

The Seacoast Reader

John A. Murray, Editor

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As editor and contributor Murray states, “the selections in The Seacoast Reader range over three continents, four oceans and a hundred and fifty years...all speak directly to the enduring beauty, power and mystery of the world’s sea coasts.” These essays and excerpts from longer works are drawn from the canon of nature writing as well as its fringes. Darwin, Carson, Beston, Muir and Thoreau are included, as are their heirs, William Warner (Beautiful Swimmers) and Barry Lopez (Arctic Dreams). So are surfer Dan Duane, “Oh, no, it’s a geologist” Rick Bass and John Cole, the gentleman angler.

Anthologizing is an art. The order in which material is presented can enhance readers’ appreciation of its content—or numb them to what might have been powerful in a different context. There’s also a flirtation element: one reads just enough to make one search Amazon.com or the card catalog at the library for everything else by an author or about a subject introduced in the collection.

Murray, a natural history writer, gets it right at least part of the time. The first essay in the book, Lopez’s “A Presentation of Whales,” is exactly what one might expect from a Nature Conservancy-sponsored volume: a save-the-whales tale about a catastrophic stranding of thirty-six sperm whales on the Oregon coast. But it’s much better than that. It’s a movie all by itself, as much about the various human reactions to the stranding as it is about marine mammalogy.

Murray’s choice for the second essay will send shivers down a few spines. “The Shipwreck,” excerpted from Cape Cod, Henry David Thoreau—sounding a little like John Barth, another coastal writer not included in this volume—describes another stranding. In this case, the bodies on the beach are humans, a shipload of Irish immigrants who very nearly make it to the New World. They fail to attract a fraction of the attention accorded their cetacean counterparts a century later. The juxtaposition with Lopez’s piece enhances both and prompts another look at both authors.

The rest of the book makes an attempt to associate similar topics, but would have benefited from more overt groupings, perhaps with subtitles: Fishing, Cataloging, Storms, etc. More biographical information on the contributors would have been helpful, especially when one develops that wonderfully desperate need to read everything an author wrote. The Seacoast Reader, however, is an anthology that will be enjoyed whether one loves the sea or not.

LAURENE SORENSEN (July / August 1999)

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