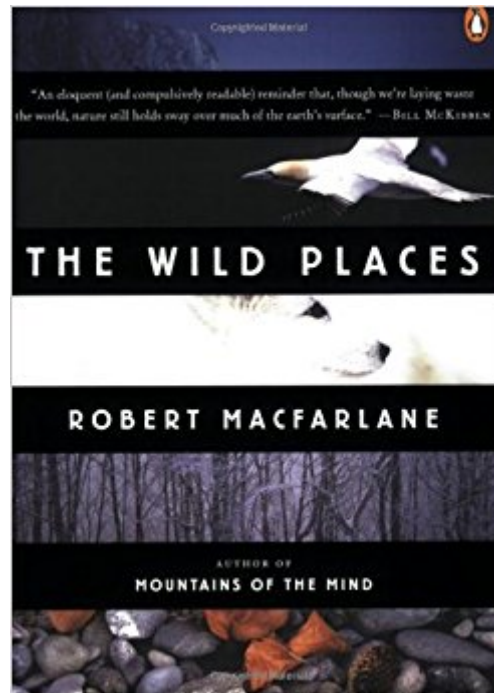




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The Wild Places



Synopsis

“An eloquent (and compulsively readable) reminder that, though we’re laying waste the world, nature still holds sway over much of the earth’s surface.” —Bill McKibben

Are there any genuinely wild places left in Britain and Ireland? That is the question that Robert Macfarlane poses to himself as he embarks on a series of breathtaking journeys through some of the archipelago’s most remarkable landscapes. He climbs, walks, and swims by day and spends his nights sleeping on cliff-tops and in ancient meadows and wildwoods. With elegance and passion he entwines history, memory, and landscape in a bewitching evocation of wildness and its vital importance. A unique travelogue that will intrigue readers of natural history and adventure, *The Wild Places* solidifies Macfarlane’s reputation as a young writer to watch.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this eloquent travelogue, Macfarlane (*Mountains of the Mind*) explores the last undomesticated landscapes in Britain and Ireland in a narration that blends history, memoir and meditation. Macfarlane journeys to salt marshes, mountaintops, forests, beaches, constantly expanding and refining his understanding of wildness. Walking a Lake District ridge at night, he observes that with the stars falling plainly far above, it seemed to me that our estrangement from the dark was a great and serious loss. Crossing a moor, he finds its vastness and resistance to straight lines of progress analogous to the inability of mere words to convey a landscape’s variety and immensity. Nonetheless, Macfarlane’s language is as surprising and precise as his environments, with such evocative phrases as heat jellying the air, ice lidded the puddles and descriptions of birds

that gild a tree and the sky as a steady tall blue. His striking prose not only evokes each locale's physicality in sensuous, deliberate detail, it glows with a reverence for nature in general and takes the reader on both a geographical and a philosophical journey, as mind-expanding as any of his wild places. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"The Wild Places" boldly celebrates places that aren't supposed to exist, and does so in prose that is at times very nearly as vivid and beautiful as the thing itself. Rebecca Solnit: "Prose as precise as this is not just evocative. It is a manifesto in itself. Macfarlane's language urges us to gaze more closely at the wonders around us, to take notice, to remind ourselves how thrillingly alive a spell in the wild can make us seem." "The Sunday Times" (UK): "A formidable consideration by a naturalist who can unfurl a sentence a poetry, really with the breathless ease of a master angler, a writer whose ideas and reach transcend the physical region he explores; the natural world swells with meaning through Macfarlane's devoted observations, which can be both minutely detailed and vast in scope; like the wild it parses, [this book] quietly returns us to ourselves." "The New York Times Book Review": "Inspiring; Macfarlane brings these landscapes to pulsing life. His precision in apprehending the world is a salutary lesson in and of itself. His descriptions have created a new map of Britain and Ireland in my mind. And like pebbles in a pond, those descriptions are now altering the way I look at the world immediately around me.. this is the final gift of Macfarlane's wild places: they illuminate the wild wonder of our everyday world." "National Geographic Traveler": "The Wild Places" boldly celebrates places that aren't supposed to exist, and does so in prose that is at times very nearly as vivid and beautiful as the thing itself. Rebecca Solnit: "Prose as precise as this is not just evocative. It is a manifesto in itself. Macfarlane's language urges us to gaze more closely at the wonders around us, to take notice, to remind ourselves how thrillingly alive a spell in the wild can make us seem." "The Sunday Times" (UK): "A formidable consideration by a naturalist who can unfurl a sentence poetry, really with the breathless ease of a master angler, a writer whose ideas and reach transcend the physical region he explores; the natural world swells with meaning through Macfarlane's devoted observations, which can be both minutely detailed and vast in scope; like the wild it parses, [this book] quietly returns us to ourselves." "The New York Times Book Review": "Inspiring; Macfarlane brings these landscapes to pulsing life. His precision in apprehending the world is a salutary lesson in and of itself. His descriptions have created a new map of Britain and Ireland in my mind. And like pebbles in a pond, those descriptions are now altering the way I look at the world immediately around me.. this is the final gift of Macfarlane's wild places: they illuminate

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Beechwood to Beechwood. The first book of Robert Macfarlane's that I read, almost a year ago now, was *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*. As I do for truly exceptional books, I gave it a "6-star" rating, and knew I would be reading more of his works. With "The Wild Places" I was again dazzled, as well as humbled by this rich, well-written and informative work. Humbled? Yes, Macfarlane is still under 40, yet has the erudition of a well-educated and curious person twice his age. (It does make me even more regret all that time I wasted in committee meetings!) He knows the natural world - well - identifying the flora and fauna, not just as a bird watcher might, with guide in hand. It is like they are old acquaintances. He is on equally familiar terms with the inanimate world, the one of the land itself, its rocks and soil layers. Being in Britain, naturally there is a lot of water, in various forms and states of agitation. He weaves into his depictions of his travels to the remote parts of Britain, the stories of others who have lived there, and often traveled far from their native locales. Well-known writers are a mental companion for him, and they are frequently referenced. So too, some less well-known ones; Macfarlane has now placed Bagnold's *The Physics of Blown Sand and Desert Dunes* (Dover Earth Science) on my reading list. The Sunday Times of London spoke of his precise prose. And so it is, as well as fresh. Right from the beginning, he draws the reader in with fresh expressions like "Rooks haggle." And he stirred some very dormant memories. How long ago was it since I'd routinely climb trees? Like most of us, just a kid, and for some inexplicable reason, I stopped. Macfarlane, in his thirties, can't resist, and continues, seeking out a favorite beech tree not that far from his home in Cambridge. Trees, and those who love them. Xerxes is normally depicted as one of the "bad guys" of history... a ruthless "oriental" despot, off to crush those freedom-loving

Greek states. Maybe so, but Macfarlane relates that he loved sycamore trees, and would stop his entire army on the march, to savor some particularly appealing ones. Macfarlane structures his work around various geographical features, such as island, valley, moor, forest, river-mouth, cape, ridge, holloway, storm-beach, saltmarsh and tor. The seeming exception is "grave," but in ways it fits, as the author describes a peninsula in County Claire, in the west of Ireland, and the limestone features, some composed of human bones from the millenniums of burials there, which includes those who died in the 1840's as a result of famine. The author presents a chilling account of the cynicism of the landowners that were indifferent to these deaths. Likewise, in the chapter entitled "River-Mouth" I found his depictions of "the Clearances" enlightening (the landowners in northern Scotland forcibly relocated entire villages in order to enhance their ability to graze sheep.) Seeing those "pleasant" pastoral scenes of sheep grazing today, Macfarlane notes: "a caution against romanticism and blitheness." My first experience with a "Holloway" was walking a section of the Natchez Trace in Mississippi. Less than half a century of travel on the Trace had depressed the road surface at least 6 feet in some areas. With thousands of years of travel along foot and animal paths in Britain, Holloways literally crisscross the isles, but are also largely "invisible." He actively seeks them out, with his own "maps" of the terrain, so different from road maps that give us a very one-dimensional picture of the countryside. The author sleeps out in the open, in remote places, and no doubt is more "alive" for doing so, truly feeling the natural world. He rarely complains about adverse conditions, and if so, only wryly and obliquely: "But you never mentioned the midges, Sweeney, I thought reproachfully..." (p.59). He quotes numerous American writers, including an icon of the American West, Wallace Stegner, on the importance of wild places to the human psyche. Roger Deakin was a life-long friend, and many of Macfarlane's travels were in his company. Deakin was another glorious eccentric, who appreciated the natural world. His most famous book is *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain*. Deakin left us far too early, a victim of an aggressive brain tumor, at the age of 63. An apt eulogy from Macfarlane: "He was an expert in age: in its charisma and its worth. Everything he owned was worn, used, re-used. If anyone would have known how to age well, it would have been Roger." Macfarlane ends his book, coming full-circle, as the beginning of this review suggests: coming back to the Beechwoods. He quotes a poem by T.S. Eliot whose message is that we may explore far places, and in the end, see the familiar places for the first time. Likewise, Macfarlane realizes that the wild places are not just in the far off Outer Hebrides, but can also be quite close to his home in Cambridge. Another 6-star impressive work.

The Wild Places is the second of Robert MacFarlane's books that I have read, the other

being *Old Ways*, his most recent book. I enjoyed *The Wild Places* even more than *Old Ways*, which I thought was wonderful. In this book, MacFarlane visits a number of places in the British Isles, each of which is in some sense wild, in order to experience wildness and explore its nature. In each of them, the reader travels with MacFarlane, carried by his precise, poetic prose that gives us intimate access to his observations and feelings. Interspersed between MacFarlane's detailed and illuminating descriptions are accounts of local history and thoughts that the landscape, wildlife, and his experiences have promoted. Each region that he visits is different: From island to tor, bookended by a favorite beech tree that stands near to his house. There is a quiet continuity to the book. The journeys are described in the sequence in which he made them, over the course of a year. As the year passes, our understanding of wildness evolves, along with MacFarlane's, from that of remote places separated from humanity to that of colonizing, evolving nature itself that can thrive in and around human spaces, in crevices, hedges, and ditches. MacFarlane's search for the meaning of wildness is interesting and thought-provoking but, for me, the wonder of the book lies in MacFarlane's ability to feel the landscape and, through the beauty of his writing, to communicate those feelings to his reader. This book will nourish, delight, and inspire anyone with a love of the natural world.

A challenging book for me, but worth the effort to read. Highly ethereal, even philosophical view of British wilderness settings that tends to focus on the people that used to inhabit the wild places that the author visits. Nature gets a place alongside man. Strange, to me, to focus as much on the human as the natural, but, in the end, it works well. I guess that even the wildest, most remote places in a country that has been inhabited for 10,000 years carry heavy traces of human occupation. How man has deeply shaped, and, in turn, how man has been shaped by the remotest places in Britain is a clear take away from this book.

Anyone who is writing needs to read Robert Macfarlane. If you cannot enroll in one of his Cambridge courses, you can at least read his books. I recommend taking a look (a highlighter) at Professor Macfarlane's verbs. After that, pay attention to his use of metaphor. Brilliant writing and reading.

What an incredibly beautiful book. Macfarlane writes so well, that the book reads almost like poetry. His words evoke the magical landscapes and the history therein. This is a treasure of a book and I feel very privileged and fortunate to have read it. Thank you!

Macfarlane takes you along on his own wild journeys, especially in Scotland and the British Isles, but, ultimately, even to Everest. His books are stimulating, knowledgeable and thorough. I read three back-to-back and hunger for more. Carolyn Foote Edelman NJ WILDBEAUTY nature blog

The descriptions of some of the most remote places in the British Isles are beautiful and evocative - in particular some memorable passages about camping out overnight in winter in the Scottish Highlands, Lake District and west of Ireland. Also some fascinating literary history of previous writings about nature. A brilliant and original young writer.

Excellent book for the nature lover, no matter where you live. I enjoyed *The Old Ways* even more than this book, though.

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