

# ***The Light Eaters: How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth*** **by Zoë Schlanger**

## CITY LIBRARY BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

### About the book

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To survive and thrive while rooted in a single spot, plants have adapted ingenious methods of survival. In recent years, scientists have learned about their ability to communicate, recognize their kin and behave socially, hear sounds, morph their bodies to blend into their surroundings, store useful memories that inform their life cycle, and trick animals into behaving to their benefit, to name just a few remarkable talents.

*The Light Eaters* is a deep immersion into the drama of green life and the complexity of this wild and awe-inspiring world that challenges our very understanding of agency, consciousness, and intelligence. In looking closely, we see that plants, rather than imitate human intelligence, have perhaps formed a parallel system. What is intelligent life if not a vine that grows leaves to blend into the shrub on which it climbs, a flower that shapes its bloom to fit exactly the beak of its pollinator, a pea seedling that can hear water flowing and make its way toward it? Zoë Schlanger takes us across the globe, digging into her own memories and into the soil with the scientists who have spent their waking days studying these amazing entities up close.

### About the author

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**Zoë Schlanger** is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, where she covers climate change. She previously covered the environment at *Quartz* and *Newsweek*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Time*, *NPR*, and elsewhere. Schlanger was the recipient of a 2017 National Association of Science Writers reporting award. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

### Interviews and articles

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- **The Globe and Mail:** "[Plants with feelings? New book \*The Light Eaters\* might change how you think about plant intelligence](#)" [May 2024; article]
- **CBC's The Sunday Magazine:** "[Yes, plants can communicate with each other. Here's why some scientists say they're smarter than you think](#)" [May 2024; article & radio interview]
- **NPR's Fresh Air:** "[Plants can communicate and respond to touch. Does that mean they're intelligent?](#)" [May 2024; article & radio interview]
- **Book Soup Author Interview:** "[Zoë Schlanger and Annaka Harris Discuss 'The Light Eaters'](#)" [May 2024; video, 69 mins]

## Discussion questions

1. The book's subtitle is *How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Understanding of Life on Earth*. Did reading it provide you with a new understanding? Why or why not?
2. Before reading *The Light Eaters*, did you ever notice ways that made you think that plants have some form of intelligence? Do you now look back on those moments through a new lens?
3. Throughout the book, Schlanger pays considerable attention to how human language can be used to describe plants ("anthropomorphizing" them) – how we ask if they have a conscious, whether they feel pain, can communicate, have memory, etc. Did any of this resonate with you? What are your thoughts on these claims?
4. Is there a particular story or scientific study related to plant intelligence that really stood out to you? How come?
5. Schlanger notes that nature has many folds and faces that are hidden from human view: "The world is a prism, not a window. Wherever we look, we find new refractions" (p. 61). How do you see this quote reflected in nature? Whether as described in the book, or as observed yourself.
6. Schlanger notes at several moments how the idea of plant intelligence remains controversial in the scientific community – and how many people are reluctant to share their findings. How is this debate framed and analyzed? Do you think she did a fair job of balancing these different perspectives?
7. What are your thoughts on the complex social question of plant intelligence – of how humans interpret this new scientific knowledge, and what we do with it (discussed in-depth in Chapter 11: Plant Futures)? Do you think humans' perception of plants will change drastically in the future? How so? Or will the relationship stay the same?
8. Why do you think that plant intelligence matters? Why do people devote research to it, and why did Schlanger feel compelled to write this book?
9. Have you ever been in awe of nature? For example, being amongst giant trees, seeing a beautiful flower, or being amazed at how a plant grew in a unique way. Do you remember what exactly caused you to feel that way?
10. What are your thoughts on how the book was written? Did you find that the scientific information was presented accessibly for readers with no prior knowledge of the subject?
11. Are you a gardener, or do you have house plants? Did this book change your perception of how you work with plants?