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A WONDROUS NEW BOOK OF MCPHEE'S PROSE PIECES—IN MANY ASPECTS HIS MOST PERSONAL IN FOUR DECADES

The brief, brilliant essay "Silk Parachute," which first appeared in *The New Yorker* a decade ago, has become John McPhee's most anthologized piece of writing. In the nine other pieces here—highly varied in length and theme—McPhee ranges with his characteristic humor and intensity through lacrosse, long-exposure view-camera photography, the weird foods he has sometimes been served in the course of his reportorial travels, a U.S. Open golf championship, and a season in Europe "on the chalk" from the downs and sea cliffs of England to the Maas valley in the Netherlands and the champagne country of northern France. Some of the pieces are wholly personal. In luminous recollections of his early years, for example, he goes on outings with his mother, deliberately overturns canoes in a learning process at a summer camp, and germinates a future book while riding on a jump seat to away games as a basketball player. But each piece—on whatever theme—contains somewhere a personal aspect in which McPhee suggests why he was attracted to write about the subject, and each opens like a silk parachute, lofted skyward and suddenly blossoming with color and form.

Silk Parachute Details

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Author : John McPhee

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From Reader Review Silk Parachute for online ebook

Leland William says

John McPhee is a wonderful writer. In this collection of essays, he takes us on tours of the chalky Cretaceous deposits that underly the English Channel and spans Southern England and Northern France, the history and emerging popularity of lacrosse, the painstaking process of capturing images with a Deardorff camera, and the thorough nature of the New Yorker fact checking team to name a few.

The uniting factor in these essays is McPhee's plain and elegant prose. He has a marvelous way of leading the reader patiently down into the weeds of whatever topic he has chosen, and once he is down there, teaching you something.

I didn't give this collection a high rating because unlike *Coming Into the Country*, it had no thematic through-line. *Silk Parachute* is a collection of random essays from the *New Yorker*, and they are each insularly delightful, but do not really make an impression as a whole, unless you are student of McPhee's style. But for this alone, I would recommend the book. McPhee is a good reminder that you don't have to do anything fancy to write with poise and beauty.

Ann Michael says

I just love McPhee. I found myself reading a long essay on lacrosse with deep, almost emotional interest. And lacrosse has never appealed to me before. That's what great writing can do.

But my favorite pieces are two short memoir-type essays, one on canoeing and one the title essay.

I fervently hope Mr. McPhee never dies.

Darwin8u says

"It's a landscape with the aspect of memory."

Laura McPhee or Virginia Beahan talking about the landscape around Trenton, NJ (I'm not sure who exactly is being quoted, it might be a slight narrative allusion to the title and subject of this essay, and McPhee is playing with the reader a bit) in *"Under the Cloth"* by John McPhee

I bought this book almost 8 years ago. I'm not sure why I didn't read it in 2010. It was shelved next to the remaining 8-9 McPhee books I haven't read and not forgotten, just postponed. Well, I jumped back into reading McPhee again (I can't sip McPhee, he is best consumed in large quantities until exhausted). I was sent a copy of his most recent book of essays: *The Patch*. And it got me rolling again. I want to finish, catch-up, complete McPhee before he is 90 (March 8, 2021). So I need to get to work again.

The book consists of several (six?) essays that appeared in the *New Yorker* (no surprise to ANYONE the least bit familiar with either the *New Yorker* or McPhee). It also begins and ends with short essays and also includes a couple essays not found outside this book (that I can find):

1. "Silk Parachute" - A short, beautiful introductory essay about his mother and childhood.
2. "Season on the Chalk" - 3/12/2007
3. "Swimming with Canoes" - 8/10/1998
4. "Warming the Jump Seat" - A short essay about writing about Mr. Boyden, headmaster of Deerfield Academy, profiled in two articles in the New Yorker in 1966, and eventually, put into a book published by FSG titled: The Headmaster: Frank L. Boyden of Deerfield
5. "Spin Right and Shoot Left" - 3/23/2009
6. "Under the Cloth" - An essay about the dual photography of McPhee's daughter Laura (I just ordered a couple of her books on Amazon) and Virginia Beahan (a form/version of this essay originally appeared as an afterword in their book of photographs, titled: 'No Ordinary Land: Encounters in a Changing Environment'). I was happy to see that Ariel Katz, in her wonderful essay "Photography and Language in John McPhee's 'Under the Cloth'" came away with the same impression I did earlier and above in my lead quote by Laura or Virginia:

"The way McPhee structures his essay mirrors his subject matter: much of the dialogue in the essay isn't attributed to either photographer, giving their words the effect of having emerged, at times, as a chorus from inside the camera with which they work. Although they're making visual art, language, as McPhee observes, is key to their collaboration. He writes, 'Neither one is hesitant with words. In the span of their work together, words by the tens of thousands, in every conceivable category, have been muffled by the dark cloth.'"

7. "My Life List" - 9/3/2007
8. "Checkpoints" - 2/9/2009
9. "Rip Van Golfer" - 8/6/2007
10. "Nowheres" - A touching and brief concluding essay on the beauty of New Jersey, McPhee's home.

Anyway, you can read 6/10 of essays and probably 8/10 of the text directly from the New Yorker if you don't run out of free views (I did just checking for this essay) or you can subscribe (I will next year) or you can just buy the damn book from FSG. It really was a delight on a day of delights (Thanksgiving). I am grateful, every year, for John McPhee.

Gary Spagnoli says

Everything McPhee writes I'll give 5 stars to - but there are some essays that're weak and meandering... the chalk on the coasts of England was very boring to me, and my limited knowledge of the geography didn't help me stay interested...

This still gets 5 stars because his essay on lacrosse alone was fantastic. Lax Rats forever. His sports writing is always top notch.

Heather says

A friend mentioned this book back in March, saying she'd read a review of it that made her think she'd like it, and wondering if I'd heard of McPhee. Since he writes for the New Yorker, and I'm one of those New Yorker subscribers who reads every single article, even if it doesn't immediately seem to be about something I'm interested in, I figured I must have read his work, but still couldn't place his name. Then I looked in the New Yorker's digital archive and realized he'd written a 2007 piece called "Season on the Chalk," about the chalk landscapes of Europe, including bits about geology and wine-making and WWII history, which I'd entirely

forgotten about until I saw it there. But once I heard the title I remembered liking it so much I tore the whole thing out of the magazine and kept it for a while, because it was just so good. Here's the start of that essay, which is included in this book:

The massive chalk of Europe lies below the English Channel, under much of northern France, under bits of Germany and Scandinavia, under the Limburg Province of the Netherlands, and—from Erith Reach to Gravesend—under fifteen miles of the lower Thames. My grandson Tommaso appears out of somewhere and picks up a cobble from the bottom of the Thames. The tide is out. The flats are broad between the bank and the water. Small boats, canted, are at rest on the riverbed. Others, farther out on the wide river, are moored afloat—skiffs, sloops, a yawl or two. Tommaso is ten. The rock in his hand is large but light. He breaks it against the revetment bordering the Gordon Promenade, in the Riverside Leisure Area, with benches and lawns under oaks and chestnuts, prams and children, picnics under way, newspapers spread like sails, and, far up the bank, a stall selling ice cream. He cracks the cobble into jagged pieces, which are whiter than snow. Chalked graffiti line the revetment and have attracted the attention of Tommaso, who now starts his own with the letter "R". (p 9)

I love that so much: the pace of it, the way it sets the scene; I love this whole essay for the way it's about landscape/place, the way it mingles broad historical fact with personal experience. I love how wonderfully precise McPhee can be, with sentences like this: "An armada of swans, in single file, swims out from near the shore and toward the center of the river—thirty-eight swans" (p 10).

And while others of McPhee's essays don't excite me quite as much, I still admire the way he writes, the care and pleasure it seems he takes in it, whether he's writing about his mother or canoeing or eating unusual meats (puffin, weasel, bear) or lacrosse. (Yes, I sometimes wished that particular essay (which is 58 pages) would hurry up and be done already, but that's more a comment on my tastes than on McPhee's writing. And when I did finish the essay on lacrosse, moving on to an essay about antique view cameras/his daughter's photographic collaborations with Virginia Beahan (really pleasing landscapes, like this and this), I forgot my boredom and was delighted all over again by the McPhee's particular mix of description and detail and humor.) Also really pleasing: an essay about unusual foods, an essay about fact-checking that's in large part a paean to fact-checkers.

Michael says

Two delightful long essays and 8 short ones that simply tantalize. "Season on the Chalk" compresses history and geology of chalk in England and continental Europe in a fine thread with surprising people and events from the Romans, who build much with chalk, to modern champaign arbors, which depend on chalk holding water. "Spin Right and Shoot Left" is a fun ride on the history of lacrosse. Like a good chef, McPhee makes a reliably good dish out of available ingredients at hand, making a lie out of any initial perspective that you know nothing about and care little about lacrosse. Started by the Iriquois Nations in the 19th century, how was it that it was adopted first by Ivy League and prep schools, then moved to hotbeds Baltimore, Long Island, and Colorado, then grew exponentially? Between 2007 and 2009, 600 new public high schools adopted the sport. Read and learn about how it has more affinity with basketball than any other sport.?

Lenora Good says

This is a delightful collection of essays by John McPhee. A real treat. I have several of his books, and this is a great addition to my library. McPhee writes on a myriad of topics—from childhood (his) to the rules of La Crosse. He picks topics I've never considered that I needed to know anything about—and you know what? I did need to know about them!

If you enjoy great writing, read John McPhee. Get hooked on his stuff. Believe me, it's a good addiction. Many of his essays are long, book length, single topic (Oranges is one), this is a compilation of shorter ones. I've yet to be disappointed in reading McPhee.

Tony says

This is the cool stuff that they don't teach in school.

-- Rattlesnakes, for all their evolutionary perfection, are not the brightest creatures. "If a line of people walks past a rattlesnake, it aims at the first person, strikes at the second, and hits the third."

-- *In the way that a placer miner can look at a nugget and say what stream it came from, a lacrosse coach can watch an unknown player for a while and write down his home address.*

-- The performance enhancing food for Olympic marathoners and such is *Vespa mandarinia japonica*, actually synthetic hornet juice, but what our author calls bee spit. The Japanese giant hornet "flies about a hundred kilometers a day ingesting but not digesting small insects, which it carries home in globular form to feed its larvae. The juice that goes for the gold is in the larvae. While the adult feeds the larvae, the larvae reciprocate with fresh juice, a blend of seventeen amino acids." If you're not a marathoner, or such, you can sit on the sofa, drink the bee spit, and are guaranteed to lose weight.

-- The worst checking error for a magazine fact checker is calling people dead who are not dead. "It really annoys them," McPhee quotes one fact checker. He tells the story of one reader in a nursing home who read in *The New Yorker* that he was the *the late* reader in a nursing home. He called, demanding a correction. The magazine complied of course, in its next issue, "inadvertently doubling the error, because the reader died over the weekend while the magazine was being printed."

-- Glaciation has replaced an asteroid or volcano as the leading theory for the cause of the mass extinction that wiped out the dinosaurs.

You would have thought that McPhee's essay about the U.S. Open played at Oakmont Country Club would be my favorite, but I preferred reading about exotic foods, lacrosse, the tunnels in the Maastrichtian chalk where Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" sat out World War II. I liked reading about the fact checkers the most. This is something you either get or you don't. Like if an author writes the phrase "Penn's daughter Margaret", the fact checker's challenge becomes whether to put commas around *Margaret* or not put commas around *Margaret*. In other words, did William Penn have one or more daughters. *Margaret, one of Penn's several daughters, went into the book without commas.*

With every essay, I thought "He would like this" or "She has to read this." Let me scroll down my list of GR friends and look and see if there's anyone who would be as delighted as I was.....reading an essay about

commas.

John Brugge says

Agree with another reviewer who said this is a very personal book of McPhee's. Also very playful, with lots of dry humor.

HBalikov says

I like McPhee no matter what he chooses to write about. These are former New Yorker pieces that I missed. Some would downgrade the book because it lacks cohesion, but not me. He writes so well whether discussing the geology of chalk or the historical significance of lacrosse that I can't get enough.

Jim says

A mixed bag of essays by an author I really like. I enjoyed his essay on the chalk lands of England and France; canoeing as a youth (which brought back fond memories for me); and fact checking. Several seemed quite personal for him. Overall most were pretty good, though I gave up on a couple of others.

Jim says

The amazing thing about John McPhee is that he can hold one's attention even when the subject matter is not otherwise interesting. The longest essays in Silk Parachute are about lacrosse and golf, neither of which sports is to my taste. Yet the great mass of details he presents somehow make the reader wonder what's next. That is no mean talent.

To date, I have read a dozen of McPhee's books, and I'm not finished yet.

Charles Matthews says

When I was a magazine editor, I always held up McPhee as a model for my writers: Find a subject that hasn't been overdone, I would say, then research the hell out of it and write about it beautifully. Easier said than done, of course. McPhee is the master of the "gee-whiz" article: the one that tells you all sorts of stuff that you didn't know you didn't know, or that you are fascinated to find out about. Granted, even I didn't want to know as much about the Swiss army as McPhee decided to tell his New Yorker readers. And maybe McPhee got too fascinated by geology, leaving some of us wishing for more stuff like Oranges or The Pine Barrens. And maybe Tracy Kidder has lately been leaving McPhee in the dust. But I don't know anyone who writes better prose -- fiction or non-fiction.

The prose is still good in this volume, but it's on the whole disappointing. What strikes me most, especially about the longer pieces in the book, is the lack of structure in McPhee's essays. In "Season on the Chalk," he hops about from place to place in England and France with only the loosest of transitions; he lards "Spin Right and Shoot Left" with lists and catalogs, such as the roster of fifty-three colleges that sent coaches to an exhibition of potential varsity lacrosse players; his piece on the U.S. Open golf tournament, "Rip Van Golfer," is distractingly scattered among observations of place, observations of players, and observations of himself as observer. It doesn't help that I have little interest in either lacrosse or golf, but McPhee used to be able to hold my interest in even things that I wouldn't be inclined to read about.

Still, no magazine writer that I know of finds more curious and illuminating things to say about whatever he writes about. I just wish for an editor that would prune his excesses.

Sairam Krishnan says

My first complete McPhee, and this was fun. Narrative non-fiction, slowly, meticulously, almost wondrously crafted. You can feel it in the rhythm of the words sometimes. A couple of pieces in *Silk Parachute* are squibs, but the two long pieces on Lacrosse and Golf more than make up for them.

Anyway, there's a lot more of him to read, and this one may be a good start.

Susan says

This collection of essays from master wordsmith John McPhee ranges across various subjects, including golf, lacrosse, photography, geology, and strange foods he has eaten. He's a dazzlingly good writer regardless of subject, but I found the autobiographical essays like the title piece the most engaging.
