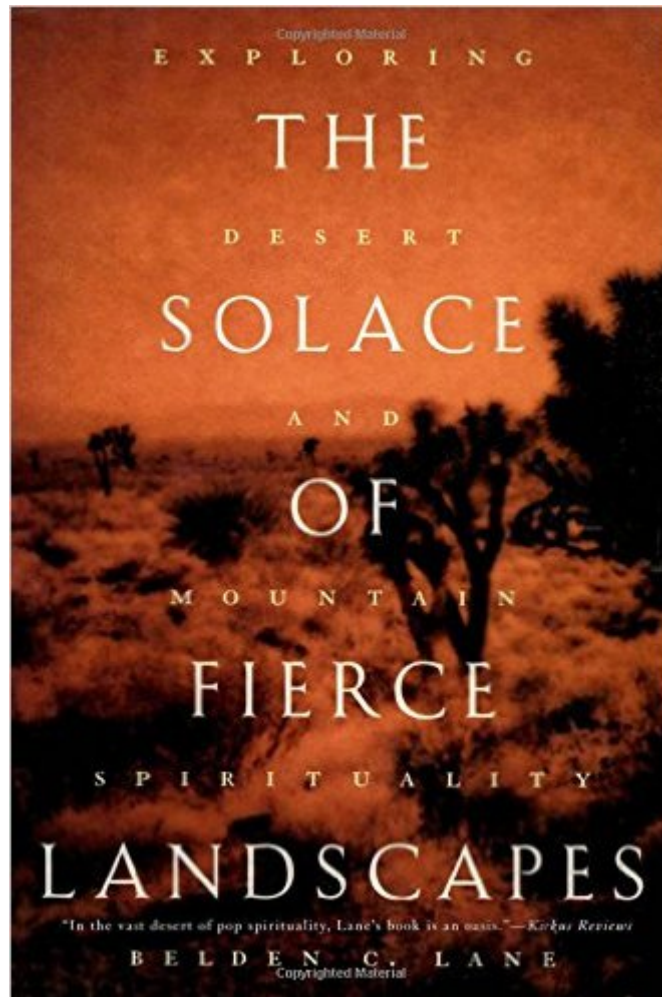


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The Solace Of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert And Mountain Spirituality



Synopsis

In the tradition of Kathleen Norris, Terry Tempest Williams, and Thomas Merton, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* explores the impulse that has drawn seekers into the wilderness for centuries and offers eloquent testimony to the healing power of mountain silence and desert indifference. Interweaving a memoir of his mother's long struggle with Alzheimer's and cancer, meditations on his own wilderness experience, and illuminating commentary on the Christian via negativa--a mystical tradition that seeks God in the silence beyond language--Lane rejects the easy affirmations of pop spirituality for the harsher but more profound truths that wilderness can teach us. "There is an unaccountable solace that fierce landscapes offer to the soul. They heal, as well as mirror, the brokenness we find within." It is this apparent paradox that lies at the heart of this remarkable book: that inhuman landscapes should be the source of spiritual comfort. Lane shows that the very indifference of the wilderness can release us from the demands of the endlessly anxious ego, teach us to ignore the inessential in our own lives, and enable us to transcend the "false self" that is ever-obsessed with managing impressions. Drawing upon the wisdom of St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhardt, Simone Weil, Edward Abbey, and many other Christian and non-Christian writers, Lane also demonstrates how those of us cut off from the wilderness might "make some desert" in our lives. Written with vivid intelligence, narrative ease, and a gracefulness that is itself a comfort, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* gives us not only a description but a "performance" of an ancient and increasingly relevant spiritual tradition.

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Customer Reviews

This is a most amazing book, impossible to classify. It is written on a number of levels at once; if you have read 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance', which broke new ground twenty years or so ago, you will know what I mean. The whole book is about prayer, in one way or another; I found it marvellous and beautifully written. If you are a desert dweller, this one is for you. The exploration of desert and mountain landscapes goes hand in hand with a reading of the apophatic traditions of prayer. "The desert practice of contemplative prayer abandons, on principle, all experiences of God or the self. It simply insists that being present before God, in a silence beyond words, is an end in itself....In the practice of contemplation, one comes eventually to embrace an apophatic anthropology, letting go of everything one might have imagined as constituting the self - one's thoughts, one's desires, all one's compulsive needs. Joined in the silence of prayer to a God beyond knowing, I no longer have to scramble to sustain a fragile ego but discern instead the source and ground of my being in the fierce landscape of God alone. One's self is ever a tenuous thing, discovered only in relinquishment. I recognize it finally as a vast, empty expanse opening out on to the incomparable desert of God". (pp 12-13) . . . "Apophatic spirituality has to start at the point where every other possibility ends. Whether we arrive there by means of a moment of stark extremity in our lives or (metaphorically) by way of entry into a high desert landscape, the sense of inadequacy remains the same. Prayer without words can only begin where loss is reckoned as total"

What a curious book this one is, joining three main narrative threads: spiritual journals of the author's experiences in desolate terrains, emotional journals of the author's mother's protracted and painful death, and historical chronicles of monastic places and practices. The candor, humility, and knowledge of the author is everywhere evident. Lane has as deep an awareness of theological writings as he has passionate appreciation for some fine desert writers (neither naturalists nor ecologists fits them better). I cannot say every page of this book provided easy going or smooth engagement, but that can hardly be said to be the point of the book. The author mentions the relative ordinariness of the lives of those who seek spiritual focus in these places. The ordinariness of these lives makes the strange ferocity of the surrounding landscapes more portentous. I came to this book seeking description of the fierce landscapes and was rewarded. The rest of the book made for bracing enrichment of the sort I can't say I commonly read (grief memoirs & theology).

This is a rare treasure among the multitude of contemporary books on spirituality. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in a fresh view on cultivating a sense of the divine in everyday life. A friend of mine gave me this book, impressed as she was by the lovely and compelling title,

and I have since read it through twice, and now refer to it often when I need an uplift for my soul (...often at night). I believe that this is a book for anyone seriously interested in finding real depth in their spiritual path. I am not the first to say this, but in a world of "user-friendly" and "feel good" religion and practices, this book reminds us of how difficult life can be, and of the power to be found in a dedicated heart. In the midst of his own personal trials, the author found deep wisdom, and solace, in his exploration of those who sought for God in remote places. He shares this with his readers in moving and profound ways, and I am grateful to the author that he has done so.

Simply a very good read. One needn't be familiar with the traditions of the Desert Fathers, apophatic theology, or the Yamabushi warrior traditions of Japan to feel a kinship with this work. Rather, a very serious subject is treated with great respect and sensitivity. Composer Alan Hovanesse writes, "Mountains are symbols of mankind's search for God," and Allen Ginsberg tells us, "Things are symbols for themselves." In this book, the mountain and the desert are allowed to both be symbols of the seeking soul and symbols of themselves--they are encountered as we internalize them in our quest, and they are encountered as they really are: cold, hard, lonely, and often dangerous. Mountains and deserts occur in cities as well. Should you find yourself struggling with one, this book may just be the companion you need.

Belden Lane has written a remarkable book. I so appreciate his modesty as exhibited, for example, at p. 217: "What little expertise I can offer to legitimate these words lies less in the training of a scholar than in the perseverance of the companero, one who has traveled with another through dangerous territory." Lane is a scholar and a good one. He knows how and when to document his sources. He is a theologian and a good one, one who appreciates the value of non-Christian religions. He is also a wounded and broken human being, like us all. His writing does not take us to the lofty heights of Theologia and Esoterica leaving us to wonder how to return to the Real World. Lane takes HIS woundedness (and if we would only will it, we the readers may let go and take OUR own woundedness with us as we journey with Lane) with him. It is Lane's lived experiences that make sense out of the lofty heights of Theologia and Esoterica, as well as the aridity Philosophia's desertscape. This is a great book and those who complain of its over-sentimentality totally miss the point. They may well be resisting dealing with their own woundedness.

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