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Just by Accident: Adventures of a Modern Vagabond

Ben Benson
Trafford Publishing (December 2008)
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“One thing I learned from living and working in the backcountry is to always expect the unexpected” Ben Benson writes. “Sometimes an event you hadn’t even considered a remote possibility happens on the trail.”

As a young man Benson never expected that he would one day just up and walk away from his wife four children and his stressful job as a town manager in New Hampshire but the former Navy corpsman also didn’t expect the Korean War to affect him personally in unfathomable ways. “Unexpected” is the perfect word to describe not only what happened to the author of this tough travel narrative but also his own actions in response.

From a brush with death on Eagle Glacier and the incredible courage and strength it took him to survive it to a chance meeting with the widow and the publisher of Jack Kerouac the “original hiking hippie” on the Appalachian Trail this author takes the reader on some incredible adventures.

The author’s love for nature shines through the book like sunlight through a stand of pine trees on Mount Washington where he “felt like a European explorer sighting the New World for the first time. Little did I realize then that this was only the beginning of a lifetime odyssey.”

Over the course of his wandering life the author would kayak around and fish for salmon on Admiralty Island a place which boasts one brown bear for every two square miles.

But his lifetime odyssey was undertaken in part because of the Korean-war- related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that caused Benson’s life to change “from that of a normal family man into a nomadic worker in the wilderness.” He says his adventures are like booze to an alcoholic or drugs to an addict and he missed seeing his children grow up.

The tales told in this book are well written and fast paced and Benson’s outward journeys are remarkable and entertaining. But his inward journey of coming to grips with his PTSD is missing. It is as if the writer is keeping the reader at a distance rather than opening up to show his emotions and his personal psychological struggles.

But this is still a great book to curl up with on the sofa and comfortably enjoy the combination of straight travel tale plus a little avuncular advice: Benson recommends that everyone take a trip through the Inside Passage from Seattle to Alaska cautions readers about breaking in their hiking boots and lectures in a friendly way on building small fires so as not to scar the landscape.

We all need a little bit of the unexpected in our lives and many of us could use a little more. Reading Benson’s gripping memoir is a good start.

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