

BOOK REVIEW

'Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Coast Trail' by Cheryl Strayed

Her life in a spiral, the author embarks on an epic hike in search of salvation

By Meredith Maran | MARCH 18, 2012

“Nothing could ever bring my mother back or make it okay that she was gone. Nothing would put me beside her the moment she died. It broke me up. It cut me off . . . I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods. It took me four years, seven months, and three days to do it. I didn’t know where I was going until I got there. It was a place called the Bridge of the Gods.”

When a book has this kind of velocity, when a narrative is enriched by the authority and raw power of a voice like Cheryl Strayed’s, it barely needs a plot to pull the reader into its vortex. But this first memoir by the author of the well-received 2006 novel “Torch” does indeed have a tightly loaded trajectory. “Wild” is a poetically



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told tale of devastation and redemption that begins with the cancer death of Strayed's beloved 45-year-old mother when Strayed was 22, and ends four years later, after she writes herself an unusual prescription in hopes of saving her own life.

“The Pacific Coast Trail wasn't a world to me then,” she writes. “It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map. I would walk that line, I decided - or at least as much of it as I could in about a hundred days.”

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Hike the trail she does: 1,100 miles of it, from the Mohave Desert to Washington state. “By the time I arrived in the town of Mojave, California, on the night before I began hiking the [Pacific Coast Trail], I'd shot out of Minnesota for the last time. I'd even told my mother that . . . I sat in the flow-erbed in the woods on our land, where Eddie, Paul, my siblings and I had mixed her ashes in with the dirt and laid a tombstone,” she writes. “I lay down in the mother ash dirt among the crocuses and told her . . . She would always be my mother but I had to go.”

WILD: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Coast Trail

Author: Cheryl Strayed

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Strayed's sojourn begins in a room at the roadside White's Motel, where she assembles her courage and her stuff, an REI warehouse-worth of camping equipment, crammed into an immense backpack she dubs “Monster.” “I gripped [my pack] and bent to lift it. It wouldn't budge . . . It was exactly like attempting to lift a Volkswagen Beetle.”

Although “Wild” is the story of an exceptional young woman who takes exceptional measures to ease an exceptional amount of pain, the universality of Strayed's emotions, paired with the searing intimacy of her prose, convince us that she's more like than unlike us, and that she did something most of us would never do, but for reasons we can all understand. Her father abandoned her as a child. Her marriage died with her mother, leaving her so grief-struck and lonely that her frequent sexual dalliances and her flirtation with heroin fail to soothe the pain.

And so we relate to her and root for her as she walks, through searing heat and trail-blurring snow, wearing boots that don't fit, with inadequate supplies of money, food, water, and experience, escaping the clutches of scary wildlife and scary men along the way. For three months. Alone. She survives on salmon jerky after discovering that she's filled her camping stove with the wrong kind of gas, and she keeps going even when her feet are shredded, and her water runs out, and an unseasonal blizzard blocks her way. She even keeps going, thanks to some sandals and a roll of duct tape, when the unthinkable happens.

"The trees were tall, but I was taller, standing above them on a steep mountain slope in northern California," Strayed writes. "Moments before, I'd removed my hiking boots and the left one had fallen into those trees, first catapulting into the air when my enormous backpack toppled into it, then skittering across the gravelly trail and flying over the edge . . . My boot was gone. Actually gone."

Along with its endless possibility for disaster, a 100-day walk also offers endless possibilities for rumination: whole days to consider a single childhood incident; hundreds of miles to come to peace with a dead parent, and an abandoning one.

"That was my father," Strayed writes midway in her journey, "the man who hadn't fathered me . . . Of all the wild things, his failure to love me the way he should have had always been the wildest thing of all. But on that night as I gazed out over the darkening land fifty-some nights on the PCT, it occurred to me that I didn't have to be amazed by him anymore. There were so many other amazing things in this world. They opened up inside of me like a river. Like I didn't know I could take a breath and then I breathed."

Walking is slow; healing even slower. Reading a travelogue of a long hike could be as thrilling as watching a faucet drip. But Cheryl Strayed is a formidable talent, a woman in full control of her emotions, her soul, and her literary gift, and in "Wild" she's parlayed her heartache and her blisters into an addictive, gorgeous book that not only entertains, but leaves us the better for having read it.

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