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Wild: From Lost To Found On The Pacific Crest Trail (Oprah's Book Club 2.0)



Synopsis

Wild is a powerful, blazingly honest memoir: the story of an 1100-mile solo hike that broke down a young woman reeling from catastrophe - and built her back up again. At 22, Cheryl Strayed thought she had lost everything. In the wake of her mother's death, her family scattered and her own marriage was soon destroyed. Four years later, with nothing more to lose, she made the most impulsive decision of her life: to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State - and to do it alone. She had no experience as a long-distance hiker, and the trail was little more than "an idea, vague and outlandish and full of promise." But it was a promise of piecing back together a life that had come undone. Strayed faced down rattlesnakes and black bears, intense heat and record snowfalls, and both the beauty and loneliness of the trail. Told with great suspense and style, sparkling with warmth and humor, Wild vividly captures the terrors and pleasures of one young woman forging ahead against all odds on a journey that maddened, strengthened, and ultimately healed her.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There is a vast amount of trail literature, a type of writing that is uniquely American. I am not aware of any other book in this genre, however, that has received the public acclaim accorded to Wild, Cheryl Strayed's recent memoir of her life on and before her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Wild is one of the top selling books of the year and will become a classic of trail literature in the future. But why is Wild so successful? It helps, of course, that Strayed is already a critically acclaimed author. A

grant from the Oregon Arts commission to write the book certainly improved the text. Unlike many trail memoirs, this is a polished affair and clearly not composed as an afterthought to the day's work. But the main reason this book is so successful is the story of redemption it tells. Strayed's life fell apart when her mother died while she was in her early 20s. Unable to deal with the grief, she first cheated on then divorced her husband (I was unable to stop feeling bad for Paul throughout the book), took heroin, and went through some gut wrenching events while slowly trying to self destruct. But when she began to hike, her life began to change. She forced all her material concerns out of her life, helped in part by two overaged boy scouts who removed many items from her pack, and focused on the immediate activities that allowed her to survive in harsh conditions. And conditions were tough in 1995. My wife and I began hiking the trail together that same year and like Strayed, we made the decision to avoid certain sections. But Strayed perserved and by the end of the trail was a changed, more confident person. She went on to start writing, got married and had children.

I had mixed reactions to this book. As a disclaimer, I would like to point out that I am not in the target audience for this book. I am 58 and male. I read the book because I am a backpacker. The book sells mostly to young, slim (probably athletic) women. Why do I make this assertion? I went to Cheryl Strayed's event and book-signing. 95% of the large audience (Ms. Strayed is a rock star) fit this target market. The other 5% probably came for the electronic, new-age musician. If I were in the target market, if I had identified more strongly with Ms. Strayed (or her 24-year old self), I would probably have loved this book. If you can identify with Cheryl Strayed, then you may love this book. If you cannot form this bond, you may dislike the book because of the follow reasons: 1. The language and metaphors are fairly pedestrian. I kept thinking, I have heard that analogy or phrasing in many books (often self-help books, no accident that Ms. Strayed was a self-help columnist). The author usually avoids obvious cliches, but if you reflect upon media discussions that focus on personal growth, you will recognize most of the language. For example, the author loves the adverb, "profoundly." She also uses some obvious tricks to make the writing seem compelling: sexual obscenities (not an objection for me, but more of an author tic) and exaggerating verbs -- "destroyed" for tired and "shattered" for distraught or depressed. Not terrible, but not Joan Didion or Dave Eggers. 2. Cheryl Strayed likes metaphor as the primary tool in story-telling (call it approach A). She made this comment in the event that I attended. Many authors, however, focus upon precise, sensory detail to show depth of character, point of view, voice and story development.

Cheryl Strayed is a capable writer and as I finished the first few chapters I became a fan. I began

recommending the book to my friends and family. Her description of her mother dying of cancer was beautifully written and hit like a gut punch. I thought, wow, this writer has potential. But as I progressed through the book I felt a gnawing sense that this was not a work of pure fact, and prone to flights of fancy and embellishment. The dialog seemed contrived and wooden at times as the book wore on. Her apparent desire to saddle up with just about any guy she bumped into seemed curious at first, began to wear thin later, and was off-putting by the end. Some encounters read like more a cheap Harlequin romance novel than reality. By the time she encounters bow hunters on the Oregon Crest Trail, she lost me. They admire her sinewy legs under her tight jeggings (I'm embellishing for effect here). They're hiking for the day but they're carrying huge backpacks. They've each consumed a six pack of Pepsi but they're dehydrated and disoriented. They leave but one of them returns to leer at her and accuse her of lying about where she was going to camp. As I read the scene I felt like I was watching Burt Reynolds in Deliverance, "You got a nice mouf". Like someone that's told you a string of faintly troubling white lies, the stink of poor credibility finally overwhelmed me. I got the sense that she created plot devices and embellished stories as a means to punctuate her experiences north of the California border. I've hiked much of the Oregon and Washington Pacific Crest Trail system. So I'm familiar with what it's like to be on the trail for 3-4 weeks at a time. And there are elements of Strayed's book that resonated.

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