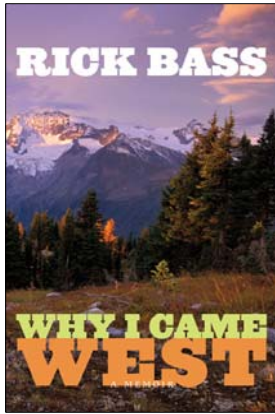


BERNARD QUETCHENBACH

## Review: *Why I Came West* by Rick Bass

The first thing one is likely to notice in considering Rick Bass's *Why I Came West* is the apparent inappropriateness of its packaging. The book is subtitled "a memoir," but a reader is quickly immersed in something half lament, half position statement. There's not much in the way of meditative



recollection here, especially in the defining middle chapters. We're told things about Bass's beloved Yaak Valley, but told them with little texture or sense of immediate experience. We're provided with lists of places—Mt. Henry, Northwest Peak—and of animals that call the Yaak home; as symbols of wilderness, grizzlies and wolverines get a particularly intensive workout in this regard. But the animals themselves rarely appear; we must be satisfied with rosters of species, sometimes accompanied by their relative abundance. Bass's twenty-one years of environmental activism—he makes sure to let us know he's been at it for twenty-one years—is largely undifferentiated.

After a thoughtful but labored introduction centered on whether affinities to places are innate or experiential, we find out that Bass is a native Texan, but the "dailiness and drama of my childhood" (23) is delivered in broad strokes, though not without evocative imagery. Bass offers a haunting recollection of riding to church each Sunday past "Wolf Corner," so dubbed for its gradually dwindling fencepost display of coyote and red wolf skins "hanging like loose shingles after a storm" or "still limp and soft, like sheaves of tobacco" (22). Bass's first sojourn in the Rocky Mountain region was as a college student following in the cinematic footsteps of the movie mountain man Jeremiah Johnson. When some years later he happened upon the Yaak, he was seeking to trade in his "previous life" as a Mississippi petroleum geologist for something, maybe anything, else. Like a typical American, Bass was instinctively aware that new beginnings are available beyond the hundredth meridian.

One of the most difficult things to like about *Why I Came West* is its tendency to hero worship, especially since the hero in this case is none other than Bass himself. He makes sure to let us know how long-suffering he is (Did I mention he's been at it for twenty-one years?), that he and his family have been subjected to the unwarranted hatred of their neighbors, and that in service to his cause he has given up his opportunity to create "pretty little stories" and "beautiful little poems" (130). Bass seems not to be aware that he has over those twenty-one years become a rather successful writer, with a widely admired body of work including novels and stories as well as collections of nature and advocacy nonfiction. All of our careers should be so neglected. And the deprecation of literary writing seems somewhat unsettling coming from a writer who tells us he wants more than anything to produce more of it. Apparently Bass believes that literature can provide only elegy for what has been lost, a reductionist stance belied by his own accomplishments, to say nothing of the work of, for instance, Wendell Berry or Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Despite these reservations, *Why I Came West* actually has quite a bit to recommend it. Bass occasionally discovers startling insights, as when he compares the densely layered ecology of

the Yaak Valley to the intricacies of the Russian novel. He tempers his self-importance with a clear-headed awareness that “the footprint or sinprint of even the most virtuous among us is but a shade of gray’s difference, really, from that of some stogie-puffing cow-eating whiskey-gulping oil company CEO” (100). What Bass has to say about the fragility of language, though not completely original, is useful and revealing when set in the context of the working life of a dedicated writer-activist. His discussions of the potential to become “plagued with—hypnotized by—indecision” (92) and other pitfalls of the activist’s life are firmly based on hard-earned experience and provide valuable caveats to anyone considering embarking on such a life.

About two-thirds of the way through *Why I Came West*, in a chapter bearing the rather Thoreauvian title “Who We Are, What We Do,” the book finally makes good on its memoir promise as Bass introduces the small but dedicated community of Yaak activists. This chapter is significant not only for its own clarity of memory, but because it seems to alter the trajectory of the book, allowing an older, more relaxed Bass to emerge. Bass drops his guard enough to offer some much-needed self-deprecating humor in his chapter on accidents with bear spray. Not only is relief provided from the book’s propensity to reiterate its basic points, but as Bass recounts his history of pepper-spray mishaps the texture of his life in the Yaak comes to the fore. We find him gathering berries with his daughters, and, on another occasion when his bear gun is accidentally engaged by a dog in his car, we watch him reeling drunkenly in the road, a passing motorist pausing briefly before moving on, “not wanting to intrude” on his apparent binge (176). Indeed, the narration becomes a bit too slack when Bass resorts to sharing a favorite lobster recipe. In these last few chapters, though, we see Bass as part of a natural and human community and partake in the valued friendships and associations that that community has brought him; the activist’s life may be a lonely one, but Bass has come to be a link in a network of connections extending from the backrooms of Montana politics to the wildlands of Namibia, an axiomatic linkage of the local and the global.

*Why I Came West* is one of those books that leave a reader more satisfied at the end than might be thought possible at any time during the reading. The digressive obscurity of the introduction dissolves as one realizes, along with Bass himself, that he has found his purpose through a complex alchemy of interior and exterior forces that ultimately resolve into something like vision. A mellowed, more pragmatic Bass details his latest prescription for preserving the fourteen unroaded areas that are the core of the Yaak. For Bass this quest has been both consuming and exhaustive, and he is left hoping that his dream will be realized before, like Rhett Butler, he loses his sense of its importance. There’s still a hint of a Messiah complex—Bass longs for the day when he will no longer be an indispensable element in Yaak preservation. But anyone who has devoted two decades of life to a single cause, a single place, has earned his spot on the soapbox. And if his latest effort, or the sum total of his efforts, brings forth the preservation of the roadless Yaak and a new level of community among its 150 human residents, his contribution may prove long lasting and significant. If along the way he finds the time and energy to produce a few of the “pretty little” stories and poems he longs for to complete his legacy, he may find that, far from being just a self-indulgent reward, they too have the capacity to change the world.