



Finding home, and protecting it: the artist in his landscape

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NONFICTION

By contemporary measures, Rick Bass' new book, "Why I Came West," is an unusual memoir.

It's not an account of his troubled relationship with his family or his efforts to beat a personal demon -- alcohol, say, or drugs or childhood stardom.

It's the story of a landscape and how Bass found himself slipping into it so comfortably "that a harmony, and a desire for fit -- a deep, biological desire -- was struck, in that first sighting, first odor, first touch."

It's a love story, of sorts.

Bass grew up in the suburbs of Houston, far from the valley in northwestern Montana he has called home for 21 years. As a child, he had no complaints about Houston, but his adult take on it is unlikely to show up in promotional materials extolling the city's amenities.

"How could I have ignored, or never noticed in the first place, the clotted tangle of skyline billboards, the 99 percent soil saturation by concrete, the perpetual clanking, tangled glitter-and-chrome gnarl of gridlocked traffic? The hissings and belchings of smokestacks elicited from me back then no more angst than had they appeared in a distant harmless dreamscape," he writes. "Where was I, really, in those years, present-but-not-present, as if existing instead in some West-dormant waiting-upon period?"

The novelist Thomas Wolfe famously wrote that you can't go home again. I think he's right -- at least not if Bass is planning on reading that passage aloud in Houston.

So how do you go from Houston to Yaak Valley, Montana?

For Bass, you head west to Utah and then eventually make your way north.

Watching the 1972 film "Jeremiah Johnson" -- filmed in Utah -- convinced Bass he should study at Utah State University, where the mountains were nearby. After graduating, he worked in Mississippi as a petroleum geologist, a career he says he enjoyed.

"[A]s a geologist, making maps of the invisible worlds below, I tracked the unanswerable comings and goings of ancient, buried oceans, imagining landscapes below as sublime as those here above in the present," he writes.

But Bass grew restless and began searching for the right landscape to call, in a deep, psychological sense, home. Think of him as Odysseus, struggling for years to make his way back home -- only Bass didn't know where it was because he had never been there.

Then he stumbled into Yaak Valley, and it hit him: home.

Chalk it up to the gods of chance: The first homestead he saw there belonged to the parents of the man who wrote the music for "Jeremiah Johnson."

Now, Bass writes, he has all but abandoned fiction writing to advocate on behalf of what's left of the wilderness there. He argues, passionately, that wilderness -- the realm of the imagination -- must be protected, especially as we move further and further from it as a society.

"The story of our dwindling wilderness has as its protagonist the essence of space, with the voracious character of time gnawing hungrily at its edges," he writes. "The narrative is in full crisis, full climax, now.

"I can still, however, imagine -- barely -- a happy ending."

Bass writes intimately in intoxicatingly circuitous, introspective sentences, and he has a tendency to judge his writing as it hits the page. "Maybe I should stop overstating the obvious," he writes at one point. At another, he writes, "I vacillate." And at another, he tells us, "I digress. I cannot help it."

The effect is tremendously appealing. It feels like we're eavesdropping on a man writing a book as a way to answer difficult, philosophically charged questions for himself, rather than for us.

Good luck convincing loggers and Houstonians, though.

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