ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

The Road Washes Out in Spring: A Poet's Memoir of Living Off the Grid

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This author is no stranger to the writing world. He served as Maine's Poet Laureate for five years running and has published seven books of poetry, but in this book-length prose work, he chooses to examine, in a wry and elegant style, his years living with his family in a house that lacked what are usually considered the basic requirements—indoor plumbing and electricity.

Wormser is what many people would call a true American individualist—in the best sense of that description—though he would be hesitant to embrace that phrase. More important, he's a remarkable and thoughtful poet. Put the two together in this first memoir, and one achieves that rare combination of writing that is active—full of the day and week and work of life—and reflective—laced with what-it-all-might-mean meditation. This memoir fulfills its promise by inviting readers into a life "off the grid," enriched by the goodness of years lived simply and the authentic recognition of how hard that is.

What separates this memoir from the often clichéd back-to-the-land life story is that the author's choices are always seen through the lens of language, especially poetry. As he describes the characters who reside in his small community in Maine, the demands of keeping up with kerosene lamps and wild gardens, the dashed hopes for the community library lost to fire, the wear and tear of time, roads, wells, and woods—he never loses the context of literary history. Wormser's authorial consciousness is permeated with Frost, Keats, Shelley, and the force of Romanticism—the individual's journey toward and examination of what life ought to be in light of what is.

For Wormser, nature is ordinary and larger than life, metaphorical in its parallels to human endeavor. Of trees, he writes: "I marveled at the relentless yearning toward the sun … In winter, I watched the bare forms gesturing like still dancers. I listened to the spry clatter of branches in a strong wind. They sounded like little bones." Of living as a poet in the woods, he writes, "I wanted to practice balance with imbalance, trace symmetry and asymmetry, toy with words and honor them."

The impulse to explore both the natural world with its relation to humanity, and the process of poetry with its insights about being human, permeates this book and makes it akin to

the great American thinkers of Emerson and Thoreau. That said, it also echoes that finest of poet storytellers, like Frost. In this tradition, Wormser places himself squarely among those writers who chose to live simply, observe clearly, and think deeply about it. Readers will be richer for it.

Anne-Marie Oomen