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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Englehard, Michael. *Where the Rain Children Sleep: A Sacred Geography of the Colorado Plateau*. Guilford, Conn.: The Lyons Press, 2004. 206 pp. Bibliography. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 1-59228-261-X.

Reviewed for H-NILAS by Leslie Van Gelder (lvangeld@waldenu.edu), Graduate Faculty, Walden University

*Rivers and Canyons of Paradox: Sacred Geographies and Storied Landscapes*

When I encounter a nature writer whose work is new to me, I fall into an old habit of reading and then imagining what it would be like to go for a walk with this person in his/her literary terrain. Thus I've pictured myself over the years on imaginary hikes in the Himalayas with Peter Matthiessen, birdwatching at the refuge with Terry Tempest Williams, or walking across the Connemara Bog with Patricia Monaghan and Tim Robinson, not to mention composing poor mountain haikus while climbing with Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. In reading Michael Englehard's *Where the Rain Children Sleep* I found myself paddling white water, rock climbing up sheer canyon walls, and sleeping out under the stars in the Red Rock country of the Colorado Plateau. Englehard's wilderness is one shaped by a landscape of paradox where he faces the continual challenge of loving a place and fearing for its loss; loving his own solitude and trying to share that solitude with others. As he describes throughout the book, he is ever in a hard place from which there are no easy routes out.

Englehard, a cultural anthropologist and *Outward Bound* guide, writes from twenty years of experience in the Red Rock country of the Colorado Plateau. All of the book's fourteen essays share a common theme: in each he describes his journey into in an inaccessible place. There, he climbs, he sweats, he paddles valiantly, he struggles with the landscape, he discovers things left behind by previous explorers in whose shoes he finds himself, and above all, he experiences the mixed feelings of a sense of wonder about these places and a sense of loss in that the modern world is spoiling them. He would like to keep them safely guarded and protected but he is well aware that this is impossible. Filled with the struggle of paradox, he would both like to be our tour guide to these sacred places and to keep us out of them, because our very presence destroys their

sacredness both to him and to the people of the region. Englehard clearly has deep respect and admiration for the aboriginal inhabitants of the land. Throughout his writing, he weaves traditional stories of the Dine' (Navajo) to reinforce his understanding of the older stories of the land and to bring their stories to a contemporary audience and demonstrate their continued relevance.

To the fan of Edward Abbey, Jack Turner, and Doug Peacock, Englehard is another fellow traveler out on a solitary journey through the canyons. If these are among the writers you treasure, Englehard's work will resonate and speak to the paradox of love and rage in lands that the writer holds sacred. The center of the book is in fact an imaginary journey with John Wesley Powell and Edward Abbey where at the outset Englehard admits that "though normally not prone to gushing or hero worship, I have to admit that Abbey's words did change my life" (p. 100).

If, however, you find those writings filled with a undercurrent of bravado of how many tough scrapes the narrator's gotten out of and how dedicated to his river running "addiction" (p. 101) he is, you will find this book to be filled with an overly familiar set of images. Englehard tells us when he drinks from pools, "kissing puddles," that "with a full backpack, subsequent push-ups make for excellent exercise" (p. 167) and that at the end of one of his hikes where he intentionally tried to get lost, he "is craving fat so badly I could chew plain butter sticks" (p. 170). While the reader may be thrilled to know of how tough each of his situations is, whether his "calves and thighs are crosshatched from bushwacking" or "a cactus spine is lodged in my little toe," (p. 151) these accounts often feel like tedious intrusions of Englehard's own character into pieces in which he has tried not to be the subject. These are the places where he is the outdoor guide engaging in the time honored tradition of attempting to win the campfire prize of having suffered the most to experience the inaccessible beauties of the world. I do not believe these are the point or message of his book, but their presence detracts from the great gems this book otherwise holds.

Englehard is at his best when he is the historian instead of the man struggling against the wild. Through his descriptions, the reader comes to understand the experiences of Anglo explorers and the Dine' people. With true artist's craft, he carefully interweaves the stories of the land and the modern realities of damming and mining in a way that brings the two more strongly into contrast through their juxtaposition. He writes, "The land, which my eyes skim, is not wilderness, has not been wilderness for more than ten thousand years. It is storied. It is a palimpsest of a past that is still vibrant and inhabited. I am trying to understand the forces that pushed and pulled people across such rugged and dry terrain, creating their geography of fear and desire" (p. 40). His histories are filled with the names of explorers, both the well known like John Wesley Powell and the less well known like John Wetherill and Charles Bernheimer who tried to find an inland route to Rainbow Bridge. More importantly, though, his stories are the stories which form the bedrock of place names, for as he most accurately writes, "A scatter of names distinguishes every place from every other place. It creates a vocabulary of belonging that roots each one of us in the world" (p. 18). In that rooting through Englehard's writing, we learn the storied histories of Sunset Crater, Devil's Canyon, Desolation Canyon, Matthew's Peak/ Chezhin Nashjini, Meat Rock, Death Hollow, and many, many others.

In the essay "The Occupied Earth," Englehard describes the two complementary forms of spoken word histories among the Dine' people. These stories, the sacred and the secular, overlap and give a deep picture of the world. Using this same model, the interweaving of the sacred and the secular, he expresses the stories of the land and his own spiritual awakenings as a self-proclaimed "Blue Domer" (which describes his belief that "the prodigious desert sky forms the vault under which I worship" (p. ix)). His holy world is challenged by a devil in the form of "the pus-colored, bloated discharge from a distant coal-burning power plant" (p. 28) that is the fiend of Devil's Canyon. In juxtaposition, he is filled with the wonder of creation where "in the mirror halls of the mind. . .hundreds of song lines sing as many canyons into existence. Memory is tied to places, and so is creation" (p. 82). His place of eternal damnation, should we have any doubt, "comes fully furnished with neon-lit office cubicles, rush hour, hospital corridors, fifty different brands of toothpaste, tax forms, Rush Limbaugh and Jerry Springer, Wal-Mart, Burger King, celebrity autobiographies. . .and off-road vehicles" (p. 21). His heaven leaves him, instead, with much more wonder, and many fewer words.

When Englehard chooses to describe the intimacy of his moments in wild places and what impact they have on him, he becomes the poet, the quiet observer, and there he is able to capture some of the ubiquitous wordlessness of the wild. Like Terry Tempest Williams, another literary inhabitant of the same country, in the Escalante area he finds himself trying to express "the resonance of the heart struck with beauty" (p. 145). If I were to ask him to tell us his stories again, I would want to know more of these moments, even if he does "guard a place like this deep within" (p. 145) because these moments of grace are far more compelling to me than the thrill of the rapids or the knowledge that he knows to bring twelve quarts of water and a Tecate beer into the backcountry with him on hard hikes. Instead, I prefer him at his best, when he contemplates his own death and then sees Edward Abbey and John Wesley Powell as his models. "I fervently wish for their respective brands of courage," he writes. "I hope when my time comes to embark, I will be able to let go, to entrust myself to the current. I may not be saved, but shall be safe on its wide shoulders. Knowing it will carry me. Knowing it will deliver me, back to the source" (p. 123).

Since there have been precious few new books by nature writers in the last few years, it is good to hear a new voice speaking to the complexities of the Colorado Plateau and the Red Rock country. Englehard's facility with language and poetic imagery, as well as his capacity to bring history to life, make him an engaging voice on the nature writing landscape. I hope that once he feels more comfortable in his own desire "to wield the pen as well as the paddle" (p. 106) we'll really be able to feel more of the depth of his encounters with the places he calls wild. I look forward to that literary evolution, because the potential and the emotions of loving the world, feeling its pains, and giving voice to its stories, both ancient and new, are certainly deep in the waters and canyons of Michael Englehard's world.



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