Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Angels Along the River: Retracing the Escape Route of Mary Draper Ingles

E.M. Lahr
AuthorHouse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Angels Along the River is a telling indication of how much impact reading can have on a person's life. After reading James Alexander Thom's historical novel *Follow the River*—the tale of Mary Draper Ingles' escape from the Shawnee Indians in 1755—Eleanor Lahr decided to recreate the forty-three-day, five-hundred-mile trip from Big Bone Lick, Kentucky, to Radford, Virginia.

Lahr's initial challenge is to enlist traveling companions. "Not us," say the descendants of Mary Ingles. "Nor us," reply the Girl Scouts. Her friends tell her she is crazy. By the summer of 1987, though, the project that Lahr named "The Walk" comes into focus. Friends agree to accompany her for several days, the West Virginia firefighters promise guidance, and strangers telephone to volunteer their time, food, and homes.

Each chapter of *Angels Along the River* is a short vignette of a day on The Walk. Lahr recounts details of the hike and describes the people she encounters along the way. One morning in particular, Lahr spies a dilapidated house with peeling paint, gaping windows, and grass the height of cornstalks. As she meditates on this scene of abandonment, a woman and a boy emerge from the hovel. Lahr is shocked to find that this house is still a home.

As she hikes through Appalachia, the author's story rustles up the hidden American poor. She admires—and envies—the apparently loving relationship of a West Virginia couple she meets. Then the wife confesses that her husband is an alcoholic and she is on the verge of leaving him.

In her narrative, Lahr shares personal insights about her life. She speaks of the bad relationships she has endured, particularly with men—her father's rejection, the "pain of [her] own tortured marriage." She is surprised that any man wanted to participate in her project and her distrust is apparent. And when male strangers approach the group, she reaches instinctively

for her hatchet and her cylinder of mace.

Lahr's narrative achieves more when she forgets herself and examines other participants, the "angels" of the title. For example, her late-night conversation with the moneyed mayor of Maysville, Kentucky, is vintage vaudeville. Unfortunately, parts of the narrative are laden with cliché and an overabundance of sentimentality.

History buffs, especially those interested in colonial Kentucky and West Virginia, will find the memoir appealing. Professional hikers will empathize with the physical challenges of the hike and admire the perseverance of these amateur walkers. Other readers will simply appreciate meeting the plain folk of America.

Thomas H. Brennan