot hole. I refuse to believe that that radish thing really has an iron shovel to turn the soil!' 'Silly boy - of course the mustard family break the soil up. And how else would they do it if they didn't secretly have shovels?' He also found the strawberry buns on the rose guardian highly amusing, but hopefully younger kids wouldn't be so distracted by them.

One thing that struck me was the dimensionality of the book. The way that water has been used to get us to imagine time passing was highly reminiscent of an exercise my son and I did when he was much, much younger studying the chapter on Pancake World in *Penrose the Mathematical Cat*, which in turn is a simplified version of that classic in the study of dimensions, *Flatland*. The way the history of the plants forms a great tree, with only the very tips showing as islands is an astonishing piece of visualisation that belies the complexity of the subject, and my son and I both enjoyed remembering how we once produced a series of drawings of how flatlanders would view a green soup-dragon if it passed feet-first through their world, presumably in much the same way that a map of the islands in Shanleya's world would change over time as the great tree grows and the water rises with time. The only book I have come across which compares to this, though the subject matter is completely different, is *The Way Things*

Work by David Macaulay. They share the same passion and depth of knowledge and understanding of their subject matter, combined with an innate story-telling ability. Using the book I think book is best used read out loud to a younger audience, visiting just one island/plant family at a time then going outside to hunt together for examples of plants from that family. For best results, I think the adult should prepare well, choose an appropriate time of year when there are likely to be appropriate plants growing in abundance, and preferably in flower. Maybe even cheat a little by spending some time outside yourself and find as many different plants of that family in advance to make sure the youngsters find them all. The prep involved in getting everything ready for them will help all the information in the book to be thoroughly absorbed, and you'll probably begin to understand how well the book is really written and how much information is packed in to the pages. I think this book has a place in the education of all children. I'd highly recommend all parents, grandparents and educators to ensure have access to a copy, and to spend some carefully planned quality time with the children in their care bringing the stories to life by studying them together and then going on their own journeys of exploration to find real life examples from the plant families showcased in this book.

Shanleya is a young girl who lives in a world where Time is a liquid that falls as rain. When Shanleya paddles her canoe out to the "Tree Islands" to learn the plant traditions of her people, she learns that each island is home to a separate family of plants, and encounters an unforgettable Guardian with lessons to teach her about the identification and uses of those plants. A mythic, fairytale-like picturebook story for young readers, *Shanleya's Quest: A Botany Adventure For Kids Ages 9 To 99* is as entertaining as it is thoughtful and thought-provoking, introducing young readers to the complex and diverse world of plant life -- and how to correctly identify various species of plants. There are even bits of sage advice along the way such as "In our national parks it is illegal to pick flowers. Please leave them for others to enjoy!". Deftly written by Thomas Elpel (whose informative text is enhanced with the artwork of Gloria Brown), *Shanleya's Quest* is confidently recommended for school and community library collections.

Overall rating: 3 stars  
Plant identification: 3 stars  
Plant uses: 2 stars  
Picture type(s): cartoonish watercolor paintings  
Who will find it useful: young kids (ages 3-9) just learning about plants, homeschoolers (though strongly conservative Christians may not approve of the book's creation myth)  
Notes: This somewhat "hippie-ish" book is designed to be an introduction into plant identification for young kids. It only covers a few plant types but focuses on edible plants along with

similar toxic plants. It doesn't teach harvesting or preparation. The artwork is bright and clearly identifies the important characteristics of the different plant families. My daughters (4 & 7) like it.

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