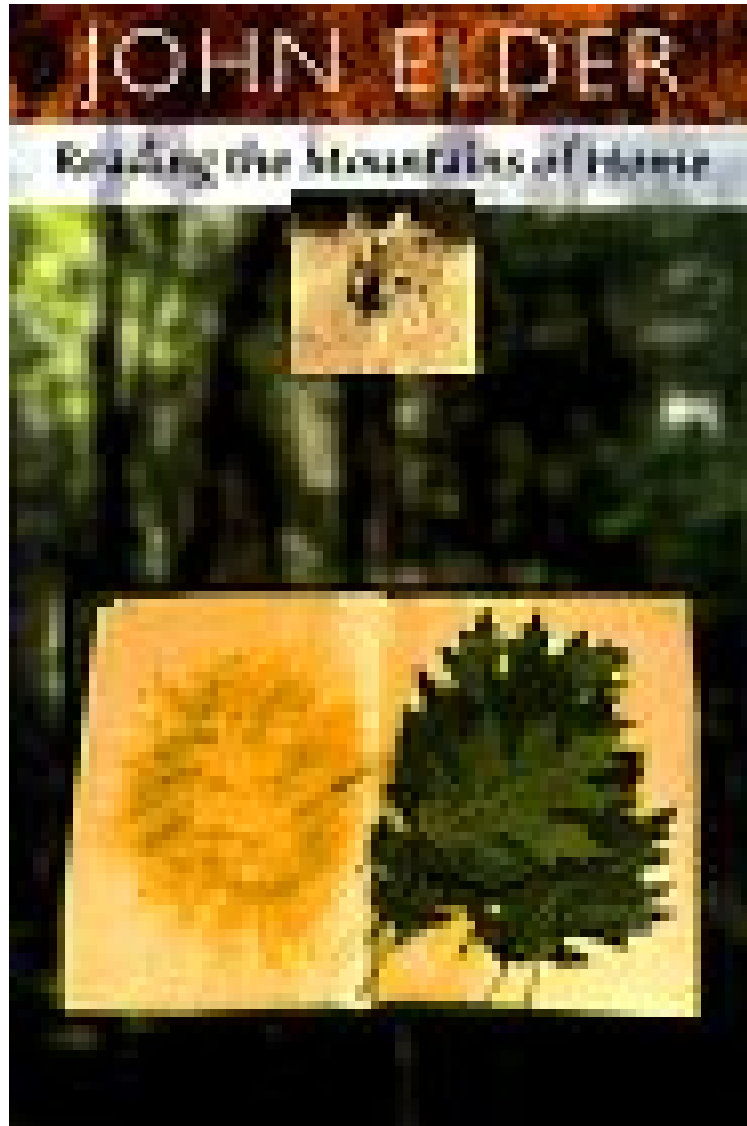


Reading the Mountains of Home

John Elder

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John Elder : Reading the Mountains of Home before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reading the Mountains of Home:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Surprisingly Satisfying Read
By Pauline Epistle
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. 9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Hope for Co-existence By Craig L. Howe 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's soul, family and surroundings. His musings transport the reader from the glaciers that shaped his 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. 19 of 20 people found the following review helpful. An outstanding book By Dan Toomey 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.

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."

.com 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 From Kirkus sA 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 renascent 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 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. Starting with a few lines of Frost's poem on the human and natural histories of this enclave, each chapter examines the exquisite detail of nearby nature in conjunction with close analysis of Frost's expansive meanings...Readers may question whether this is primarily a book of literary criticism, environmental appreciation or simply a minute vivisection of a poem, but in the end Elder persuades us of the vastly encompassing theme Frost addressed and the eventual self-discovery of being lost in this land. Elder has written a tour de force of insight and interpretive skill. (Publishers Weekly)It is deeply personal and profoundly moving--and an eloquent challenge to some of the principal assumptions that guide the environmental movement in this country. Reading the Mountains of Home may be at once one of the more accessible yet complex nature books ever published. It is accessible because Elder is an immensely gifted writer, whether he's describing the way a glacier halved a mountain 20,000 years ago or explaining why, in his opinion, Frost was one of New England's great naturalists. It is complex because the book has three distinct threads: First, there is a nature writer's scrutiny of the world; second, there is an English professor's precise discussion of literature and one long Frost poem; and, third, there is one man's self-examination at midlife...Though John Elder's book is suffused with loss...[it] is uplifting. In part, this is due to Elder's contention that man and nature are not incompatible and that wilderness may be renewable after all. But it is due also to Elder himself: It is not hard for Elder to find beauty and pleasure in the world, and this comes across on almost every page. (Chris Bohjalian Boston Globe Magazine)[This] is the most intelligent book about Vermont that I've read in several years. New Vermont books often fall into a very few predictable categories...John Elder's book, Reading the Mountains of Home, fits into none of those categories. It transcends them all, brilliantly, and emerges as that rare find: a new and fascinating look at this complex place we call home...A book of considerable subtlety and complexity that reads easily and spins a story as compelling as any good novel. But that's only one of [its] accomplishments. For what Elder has also done here, I believe, is the very important task of pointing a new, coherent direction for the national environmental movement, a movement now struggling with an outmoded script, and very much in need of revitalization...Perhaps the best description of Reading the Mountains of Home is to call it an exploration--a deep exploration of what a particular place can mean to a particular human being--and thereby to all of us. It's a book I hope every Vermonter will read. (Tom Shayton Vermont Public Radio)John Elder turned to Frost's last great poem and has written a beautiful study of its complicated narrative...More than literary criticism, Reading the Mountains of Home is an extended homage, a memoir and meditation. Elder succeeds in the most difficult of ways: As his focus expands, his concentration grows more acute...His analysis is attuned to both the language of the poem and to its concentric rings, the stories that illuminate this landscape and prove the vitality and relevance of poetry. (Thomas Curwen Los Angeles Times)John Elder has plumbed deeply the wisdom of the likes of Parker and Frost, examining with the skill of both a poet and a naturalist the history of the modern Vermont landscape...[He] has written a book that manages at once to blend precise nature writing, profound literary criticism, and a moving examination of his own personal world at midlife...Reading the Mountains of Home is a truly rare joy: It is a book that will not merely help a reader to navigate the world in the woods; it will also help one to understand that all too complex geography of the human soul. (Chris Bohjalian Free Press (Burlington))Elder's extended essay achieves what little criticism does: it brings poetry, literally, down to earth...Part meditation, part ecological history of [the Bristol] woods, and part literary criticism, the work is also a quiet testimonial to the uses of reading--reading either a mountain or a poem...This is the opposite of most academic writing--although Elder is a professor of English and environmental studies at Middlebury College--and also averse to the critical writing of most poets today, since...[his] language avoids the lyrical and mystical steadfastly for the plain and true. As a provocative alternative to customary criticism, it is also an example well worth following by other writers--a 'directive' of its own. (Poetry Calendar)Elder hikes through the [Bristol] region as he muses on its sociology and biology and how its hardwood forests were lost to small farms, themselves now replaced by blazing maples. In an unusual and insightful book, Elder argues that not all ecological destruction this century was intrinsically wrong, while showing that, just because a landscape pleases the eye, there is nothing to say that it must be natural. (Adrian Barnett New Scientist [UK])I'm not sure what impressed me more about John Elder's writing in Reading the Mountains of Home: his eloquent use of language or the ambitiousness of what he accomplishes. First, the book functions as a literary exercise...Second, it examines the complicated cycles of loss and recovery within Vermont's natural and human communities. Finally, Reading the Mountains of Home is an engaging familial narrative, as Elder processes several personal losses--the death of his father and dog, the slow recovery of his

mother from surgery, and the social withdrawal of his son...This book is for the optimist as well as the amateur historian. Elder celebrates change by describing how loss soon leads to recovery; 'sometimes we must go down before we find our second chance.' Citing [Frost's] 'Directive,' Elder espouses the value of being 'lost enough to find yourself.' Delightfully, Elder's journey becomes the reader's. (Kelly Ault Vermont Woodlands)Elder begins each chapter with several lines from the poem, an effective technique that creates a convergence of literary criticism and nature writing. The reader learns much about the natural history of the Vermont landscape, from prehistory to the settling and clear-cutting by Europeans to current recovery and return to wilderness. Elder is an able guide, sprinkling his text with anecdotes, statistics, and self-revelation. (Randy Dykhuis Library Journal)A sure sign that the Northern Forest region is in the early stages of cultural renewal is the development of a Northern Forest literature, 'a dialogue between wilderness and culture.' John Elder's...book *Reading the Mountains of Home* is a wonderful contribution to this dialogue...[The book] is a deep, lyrical, celebration of living very locally. Yet, its focus on such a small plot of land leads the writer and reader to ponder universal questions of living lightly on Earth. (Jamie Sayen *Wild Earth*)