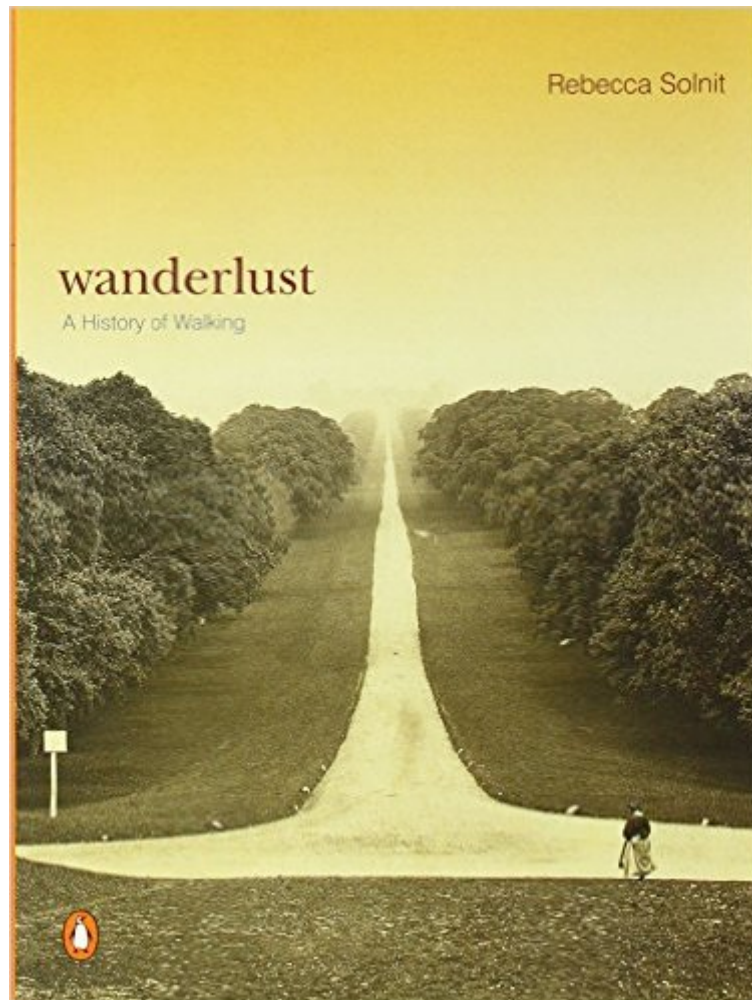


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Wanderlust: A History Of Walking



Synopsis

Drawing together many histories-of anatomical evolution and city design, of treadmills and labyrinths, of walking clubs and sexual mores-Rebecca Solnit creates a fascinating portrait of the range of possibilities presented by walking. Arguing that the history of walking includes walking for pleasure as well as for political, aesthetic, and social meaning, Solnit focuses on the walkers whose everyday and extreme acts have shaped our culture, from philosophers to poets to mountaineers. She profiles some of the most significant walkers in history and fiction-from Wordsworth to Gary Snyder, from Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet to Andre Breton's Nadja-finding a profound relationship between walking and thinking and walking and culture. Solnit argues for the necessity of preserving the time and space in which to walk in our ever more car-dependent and accelerated world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I found this book to be a fascinating read because of Solnit's writing style and because of her commentary on the subject of walking. Although I have always enjoyed walking myself Solnit helped me understand some of the more philosophical reasons why. Contrary to the views of other reviewers Solnit does include her own commentary such as her experience on the Chimayo pilgrimage and as a woman walking down the streets of her own neighborhood in San Francisco. One may say Why not read the people Solnit quotes rather than Wanderlust, but the fact is Wanderlust increased my exposure to such works and helped me understand their context. Her

perspective on the history of the freedom to walk is truly eye-opening; we take it for granted that these days we can pretty much walk anywhere we want to. But, it's really an extended essay.

Solnit's "history of walking" is a surprising excursion in a vast and unsystematised subject area. Indeed, like eating and playing, walking is one of these emblematic human activities that are invested with wildly different cultural meanings. I picked up the book because I am an avid walker and mountaineer and, as I learned, an adherent to the British walking tour ethos. For me there is something fundamentally cleansing, wholesome and right about spending time in the great outdoors. However, this smug romanticism, this adhering to an "established religion for the middle class" is sternly criticised by the author of this book. For Solnit walking is a quintessentially political activity. And the politics play out at different levels. First, walking is a bulwark against the erosion of the mind by the incessant contemporary rhetoric of efficiency and functionality. The walker exposes herself to the accidental, the unexpected, the random and unscreened, and by doing so rebels against the speed and alienation endemic in our postindustrial world. Second, walking is also a reclamation of a physical and public space that is increasingly suburbanised and privatised. Solnit discusses how the early 20th century city was an arena for aesthetic experimentation and political agitation. Walkers and flaneurs, starting with De Quincey in London and Baudelaire in Paris, experimented with an urban underground culture suffused with eroticism and desire. Protest marchers all over the world and throughout the ages have relied on the democratic functions of the street to make their voices heard. Today, the scope for these kinds of trespasses are increasingly rare due to encroaching private property rights and a soulless, panoptic urban architecture. Hence, thus Solnit, we need to revitalise a counterculture to walk in resistance to the post-industrial and post-modern loss of space, time and embodiment. Last and perhaps not least, walking is and will remain the domain of the amateur. It is one of these few areas of human activity where a hierarchy based on expertise makes very little sense. Everyone, barring physical disabilities, is in principle able to be an expert walker. Beyond the political, there is also a phenomenological dimension to walking which is quite deftly described by Solnit as an "alignment between mind, body and the world". Whoever has spent a couple of days on the trail knows that once the rhythm has been established, one becomes much more alert to minute variations in sensory input (smell, colour, temperature). Meanwhile, the mind starts to wander much more freely. Solnit writes: "This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it." Solnit's smart and cogent survey of 3 centuries of walking is appropriately brought into relief by her supple and subtle prose which is a

real pleasure to read. Her writing is warmly personal - with a tone that modulates unexpectedly between stridency and vulnerability - as well as erudite. There is none of the pedantic selfconsciousness that spoils the discourse of many academic writers and popularisers alike. After "Wanderlust" I went on to read Solnit's "Field guide to getting lost" which, although not in the same league, confirms her qualities as an engaging personal voice.

This book fulfils that vital function of art to make you re-evaluate something that might have seemed simple and ordinary. For a few days after reading this book, I could not stop thinking about walking - its history, implications, value etc. For my taste, I would have wanted the author to tell me more about what she thought of walking, rather than always relying on great names (Wordsworth, Benjamin, Long etc); but I love the idea of the book and the personality of the author that comes through - radical, humane, witty, sometimes wonderfully dandyish, at other times, impassioned and serious.

When I walk, which is often, I like the serendipity of the experience, the unknown that meets me, the new perspective that greets me, the unexpected that grows from the experience. Reading this book has been like a walk. At times I was enthused at what I read (on how Las Vegas is becoming more of a walker's world). At times I was encumbered with laborious literary chronicling of walkers and walking (the writings of Rousseau and Wordsworth). At times I was ecstatic with a simple relationship (the mind at three miles per hour). At times I was educated (the role of walking in the Paris revolutions). And at times I was given a new perspective (how women have dealt with the male's use of walking to control them). While not quite knowing what to expect when I first saw this book, I thought it would be a great read because a history of something so common as walking could be so interesting. And this book is that. The author looks at the relationship between walking and thinking, between walking and culture, between walking and history, between walking and nature. And she delves into the interplay between walking and how the body uses it to jar the imagination and creativity to enable the walker to see the world around her in a different way. The book drags at parts because I don't have a particular interest in that subject, just like at times a walk will become tedious. But, overall, this book is much like a walk: a discovery by accident.

The worst that can be said of this piercing inquiry is that the broad forest of walking it depicts -- walking's effects on the pilgrim, the protester, the gawker in Las Vegas; its evolution from garden to countryside to modern city; its relation to writing and thinking itself -- left some readers bumping into

the trees, and seeing only stars and not the bigger picture. But the bigger picture is here, laid out in stunning detail (she doesn't just say that labyrinths have made a recent comeback, but describes their makers and impacts in a variety of disciplines (art, garden design, spirituality) and countries, and what it feels like to walk on a replica of the Chartres labyrinth). I cannot recall reading a work that so seamlessly melded personal experience with a broad but profound reading of literature and history. Reminds me of Terry Tempest Williams, and in some of the same terrain. I'm headed back to read Solnit's earlier work "Migrations," about Irish history. I'll bet it's another forest well worth meandering through.

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