ForeWord Reviews

Muses in Arcadia: Cultural Life in the Berkshires

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At its best, a travel guide can give wayfarers a sense of the place to which they're journeying, describing not just the famous spots, but also the hidden treasures. Muses in Arcadia goes far beyond this, upping the standard for travel books.

As a cultural center, Boston is well-known for its music, dance, art and theater, but it has a fierce competitor to the west in Massachusetts in the form of the Berkshires, a gorgeous pocket of land that has drawn artists, writers and musicians for the past century. The regionally based journalists who contribute to this collection do a wonderful job not just in describing the area's cultural charms, but also in explaining the region's history, bringing a deeper understanding of the Berkshire's lure for art lovers.

Especially notable are the long passages about Tanglewood, MassMoCA and The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, illuminating how each rose to fame and popularity. Tanglewood, the leading summer music festival in the nation and perhaps in the world, is given admirable treatment by journalist Nunley, who describes its post-Depression era start and the graceful first concert replete with newly painted benches and upper-class "program girls." Of that first concert in 1934, he writes, "The moon shone, and almost 3,000 people were in attendance. Hadley opened the concert with Berlioz's Roman Carnival Overture, and the festival which became Tanglewood had begun."

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, the brightest light of the area's art museums, is described in loving detail by Cahill, as is the rocky journey of the region's newest institution, MassMoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art). Cahill's fellow writers also dazzle with their fascinating explorations of such beloved treats as the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival and the Williamstown Theatre Festival.

Rather than simply presenting a list of Berkshire cultural events, the writers convey an understanding of the atmosphere, mission and spirit of each venue with passion and, sometimes, wit. Muses in Arcadia will turn tourists into cultural sojourners, making traveling readers appreciate not just the region's beauty and its arts events, but its rich history as well.

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