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Doug Peacock and the American West

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Essay Reviews Doug Peacock and the American West Grizzly Years: In Search of American Wilderness. By Doug Peacock. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1990. 288 pages, \$22.95.) Like the shaman, the adventurer crosses over into the mythic realm and returns with the story of his journey. By extruding his humanity beyond the frontier of human events, he embodies a victory over the invisible world. For this he is condemned to a life of endless mobility. Because he is at home everywhere, he will be at home nowhere. His existence will be humanly pointless. The gods are angry with him, for he is a thief; men distrust him, because he is not entirely one of them. This is the sort of man Odysseus is: a danger to himself and to everyone he knows, a bringer of trouble, yet a figure worthy of epic, for he brings the knowledge which men need. He is a great storyteller too, because stories are his bond to the human world. Only they are able to vanquish the distance which his character secretes around him. He entralls his audience, while remaining separate from them, expressed but also hidden by the tale he tells. Paul Zweig, The Adventurer Men went to Vietnam young; those that returned, returned old, aged by trauma, disillusion and cynicism, wounded by a lost

capacity for hope, and em bittered by a reality so real their past was forever severed from their present. In stead of the hero's parade, there was indifference and hostility. A million men remain afflicted by this social malaise. *Grizzly Years* is a story of how one of those men healed himself through intimacy with wild bears in the solitude of wilderness. When Doug Peacock returned home from Vietnam after three consecutive tours of duty as a Green Beret medic, he bought a jeep and drove west to visit his favorite wild haunts. The small, tattered road map of Montana and Wyoming he had carried around Vietnam was not just a reminder of beloved country and a source of "bottomless homesickness," but a talisman of mythical place. When he returned, Peacock didn't just head for the western states, he headed for Thoreau's west: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild." And he went there for a reason: "Something was wrong. On the outside I was calm, even passive, but there was something frenzied on the inside." Doug Peacock went to the wild to heal himself. 52 Western American Literature

Going into wilderness to be restored from the traumas of war is an old tradition, and it has produced some fine writing. After World War I, R. M. Patterson travelled through the Nahanni country of the Northwest Territories and wrote *The Dangerous River*; more recently another Vietnam veteran, James P. McMullen, went into the Everglades and wrote *Cry of the Panther*. The archetype for this path of restoration is Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River," where a war-weary Nick Adams returns to a favorite trout stream on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The Big Two-Hearted River was also an important place for the teenage Doug Peacock; he tells us he took his "first long solo backpack trip" there, and the spirit of Hemingway's story pervades *Grizzly Years*. Peacock also returns to his favorite places, the canyons of the Colorado Plateau and the alpine lakes of the Wind River Range—"one of the wildest spots left in the lower forty-eight." Like Nick Adams, he camps and goes fishing. After a first chapter that is best understood at the end of the book, Peacock recounts this attempt at restoration. He travels in the wilderness, he is plagued by memories of action in Vietnam. His vignettes of war are portrayed in a clean, well-crafted prose that will shock readers who neither served in Vietnam nor are acquainted with such Vietnam classics as *Dispatches* and *The Tunnels of Chu Chi*. But camping and fishing fail to heal Peacock. He remains enraged, aggressive, rude, physically ill, depressed, not a little paranoid, and "armed to the teeth" with handguns, a shotgun, a rifle, and "a...

Essay Reviews

Doug Peacock and the American West

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Paul Zweig, *The Adventurer*

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