



Wilderness Spa: Where Physical Survival Meets Psychological Survival

Jim Halverson

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In the visionary novel Wilderness Spa, a group of disparate individuals leans on, and learns, wilderness survival strategies after a natural disaster.

In Jim Halverson's adventure novel *Wilderness Spa*, an unconventional group is united by an earthquake and works together to survive.

Tom, an Alaskan homesteader, was out panning for gold when a landslide destroyed his family's home. He departs the site and meets a vacationing group who lost their guides in an avalanche. In too much despair to help, Tom leaves them behind. But when he's attacked by a bear, he accepts their aid, and they join forces. Instructed by Tom, the group heads toward safety. Soon, they add survivors of a plane crash to their trek out of danger.

The plot centers around the group's dynamics. After the initial earthquake and the ensuing destruction, the group jumps into action, making fires, checking gear, and determining their next steps. As they move, they encounter more bears, experience boating disasters, and enter into starvation. Such sequences are action-oriented, short, and succinct; they function as backdrops to the meat of the story: the group's long conversations about what brought them to Alaska in the first place, and what effects the quake will have on them. These discussions are shared in full detail.

Each character transforms over the course of the book. Their backstories are revealed over natural mineral baths, meals, and bonfires. Tom starts out as an independent man who takes care of himself first, but he discovers a penchant for leadership and community building among the group. He takes vacationers aside one by one to encourage them to keep working toward the goal of getting out of the wilderness.

Eric and Connor, the brothers who survived the plane crash, change the most. Privileged and white, they go from expecting service from others to committing to serve others. They hunt to feed the group in a convincing turn around. A lesbian rancher and computer engineer, and a Black farmer turned accountant, prove the most equipped for the hard work of overcoming hardships. Their bighearted candor, determination, and grit become the group's backbone.

As personal histories are fleshed out, the group becomes more cohesive. Its individual members learn from one another and work as a whole, adopting distinct and complementing roles. They face adversity without complaint and with hope. The promising conclusion of their story also acts as an invitation to follow their example of teamwork, communication, and self-reliance.

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MARI CARLSON (May 5, 2021)

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