FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Autobiography & Memoir

A Geography of Saints
Penny Allen
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“Those magical first days, the air was already hot even though it was early spring. It was dry and very still, except in the afternoon, when the cicadas would start clicking their high-pitched castanets.” Allen, a filmmaker and writer based in Paris, recalls the beginning of her adventure of caretaking a horse ranch in the high-desert country of central Oregon in the mid-1980s. She was in her late 30s, living in Portland, and ready for some kind of change in her life.

It came in the form of Peter, a Kansas-bred lawyer who invited her along when the opportunity arose to live in a cabin outside the tiny town of Saints.

This is her story about her relationship with Peter, and the people they met during their planned six-month hiatus there, such as Ham Jones, a Ph.D. who dabbles in teaching adult evening classes. One time Allen caught a glimpse of the pair talking outside her window: “They planted themselves out by the hitching post and had the kind of conversation during which men my father’s age jingled the change in their pockets.”

Allen brings wild cats she’s captured to the town’s vet, a woman who eventually seeks Peter’s legal advice when she suspects a forest ranger of molesting her son. Forty miles from Saints, Allen comes across the town formerly known as Antelope, renamed Rajneeshpuram for the Indian mystic whose thousands of followers built their own city there in 1981. She is there to witness the last days of the cult as she attempts to write an article about the red-clad Rajneeshees and their leader, who was ultimately deported in 1985. The movement, which was under investigation for arson, attempted murder and drug smuggling, fell apart soon after.

The six-month interlude Allen had initially agreed upon in Saints turned into seven years with Peter, who found his niche pursuing “bizarre logging activity in some remote corner of the national forest.” Allen, too, became a forest spokesperson, occasionally lobbying in Washington, D.C. One day, toward the end of her time in Saints, Allen discovered: “Some days I felt angry alone on the ranch and thought I would surely die there angry and alone and no one

would know.”

She and Peter left for Paris, but he returned a year later, becoming a permanent fixture in the geography of Saints. She never came back.

Robin Farrell Edmunds