

A review of 3 books about walking in western US by Rawlins, Ferguson, Berger and Smith

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Walking Out West

Walking Down the Wild: A Journey Through the Yellowstone Rockies

By Gary Ferguson, researched coordinated by Jane Ferguson

224 pp. Simon & Schuster

\$20.00

Where the Waters Divide: A Walk Across America Along the Continental Divide

By Karen Berger & Daniel R. Smith

319 pp., 11 maps. Harmony Books

\$23.00

Sky's Witness: A Year in the Wind River Range

By C.L. Rawlins, illustrations by Hannah Hinchman

313 pp. A John Macrae Book, Henry Holt and Company

\$23.95

REVIEWED BY SCOTT EDWARD ANDERSON

"When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: What would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?" It's been 130 years since Thoreau's essay, "Walking," appeared and as the number of woods and fields and natural places in the world dwindles, we are in danger of losing our superb walking places.

For Thoreau, walking and being attentive to the world around you was a sort of holy pilgrimage. For his spiritual children, this pilgrimage has become an obsession. In the United States, it has led to the creation of two distinct national trail systems: the Appalachian Trail, which wends 2,200 miles from Georgia to Maine; and the 2,600-mile Pacific Crest Trail.

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When Thoreau wrote those words, sitting at his desk in Massachusetts, the west was the thing, and he was no stranger to this ideal: "Eastward I go by force; but westward I go free."

We still turn to the west for the wild; for it is there that the great outdoors aren't as cramped or choked by the arteries of the major cities and industrial wastelands. Out west, there are still places which capture the imagination of many Americans. Out west, there are still many places to walk.

In *Walking Down the Wild*, Gary Ferguson attempts to take in the Yellowstone Rockies by foot. His 500-mile trek crosses the Gallatin Range, Yellowstone Park, the Grand Teton National Forest, the Gros Ventre Range, the Absaroka Mountains, the alpine tundra of Beartooth Plateau and finally into Rock Creek Valley.

Along the way, he comes to appreciate not only the beauty of the area, but its power and terror. He also discovers that wildness is not "so much a product as a process - a sluggish, persistent unfolding" that requires "centuries to run its course."

Walking Down the Wild is strong in its depiction of the flora and

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fauna of the area and rich in historical details (the research is credited to Ferguson's wife Jane). It is also filled with a variety of colorful historical characters that are the stuff of legend. From Jim Bridger, "the consummate liar and imagineer," to the stage coach-robber Edwin Trafton who "managed to hold up nineteen stages full of tourists" on a July morning in 1914 and a Mrs. Bennett who, during the earthquake of 1959, watched as her husband "grabbed for a small conifer to steady himself, [and] was picked off his feet and twisted like a flag in a tempest, and then, when he could hold no longer, blew away down the canyon, never to be seen alive again."

Although Ferguson occasionally has difficulty linking this information with his journey, his observations do tend to enlighten and his attention to the natural wonders of the Yellowstone Rockies makes for a lively journey.

Karen Berger and Daniel R. Smith make their pilgrimage along the Great Divide, following as faithfully as possible the route of the proposed Continental Divide Trail (CDT). The CDT is not yet completed, nor is it clearly marked.

It would help, the authors note, if they had "eyes at ease with the bigness of the country, eyes that effortlessly focus on the

subtleties of brown antelope on brown hills and acres of sagebrush emptiness." Being from the east, however, their eyes are too accustomed to "the constant movement of fast cars, blinking lights, and hurried people." Their ambitious trek of 3,000 miles -- from the Mexican to the Canadian border -- affords them a greater appreciation of their own abilities and of the political and environmental issues of the region.

Yet, too often, Berger and Smith seem patronizing of the westerners they meet, as when they marvel at the friendliness and helpfulness of ranchers and reservation-bound Native Americans. This belies a fault of their essentially eastern sensibilities that too closely resembles the old New Yorker cartoon, wherein "civilization" ends on the banks of Manhattan Island.

This attitude prevents the authors from thoroughly becoming a part of the place of their journey. What they lack in this regard, however, is made up by what they learn, including "how to read a landscape, to understand the lay of drainages and rivers and passes and peaks...how to feel the weather change." There are lessons here for all of us, such as how "there are few villains and few heroes in the fight over our wild places -- and that there are few easy answers, too."

One person who knows well the value of these lessons is C.L. "Chip" Rawlins. *Sky's Witness* is the thoughtful work of someone who, like Wordsworth, has his study out of doors. The irony is that of these three books, *Sky's Witness* covers the most ground while traveling the least amount of territory.

Working as a field hydrologist in Wyoming, Rawlins returns each season to the same range of mountains, the same lakes and rivers to gather water and snow samples in order to measure air pollution. It is perhaps this cyclic return that gives Rawlins' narrative its perspective, as if focusing on one particular place allows for a greater understanding of the larger scope of things.

What makes this book so rewarding is the fact that Rawlins is a master of the effortless digression. At times the narrative seams are so smooth that we hardly notice the transitions from technical information to personal reflection. This is the mark of a true storyteller, acutely attuned to his craft:

"One of our uniquely human qualities is our need to place ourselves in stories. Most animals probably don't, except through what we call instinct. Our instinct is for stories.

From the sensory chaos of life, we build a narrative. This is how we make sense out of raw experience. We hope that in the course of our tale, some desire will be fulfilled or some point proven beyond a doubt. Against these self-made epics, we set our days as we understand them, judging, weighing, agonizing."

A poet, Rawlins is a pragmatic one. He uses just enough poetry to heighten our enjoyment of his Wind River Range:

"I wish I knew a better word for blue. In winter, after the sun sets, there is blue in every particle of matter, in every pool of air, a watery transparency to every solid thing."

Contemporary nature writing has as much to do with the perceptions and values of the author as with the natural world, and as such it can be intensely personal. The challenge in this form is to render the personal more universal.

Part of the recipe for success in this regard is to realize that nature and not the individual is the subject, just as, in the words of Chip Rawlins, it is "the act of walking rather than the shrines, [that]

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is vital. The physical process of moving over the land seems to swell the human heart with a conviction of finally, absolutely doing the right thing. The Grail, Mecca, Lourdes, the Frontier, Everest -- all are simply good excuses for going." What we come away with after reading these three very individual accounts of personal journeys, is a desire to follow the 130-year counsel of Thoreau: "If you would get exercise, go in search of the springs of life."

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Walking Down the Wild book. Read 7 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. A seasoned naturalist vividly recounts his 500-mile trek through... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Walking Down the Wild: A Journey Through the Yellowstone Rockies" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... Want to Read. Parts of the Yellowstone region are wilder now than they've been in a century. Grizzlies are spreading. This one, in Grand Teton National Park, fends off ravens from a bison carcass. It's a wild place that we have embraced, surrounded, riddled with roads and hotels and souvenir shops, but not tamed, not conquered—a place we treasure because it still represents wildness. Walking Down the Wild: A Journey Through The Yellowstone Rockies. Simon & Schuster, 1993. Globe Pequot, 1999. ^ Brett French, "Red Lodge author Gary Ferguson talks about his journey through grief," Billings Gazette, Sept. 18, 2014. http://billingsgazette.com/lifestyles/recreation/red-lodge-author-gary-ferguson-talks-about-his-journey-through/article_40c9f58a-6faf-5053-9a34-1c555d0a228a.html. Accessed February 13, 2016. ^ "Special event: gary ferguson reading + workshop". What we do. Every page goes through several hundred of perfecting techniques; in live mode. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. ^ Walking Down the Wild: A Journey Through the Yellowstone Rockies. Falcon Guides. p. 173. ISBN 1-56044-575-0.