



Essays

Howard Giskin

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The autobiographical collection Essays covers both aging and hope in its forward-looking trajectory.

Focusing on a passion for travel and nature, Howard Giskin's *Essays* is a philosophical memoir.

Wide-ranging and often disconnected, the book's sections highlight topics including pivotal travel memories, personal experiences and relationships, art and museum visits, and lifelong musings. Their imagery is evocative: one mentions a "balmy lilac-scented night" spent sipping wine on an open-air porch in Greece.

References to personal growth following Peace Corps adversity during an assignment in Africa recur as Giskin confronts physical and mental challenges while climbing in the High Sierra. Lessons learned while hiking gain force as the book progresses. Giskin details climbing to the summit of a 12,000-foot peak, which leads into an interesting discussion of the art of self-reliance. Looking over a 60-foot precipice results in heightened awareness and a description of the fragility of life. Giskin discusses the danger of a single misstep with acute sensitivity while also expressing his deepening appreciation of traveling with wisdom. Elsewhere, Giskin's experiences in nature are covered in terms of how encounters with it enhanced his life. He expresses appreciation for trees, as well as covering his disorienting struggle to emerge from a forest, which is said to mirror his ongoing quest for understanding.

But the entries covering Giskin's relationships and everyday experiences are more meandering. They include discussions of road trips with a friend, memories from the playground, tales of drive-in movies, and nods to a golf course near his childhood home. They are punctuated by longing for the "boundless energy of youth." Their lessons are familiar ones, as on the importance of common sense and clear communication. In "Mother," Giskin questions how well people can ever know their parents, wondering about the dreams that are sacrificed when one starts a family.

Working to tame the swarm of thoughts that it represents, the book raises provocative questions throughout its disparate essays. They include inquiries into why people are drawn to unknown places, or why they remember some experiences and forget others. The suggestion that one's memory shapes their perceptions of life is made as a partial answer.

Simple graphics of mountain peaks mark the beginning of the essays, and small leaf images are used to signal some section breaks. Images of paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Joan Miró embellish a section that analyzes their artwork; these are helpful additions, used to raise points about how art can be said to reflect the horror and beauty of each age. Sections on melancholy and world weariness conclude the winding text, whose essays are interspersed with poems that deviate from its prose descriptions of travel and relationships.

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ANDREA HAMMER (March 23, 2022)

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