GALE CENGAGE Learning

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Cheryl Strayed

1968-

Born: September 17, 1968 **in** Pennsylvania, United States
Nationality: American etc.
Occupation: writer etc.

Biographical Essay:

Cheryl Strayed is the best-selling author of two books of nonfiction, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* and *Tiny Beautiful Things,* both published in 2012. She also wrote the acclaimed novel *Torch*. As a writer, Strayed explores the harshness of life, informed by her own difficulties which included a childhood spent in poverty and difficult conditions in Minnesota. *Wild,* which reached number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list, also was chosen by Oprah Winfrey to re-start her famous book club online. *Wild* described a difficult personal journey that lead to personal healing and moved readers and reviewers alike. Critics praised Strayed for her honesty, insight, and readable writing style.

Difficult Childhood

Strayed was born on September 17, 1968, in Pennsylvania, the daughter of Bobbi Lambrecht and her abusive husband. The family was working class, and her parents divorced when she was five years old, when Strayed's mother was finally able to leave her husband. After the divorce, Strayed did not have contact with her father. Lambrecht took Strayed and her two other children to Minnesota, first living in Chask, then in McGregor after her mother remarried when Strayed was eleven years old. Though the family was extremely poor, Strayed's mother had inner strength, was loving and optimistic, and possessed valuable skills like being able to change a tire, sew, and plant a garden. She supported her family by working as a cocktail waitress, factory laborer, and seamstress. They lived in a tar-paper shack, and often needed welfare to get by. After her step-father came into their lives, he built a better, though still modest, house that had no electricity or running water or an indoor toilet.

Strayed's impoverished childhood gave her a valuable perspective on life. She wrote in the *New York Times Magazine,* "What did I get? A view of the world that can be had only by looking from the bottom up. An understanding of the actual value of a single dollar by virtue of having witnessed that dollar being stretched again and again. A particular brand of faith, humility, pride, and resilience that takes root when everything you have was earned in spite of the odds, not because of them."

Despite what she lacked, Strayed love to read and began writing from an early age. When she graduated from McGregor High School in 1986, she became the first person in her family to attend college. Though she did not know how choose a school, she picked St. Thomas because it had a program that allowed the parents and grandparents of students to attend for free. Strayed and her mother went to college together. Through the experience, Lembrecht found out she was intelligent and could do well in school. The pair then transferred to the University of Minnesota, though they went to different campuses. Strayed went to Minneapolis while her mother went to Duluth, and both were on track to graduate in the spring of 1991.

Mother's Death Changed Life

During the fall semester of 1990, both women's senior years, Lembrecht was diagnosed with lung cancer. She died 49 days after her diagnosis, during spring break in 1991 before she could complete her degree (though it was awarded posthumously). Strayed did complete her degree, but regretted missing her mother's death by one hour. The losses piled up for Strayed. In addition to losing the valuable love and connection she felt with mother, her beloved stepfather distanced himself from his stepchildren and remarried rather quickly. Strayed's two siblings also went their own way. Strayed was married to a kind, loving man named Paul, but she began acting out in her own life by cheating on him and becoming a regular user of heroin with one of her lovers.

Of this time in her life, Strayed told Oprah Winfrey in *O, The Oprah Magazine,* "My mother's death brought me to what I think of as my most savage self. It stripped me of the one thing I needed. My mother was the taproot of my life. And suddenly, I didn't have that anymore. I had wild love for my mother. I had wild sorrow. And then I *went* wild. I went wild into my life."

There was also good in Strayed's life. She was employed by the Sexual Violence Center in Minneapolis as an outreach worker, then for Women Against Military Madness as a political organizer. She wanted to write but found her jobs to be consuming of time and emotional energy. Also because of her ongoing personal problems, Strayed quit so she had time to write as a waitress at Nikki's Cafe in Minneapolis. She wrote both fiction and nonfiction, often about small-town life.

Took Influential Journey

In spring of 1995, Strayed left her husband and Minnesota for the West Coast to end the downward spiral she was on. After seeing a guide about the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) in 1994, she decided to hike the 1,100-mile trail by herself. This experience would later inform her first major work of nonfiction. Strayed spent five months hiking the trail. Though the experience was difficult and mistake-filled, she persisted because she could not fail and she emerged a different person. Moving to Portland, Oregon, after she ended the hike, she met her future husband, Brain Lindstrom, nine days after her hike ended. He was a documentary filmmaker who also came from a working-class background. They eventually had a son and daughter together. A few years later, Strayed

decided to continue her education. She earned an M.F.A. from Syracuse in fiction writing in 2002. She began publishing essays and short stories in many publications, including the prestigious *New York Times Magazine*.

In 2005, Strayed published her first novel, *Torch*. Selected as a finalist for the Great Lakes Book Award, it also was named by *The Oregonian* as one of the top ten books of the year by writers from the Pacific Northwest. The engaging first novel looked at lives in a fictionalized version of her hometown McGregor, renamed Midden, and the effect the early death of a woman had on her family, revealing much about the Midwestern psyche in the process. The story centered around Teresa Rae Wood, who left her abusive first husband and moved to Midden with her two children, Claire and Josh. After several years as a single mother working menial jobs, she met Bruce at a laundry mat. He became her common-law husband, and she found fulfillment as the host of a radio show, *Modern Pioneers!* At the beginning of *Torch*, she had been diagnosed with cancer and was told she only has months to live. The first half of the novel focused on her last months and death, while the second half explored how it affected her family. Bruce considered suicide, but instead remarried quickly, angering his stepchildren. Claire gave up on college, became involved with an older man, and moved to Minneapolis, while teenage Josh used meth, became a drug dealer, got a girl pregnant, and ended up in jail.

Torch was praised by critics for its language and how it reflected small town life. Describing the book, Claude Peck of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* also noted that "In her debut novel, Cheryl Strayed proves a master of the little and the big, the telling details that cement the book's larger themes in mind and memory." The reviewer stated that *Torch* was full of details like Bruce helping workers pour Jell-O in the middle of the night at the hospital while his Teresa is dying. Peck also lauded Strayed's "perfectly tuned ear to the speech of small-town bar owners, teenagers and a hyper-perky hospital chaplain named, perhaps too obviously, Pepper."

Because of the parallels to her life, especially the early death of her mother, many asked Strayed if she was Claire in *Torch*. Strayed told Peg Meier of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, "Each of the characters is part me and part not-me. There's as much of me in Teresa [the mother], Joshua [the son], and Bruce [the step-father] as there is in Claire. When you're writing fiction, characters somehow emerge." Strayed also wanted to emphasize love as much as grief, while being very realistic in her intentions looked at the effects of losing a beloved family member.

Became Advice Columnist

Several years after *Torch* was published, Strayed took on a new challenge as a writer. In March 2010, she began writing the "Dear Sugar" column on Rumpus, an alt lit Web site founded by novelist Stephen Elliott. She was not the first Sugar, as the column was originally written by Steve Almond, but Strayed wrote it anonymously for two years when she took over. Strayed had no experience as a therapist or advice giver, but she also had no limit on word count. Strayed found the experience fulfilling, and used storytelling to answer questions sent by readers. She picked the letters herself, focusing on ones that reflected the human condition. The most common questions had do to with romantic love.

Describing the perspective she took as Sugar, she told Molly McArdle of the *Library Journal*, "My advice as Sugar is precisely the advice I give my children. The core values I express in the column are the values I hope my children will embrace in their lives. Trusting the gut. Following the heart. Understanding that complexity is part of being human.... We all want to be loved and to express our love. Acceptance is a small, quiet room."

On February 14, 2012, Strayed revealed that she was the writer of "Dear Sugar." Later in 2012, Strayed published a collection of her columns in book form under the title, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*. The book became a *New York Times* best seller. The collection contains questions and Strayed's responses, and includes a clear mandate from Strayed for readers to be better people. Critics embraced *Tiny Beautiful Things*. Praising the collection and the writer, Sunil Badami wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Sugar's deeply considered, even more deeply felt replies to her 'sweet pea' correspondents were like a three-in-the-morning conversation you might have with a best friend: compassionate, profound, occasionally profane, offering not merely soothing blandishments but wisdom torn from hard-found experience, burnished into something like the best literature."

Published Influential Memoir

Also in 2012, Strayed published a memoir that would be her best-known work to date. She filtered much of her life and grief through her experience hiking on the PCT in book form with *Wild*. The tome debuted at number seven on the *New York Times* hardback nonfiction best-seller list, eventually reaching number one. One reason for its popularity was former talk show host Winfrey picking it as the first selection of the digital version of her book club, Oprah's Book Club 2.0. It also was optioned for film by Pacific Standard, the production company owned by actress Reese Witherspoon.

Wild not only described the physical tests Strayed underwent on her journey on the PCT, but also her spiritual quest, how she dealt with the grief related to her mother's death, and how the experience gave her a sense of acceptance of what had happened of and her life in general. Strayed had a journey of self-discovery, but also admitted she was not fully prepared for it. Strayed told Winfrey, "The most important thing I hope readers will take away from *Wild* is the realization that I'm not different from them. I'm not any more courageous or brave than anybody else. I have plenty of fears."

Critics responded positively to *Wild*. Reviewing the book for *Slate Magazine*, Melanie Rehak stated, "It is this voice—fierce, billowing with energy, precise—that carries *Wild*.... By turns both devastating and glorious, Strayed uses it to narrate her progress and setbacks on the trail and within herself, occasionally flashing back to fill in the events that brought her to this desperate traverse." In the *New York Times*, Dwight Garner wrote, "It's uplifting, but not in the way of many memoirs, where the uplift makes you feel that you're committing mental suicide. This book is as loose and sexy and dark as an early Lucinda Williams song. It's got a punk spirit and makes an earthy and American sound." Garner was deeply affected by the book, with a compelling narrative he compared to Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*.

In addition to these books, Strayed also wrote for numerous other periodicals including the *New York Times Magazine, Washington Post Magazine, Vogue, Allure, Self, the Missouri Review, Brain, Child, Creative Nonfiction,* and the *Sun*. She was also a founding member of VIDA: Women in Literary Arts and served on the board of directors of VIDA. Of her success as an author, Strayed told Ellen Fagg Weist of the *Salt Lake City Tribune*, "I've been a writer for a really long time. Obviously, I hoped my books would find an audience, but this has been beyond my imaginings, frankly."

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born September 17, 1968, in PA, daughter of Bobbi Lambrecht; married Paul (divorced, c. 1995); married Brian Lindstrom (a filmmaker); children: (second marriage) son, Bobbi (daughter). **Education:** Attended University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN, 1986; University of Minnesota, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1991;

Syracuse University, M.F.A., 2002. **Addresses:** E-mail—cstrayed??earthlink.net. Office—c/o Author Mail, Vintage Books, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Web site—http://www.cherylstrayed.com/.

Awards:

Pushcart Prize, Pushcart Press, for "Monroe Country," 2010.

CAREER:

Began writing as a child; outreach worker, Sexual Violence Center, Minneapolis, MN, then political organizer, Women Against Military Madness, c. 1991-1995; hiked down the Pacific Crest Trail, which became the basis for memoir *Wild,* 1995; published first novel, *Torch,* 2005; began writing "Dear Sugar" column, 2010; published collection of "Dear Sugar" columns, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar,* 2012; published memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail,* 2012.

WORKS:

Selected writings

Novels
Torch, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2005.

Nonfiction
Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail, Knopf (New York City), 2012.
Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar, Vintage Books (New York City), 2012.

FURTHER READINGS

Periodicals

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Deseret Morning News (Salt Lake City, UT), July 28, 2012.
Library Journal, May 15, 2012, p. 86.
New York Times, March 28, 2012, p. C1.
New York Times Book Review, April 1, 2012, p. 16.
New York Times Magazine, June 6, 2004, section 6, p. 76.
O, The Oprah Magazine, July 1, 2012, p. 102.
Salt Lake City Tribune, July 30, 2012.
Slate Magazine, March 3, 2012.
Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN), February 5, 2006, p. 14F; February 27, 2006, p. 1E.
Sydney Morning Herald (Australia), July 7, 2012, p. 32.

Online

Cheryl Strayed Official Web Site, <http://www.cherylstrayed.com/> (November 21, 2012).
Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2012.

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PRINT

Wild by Cheryl Strayed Reading Group Guide

Dive into the first pick for Oprah's Book Club 2.0 with 17 in-depth questions about Cheryl Strayed's astonishing memoir.

Oprah.com | Jun 01, 2012

1

When Cheryl discovers the guidebook to the Pacific Crest Trail, she says that the trip "was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery." Later, her soon-to-be ex-husband suggests she wants to do the hike "to be alone." What do you think her reasons were for committing to this journey?

2

In the beginning of the book, Cheryl's prayers are literally curse words—curses for her mother's dying, curses against her mother for failing. How does her spiritual life change during the course of the book?

3

Cheryl's pack, also known as Monster, is one of those real-life objects that also makes a perfect literary metaphor: Cheryl has too much carry on her back and in her mind. Are there other objects she takes with her or acquires along the way that take on deeper meanings? How so?

4

"The thing about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail...was how few choices I had and how often I had to do the thing I least wanted to do," writes Cheryl. "How there was no escape or denial." In what ways have her choices helped and/or hurt her up to this point?

5

"Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves," Cheryl writes her first day on the trail. She is speaking about her fear of rattlesnakes and mountain lions and serial killers. To defeat that fear, she tells herself a new story, the story that she is brave and safe. What do you think about this approach, which she herself calls "mind control"? What are some of her other ways of overcoming fear?

6

At one point, Cheryl tells herself, "I was not meant to be this way, to live this way, to fail so darkly." It's a moment of self-criticism and despair. And yet, some belief in herself exists in that statement. How do the things Cheryl believes about herself throughout the memoir, even during her lowest moments, help or hurt her on the PCT?

7

Walking on the trail during the first few weeks, Cheryl writes, "My mind was a crystal vase that contained only one desire. My body was its opposite: a bag of broken glass." Through the book she talks about the blisters, the dehydration, the exhaustion, and the hunger. How—and why—did this physical suffering help her cope with her emotional pain?

8

Once deep in the wilderness, Cheryl feels something she describes as "radical aloneness." What does she mean by this, and how did her surroundings and situation amplify this feeling?

9

Think about the things—both physical and mental—Cheryl discards along the trail. What are they? How do they change her when they get left behind?

10

Cheryl writes that her old approach to meeting people, especially men, was to present the "least true version of me." How does she change this approach on the PCT?

11

What does the death of Lady mean for Cheryl? What did that horse represent to her and to her mother—and to the rest of their family?

12

Why might Cheryl have identified the fox she sees on the trail as her mother?

13

Why is it so crucial that, after extolling her mother throughout the book, Cheryl lists her mother's faults and failures?

14

The geographical terrain Cheryl crosses plays such a large part in the memoir. Crater Lake for example, is described as powerful, as if it "would always be here, absorbing every color of visible light but blue." How do her descriptions of the physical landscape create a spiritual or emotional landscape for her readers?

15

Cheryl's fellow hikers play a large role in her experience on PCT. How do you think they contribute to her grieving and healing process? In what ways, beyond providing practical aid, did they enable her to finish her hike?

16

In which moments do you feel that Cheryl has stopped resisting the loss of her mother's death? Where has she found some release?

17

Wild is a journey book. It moves around in time, but it starts in one place and ends in another. At the very end, the story jumps forward to describe what Cheryl doesn't know yet, what she will find out beyond the wilderness, then concludes with her saying, "It was enough to trust that what I'd done was true." What kind of understanding has she come to by the last line of the book, "How wild it was, to let it be"?

GUERNICA / a magazine of art & politics

Redeemed

Amitava Kumar interviews Cheryl Strayed

June 3, 2013

The bestselling author of Wild *on the Pacific Crest Trail, bringing consciousness to bear on the work, and how success has been met with a backlash.*

Image by Joni Kabana

Cheryl Strayed and I were in a small writing-group in our twenties in Minnesota, where we were both students. Strayed was younger by five or six years, which somehow means a lot more when you are young. She was bright and beautiful. This is how I remember her. And she was already a writer, in the sense that

she was sure she was never going to be anything else first.

In the early 1990s, after I had got my first teaching job and moved to Florida, I'd get an occasional postcard from Cheryl. She was a profligate writer, generous and flirtatious, offering glimpses of a life that roused my envy. There were always surprises in her letters. She had walked into a café in a strange town somewhere in Arizona, say, and standing in line was Grace Paley. If memory serves, Cheryl introduced herself and Paley bought her a slice of carrot cake. But the postcards stopped and we lost touch.

In 2004, I was in transit at Chicago's O'Hare when I paused at the airport bookstore. There was a copy of *The Best American Essays* sitting on display. The first line of an essay entitled "The Love of My Life" read: "The first time I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week." This sentence sent a shiver through me. Cheryl had adopted a new last name. But there was no mistaking the voice, bold and provocative, finding on the page something like clarity, if not exactly release from pain.

The enormous success of Cheryl's memoir, *Wild*, an account of her hike on the Pacific Crest Trail, has only reinforced the sense of her as a writer always going for broke to tell her stories. There seems to be a desperate urgency in the act, and, mixed with it, the unfolding of narrative magic. *Wild* has remained stubbornly on the *New York Times* bestseller list since publication over a year ago. It has been translated into thirty languages. This spectacular success has carried with it the pleasant scent of surprise that I used to associate in my youth with Cheryl's postcards. But also present in the work now, as before, is the same hunger for experience and truth.

When Cheryl came to Vassar College to speak in front of an audience in late April, we hadn't seen each other for more than twenty years. I wanted her to give me clues about what we were then, and what she had become now.

—*Amitava Kumar for* Guernica

Guernica: *Wild* has been celebrated for its honesty, and *Tiny Beautiful Things* for the beauty of its compassion. But what I also very much admire in your writing is that it works on a variety of levels. Not many writers have it; we only write for our narrow enclaves. But you talk to everybody.

Cheryl Strayed: That's a kind thing for you to say. I didn't grow up in an educated household and I didn't know any writers as a kid. My brother—my dear brother, who I write about in *Wild*—doesn't even have a GED. He's a high school dropout. Pretty early on in my writing career I realized that I never want to write something that he couldn't read, that wasn't accessible to him. That doesn't mean he's not intelligent—he's a very intelligent person—but I didn't want to write something that you have to have an advanced degree to understand. I wanted to write intelligent stories, using intelligent language, that was accessible to the uneducated as well.

Guernica: I said to my students: I want you to take Cheryl very seriously, because when I first knew her, she was the same age as you are at the moment. She was in her early twenties.

Cheryl Strayed: I was twenty-two, a senior in college.

I was basically the same person when I began my hike as I was at the end.

Guernica: What is the difference between the person you were then and the person you are now? How has writing been a part of that change?

Cheryl Strayed: All of us, as we mature and grow up—if we're doing life right—we evolve. One of the things in *Wild*—and of course *Wild* just tells a slice of my life, it ends a couple days before my twenty-seventhth birthday—that I really wanted to write about is how we transform ourselves, how change looks in real, actual lives. I think in some ways *Wild* works against the transformation narrative that we see so often —what I'm just going to go ahead and call "Hollywood"—and that is, somebody starts off, and they're this terrible sort of Charles Manson–like person, and then they go through their journey and at the end they're the Buddha. [*laughter*] I was basically the same person when I began my hike as I was at the end.

If you knew me then, as you did, Amitava, you wouldn't say I was terribly different after the hike than I was before. The changes that this radically transformative experience brought about were discrete and subtle from the outside. But there were huge shifts on the inside. That's how change happens. There are these really small things that occur, this series of decisions that we make and continue to make that equal big change. And so I would say, looking back at my younger self, that I'm not so different than I am now. I was always a seeker. I wanted very ambitiously to be a writer and what happened between now and then is that I continually threw myself in the way of those things that would help me become that, of doing and finding and learning from things that altered me along the way.

As "Dear Sugar," I write a lot about the importance of learning from experience. So much of what I've learned, so much of what's good in my life, was learned because something bad happened, or from making the wrong decision. Through bad decisions I learned how to find the ways to make the right ones.

What about you, how have you changed?

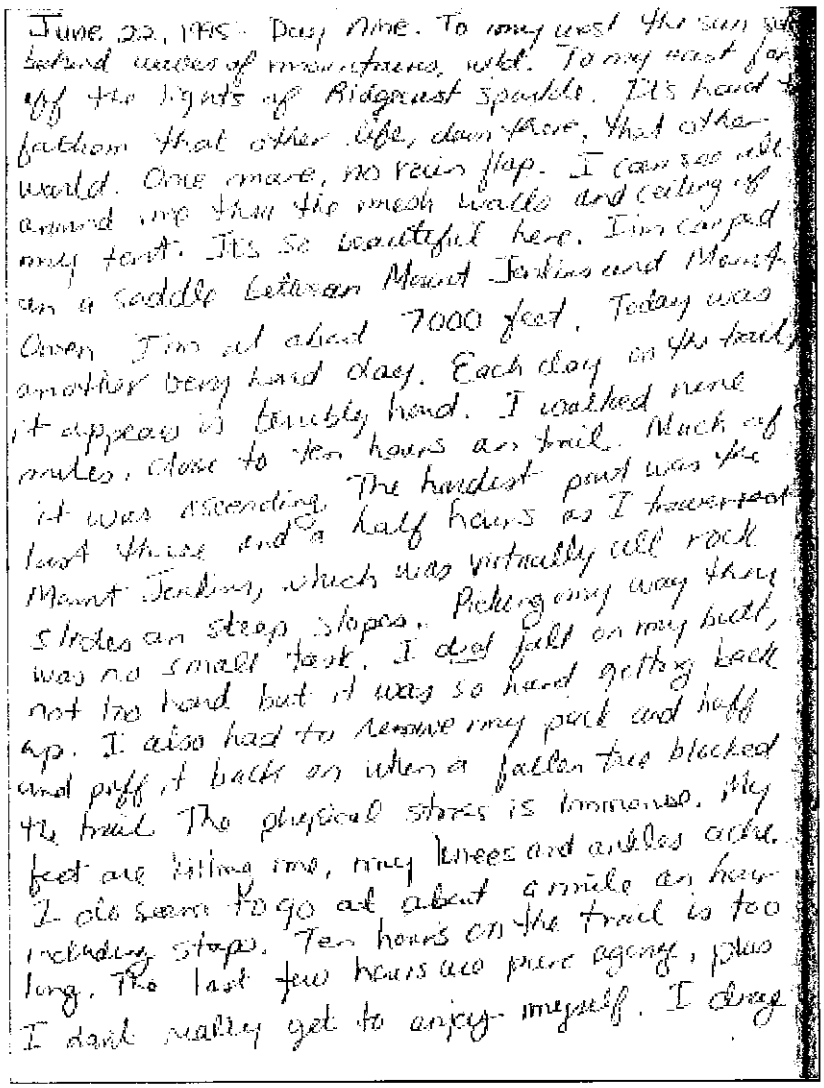
Guernica: I've grown old with great enthusiasm, you know.

Cheryl Strayed: That's what's so weird. It's been twenty years since we've seen each other.

Guernica: The last time I saw you, you were working as a waitress in New York. I was finishing my dissertation in Minnesota and coming to deliver a paper at Columbia. So I wrote you and said I'm coming, I'll see you. You said, if you come, I'll give you a free meal. It was great. I ate the pasta. Greedily. Now let's talk about you and your writing.

Cheryl Strayed: This is embarrassing, because when you asked for a page from my journal I honestly just opened it up and photocopied a page. I didn't quite realize it would be here. It's not brilliant by any

stretch. It's really just what I wrote that day. It's very mundane and banal.


June 22, 1995 - Day Nine. To my west the sun sets behind miles of mountains, wild. To my east far off the lights of Ridgecrest sparkle. It's hard to fathom that other life, down there, that other world. One more, no rain flap. I can see all around me from the mesh walls and ceiling of my tent. It's so beautiful here. I'm camped on a saddle between Mount Jenkins and Mount Owen. I'm at about 7000 feet. Today was another very hard day. Each day on the trail it appears is terribly hard. I walked more miles, close to ten hours on trail. Much of it was ascending. The hardest part was the last three and a half hours as I traversed Mount Jenkins, which was virtually all rock slides on steep slopes. Picking my way there was no small task. I did fall on my butt, not too hard but it was so hard getting back up. I also had to remove my pack and huff and puff it back on when a fallen tree blocked the trail. The physical stress is immense. My feet are killing me, my knees and ankles ache. I do seem to go at about a mile an hour including stops. Ten hours on the trail is too long. The last few hours are pure agony. Plus I don't really get to enjoy myself. I don't really get to enjoy myself. I don't

Guernica: What does it say?

Cheryl Strayed: [*reading*] "June 22nd. The physical stress is immense. My feet are killing me." Which, you see, came to be a theme in *Wild*. "My knees and ankles ache. I do seem to go at about a mile an hour, including stops. Ten hours on the trail is too long. The last few hours are pure agony. Plus, I don't really get to enjoy myself." So you see those lamentations in *Wild* are true!

Guernica: Have you been a writer who has always kept journals?

Cheryl Strayed: I kept a journal all through my twenties and into my thirties. I essentially stopped keeping a journal the moment my son was born. Which was nine years ago today. The moment I became a mother it was no more lounging around in cafes reflecting on life. So, I always kept a journal, and this page is a fairly mundane example of it. On that page I'm essentially recording the physical reality and to some extent how I feel about it. But what I would often do in my journal without any sense that some day the story of my hike would become a book, is that I would often really write—my journal was my way to practice fiction writing.

When I met somebody on the trail, for example, and they'd walk away, I'd sit down and immediately write the scene of our meeting and I'd write it as if it were a scene. I'd put what they said in dialogue—what I remembered of what they said, and they had just said it a couple minutes before so it was pretty fresh—and I would describe them the way I would describe a character in a book. Which was great when I was writing, but *Wild* was by no stretch a direct translation of my journal. I didn't turn my journal into a book, but rather my journal served as one of the sources I drew upon when I was writing the book.

Most of the conversations I wrote in the book are conversations I wrote from memory all these years later. I remembered that we talked about this, that, and the other thing, and re-conjured it in *Wild.* But some of the conversations were recorded in my journal. It was a great resource because I often wrote down that quirky thing that somebody said. There's that scene where I meet the miners and they're about to blow up that side of the mountain. The one man says something to the younger man: the younger man says he's going to join the military, and the other man says, "And you never even said 'Thank you'"—because he had also served. That was something I had because I'd written it in my journal. Or the hobo care package. That was also in my journal. All the contents.

Guernica: I initially knew you as a member of a small writing group. How important is it for young writers to be in supportive groups? Can you talk about your experience, and also why you chose to go to the MFA program in Syracuse?

Cheryl Strayed: I think the first thing—if you want to be a writer—the first thing you need to do is write. Which sounds like an obvious piece of advice. But so many people have this feeling they want to be a writer and they love to read but they don't actually write very much. The main part of being a writer, though, is being profoundly alone for hours on end, uninterrupted by email or friends or children or romantic partners and really sinking into the work and writing. That's how I write. That's how writing gets done.

But that can be such a lonely endeavor that I do think community is also important. I have a writer's group now in Portland, Oregon, where I live. Twenty years ago Amitava and I and this other woman named Trish would get together at cafes and exchange work and read to each other and give each other little bits of encouragement and feedback and thoughts. I think that's an incredibly rich experience because what it does is it gives you a sense of community but also purpose. If I know I'm going to meet you in a cafe next Tuesday, I'm going to write something that I can hand to you. Discipline is such a challenge for so many writers and so I think that that's a key benefit of being in a group.

Guernica: Happy birthday to your son Carver, by the way. He's named after Raymond Carver, who used to teach at Syracuse, except that by the time you got there, if I remember right, he had passed.

Cheryl Strayed: I didn't go to Syracuse because of him. But I certainly was excited he had been there. I did name my son after him, so, yes, I love Raymond Carver. What happened is that I was, all through my twenties, working as a waitress and writing, and I think that was the right thing to do. I had been in college and didn't want to go straight from college to graduate school in writing, because I didn't think that I was ready as a writer. I think that you should go into an MFA program when you're solid in your identity as a writer and you're going because you want to learn more and because you want that community of peers and mentors, not because you want to convince yourself you are a writer. So that's when I went, when I

was thirty. And I wrote my first book, which is a novel called *Torch*, when I was there.

Guernica: So it was a good experience for you?

Cheryl Strayed: It was a great experience. I highly recommend it, but not until a bit later. Of course some people manage to write books really young and publish really young. But for most writers, it takes several years because you have to apprentice yourself to the craft, and you also have to grow up. I think maturity is connected to one's ability to write well.

[My mother] and I were both going through this experience together where educated people we respect are saying things like, "Oh, Michener sucks. You should be reading Moby Dick."

Guernica: You know, we are very lucky today to have a very mixed audience. But we are going to persist just for a moment longer in talking about craft and training, so the students will benefit and then we'll turn to more delicious things.

Cheryl Strayed: I know. I hope I'm not boring the people who are not writing. My feet are fine, that's the main question I get from readers of *Wild*.

Guernica: Cheryl, there's a paragraph on page 149. You are on the trail. Someone has given you a book. I'm about to ask you to read it.

Cheryl Strayed: [*reading*] "I looked at the book. It was called *The Novel*, which I'd never heard of or read, though James Michener had been my mother's favorite author.

> It wasn't until I'd gone off to college that I learned there was anything wrong with that. An entertainer for the masses, one of my professors had scoffed after inquiring what books I'd read. Michener, he advised me, was not the kind of writer I should bother with if I truly wanted to be a writer myself. I felt like a fool. All those years as a teen, I'd thought myself sophisticated when I'd been absorbed in *Poland* and *The Drifters*, *Space* and *Sayonara*. In my first month at college, I quickly learned that I knew nothing about who was important and who was not.
>
> "You know that isn't a real book," I'd said disdainfully to my mother when someone had given her Michener's *Texas* as a Christmas gift later that year.

"Real?" My mother looked at me, quizzical and amused.

"I mean serious. Like actual literature worth your time," I replied.

"Well. My time has never been worth all that much, you might like to know, since I've never made more than minimum wage and more often than not, I've slaved away for free." She laughed lightly and swatted my arm with her hand, slipping effortlessly away from my judgment, the way she always did.

When my mother died and the woman Eddie eventually married moved in, I took all the books I wanted from my mother's shelf. I took the ones she'd bought in the early 1980s, when we'd first moved onto our land: *The Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening* and *Double Yoga. Northland Wildflowers* and *Quilts to Wear. Songs for the Dulcimer* and *Bread Baking Basics. Using Plants for Healing* and *I Always Look Up the Word Egregious.* I took the books she'd read to me, chapter by chapter, before I could read to myself: the unabridged *Bambi* and *Black Beauty* and *Little House in the Big Woods.* I took the books she'd acquired as a college student in the years right before she died: Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua's *This Bridge Called My Back.* Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.* But I did not take the books by James Michener, the ones my mother loved the most.

Guernica: What is this passage about, Cheryl?

Cheryl Strayed: It's about class. At that moment where I was discussing those books in my twenties, I was beginning to understand what a culture hop I'd made growing up poor and working class and then going to college and suddenly being in this world where people were telling me essentially who I was. I didn't know what my culture was until I went away from it and moved into another one. And one of the things that struck me most profoundly in college—and maybe some of you in this room know what I'm talking about—is that by going to college and becoming educated, I was becoming someone who was less like the community I came from and less like the family I came from.

Many of my peers, their parents were lawyers or surgeons or realtors or whatever they were, and they were on the path to becoming more like their parents, and I was on the path to becoming less like my parents. You know the funny thing is my mom was also on that path. She went to college when I did, and so she and I were both going through this experience together where we go to college and educated people who we respect are saying things to us like, "Oh, Michener sucks. You should be reading *Moby Dick.*"

And so there was this conundrum between high and low art, poor people and rich people, privilege and oppression, all of those things were presented to me in the form of simply what books you were allowed to read value.

Guernica: Yes.

Cheryl Strayed: It's so complex I can't even do it all justice right here.

Guernica: Now, for the next part of our conversation, the page will change. What the audience now sees on the screen is a manuscript page. I was interested in this because one of the things that happens is you have to edit your thoughts, and others edit you. It's an edited life. I want to understand how one edits oneself, how one edits one's identity, how one emerges as someone different, and also how other people do something to you and your words on the page. But before I ask you to answer all those questions, will you please read this passage from page 258?

Cheryl Strayed: In this scene, I'm with a guy named Jonathan who I've basically been having a little sexual adventure with for the past twenty-four hours. But meanwhile I'd recently divorced my husband—who I call Paul in *Wild*—and I still love him when Jonathan and I go to this beach and I realize I'd been at that same beach a year or two before with Paul.

> When I'd gone so far that I couldn't make out Jonathan in the distance, I bent and wrote Paul's name in the sand.
>
> I'd done that so many times before, I'd done it for years—every time I visited a beach after I fell in love with Paul when I was nineteen, whether we were together or not. But as I wrote his name now I knew that I was doing it for the last time. I didn't want to hurt for him anymore, to wonder whether in leaving him I'd made a mistake, to torment myself with all the ways I'd wronged him. What if I forgave myself? I thought. What if I forgave myself even though I'd done something I shouldn't have? What if I was a liar and a cheat and there was no excuse for what I'd done other than because it was what I wanted and needed to do? What if I was sorry, but if I could go back in time I wouldn't do anything differently than I had done? What if I'd actually wanted to fuck every one of those men? What if heroin taught me something? What if *yes* was the right answer instead of *no*? What if what made me do all those things everyone thought I shouldn't have done was what also had got me here? What if I was never redeemed? What if I already was?

Guernica: This idea of telling a story where you are already redeemed—it is the principle through which you have edited yourself into this person who has become such an important voice when she writes her columns. Do you see what I'm saying?

Cheryl Strayed: Yes

Guernica: Marilynne Robinson, a wonderful writer, a Pulitzer prize winner, is sometimes asked to deliver sermons at her church in Iowa. The *Paris Review* asked her what she does in these sermons. She says, "In my tradition, there's a certain posture of graciousness you have to answer to no matter what the main subject matter of the sermon is." The interviewer asks what she means. Robinson says, "The idea that you draw a line and say, The righteous people are on this side and the bad people are on the other side—this is not gracious." This holds true in your writing, I think.

Cheryl Strayed: Thank you.

Do I think it was punishment for the book's commercial success? Absolutely, positively: yes.

Guernica: Now, let's talk about editing.

Cheryl Strayed: Any writer who knows what they're doing will tell you that editing is such a huge piece of the journey. You do the writing and then in editing you have to re-enter the writing and take a bunch of stuff out and add a bunch of stuff in and make it better. That journal page that you just saw on the screen, I was writing with no consideration of you as an audience. I'm the audience in my journal. This page you see above me now is entirely this union of me writing privately while also having a strong vision of what I want you—the audience—to feel and think. And so you are constantly in my consideration in the editing process.

I think a lot of people have this idea of an editor being someone who comes in like a dictator, and says, "You can't have that scene." And it never is like that—or perhaps some editors are like that and they're assholes, and they're not good editors. A good editor actually says, "I respect you" and they understand that you have a vision and they're actually trying to help you realize it. So, with Robin Desser, there was such a conversation, she considered every word. Sometimes we'd have these long conversations about whether this one word was the right word. Writing is such a strangely and radically private act, and yet its purpose is this great sense of connection and community. I mean, I wanted people to love the book. And the only way to get them to love it is to try to make it good for them. So of course the audience has to be considered.

My job is to simply keep doing the work. Like—well, you know—a motherfucker.

Guernica: The audience has to be considered and therefore you offer yourself as a sacrifice. I'm exaggerating. But what Steve Almond calls your "radical empathy," in the foreword to *Tiny Beautiful Things*, is in a deep way your openness to share with others your failings. Here's a note you put up on your Facebook page: "Going through a drawer I found the submissions/applications log I've kept off and on over the years. Just in case you think it's all been roses I'd like to report that Yaddo rejected me (as recently as 2011). McDowell rejected me. Hedgebrook rejected me twice. The *Georgia Review* rejected me and *Ploughshares* rejected me and *Tin House* rejected me, as did about twenty other journals and magazines. Both the *Sun* and the *Missouri Review* rejected me before I appeared in their pages. *Literary Arts* declined to

give me a fellowship three times before I won one. I've applied for an NEA [grant] five times and it's always been a no. *Harper's Magazine* never even bothered to reply. I say it all the time but I'll say it again: keep on writing. Never give up. Rejection is part of a writer's life. Then, now, always."

Can you talk a bit about what you're doing here? Do you ever doubt yourself when you offer such help?

Cheryl Strayed: What I'm doing is telling the truth and no, I don't doubt myself when I reveal my own failures and vulnerabilities. The strangest thing to come out of *Wild*'s success is how often people make incorrect assumptions about me. They assume writing is easy for me and I'll never face rejection again. But of course I will and I do. The thing I've learned over and over again is never, ever assume that you're going to get something—publication, award nominations, a prize, a residency, or fellowship. And never assume you aren't going to get it either. The writing life doesn't move in a straight line. I've had successes and rejections all along the way, at every stage of my career, and I will continue to do so. Acceptances and rejections don't define me. They're both part of what it means to be a writer. My job is to simply keep doing the work. Like—well, you know—a motherfucker.

Guernica: Dani Shapiro called *Wild* "a literary and human triumph" in the *New York Times Book Review*. Dwight Garner, reviewing it in the same newspaper's main pages, raved about "the writer finding her voice, and sustaining it, right in front of your eyes." But your book wasn't included among the ten best books of the year. Egregiously, it didn't even feature among the hundred notable books of the year. What gives?

Cheryl Strayed: This proves my point about rejection. You really can't focus on such things or it will kill you. I'd never presume that *Wild* should be on anyone's list, but that the *NYTBR* left it off their hundred "notables" at the end of 2012 was rather striking. Do I think it was punishment for the book's commercial success? Absolutely, positively: yes.

First audience member: I'm a clinical psychologist, and I was struck by you saying you're not a therapist. I just came from a conference of psychoanalysts, and what you just read is more connected to the human condition than what happened at the conference.

Cheryl Strayed: Thank you. If things hadn't worked out so well with *Wild* I was going to hang a shingle out actually. When I say I've never gone to therapy I don't mean to knock it. I want to and I often tell people who write me that they should. I think therapy is useful. It's essentially looking deeply at what it really means to be human—just like I try to do in my writing. One of the coolest things about the "Dear Sugar" experience has been that I've gotten so many letters from therapists who say they use the column in their practice. As Sugar, I'm able to do what therapists are often not allowed to do because you have professional restrictions—codes that are in place for good reason. But, as Sugar I can say whatever I want. I'm grateful that the column's been used by therapists.

First audience member: In reading the book as a therapist, I was interested in your walk on the Pacific Crest Trail and how you presented it as very healing. But as I was reading, I was also struck by elements of self-destructiveness.

Cheryl Strayed: I wrote this book as the older self, the self that's grown beyond those years that I wrote about in *Wild*. So I had some perspective on it. When I think about my decision to use heroin, or to be

promiscuous, to do things that were self-destructive, I really think even in doing those things I was trying to heal myself. Our culture doesn't have rites of passage traditions, and in so many ways I needed one. I was an orphan, I was in grief, I was in my twenties, trying to figure out what I'm going to do and who I am —which you have to do even when things are going great.

And so I was trying to throw myself into danger. I was always putting myself up against risk and the Pacific Crest Trail just happened to be a healthy way of doing that. All rites of passage entail an element of suffering, usually physical suffering, and I think I was enacting that on my hike with my heavy pack. I was enacting what I felt on the inside and it ended up being like a cure for me.

Second audience member: You wrote *Wild* long after the experience discussed in the book. What prompted you to write about this now?

Cheryl Strayed: When I was taking the hike, I wasn't thinking I'd write a book about this experience. I didn't take the hike to write a book about it, though I was a writer at the time. In *Wild*, I write about this book that I was writing in my head. That was my first book, *Torch*. That was the book I had burning in my bones and I had to write it. So I did that—*Torch* was published in 2006—and after that I started to think, what's the next story? The way I often find what I'm going to write next is by writing. All these years, people who know me would tell me: "You have to write about your hike on the Pacific Crest Trail." I'd say, "Until I have something to say about it, I don't want to write about it. We've all had adventures, traumas, dramas, we've all had all kinds of experiences, and that does not necessarily make a memoir."

The point of *Wild* is not, "I did something nobody's ever done before." A lot of people have hiked a long way, longer than me, better than me, braver than me, everything more than me. *Wild* does not hinge on: I did this big thing. What it does hinge on is the consciousness I brought to bear on this big thing. What do I have to say about this experience? So first of all, I needed to have some perspective. I needed the passage of years so I could understand myself in my twenties. When I was in my twenties, I was too close to the experience. As I grew up I could see what I'd passed through and how it was made manifest in my life.

After *Torch* came out, I thought, well, maybe I'll write a little bit about this hike. So I started writing an essay—I thought I had about twenty or thirty pages of material that I could tell about this hike—and I started writing it and I was writing and writing and I was maybe ninety pages in, and I still hadn't even set foot on the trail. And my writers' group kept saying, "This is a book, this is not an essay," and I kept saying, "Well, I'll trim it back," and they'd say "No, no, it's a book." And my husband had been telling me the same for years. So finally I realized I had a book.

Third audience member: The piece "Write Like a Motherfucker" is fantastic. I guess on the other side of that, as a professional writer, I have to meet deadlines every single day. How do you stop that and go back to the quiet place where things just kind of come? What is your advice?

Cheryl Strayed: I know, it's maddening! It's so hard, because you have to make a living, or most of us have to. I certainly had to, and have to still. So it's really this balance between doing things you have to do because you need the money so you can pay the electric bill, and then doing that thing you really care about, your passion. I've done different things over the years.

One of the things I did is I never made excuses for myself when it came to writing. I prioritized writing time. Even if that meant taking risks financially. I'd apply for residencies—places that give you a free place to live and they feed you and sometimes also provide a stipend—and go off and write for these intensive periods of time. That's why I was a waitress, because the job never meant anything to me, so I could quit. I'd quit my job if I got a residency or a grant and I'd go off and write.

The other thing I did more recently, once I became a mom and my kids were old enough that I could leave them for a short time, is I would just check into a hotel right near our house, you know, like, the Courtyard Marriott a half a mile from my house in Portland. I'd check in for two nights and I'd write more in those forty-eight hours than I would for weeks at home. So just finding all these different creative ways to say, this thing actually matters and we're gonna do it, and we're gonna do it whether we have the money or not, or we have two little kids, or whatever it is. And I know it's hard. I mean, I truly know it's just plain hard. But do your best. And really actually do your best. Ask yourself: *What is the best I can do?* And then do that.

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To contact *Guernica* or Cheryl Strayed, please write here (mailto:editors@guernicamag.com) .

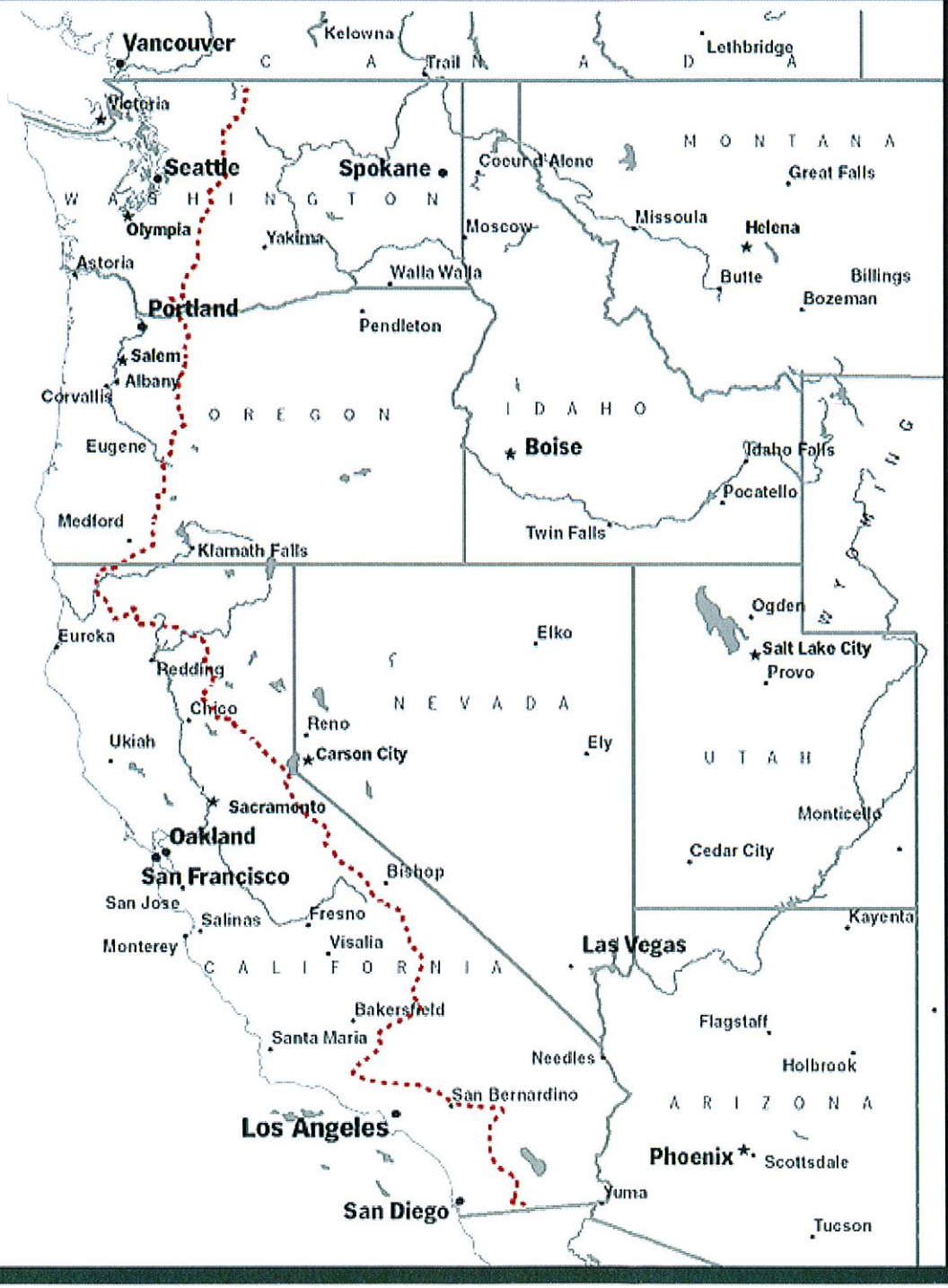
You might also like

Ondaatje's Table (http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/kumar_03_15_2012/) (http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/kumar_03_15_2012/) Michael Ondaatje on making fiction of un-remembered autobiography, holding back two-thirds of the story, and bringing the marginalized to the center

Natasha Lewis: Zadie Smith's NW and Big Ideas (http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/natasha-lewis-zadie-smiths-nw-and-big-ideas/) (http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/natasha-lewis-zadie-smiths-nw-and-big-ideas/)

Pacific Crest Trail

The Pacific Crest Trail spans 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada and passes through three states.



History

The PCT has a rich history that stretches back nearly a century. Beginning in the early 1930s, Clinton C. Clarke pushed forward the idea for the trail while battling a government system that couldn't fathom the idea. The story of the PCT continues to this day.

Timeline

- 1926 – first known record of a proposal for a trail through California, Oregon and Washington
- 1932 – Clinton Clarke, the "father of the PCT," begins promoting the trail
- 1930's – exploration begins
- 1935 – first meeting of the Pacific Crest Trail System Conference
- 1935 – 1938 – YMCA organizes relays to scout the trail's route
- 1939 – PCT appears on a federal government map for the first time
- 1940's – work halted due to WWII
- 1950's – advocacy work continues
- 1968 – designated as National Scenic Trail
- 1971 – Warren Rogers, Clinton Clarke's protégée, founds the Pacific Crest Trail Club
- 1973 – first Wilderness Press PCT guidebook is released
- 1977 – Pacific Crest Trail Conference incorporated
- 1987 – Pacific Crest Trail Club merges with Pacific Crest Trail Conference
- 1988 – monuments placed at the southern and northern terminuses
- 1992 – Pacific Crest Trail Conference changes its name to Pacific Crest Trail Association
- 1993 – Golden Spike "completion" ceremony, PCTA hires first paid staff
- 1997 – PCTA begins annual advocacy trips to Washington, D.C.
- 2000 – U.S. Forest Service hires full-time PCT Program Manager
- 2001 – U.S. Forest Service signs agreement with National Park Service for PCT land

acquisition work

- 2006 – PCTA adopts Strategic Plan
- 2010 – PCTA exceeds 100,000 volunteers hours with the help of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

Our history

The birth of the trail

It may be impossible to pinpoint the first person to propose the Pacific Crest Trail but published accounts tend to acknowledge the following people: **Catherine Montgomery** at the State Normal School in Bellingham, Wash.; a former Supervisor of Recreation for the U.S. Forest Service, **Fred W. Cleator**; and **Clinton C. Clarke** of Pasadena, Calif. According to author and mountaineer Joseph T. Hazard, Catherine Montgomery suggested the idea of a border-to-border trail to him in 1926. Fred. W. Cleator, who oversaw the Pacific Northwest Region of the Forest Service, outlined Oregon's Skyline Trail (a seminal link of the PCT) in 1920 and extended that trail to Oregon's north and south borders. Cleator also initiated plans for a similar trail in Washington. Clinton C. Clarke, founder of the Pasadena Playhouse and chairman of the Mountain League of Los Angeles, however, is often called the "father" of the PCT because he organized the Pacific Crest Trail System Conference in 1932 to promote the concept of a border-to-border trail.

Under Clarke's inspiration, the Pacific Crest Trail System Conference (a federation of hiking clubs and youth groups) devoted itself to developing an interconnected system of existing trails and new trails that would extend all the way from Canada to Mexico on or close to the crest of the mountainous western states. This was not a new idea, but unifying the many hiking groups for this cause was. Members of the conference included the Boy Scouts, YMCA, Sierra Club, Los Angeles County Department of Recreation, California Alpine Club, Mazamas of Portland, Mountaineers of Seattle, Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs, and the Shasta-Cascade Wonderland Associations. Clark served as president of the conference for 25 years. Renowned nature photographer Ansel Adams was a member of the executive committee. At the time, six segments of the system were already complete (the Cascade Crest Trail in Washington; Oregon Skyline Trail in Oregon; Lava Crest Trail in northern California; Tahoe-Yosemite Trail in California; John Muir Trail in California; and the Desert Crest Trail in southern California) and Clarke recruited Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) members to help plan and build remaining trail links, bridges, and structures.

Clarke also organized the YMCA PCT Relays, held during the summers of 1935 through 1938. During these relays, 40 teams of young hikers (ages 14-18) under the direction of a young YMCA outdoorsman named Warren Rogers (Rogers had driven to Pasadena to meet Clarke after reading a newspaper article about his PCT proposal) scouted a route for the trail. The hikers carried a log book north from Campo on the Mexican border, recording their adventures and route. On August 5, 1938, the final relay team reached milepost 78 on the Canadian border. The PCT Relays demonstrated that hikers could traverse the mountainous spine of three states using the available combination of trails, roads, and open country. Today, portions of the PCT follow the exact route walked by the YMCA relays. Rogers became the Conference executive secretary and began a life-long mission to organize support for a border-to-border trail along the Pacific Crest. He is credited with keeping the dream of the PCT alive until the 1960s when hiking and trails began to receive more national attention and garner enthusiasm.

A national treasure is created

On February 8, 1965 **President Lyndon B. Johnson** called for development and protection of a balanced system of trails to help protect and enhance the total quality of the outdoor environment, as well as to provide much needed opportunities for healthful outdoor recreation. Soon after, the Secretary of the Interior, **Stewart L. Udall** requested the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation to take the lead in a nationwide trail study. A four-member steering committee, representing four federal agencies, was appointed to conduct the study. The results were documented in a volume entitled "Trails for America" and were published in December 1966. Trails for America formed the basis for the original language of what was to become the National Trails System Act, passed by Congress on October 2, 1968.

The Act established policies and procedures for a nationwide system of trails consisting of national recreation, scenic, historic, and connecting or side trails. The Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail were designated as the nation's first national scenic trails.

A Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Advisory Council was appointed and held its first meeting in 1970. Rogers served as a member along with the co-founder of the American Hiking Society, **Louise Marshall**; a California trail equestrian, **Charles Vogel**; and Oregon Obsidian, **Larry Cash**. Other members represented cattle ranchers, timber and mineral interests, youth organizations, Native Americans, and each of the trail states.

At its second annual meeting in May 1971, the Council recommended approval of the Pacific Crest Trail "Guide for Location, Design, and Management." This guide became the management plan for the trail and has been used by the USDA Forest Service ever since.On January 30, 1973, after consultation with the states, Advisory Council members and participating agencies, the Forest Service published in the Federal Register the

selected route of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail.

The current Pacific Crest Trail Association was first chartered as the Pacific Crest Trail Conference in 1977 under the leadership of Rogers and **M. Merritt Podley**. It is the natural outgrowth of the Pacific Crest Trail System Conference and the Pacific Crest Trail Club (an individual membership group that Rogers founded for hikers and equestrians.)

Rogers ran the Conference and Club from his home in Santa Ana until his health failed him. He relinquished leadership to Vogel, Cash, and Marshall in the early 1980's and the Club was merged into the Conference.

Dedicated volunteers organize

The name was changed to the Pacific Crest Trail Association in 1992 to reflect the focus and volunteer structure of the new group as an individual membership organization, rather than a federation of outdoor clubs. The board of directors developed new bylaws for volunteer governance of the organization and took over the responsibilities of serving the membership.

In 1993, the PCTA signed a memorandum of understanding with the Forest Service, Park Service and the BLM. This agreement recognizes the PCTA as the federal government's major partner in the management and operation of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. In June of the same year, the Pacific Crest Trail Association joined the U.S. Forest Service and other land management agencies in celebrating the completion of the trail with a "Golden Spike" ceremony near Soledad Canyon in the Angeles National Forest. While the trail was declared complete, approximately 200 miles remain on private land and thus at risk of urban encroachment and impacts on resources. In some areas, the PCT runs through private land via right-of-way easements as narrow as just eight feet. Other portions of the PCT exist without easements, and work continues to secure the trail in optimal locations.

With assistance from the Forest Service, the Association hired its first full-time, paid executive director **Bob Ballou** (a former Boy Scout executive) and a membership services director **Joe Sobinovsky** (a 1995 thru-hiker) in 1996. At the time the Association had just 800 members and then-president **Alan Young** helped the PCTA to develop its first long-range plan that included growth to 5,000 members in just five years. The focus of the Association at that time was almost entirely on recruiting and training volunteers for trail maintenance. Then, in 1997 the Association became aware that segments of the trail on both private and public land in Agua Dulce, Calif., were on the auction block and that the conditions and continuity of the trail was in danger. With that the PCTA added "protection" of the trail to its mission. Today, the PCTA is "the voice" of the PCT, its steward, and its guardian, crucial to ensuring that the trail experience and the

opportunities for outdoor recreation it affords remain in keeping with the original vision of its founders.

History continues to be made with each hiker and equestrian who travels the trail, each member who joins the PCTA, each PCTA president, board of directors member, staff member, and volunteer who dedicates time and talent to help ensure that its border-to-border route is available for generations to come. It would be impossible to list here all of the people who have shaped the world-renowned PCT and have helped to keep the PCTA alive and well in order to continue its work to protect, preserve, and promote the trail. If your life has been touched by the PCT, you are a part of its history and significance. Special recognition however should be paid to the PCTA's past presidents for their invaluable leadership.

Articles

The following articles appeared in the *Pacific Crest Trail Communicator* magazine.


The Third Bestseller; Winter 2013


History in the Making: Marcus Moschetto; Fall 2013


FOUND: 1938 YMCA Relay Boy Marcus Moschetto; Spring 2013


Tween Years; Winter 2012


Boots and Saddles; Fall 2012


The Search for the PCT Relay Boys; September 2011


On the Trail with pioneer thru-hiker Teddi Boston; June 2011


No, it's Montgomery; March 2011


Discovering dad: A dusty trail leads to Clinton Clarke's handmade journal; December 2010


The Making of the first Pacific Crest Trail Guidebook; February 2010


The 1959 PCT Thru-ride of Don and June Mulford; December 2009


Ryback Returns; September 2009

Documents

National Trails System Act

This 1968 Act of Congress established our nation's network of National Scenic, Historic, and Recreation trails. It has been amended several times since 1968 with the addition of more National Trails.

PCNST Federal Register Notice

The PCT's selected route location was published in the Federal Register of January 30, 1973 (Vol. 38, #19, Part II).

PCNST Comprehensive Plan

The 1982 PCT Comprehensive Plan established guidelines for administering the trail. A 1978 Amendment to the National Trails System Act required a comprehensive plan to be submitted to Congress defining the development, management, and use of the trail. The plan was developed in consultation with the PCT Advisory Council, the Governors of California, Oregon, and Washington, the BLM and the National Park Service.

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Wild (Strayed) - Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions

1. "The Pacific Crest Trail wasn't a world to me then. It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map" (p. 4). Why did the PCT capture Strayed's imagination at that point in her life?

2. Each section of the book opens with a literary quote or two. What do they tell you about what's to come in the pages that follow? How does Strayed's pairing of, say, Adrienne Rich and Joni Mitchell (p. 45) provide insight into her way of thinking?

3. Strayed is quite forthright in her description of her own transgressions, and while she's remorseful, she never seems ashamed. Is this a sign of strength or a character flaw?

4. "I knew that if I allowed fear to overtake me, my journey was doomed. Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves, and so I chose to tell myself a different story from the one women are told" (p. 51). Fear is a major theme in the book. Do you think Strayed was too afraid, or not afraid enough? When were you most afraid for her?

5. Strayed chose her own last name: "Nothing fit until one day when the word strayed came into my mind. Immediately, I looked it up in the dictionary and knew it was mine...: to wander from the proper path, to deviate from the direct course, to be lost, to become wild, to be without a mother or father, to be without a home, to move about aimlessly in search of something, to diverge or digress" (p. 96). Did she choose well? What did you think when you learned she had assigned this word to herself—that it was no coincidence?

6. On the trail, Strayed encounters mostly men. How does this work in her favor? What role does gender play when removed from the usual structure of society?

7. What does the reader learn from the horrific episode in which Strayed and her brother put down their mother's horse?

8. Strayed writes that the point of the PCT "had only to do with how it felt to be in the wild. With what it was like to walk for miles for no reason other than to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets" (p. 207). How does this sensation help Strayed to find her way back into the world beyond the wilderness?

9. On her journey, Strayed carries several totems. What does the black feather mean to her? And the POW bracelet? Why does she find its loss (p. 238) symbolic?

10. Does the hike help Strayed to get over Paul? If so, how? And if not, why?

11. Strayed says her mother's death "had obliterated me.... I was trapped by her but utterly alone. She would always be the empty bowl that no one could fill" (p 267). How did being on the PCT on her mother's fiftieth birthday help Strayed to heal this wound?

12. What was it about Strayed that inspired the generosity of so many strangers on the PCT?

13. "There's no way to know what makes one thing happen and not another.... But I was pretty certain as I sat there that night that if it hadn't been for Eddie, I wouldn't have found myself on the PCT" (p. 304). How does this realization change Strayed's attitude towards her stepfather?

14. To lighten her load, Strayed burns each book as she reads it. Why doesn't she burn the Adrienne Rich collection?

15. What role do books and reading play in this often solitary journey?
(*Questions by publisher.*)

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