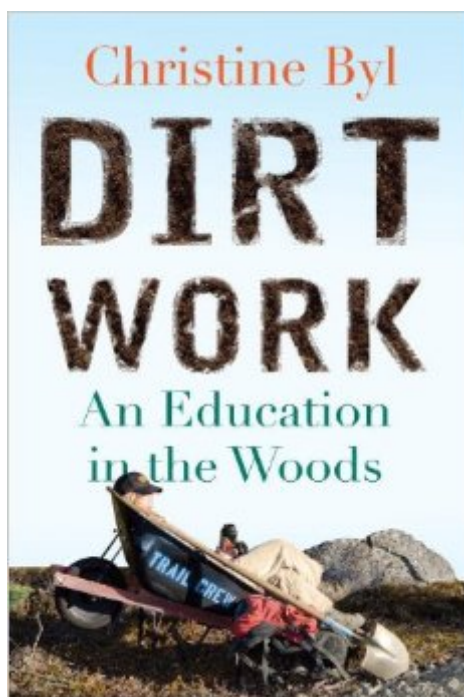


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Dirt Work: An Education In The Woods



Synopsis

A lively and lyrical account of one woman's unlikely apprenticeship on a national-park trail crew and what she discovers about nature, gender, and the value of hard work. Christine Byl first encountered the national parks the way most of us do: on vacation. But after she graduated from college, broke and ready for a new challenge, she joined a Glacier National Park trail crew as a seasonal traildog, maintaining mountain trails for the millions of visitors Glacier draws every year. Byl first thought of the job as a paycheck, a summer diversion, a welcome break from the real world, before going on to graduate school. She came to find out that work in the woods on a trail crew was more demanding, more rewarding, more real than she ever imagined. During her first season, Byl embraces the backbreaking difficulty of the work, learning how to clear trees, move boulders, and build stairs in the backcountry. Her first mentors are the colorful characters with whom she works: the packers, sawyers, and traildogs from all walks of life, along with the tools in her hands: axe, shovel, chainsaw, rock bar. As she invests herself deeply in new work, the mountains, rivers, animals, and weather become teachers as well. While Byl expected that her tenure at the parks would be temporary, she ends up turning this summer gig into a decades-long job, moving from Montana to Alaska, breaking expectations, including her own, that she would follow a professional career path. Returning season after season, she eventually leads her own crews, mentoring other trail dogs along the way. In *Dirt Work*, Byl probes common assumptions about the division between mental and physical labor, women's work, and men's work, white collars and blue collars. The supposedly simple work of digging holes, dropping trees, and blasting snowdrifts in fact offers her an education of the hands and the head, as well as membership in an utterly unique subculture. *Dirt Work* is a contemplative but unsentimental look at the pleasures of labor, the challenges of apprenticeship, and the way a place becomes a home.

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Having grown up in logging towns in the Pacific Northwest, I know dirt work pretty well, so the title grabbed me right away. I was happily surprised that the author's writing voice was reminiscent of two of my favorite writers, Norman MacLean as well as Annie Proulx. The book is organized both as a storyline narrative and also as a journal that invites browsing. Byl's writing gifts are very evident especially in her descriptive passages, some of which are lyrical yet concise and not at all flowery. Given the extraordinary beauty of her settings, the average nature writer would tend to wax on and on, but not this author. No time to waste, and miles ahead to hike. Byl carries the reader on a gritty, soggy journey, buoyed up by her ebullient spirit, boisterous sense of humor and frequent introspective observations. Her decision, to pursue a career of labor rather than the academic, served as a challenge to me, as it brought back my own memories of working one summer on a Georgia Pacific tree planting crew in the Cascades. The hard days came back clear and pungent, and with not a little bit of pain. I was cut after three weeks, as I just couldn't keep up. All 6'3", 195 lbs of me ended up at the cannery instead. It was the first job I ever lost that I felt bad about. Overall, Byl's book is a thoughtful approach to the Wild, in much the same way that HD Thoreau's masterwork was, but written for our time and our scattered lives. The lessons she learns from the most basic tools are lessons each of us can utilize. When the time comes for anyone to simplify their lives and make connection with what is true and real, this book will help open your eyes to possibilities you might not have considered. It certainly illustrated her realization that life is... life. We're all connected. As the Lakota say, in the pipe ceremony, "All my relations".

Christine Byl worked as a "traildog" for seven summers, maintaining the trails and facilities at Glacier National Park. Hers is an enlightening book about the care and feeding of the national parks -- have you ever given thought to how the path under your feet is maintained? I never had. Ms. Byl is drawn by the majesty of the natural world and exhilarated by the sheer physicality of the work. She doesn't hug trees -- she cuts them down. And loves it! Byl is the perfect person to see this world through perceptive eyes. She isn't a lifer or a year-round veteran, so she can see the forest for the

trees. And, she's a woman conquering a man's world, another unique position from which to observe and appreciate. Ms. Byl feels empowered by the abilities she gains: "Women have long been told that our bodies are to be presented, arranged for viewing, and that our power comes through flirting, a psychological dominance that stands in for physical strength. Goodbye to all that... I felt power in my body. By itself." She is also clear-eyed and nonsentimental about the animals with whom she shares the park. When she comes across a wolf, this is what she thinks: "The world seemed to close in around the edges of my perception until it was only me and the wolf, our eyes locked, some ancient knowledge passing--stop. Did I think this? Please. That wolf cared nothing for ancient knowledge, and in any case, I had little of it to give." I imagine the author enjoyed her experiences all the more knowing that at some point she was going to return to "civilization"; in her case, go back to school for an advanced degree. This knowledge imbues her experiences with more weight and meaning than they might otherwise have had: "Knowing a place means investing in it like you aren't going anywhere, even if you might," she says. Ms. Byl's "education in the woods" shaped her life in ways no academic life could have, and readers are all the richer for it.

I've often wondered how people end up choosing a life that embraces the outdoors. I grew up loving the outdoors then slowly became more of an indoor person as my education and career kept me locked up inside. It never would have entered my mind to look for a job in a state park. Now, twenty years later as I face trying to finally figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life, I wish I had. Christine Byl and her eventual husband, Gabe, took jobs with the National Park Service in Glacier National Park. The job is a tough one - and one I didn't even know existed - as it involves clearing and maintaining the trails that millions of visitors use every year. Building steps into the terrain? They do that. Fixing natural bridges? They do that. Many will think that this is a woman in a man's world. Men still dominate the profession, but more and more women are choosing to take on these seasonal jobs. The schedule is 8 days on, 6 days off. I would LOVE that! I wouldn't mind having my hiney handed to me for 8 days, knowing that I would soon have 6 off to recuperate and enjoy my surroundings. In time, Christine matriculates to the University of Alaska-Anchorage and takes an outdoors job up there as well. I loved how the book was organized and how she described each tool used in her job. It made it so accessible to those of us who don't know the difference between a bulldozer and a Bobcat. The machine kind of Bobcat. I know what the animal one is. Completely enjoyable. Highly recommend.

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