

AWOL on the Appalachian Trail by David Miller

Book Notes

“It is disturbing how tenuous our potential is due to our fervent defense of the comfortable norm.”

Overall impression:

- Presented a good, descriptive overview of a northbound hike and what to expect as far as weather, terrain, trail conditions, difficulty.
- Compelling narrative with sprinkles of characters the author met on the trail (though we never really get to know any other hikers that intersected with Awol’s time on the trail. This book was not about the people on the trail. It was about the trail. And even without fully fleshed out characters, it was a compelling read that kept drawing me forward towards the natural end...Mt. Katahdin. I knew enough about the trail already to look forward to his description and handling of the highlights—the White Mountains and the navigation of the hut system, the Knife’s Edge, the Mahoosuc Notch. I was left knowing more about Awol’s feet than about any one aspect of the trail, so I was a bit disappointed for that. Yet, something kept pulling me forward, one page after another.
- This would be a great first book for anyone looking to learn more about a thru-hike. It’s a perfect primer.
- I’m left craving more—more about the other hikers on the trail; more afterward, what happens after Katahdin is summited, more stories. (But, full disclosure, this is how I’ve felt after all the books I’ve read so far by AT thru-hikers.)

But this book isn’t about that. It’s about learning to enjoy the quotidian aspects of living for an extended stretch of time in the outdoors, and Miller captures this perfectly, page after page. It’s not

car-chase, criminal-capturing exciting (though, funny enough, that does happen). It's day-to-day moment-capturing in all of its subtle beauty.

“It is easiest to characterize the AT in terms of its most challenging and spectacular features. Most people have experienced the difficulty of steep uphill climbs, rocky terrain, and pestering bugs. Likewise, spectacular overlooks and scenic waterfalls have universal appeal. But I have come to recognize that *most of what is memorable and pleasing about my time on the trail is ordinary moments in the outdoors.*” (Emphasis mine, because, fuck, yeah!)

“ Simply sitting unhurried in the shade of leaves is an irreplaceable moment. It is a joy in itself to amble through the woods for hours, even when views are limited to the dense trees surrounding me.” (OMG, be still my beating heart! Me again!)

“It is fulfilling to be saturated with the sights, sound, and smells of the outdoors. My fond recollections of my hike are *full of unremarkable moments*, like the smell of a dewy morning, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the blaze of a campfire, the soothing trickle of a stream, or rays of sun through a maze of trees.

Humans are creatures with a longer history of living in the outdoors than of living within the confines of concrete and artificial light. We have an atavistic sense of well-being when immersed in the natural world.” (p. 214)

So, the thing that kept drawing me forward was that kind of depth of the author's reflections while on the trail, wisdom gleaned on the trail that is just as applicable on one's journey through life.

For example:

“If we were paid to do this, we should have quit by now.” So, “...why do we voluntarily submit ourselves to tribulation? ...because there is **ownership**. This endeavor is much more endurable because we ‘own’ it. We are here by choice, and we are going about it in the way of our choosing.” (p. 229)

Also, here's a **great reframe for work**...the sherpa's believe that “it is the task, not the employer, that is served” by hard work. And that “the

doing matters more than the attainment or reward.” (p. 229, attributed to Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard*.)

And the realization that **possessions are burdens**.

The recognition that **it is the lows**—the challenges and the tedium and the things that hurt—**that put the highs in perspective**. “When you attempt to capture the highlights without burdening yourself with the tedium, the highlights lose the foundation that elevates them to the status of ‘highlight’.” (p. 51) Yes!

In the same vein: **obstacles are what make life interesting**, give us stories, make us “come alive.”

Vis-a-vis keeping a journal: “Experience is enriched by reliving it, contemplating it and trying to describe it to another person.” (p88)

Other things of note:

- I learned a little about trail etiquette, e.g. don't be the asshole who doesn't make room at the shelter.
- I realized I need to **start stretching NOW** as part of my training plan.
- I love that his payoff for having completed the hike was that he is now much more inclined to do things. “How regrettable it would have been had I ignored the pull that I felt tho hike the trail. A wealth of memories could have been lost before they had even occurred if I had dismissed, as a whim, my inkling to hike. It is disturbing how tenuous our potential is due to our fervent defense of the comfortable norm.” (p 321-322)
- Timeline of adventure: (p. 321)
 1. Being intrigued with the idea
 2. Reading about it
 3. Taking practice hikes
 4. Trepidation of the start
 5. Excitement of being under way
 6. Drudgery in the middle ground
 7. Anticipation of heading into heralded locations
 8. Contentment of travel knowing the end was near