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Literary Collections

Why We're Here: New York Essayists on Living Upstate
Bob Cowser Jr., editor
978-0-912568-22-5
(August 31, 2010)

Themed anthologies strive to present a buffet, varied yet unified, so readers attracted by the overall idea can dig in and find, perhaps to their delight, that their favorite bites are sometimes not those they anticipated. Bob Cowser Jr., editor of *Why We're Here*, succeeds in providing an omnivore's feast with these eighteen essays.

These nonfiction authors come at their topic from varied perspectives, ranging from the ordinary to the oblique. There are the expected likeable elderly dogs, quirky aged vehicles, creaky and leaky old houses, overgrown land, and the oddly adored cold, snow, ice and isolation. But also included are captivating ruminations on such less expected lures as snakes, fences, trail marking, driving lessons, 1960s college campuses, subsistence farming, getting lost, a professional idol, and living in a place one dislikes long enough to love it.

In good collections of thoughtful essays, a reader can find himself suddenly, even if only momentarily, passionately interested in ideas, places, and lives never before contemplated. In "Sixteen Years," Leila Philip traces the emotional and technical intricacies of maintaining a 300-year-old family apple farm. Who knew inspecting apple tree leaves daily for good and bad insects could be so enthralling?

Natalia Rachel Singer, in "Driving Lessons," connects geography, longing, rootedness, and friendship when she lands work temptingly close—but only by car—to places and choices not before noticed. "Upstate," by Marion Roach, follows the writer from Manhattan to several North Country locales: "Leaving my lake, I felt no small accomplishment. I had lived alone in the Adirondacks, and goodness knows, there are far worse things that a woman can do."

A few pieces are not so much about living upstate, but are finely crafted essays by authors who happen to live there. Other gems are by writers who did once, but no longer, call the region home, invoking the literary adage that in order to write well about a place, one must leave. These essays don't so much inquire as to why to live upstate, as to why *not* to live elsewhere.

Adopting the state, either begrudgingly or with an initial hearty embrace, is a common thread. Bebi Wein, in "Home," explains: "Some, surely, can name the moment of falling in love. Not I. But it was when the familiar became strange that my love for this place became possible."

In "The Third Thing," Paul Graham explains: "Daily we might question why we live up here, though we know: we have chosen to be here, having lived elsewhere and returned partly because we sense that the rhythm and cadence of the life we have here, though not impossible to find elsewhere, is nonetheless difficult to find; and because in a way, we like the winter."

Lisa Romeo