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Reading The Mountains Of Home



Synopsis

Small farms once occupied the heights that John Elder calls home, but now only a few cellar holes and tumbled stone walls remain among the dense stands of maple, beech, and hemlocks on these Vermont hills. *Reading the Mountains of Home* is a journey into these verdant reaches where in the last century humans tried their hand and where bear and moose now find shelter. As John Elder is our guide, so Robert Frost is Elder's companion, his great poem "Directive" seeing us through a landscape in which nature and literature, loss and recovery, are inextricably joined. Over the course of a year, Elder takes us on his hikes through the forested uplands between South Mountain and North Mountain, reflecting on the forces of nature, from the descent of the glaciers to the rush of the New Haven River, that shaped a plateau for his village of Bristol; and on the human will that denuded and farmed and abandoned the mountains so many years ago. His forays wind through the flinty relics of nineteenth-century homesteads and Abenaki settlements, leading to meditations on both human failure and the possibility for deeper communion with the land and others. An exploration of the body and soul of a place, an interpretive map of its natural and literary life, *Reading the Mountains of Home* strikes a moving balance between the pressures of civilization and the attraction of wilderness. It is a beautiful work of nature writing in which human nature finds its place, where the reader is invited to follow the last line of Frost's "Directive," to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion."

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Customer Reviews

Late in life, the American novelist and conservationist Wallace Stegner left California, where he had

lived for half a century, to move to Vermont. The reason, he said, was simple: there is more wilderness to be found in the pine forests of western New England than in the Far West. John Elder supports Stegner's claim, writing in *Reading the Mountains of Home* that the abandoned farmsteads of so many of Robert Frost's Vermont poems have now reverted to wild lands, dense with fallen logs and snags, full of bird and animal life. A longtime resident of the state, Elder uses Frost's great but little-known poem "Directive" as a touchstone by which to guide his discussion of how modern humans can truly inhabit a landscape--in this case, a landscape that had been developed for generations and then all but forgotten. In such places, Elder writes, the issue is not one of wilderness versus civilization, that old trope, but the wildness that endures at the edges of settled places, wildness that is accessible to people all around the world. His celebration of returning greenness, of the forest's seasons, and of his own life in the woods makes for engaging reading indeed. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

A slight memoir celebrating the natural wonders of the Vermont mountains. Elder (Following the Brush, 1993), a professor of English and environmental studies at Middlebury College, has clearly read the approved canon of nature literature, and much of this book reads like a heavily annotated syllabus. When he describes a place at first hand, he more often than not relates what another writer especially Robert Frost, the dean of writers in those parts has had to say about it, too. His glosses on those writers, Frost included, are seldom helpful ("In Frost's landscape, things are always changing, but the change is never random"); and his bookish leanings often obscure what is meant to be his subject, the "hirsute" landscapes (the metaphor derives from Dante) of northern New England, which, Elder points out, is "far wilder today than it was a century and a half ago." Elder traces this nascent wildness to a combination of factors; whereas, he notes, Vermont was the fastest-growing American state up to the War of 1812, it fell victim to economic stagnation, farm failures, and industrial collapse, leaving it a hard-pressed and hard-bitten place one that is now being yuppified, he writes, thanks to the telecommunications revolution, which "turns quiet little worlds like this into targets for settlement, and for exploitation." Elder's immediate observations on both that land and its crusty Yankee occupants are often perceptive and well made. Would that his book had been given over to such direct reportage, and not to lit-crit and green pabulum, such as "Wilderness . . . offers a realm for human activity that does not seek to take possession and that leaves no traces; it provides a baseline for strenuous experience of our own creaturehood." Frost would have cringed. (illustrations and maps, not seen) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

A fascinating account by a scholarly professor which records his observations (including accounts and memories of his family life) as he hikes around his home area in Vermont during one year's time. His annotated reading of Robert Frost's poem "The Mountains of Home" shows how Frost refers poetically to the geography, history, and geology of this region in Vermont, which is also Frost's home region. As Elder hikes in the area during each season of the year, he quotes freely from other works--poems by Frost and Wordsworth, essays from Thoreau and other New England writers, and notes, also includes litho-like drawings of scenes and hand-drawn dioramic drawings of topographic maps of his hiked routes. John Elder's language itself is so poetic, yet so precise and so personal that I re-read many passages; and also recognized a quoted poem of Frost's which appears as a lyric about Spring set to music in a familiar hymnal.

This is an unusual book. John Elder has written a book that blends the rhythms of life with the rhythms of nature. Using Robert Frost's poem "Directive" as a springboard, Elder guides the reader through a series of year-long hikes that provide a rare glimpse into the writer soul, family and surroundings. His musings transport the reader from the glaciers that shaped the plateau for the Village of Bristol, VT., the farmers who struggled and more often than not, failed to scratch a living from the rocky soil that surrounds his adopted home. He carries us from broken china to Abenaki settlements, meditating on family relationships and deeper relationships with the land. This is a beautiful example of nature writing, a work that draws a balance between the machinations of civilization and the beauties of wilderness. By inviting the reader to follow the last line of Frost's "Directive," to "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.", Elder creates a sense of hope that Vermont's balance between nature and culture can speak to the rest of the nation.

I have read many of the reviews of *Reading the Mountains of Home*--both before and after I studied the book itself--in various magazines and newspapers, and, while many of them summarize accurately and manage to convey fairly clearly its complex and compelling structures, the musical grace of the sentences, the unique of John Elder's vision about the interlinking of language and place and time and family, of Robert Frost's "Directive" and of the concept of wilderness in America. There is a sense also in which he has taken nature writing--a broad genre forever in evolution--and brought it to new heights through this creative interweaving. But what I notice most is the book's quiet heroism. By this I mean simply that the author exhibits the courage to put all of his deepest

convictions, his most strongly held beliefs, the raw stuff of his very life in a place for all to see. One does not see this very often in books. We need more writers like John Elder. We need people like John Elder, people who have the courage to write from the deepest parts of themselves for the greater good of all of us and the larger home we call earth. If there were six stars I would give it six stars.

I learned much about New England from this fine book -- and about Robert Frost.

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