

Book Review

Review of *Peak Experiences: Walking Meditations on Literature, Nature, and Need* by Ian Marshall, 2003, 267 pages with Notes and Index. Series Title: Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism, 11 titles so far. University of Virginia Press, www.upress.virginia.edu
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Reviewed by Alan Drengson

The title of this book, *Peak Experiences*, refers to the author's own journeys in nature walking to the tops of various hills and mountains, and to Abraham Maslow's typology of human development as a pyramid whose top represents the peak experiences of self-actualizing humans. The mountain and triangle represent the hierarchy of human needs, their fulfillment, and the levels of conscious development open to human life. The author discusses his personal experiences, reflecting on literature and *nature writing*, while in nature walking and camping, alone and with others. This wonderful book is for anyone who loves the wild and being outdoors in free nature. As the author's book reveals, returning again and again to the same places, living outside, relating to others in these natural settings—where basic needs and physical realities are so plain and uncomplicated, is an excellent way to improve ecocriticism. I cannot imagine a better way to reflect on our literature of nature than by being out there again and again as a life-long activity. Marshall brings together current reflections in ecopsychology relevant to Maslow's concept of self-actualization, along with how these show up in literature, human development, and in our relationships with nature.

No matter what the current "wisdom" in the academic community, or what is chic to discuss, we must admit that too much of our daily focus in contemporary society is nature deprived. It is overly rich in cognitive abstraction, technological cleverness and quickening obsolescence. When, for example, we walk in nature on a regular basis, at least an hour a day, we learn what it truly *is* to inhabit a place. We live outdoors as the other alive beings on our planet mostly live, and the way our ancestors lived before they stayed indoors and worked in factories. Our clever devices, Muir observed, turn us

into factory workers, even those who teach in our increasingly controlled education institutions. *Peak Experiences* encourages us to get out and walk in the outside air, reinhabit the Earth with our bodies, and enjoy our senses in every way we can, as much and as soon as possible! Read the great literature and poetry of nature, but reflect on all of these as part of a total process in living that grounds daily experience where you are, in the Earth, outdoors, in your home place. Learn to love and know the unique details of the individuals and communities within your home place.

These are some thoughts and feelings that came to me as I read Ian Marshall's insightful book. I am grateful that I was asked to review it. I now better appreciate *nature writing* in our society, along with having the joy of discovering poets such as Pattiann Rogers. Marshall's book is a treasure trove for all who love nature and being out year round no matter where we live. We can find wild places even in the middle of a city, finding the wild in ourselves everyday. Our lives in our home places *mean* something through our daily mixing with all that is concretely there, and by appreciating and sharing our deepening whole experiences in song, dance, poetry, and stories. What more could we ask for when spontaneous experience is so rich and our possibilities practically unlimited? This is what peak experiences in nature every day gives us, as we see more clearly by reading Marshall's book. Our spontaneous experiences in daily life in nature give us peaks of perspectives, a wider and deeper sense for human possibilities and potentials; a unity of experience that is interconnected with the awareness of a larger living community of sentient beings.

Peak Experiences is divided into five chapters that correspond to Maslow's levels of development and need: 1 Physiological needs, 2 Safety Needs, 3 Love and Belonging (Needs), 4 Esteem Needs, and 5 Self Actualization (Needs). Each chapter is set in specific areas in various places in the United States and Canada, from the Rockies to the Adirondacks. A "Wandering Introduction" explains the author's purposes and methods in the book. This is an experimental and imaginative work filled with surprises. Some of it is demanding, like a steep trail with heavy pack, but in other places, we soar with delight, as we feel Ian's summits of excitement, read poetic lines of self-actualization. It becomes clear in the journeys that our total needs cannot be met by the artificial alone. We require *live* experience, engaged in our own real struggle and exertion, to become fully actualized persons. Our maturity deepens and our reflections enrich as we know peak after peak; life is a series of sunrises and sunsets, sorrows and joys, highs and lows that rise higher and higher to full self realization. Here we are on the ground of the sacred, aware of the wild energies that unite us all. "That is the peak experience, an ecological perspective become spiritual insight" (237). "[T]he ultimate goal of our recognition of spiritual truths—to reestablish our connection with the spirit that runs through all things" (226). Our unities far exceed our superficial disagreements using confused ideas and inept language. We become poets and storytellers by creating contexts that are rich and full in all these things. From a Norwegian and Scandinavian perspective, Marshall is a practitioner of

Friluftsliv (free-air-life), living and returning to the mountains and wilderness in scholarship, teaching, and research, fully grounded by experience in the open air.

In these rich natural contexts we become fully alive once more. We move out of our cognitive abstractions, out of theoretical and emotional preoccupations. In our spontaneous experience as whole and unified, our spiritual, cognitive, emotional and physical needs are met. We have a sense for the unity and diversity we share with all aware beings. We are in a living context not of human design, one with fantastic possibilities, one with creative evolving processes that give rise to novelty and uniqueness. In nature we have diversity and individual uniqueness within a context of unified energy flows; we have multiple perspectives, individual experiences and creative adaptations; at the cultural and personal level, diverse worldviews and personal lifestyles, with rich ways of celebrating and expressing our joy of connecting with the communities in our home places and in wildland explorations.

Marshall discusses many authors and poets throughout this book. He discusses archetypal figures from our shared mythologies, such as Hercules, the hero who tries to control nature, Antaeus, nature's defender, and Psyche, who reminds us that touching the Earth is good for our soul. His discussion of these figures and writers is insightful, touching, and well expressed. As he sees it, our culture is caught by a Herculean fixation, leading us to try to control everything around and within us. Yet, there are growing numbers who see the flaws in this, and who want to, and do, *embrace* nature. Marshall is one of them.

He uses a variety of ways to tease depth of interpretation out of these literary traditions and other works. For example, he reads the *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman as he is climbing and hiking in the wild. It is a very fruitful exercise for he and his readers. Some of the many authors he discusses are Pattiann Rogers, Walt Whitman, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Henry Thoreau, William Wordsworth, Abraham Maslow, Gary Snyder, Laura Sewall, Sigmund Freud, William Shakespeare, Paul Shepard, Herman Melville, Homer, Jon Krakauer, Robert Frost, Ralph Waldo Emerson, T. S. Eliot, John Burroughs, Annie Dillard, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Cole, Ralph Metzner, Theodore Roszak, and Michael P. Cohen. A few of the many places discussed and/or visited include Mount Shasta in California, the Colorado Rockies, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Laurel Highlands, Bald Eagle, Mount Rainier, Mount Everest, Big Bald Mountain, Mount Lassen, and so on. Throughout the book Marshall comments on the healing power of nature revealed in ecopsychology and literature and in his own regular experiences as a wild journeyer in free nature and as an author and teacher. He writes:

“I offer myself as a test subject, recently divorced, a father sharing custody of two children, someone with a high regard for the written word, . . . a little too stressed-out these days, no more self-actualized than the next person but just

as curious about it—and what I have going for me are a lot of well-read books, a good pair of broken-in hiking boots, and a thing for the mountains” (10).

The summit of the book is the last chapter. There we get some idea of how Marshall’s personal test has worked. On the union of self and mountain he writes:

“That conflation of self and mountain has been my main conceit throughout, and I’ve been engaged in a sort of self-ascent, progressing up the life zones of psychological needs. But how can I be both the climber and the thing climbed? Let me consider the mountain as mountain for a moment, and Maslow and Whitman two slopes rising to meet at the ridgeline. That’s what literary critics do—bring some sort of theory in contact with literature: Maslow’s hierarchy, biopoetics, ecopsychology, Freud, flow, touching on *Walden*. The *Odyssey*, the poems of Pattiann Rogers, John Muir’s mountaineering essays, Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” I have walked those slopes, followed those paths, my boot soles striving for contact (contact!) with “the *solid* earth, the *actual* world,” striving for that high point where all meet and merge, fall away and disappear into the sky. The slopes of the pyramid are not walls penning us inside, but a series of footholds. And at the top, where slope meets slope and together they come to a point (and here I come to the point), the self ends” (240).

If the other books in this series are as good as this one, then there are yet 10 volumes more I will enjoy reading. As you must know now, I heartily recommend this book.