

crossing boring ground

Y'know, I don't wanna saunter down trails that've been blazed so well and so widely before, hewed and hoed with weed-whackers and lawnmowers and road-graders. I don't wanna be redundant with anyone - I wanna add. So I'm compelled to read others of my ilk - an ilk I admittedly feel uneasy in, like all ilks - that ilk known as Western American nature writers. Thus up in my hands and into my eyes have gone Muir and Austin and Abbey and House and Haig-Brown and Rains Wallace, and, at the insistence of a friend, Barry Lopez, with his collection *Crossing Open Ground*.

Barry Lopez. Y'know...fuck him. Yes, I've no doubt he was (*was* - he's dead) a very kindly man, but, well - fuck him. This realm, translating the transcendence of total fusion with the Wild into words, having the reptile and mammal and human brains all enlivened and melding with the energy of land and water and air and plants and animals, requires an equivalent language, a language of passion, of sex and grief and euphoria and love and hate and hilarity. And Lopez? Oh, fuck, the guy is so...dull. Prim. Lethargic. Ingenuous. Cowardly. And so as a messenger through words of the power of Mother Earth and the Wild - he fuckin' sucks.

He and his wife never had kids - no surprise, because he probably never fucked her, let alone licked and tickled her in all the right spots.

The book I've got states he's won a bunch of accolades - for example, the American Book Award - from a bunch of mainstream organizations or clubs or whatever. I'm not surprised given the book has nothing within it to offend - and the converse, that it's nothing within it to inspire. That such amazing "artists" as Paula Abdul have won Grammys from a mainstream organization does not reflect the quality or value of the art. So Lopez's awards? I'm not impressed.

His writing style just does not reflect the subject. The Wild can be geologically slow, lightning fast, and everything in between. Lopez's writing, however, is only the former - it fuckin' drags. The dude barely uses contractions (*e.g.*, it is to it's) to tighten shit up, spelling out nearly every goddamn word, like his stuffy-ass professors probably demanded at Notre Dame. He dribbles out way too many expletive sentence forms, which just waste time and space. Example: "In the cave there are certain mysteries..." (p. 59) - dude, how about "The cave holds mysteries..."? Another: "There are a handful of miners in Yukon-Charley" (p. 87) - y'know, they *live* there, so how's about we hone it closer to truth and write "Several miners *live* in Yukon-Charley." Too many prepositional phrases, also, but I'll just carp about the one that vexes me most - "...period of time..." (p. 30). "An extent of time of time," in other words.

Congruent to the dynamic speed of the Wild is the color - Gawd, man, it swings from such overwhelming vibrancy to sullen greyscale and everything in between. And Lopez? Fuck, the most colorless, gutless prose. His similes, for example, are fucking weak, inappropriate, inaccurate, demeaning, and even insulting...yeah, insulting. He compares the music emanating from thousands of Snow Geese to..."cries of athletic men" (p. 28). In other words, a couple dozen meathead jock football hooligans whoop-whooping it up on some razed field - that seems a minimization, a slander to the far more numerous, grander, graceful birds saturating the aural space of the far larger open land of northeastern California. He compares the expansion of experience to euphoria when intimately engaged with a Wild land - the Grand Canyon in this case - with being "snapped...like fresh-laundered sheets" (p. 43). A bleached, lifeless bedsheet just out of the dryer

to represent the transcendence that engaging deeply in the Wild can inspire? That's just wrong. Possibly the worst, among many more (e.g., "...quick as popping a button on a shirt"; p. 58; "...the smell of cinnamon"; p. 75; "...a snap of the fingers"; p. 154), is when he compares the uniqueness of three resourceful, wise, super-cool dudes to "...the color of a peach" (p. 190). He fuckin' compares three kick-ass men with so much connection to the Wild with a goddamn domesticated fruit that's red and orange - that's fucking insulting.

His word choices - the stuffy, genteel background the cat came from shines through and doesn't reflect the lust or rage or frigidity that Mother Earth can be. Not once did I read a word with a sensual connotation, let alone a curse word (at least one from his mouth - he puts 'em in the mouths of the bull-riders in "On Bulls"), but I read the goddamn Ivory Tower "euphony" way too many times. And "pi meson" (p. 163)? Wouldn't it have been clearer, and understandable to more people, to just write "energy"? The guy can't even refer to shit as shit - instead, we get the Victorian-esque, evasive "evacuation of the bowels" (p. 49) or "droppings" (p. 64, 97) from animals. When escaping a near-death experience, what's more effective to say - *man, I nearly evacuated my bowels into my pants* - or what actually conveys the experience far more emphatically - *I nearly shit myself!* And "droppings"? Hmm, such as the salmon carcass the bear casts aside after gnashing the belly meat and head? Such as the bits of grass that escape the rotating munch of a hare? Such as the water rolling off the duck's back onto the riverbank's cobbles? Those, too, are droppings, but that's not what's meant, which is *shit*. So just grow the fuck up, ditch the euphemisms, and say it straight and concise - SHIT!

I'd criticize Lopez's jokes, but he has none. Ain't no humor in this motherfuckin' tome. But Momma Earth, She sure got some humor - you ever watched river otters? Raccoons? Minks? Newts bumbling around on land? *They're fucking hilarious.*

The dude seems to have an overly optimistic - childish - view of government. I nearly gagged when I read that his buddies' experiences in the Grand Canyon might surface "in a note of gratitude to nameless faces in the Park Service" (p. 53), as if the agency were some angelic godsend savior of wilderness. The truth is that the agencies can sometimes benefit their charges but also harm 'em, as Abbey comprehensively delineates so well, and so much better, in his polemic on the National Park Service in *Desert Solitaire*. Lopez applauds the generosity of the United States Forest Service on spending "its" money on torching the dead, stranded whales in "A Presentation of Whales" (*wow*, what an engaging title) - he seems unaware that that's not the USFS's money - that's the *people's* money. (Digression. Lopez writes that many sharks had come inshore to eat the dead whales - doesn't that intimate that the whales' carcasses would've been a welcome bounty for innumerable plants and algae and animals, just like carcasses of post-spawn salmon are to bears and eagles and trees and grapes? And if so, wouldn't burning the whales deprive all that other life of those nutrients? He never bothers to question the burning.) He writes of the government employees making shit up about possible "medical risks" from the dying whales to keep the public from the creatures and seems to find nothing wrong with such lies...and ya wonder why so many distrust the government - because of *that*. He laments when one observer yells at a cop who's telling a well-meaning, nice man and his daughter trying to ease the dying of one of the whales by pouring cold water on its head to stop it, and the way Lopez writes it, what he laments isn't that the father and daughter aren't allowed to comfort the poor whale, but that the cop's interference is questioned. He admires a G-man biologist for speaking "...without scientific distance," and yet in

the same paragraph describes how the G-man told concerned crewmembers that they were "collecting" seals but never what they were really doing - killing 'em (p. 158). And *what a fucking government stoolie bitch*. He laments that when the Charley River Watershed is designated as a wilderness, the subsistence hunters, who live with rather than over the Wild, will be kicked off as a result, but he doesn't fire back that that'll happen over his dead body, or that he'll support their defiance of the government by staying put, only that he doesn't want to be the one to tell 'em to leave (p. 89). *Coward*.

But, like that cold, smug asshole Peterson, Lopez ain't all bad. He's aware that the current overdominance of deterministic thinking disengaged from both the Wild and the uniqueness of place severely limits the healthy evolution of life. The dude nails it in his approbation for Carl Sauer's idea of bioregionalism (actually, the idea winds all the way back through Powell to the California Indians), which does follow the Wild's divisions (*i.e.*, watersheds) and not those silly, nonsensical imaginary lines that carve up this country's states and counties. Several times he intimates that to really understand, you gotta have more than just your intellect engaged - gotta have your heart and soul, too, gotta have intuition and emotion and experience as well as logic. These, though dry, ain't bad:

With the loss of self-consciousness, the landscape opens (p. 44).

An indigenous philosophy...may also be derived from a people's continuous attentiveness to both the obvious (scientific) and ineffable (artistic) order of the local landscape (p. 67).

...the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in paradox, irony, and the contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives - beyond this there are (eh, despite another unnecessary expletive) only failures of imagination: reductionism in science; fundamentalism in religion; fascism in politics (p. 71).

Clearly Lopez is (was) very knowledgeable: his descriptions of the history of North American Indians, such as in "The Stone Horse" and "Searching for Ancestors," are very instructive. He knows the animals well, too, such as the geese he writes about; he can identify which bird species a feather came from (I only rarely can do that). Ya gotta be skillful to ride wild rivers in rubber rafts and canoes, to freeze your ass off in Arctic waters, to immerse yourself in real wilderness with just another person or two - and survive. With such characteristics, he could've cut a killer field or natural-history guide.

And as a writer, at least based on this book, that's what he should've been, a field-guide writer, not an artist singing about the mystical realm of Mother Earth. And that highlights that to really express the power, the euphoria and anguish that is the multifaceted relationship between humanity and Wild that is Nature, ya gotta get your head and words out of the ass of the Ivory Tower.

In summary - fuck this book.

REFERENCES

Lopez, B. 1989. Crossing open ground. Can't Remember, Vintage.