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Backtracking, Benjamin Long

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Description :

Benjamin Long and his wife Karen Nichols pack up the Subaru with canoe, packs, notebooks and cameras and visit points along the Lewis and Clark Trail. Reflections and comparisons of the present animals and plants to the journals and experiences of the Lewis and Clark Corp of Discovery are done in great style and makes for very enjoyable reading at the Bicentennial of this remarkable Voyage.

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As we enter the Bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark *Voyage of Discovery*, there have been several recent books that track the explorers. This text differs considerably from retelling the journals or remapping the trail. It revisits selected spots along the trail and tells the stories of the animals or plants that played a role in the Voyage and continue to play a role in the lives of many living along the trail. This backtracking, as explained below, is an excellent method of revisiting these points on the explorers trail.

Benjamin Long, a Montana newspaper journalist, uses the Lewis and Clark Trail through Montana, Idaho and Washington to both introduce his discussion points and to highlight environmental issues in these states. Each of the chapters highlights a species of animal or plant at a certain point along the Trail and then discusses the state of this species in the context of the present and the past. Of course, in nearly every instance the abundance or distribution of the animal or plant has been considerably reduced over the past 200 years, but in telling this story this book is not just about the change but about the interaction of explorers of the past and the interaction of the present explorers with these species. Excellent bits and pieces of the journal entries from Lewis or Clark are woven into the stories of present day observers, managers, caretakers, and explorers.

Chapters cover, Black-tailed Prairie Dogs, Grizzlies, Bison, Beaver, Cutthroat Trout, Sharptail Grouse, Whitebark Pine and Clarks Nutcrackers, Wolves and Coyotes, Sturgeon, and Great Plains Cottonwood, along with many other supporting species. Each of these species was noted, described, used, or somehow affected the Voyage of Discovery, and continues to play a role in the environment in some form today. Long, in each chapter introduces the species, discusses its past and present range, introduces bits and pieces of the Journals and contrasts those to current observers of these species.

Backtracking as the metaphor of this book is explained in the opening chapter:

I used to track with my hunter's heart-pursuing whatever creature laid down the sign. Trying to run it down. I hungered for even a glimpse of it. It might be a moose or a weasel or anything. If I caught sight of the creature, even just the animal crashing away in a shattered second, it made my heart beat faster. It was Michael Fairchild who taught me another way. The way of backtracking.....

Mike had to backtrack the wolves. He would unravel their trails backward, traveling on foot, wearing crosscountry skis or stubby snowshoes. He backtracked the wolves over snowbound ridges, through thickets, and across icy rivers. This way he learned their secrets....

Mike's method took us farther away from my target, farther away from what I believed was the prize...

"But this is the way you learn the truth," he told me. "If you follow, the animal is just reacting to your presence, trying to avoid you. Backtracking, you study the evidence as the animal laid it down."

Long, and his wife, Karen, a photographer, backtrack Lewis and Clark across the West on foot, by canoe and in a beat up Subaru. Their trips along the Missouri and Columbia Rives are combined with interviews and interactions with present day folks who interpret, teach, and illustrate the importance of the plants and animals that were encountered by the explorers of the past.

Long discusses the role of the Voyage of Discovery in describing many new species of plants and animals, and how this early beginning has lead to much more.

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The Voyage of Discovery was the first exploratory expedition sponsored by the United States of America. It was the first link in a chain of exploration that put men on the moon, robots on Mars, and telescopes probing beyond the bounds of our galaxy. The trek took place when the tree of western science was a sapling, biology its initial branch. Carl Linnaeus, creator of binomial nomenclature, died twenty-five years before the expedition. Charles Darwin, who introduced rudimentary concepts of evolution, was born three years after it return, In the era of Lewis and Clark, scientists were still battling the myth of spontaneous generation....

Lewis and Clark were first soldiers, not scientists. But their boss, Thomas Jefferson, was probably the most scientifically minded president the United States has ever elected. He turned both Captains into scientist-soldiers. According to historians who specialize in these things, Lewis and Clark discovered some 122 varieties of animals and 178 types of plants on their march west. (I hesitate to call them discoveries, since every creature and plant was intimately know to the native peoples Lewis and Clark met on their path, and often to French, English, and Spanish trappers and soldiers as well).

In possibly my favorite chapter of the book we have Benjamin and Karen backpacking in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. Here they weave Norman Maclean's forest service firelookout experience in 1919, Bud Moore's life story of the present day, and their walk all with the crossing of the Corp. Here is the beginning of this finely done weave:

WE KNEW IT WAS BEAUTIFUL and we were a little bit crazy, but we hadn't noticed it yet.

*That opening line from Norman Maclean kept going through my head. It was from a story called **U.S. Forest Service, 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and the Hole in the Sky**. It takes place, in part at Elk Summit. It is a semiautobiographical story of a young man who fought fires here before helicopters and yellow, fireproof shirts. Maclean wrote it in the 1970's, as an old man remembering his youth. In his day, gear was hauled by mule, and trees were felled with crosscut saws called misery whips. It is the story of a young tough who mouths off to the camp cook at Elk Summit and as punishment is banished into this wilderness. Young Maclean was sent to watch for smoke at a mountaintop called Grave Peak, northwest of here.*

No one was banishing Karen and me to the wilderness. We were banishing everyone else. We shouldered our packs and set off down a grown-in fire road. The road devolved into a narrow trail. We walked past a faded, unpainted wooden sign, routed letters informing us we were entering the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area. Beyond the sign, all dirt bikes, jeeps, helicopters, even bicycles were officially banned. Here, travel is by foot or by horse. Everything moves at the same speed it did for Norman Maclean and William Clark and the Nez Perce before them.

The tangle of this wilderness, the Whitebark Pine, Clark's nutcracker and fire-both prevention of the past and new burn policies are discussed. The inter-dynamics of fire, Whitebark Pine, pine blister rust, forest service past and present policies, Bud Moore's contributions to these policies, and the treks of both the new and old walkers makes this chapter an interesting and holistic review of this spot on the trail. Weaving Maclean's story just adds excellent imagery and depth to an already excellent stop on the trail.

Benjamin Long is a great story teller, and the encounters with present day folks are incorporated in a very compelling way with the journal entries of 200 years ago. The loss or reduction of the various species is a fact and is not told from a fanatic environmentalist viewpoint but from a journalist that has found caretakers of these natural environments or pockets of existing species who are doing their part to preserve and protect that which remains. These chapters are enjoyable reads with lessons, but the incorporation of the past with the present interrelations of these species with man is the point and the purpose.

Backtracking, Benjamin Long

I found my 237 page, Sasquatch Books hard cover on a bargain book counter for \$9.00. This volume is fairly easily found in both new and used bookstores and through Bookfinder for between \$5-30.

Resources

A River Runs Through It and Other Stories Norman Maclean University of Chicago Press

Various editions are available at good prices. I highly recommend this book both for its excellent titled novella and for the other stories. *Logging, Pimping and "Your Pal Jim"* and *U.S.F.S., 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and the Hole in the Sky*. This is a book I reread every year or so. The bits of this interwoven into the Whitebark Pine chapter of *Backtracking* may be the ultimate reason it is my favorite chapter.

[My review of this book.](#)

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Post-scriptum :

Version 1.5 3/25/2004

Version 1.6 5/14/2004 linked to A River Runs Through It Review