

Anne LaBastille's *Woodswoman*
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I decided to read *Woodswoman* because of the various subtitles and blurbs of the book: "Woodswoman: Living Alone in the Adirondack Wilderness" and from the back cover, "Ecologist Anne LaBastille created the life that many people dream about... she built the cozy, primitive log cabin that became her permanent home... Most of all, she captures the struggles to balance her need for companionship and love with her desire for independence and solitude." I had originally planned to read this book near the end of the semester, closer to the time I would be living by myself. But when I finished wading through Thoreau for the first time (I plan on revisiting it often, if not entirely then at least in part), I needed a break, and LaBastille promised both a far easier read and a direct response to *Walden*. She delivered on both counts and this book proved the perfect antidote to *Walden's* dense, ponderous pages.

But first: the prose. It's a good thing she's had an interesting life, because her prose really does not go far on literary merit. Portions of the book have beautiful bits in there, but this book really made me appreciate Thoreau's craft. In fact, I think his longevity as a thinker in part comes from his ability to write so eloquently. *Walden* is a carefully conceived and incubated work. LaBastille, on the other hand, has no doubt put a great deal of time and effort into her book, but it does not have the intrinsic beauty of Thoreau's language. While she describes many beautiful things, the beauty of the work is all from imagining the external imagery, not the language used to portray it. This made me appreciate Thoreau and all the other writers I have read and am reading who are truly literary. It's not that LaBastille is a bad writer—she's not—but her target audience is *not* English majors.

In fact, she earns her living writing, so she is of course able to write grammatically and her prose carries one along quite rapidly. Where she really falls down is dialogue. ("“Oh, Nick...” ‘Ummmmm?’ ‘Isn't it amazing how times change? We've really had a walk through history...’”) Most of it, even between herself and her eventual lover, feels flat, forced, and incredibly staged. The book is also divided into very distinct chapters which sometimes seem only haphazardly organized. Thoreau's book was put together somewhat idiosyncratically, but it had a fluent arc. This book borders on random; it feels patchy. However, what it lacks in artistic prowess is more than made up for by being incredibly thought-provoking. And at times, LaBastille is able to really neatly encapsulate complex issues relating to her theme of wilderness and living a solitary life in it.

Woodswoman was published in 1976. It is addressed to an audience which is both interested in wildlife and conservation but perhaps not well-informed about it. In the 1850's, Thoreau's conservationism was seen as eccentricity, I think. In the 1970's, environmental conservation is starting to be taken seriously, but it's still a relatively new idea. Of course even today, many people do not have a conservation ethos, but it is a more established part of our culture. LaBastille writes as a literal tree-hugger just as that became a labeling term in society (her book has passages devoted to her experiences throwing her arms around trees and communing with them in the beginning and at the very end). I step away from the tree-hugger image because I don't want to be labeled as any one distinguishable "type"; she unwittingly was part of that label's formation.

As I read about her conservation viewpoint, a recurring theme in my reading became apparent. While I personally agree with fairly extreme conservation ideas—I am very much in favor of pristine wilderness—I also have tremendous reservations about the reality of pristine wilderness, and while I would love for everyone to have his or her own 22 acres of wooded serenity, I am aware of a more realistic world, one which is *not* polarized between city and rural life but has many in-betweens, all of which have populations—and all these populations need to be addressed. As a society, we’re past the point of no return when it comes to preserving our wilderness areas. We still have some beautiful sites (I’ve been to some of them), but people are no longer able to be pioneers like they once were. All land is charted. All land is disrupted. All water is polluted. We cannot go back as both Thoreau and, over a hundred years later LaBastille, argue we should.

But we can never go back. Time does not function in reverse and neither does human life or culture. What we can do is adjust and make positive changes as we go forward in the world. The conservation ethos is a pipe dream in many respects. It is a laudable ethos, I believe, but a deeply unrealistic one—worse, I think the idea of conservation and going back can lead to extreme frustration or total desperation, both states of mind which hinder greater progress. If you cannot enjoy and appreciate the nature which is still here, can still be wondered at, because of all the piles of extinct species and polluted waterways and raped soils—then you are losing the last of what you appreciate most.

It’s important to consider what has been lost and most urgently, what we are losing. But it is just as important to look around and see what we have, and what we can gain. LaBastille does offer many nice descriptions of nature—but they’re mainly tinged by her regret that the scenes she watches are on the decline. I believe that we must revel in what we have in order to gain enthusiasm for the next day and the next day’s work that can be done. I know that I am currently feeding my rabbits a mostly grain-based pellet and that the grain is most likely from unsustainable sources. Eventually, when I eat their meat, I will be eating by proxy some of that processed material that is so detrimental to our ecology and society. But in the meantime, I do this: I watch their animal-ness and marvel at their fluid motions and vivacity, and I know that when I kill them I will be making every effort to do it humanely and not to waste any part of the animal. It is not enough, in some ways, but it is *something*. It is a step, and I think current literature needs to focus on these forward steps, not the steps we shouldn’t have taken, or the ways we should backtrack. We will not backtrack. But we can still go forwards, and that can still be good.

Beyond the ecology, LaBastille has other interesting points to make. She is a wildlife ecologist so it makes sense that her book centers around those themes, but she’s also a woman, and that is another really interesting facet of the book for me. LaBastille is a divorced woman (in fact, while she had always loved wildlife and the outdoors, the divorce is the specific reason she must build her own cabin and learn to life self-reliantly), and there are several aspects of her experience which were incredibly timely for me to read about.

After the divorce, she is at the cabin for many years before she has any romantic encounters (at least that she writes about). Then a chance meeting leads to a two-year relationship with a man named Nick. Ultimately, however, they break up when he moves to Alaska, though he invited her to come. She chooses her professional career, cabin, and lifestyle over a serious romantic attachment. Part of this came from already feeling “certain psychological conflicts which had been building between Nick and [Anne]” (258). She goes on to discuss “the” independent woman’s dilemma:

I was constantly faced with a choice. To go ahead and act competently and independently, as I had been doing, thereby alienated the man I cared for. Then I

was forced to handle the situation in a most careful and diplomatic manner. Or, to act like a “dumb blonde” or “helpless female” to build up my man’s ego. Then I compromised my integrity. This conflict, I often reasoned, must be a basic concern of women’s liberation. It certainly was of mine. (259)

As I read this, I could not help but reflect on my own circumstances. Unlike LaBastille, of course, I have not been married or divorced. I also live in a far different time as far as women’s liberation goes. Yet “women’s liberation” is still an issue. We have been liberated, in theory, I believe, but gender roles are still prevalent and there are many firm associations with both genders. There are also increasingly blurred and blurry lines. In many ways I feel fortunate to have been raised by parents who actively sought to make me an individual, someone who does not feel constrained by gender roles. In many ways, they succeeded. I always reacted strongly against girlyness and typical gender associations. To my schoolmates, I kept my huge love for horses secret to avoid being pegged as yet another pony-crazy girl. I am happy to hold doors open for others, and I am a great person to call if you need to get rid of some insect, arachnid, or dead animal. I am not squeamish and I resent double-standards. I went to four proms with four separate people: I asked twice and got asked twice.

But “female” is a complicated thing to be. I admire LaBastille tremendously for remaining feminine while rejecting assumptions of things she could not do because she was female. *That*, in my mind, is the best kind of feminism—not the kind of “equality” that calls for women to be more manly (after all, what is that but a glorified way of exulting the male gender in the name of so-called equality?) but the kind of attitude that says “yes I am a woman, and I can do anything!” LaBastille is a strong individual, and that is more important than being a strong woman. She never shies away from talking about things like going skinny dipping (which she does regularly) or wearing a bikini. She does not sound constrained or frumpy in the least. She often wears her hair in pigtails. Yet she also becomes a fairly skilled lumberjack, sets up her own plumbing system, and can basically always “keep up with the boys.”

Ah, but this has to be more complex! She *is* a fierce, independent woman—incredibly so—but she is not immune to loneliness as Thoreau seemed to be. From Thoreau’s account, he was always so happy to be left alone. But LaBastille has mixed feelings about her solitary existence, and I think part of this may be the difference between living alone with lots of visitors in an easily-accessible place for just a couple years, versus living alone in an extremely secluded place for many years and the foreseeable future. In the chapter about making the decision to stay in the Adirondacks instead of following Nick to Alaska, LaBastille writes, “The loneliness which swept back into the cabin was different from what I’d felt when I first moved in. This time there was a tinge of relief, a feeling of having made the right decision; yet the heaviness was as bad as before. ... I have a great need for love—to get it and give it—but it’s hard to find, living alone in the woods” (260).

I look up to her, I want to emulate her in many ways, and I also have these exact worries about love and loneliness. Over the summer, I was in a relationship that turned sour when he expected gender roles to switch once we were dating. More recently, I got into another, slightly healthier relationship. While I am currently still in that relationship, current stresses have me questioning whether or not I “need” to be in a relationship (my conclusion? a defiant NO). I worry about ending up alone, as many of the decisions I want to be making could easily lead to a very solitary life, but I also worry about choosing someone who restricts my ambitions, because I have them, they’re rather unconventional, and I am a somewhat unconventional personality to deal with in the meantime. I’m also not willing to sacrifice my primary goals for someone else’s, which is something I think many women eventually do.