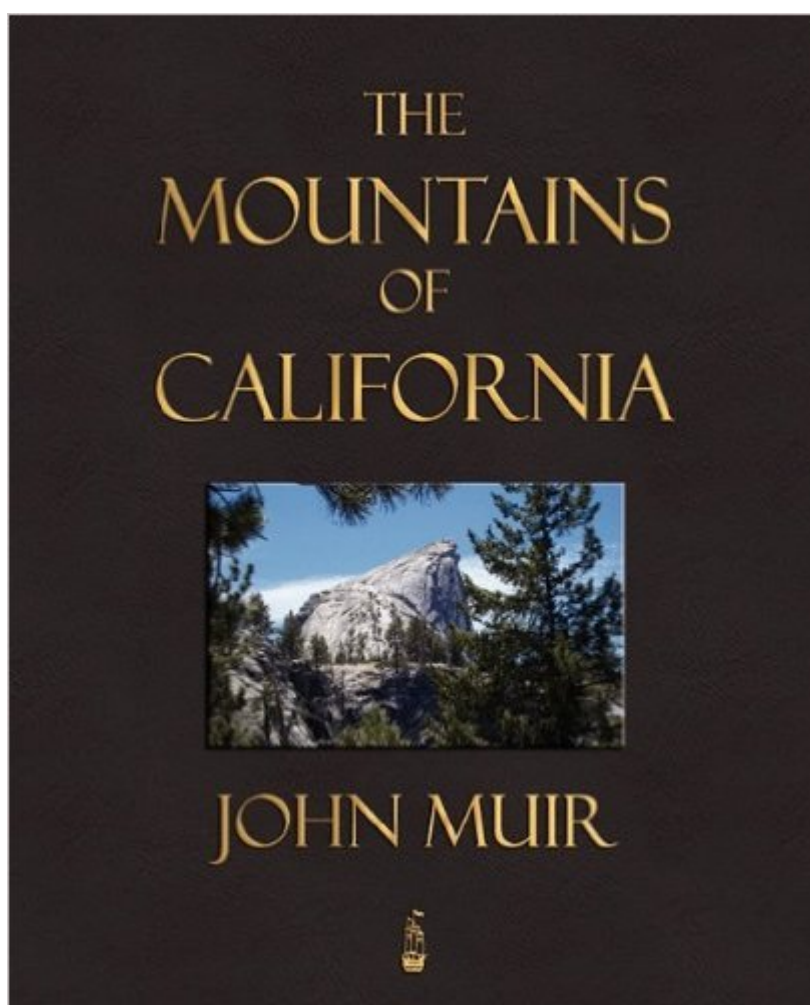


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The Mountains Of California



Synopsis

An Unabridged, Digitally Enlarged Edition With Original Illustrations, To Include: The Sierra Nevada - The Glaciers - The Snow - A Near View Of The High Sierra - The Passes - The Glacier Lakes - The Glacier Meadows - The Forests - The Douglas Squirrel - A Wind-Storm In The Forests - The River Floods - Sierra Thunder-Storms - The Water-Ouzel - The Wild Sheep - In The Sierra Foot-Hills - The Bee-Pastures

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Customer Reviews

The question is not whether Muir is a terrific writer-but how he got that way, and secondarily, why it is important. The Mountains of California was his first book, published in 1894, and was an instant success. This book contains not just some of the best nature writing, but for its vividness, immediacy and vision some of the best writing in English in any genre. Modern Library's edition is quite special with its introduction to Muir by Bill McKibbin and about 50 illustrations, though I wished there were better maps for following the footsteps of Muir's many great narratives among the fabulous natural wonders of the Sierra. Muir succeeds in his writing in ways that Emerson and Thoreau fall short. Emerson's nature is an internal construct, almost a habit of mind. Thoreau conveys something of the immediacy of Muir in selected writing (and he, like Muir, actually immerses himself in nature itself), but his writings and especially his journals seem chaotic at times and lack a unifying vision. Muir, on the other hand, always draws the reader forward from one vision to another, each one more fantastic than the previous. My favorite passages are his descent into the Merced Glacier (in "the Glaciers"), and his description of being on the high slopes during a major

windstorm when he climbs a swaying pine to get an even better look. His description of the Giant Sequoia is a work of great subtlety and richness--I seriously doubt you will find a more enchanting description of the two California Species of Sequoia anywhere. This work abounds with rich and sensuous passages that are descriptions of actual experiences in over a decade of exploring, mostly alone, in the high Sierras. The strength of Muir's writing is based on the depth of his emotional experience of nature-his very personal relationship to the whole and many specific animals, trees and features of the landscape. You would say that it's mystical except for the fact that it's very sensual and very concrete. Muir employs religious language though he never becomes ethereal or abstract as Emerson sometimes does. The reader is always right in the immediate moment of the present listening to Muir's voice. And that suggests another reason why this writing is great. Muir's Scottish heritage (he was born in Dunbar Scotland in 1838) has provided him with a rich, luxurious and slightly exotic vocabulary for describing all the natural wonders that he sees, feels, and hears. It's a voice like no other in American writing. Of course, the reason it is important is because of what Muir spawned through his vision and experience-he was the true creator of the conservation movement leading to modern environmentalism. I should say that this work is all luxurious description and scientific discussion and rarely becomes didactic or preachy-as modern environmental writers sometimes do. It is not fashionable to think that one person of vision can create so much; but it's hard to conclude otherwise about Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, after reading this work.

Some say this is Muir's finest work. As the only other Muir book I've read (at this writing) is *Travels in Alaska*, I cannot comment on this, other than to say that I enjoyed this book a great deal. From almost any vantage point in California, whether near or on a distant horizon, there are mountains. A fact not lost on Muir, whose sense of wonder and love of life endear him to his readers. "God's glacial-mills grind slowly, but they have been kept in motion long enough in California to grind sufficient soil for a glorious abundance of life ... In so wild and so beautiful a region [was spent my day], every sight and sound inspiring, leading one far out of himself, yet feeding and building up his individuality." Muir was the consummate man in nature. Anyone who is indifferent to Muir's writing may simply be indifferent to wonderment itself. I have no doubt that if Muir were placed in a room with the great kings and generals and tycoons and empire builders of history, he would appear singularly as a man among men. Unimpressed with their pomp and bluster over rotting empire, he might soon command more attention than they, and many would be happily listening to Muir in spite of their self importance. Why? He would have the most interesting insights, offered poetically and in

a most humble and charming way. ... (in fact Muir was sought out by the great politicians and philosophers of his day). If you like mountains, if you like California, if you like trees and glacier-fed streams, you will like this book.

As a Birder, I spend a lot of time travelling outdoors. I also have a large collection of Bird and Nature books and spend a great amount of time in them. For pure enjoyment, I found this one of the finest. Muir was as one of America's greatest partakers in and writers of Nature and Environment and was in every way as much a giant as the Sequoias and Mountains he wrote about. I read this Classic a short time before I visited Yosemite National Park and having done so, increased my enjoyment and appreciation immeasurably. After many years of reading, I have come to the conclusion, that I tend to like books about people I would like to have known, or to spend some time with. What an experience it would have been to have known and travelled with Muir. While that is impossible; at least we have his writings and can dream.

John Muir is a superlative writer and this book is about a place (the California Sierra Nevada) near and dear to my heart, so I enjoyed this book. However, I would have really liked to have had a forward or preface that gave more context to the writings, e.g. some short biographical data or background about John Muir's life and the relative time frame during which he wrote these essays. There is nothing of this nature; page 1 starts with Muir's words. In addition, he goes into sometimes excruciating detail about his experiences in the sierras, down to minutia about rock formations and such. If this isn't of particular interest to certain readers, I imagine some sections could drag for them.

After years of seeing wonderful quotes from books by John Muir, I finally bought *The Mountains of California*, and it simply bowled me over. Here is a man whose writing is informed and beautifully poetic. He wrote with a broad knowledge of geology, botany, meteorology, and a giant love of the natural world around him. If you are AT ALL interested in nature, and would like to read someone who is not dry or boring, his writing will sweep you up.

Muir describes the sierras with detail and love. He is one of the few authors who is content just to be in and describe a landscape. And what a description! He describes the evolution of glacial lakes to the heights of Mount Ritter and the migrations of deer and native peoples. A great book I recommend it to anyone who loves the outdoors.

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