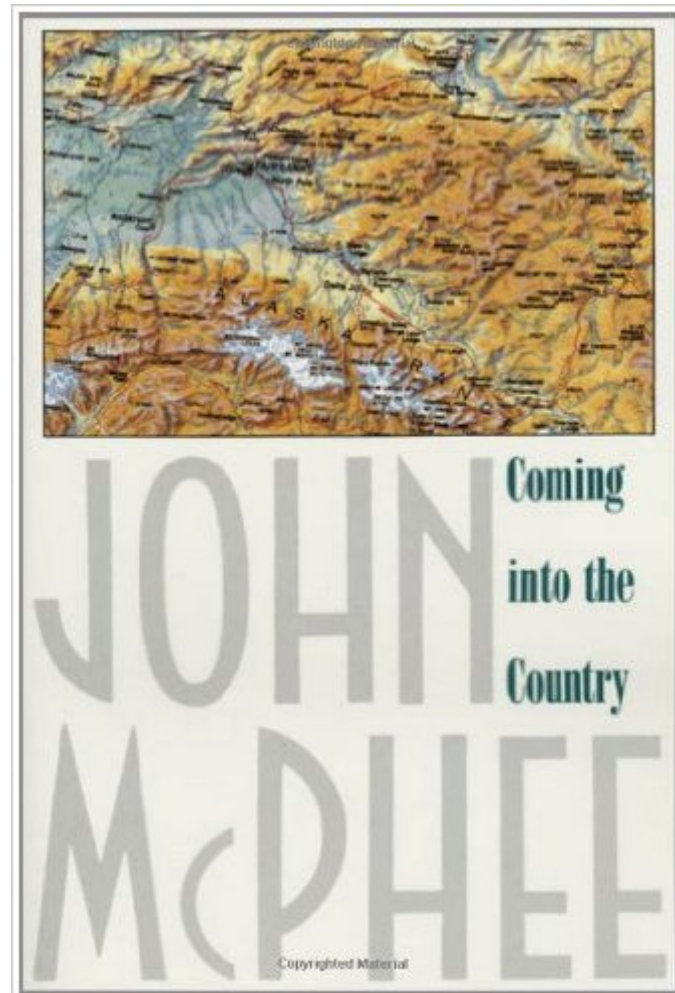


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Coming Into The Country



Synopsis

Coming into the Country is an unforgettable account of Alaska and Alaskans. It is a rich tapestry of vivid characters, observed landscapes, and descriptive narrative, in three principal segments that deal, respectively, with a total wilderness, with urban Alaska, and with life in the remoteness of the bush. Readers of McPhee's earlier books will not be unprepared for his surprising shifts of scene and ordering of events, brilliantly combined into an organic whole. In the course of this volume we are made acquainted with the lore and techniques of placer mining, the habits and legends of the barren-ground grizzly, the outlook of a young Athapaskan chief, and tales of the fortitude of settlers's ordinary people compelled by extraordinary dreams. Coming into the Country unites a vast region of America with one of America's notable literary craftsmen, singularly qualified to do justice to the scale and grandeur of the design.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Lots of writers have tried to convey Alaska to non-Alaskans. Few have succeeded. Those who have are the ones who have chosen to illustrate small parts of the larger whole, and selected the right parts. Margaret Murie comes to mind. But 16 years on, Coming Into the Country is still the best. I own and have read everything McPhee has written. I subscribe to New Yorker mostly for the annual or biennial piece by McPhee. I like the geology series very much, and parts of Birch Bark Canoe still make me laugh out loud, but Country is his best book. McPhee's many gifts including finding and understanding interesting, compelling people, and writing about them eloquently and non-judgmentally. He uses those people and what they say to convey his larger themes. Stan

Gelvin and his dad, Willie Hensley and, of course, the folks in and around Eagle. He somehow wrangled a seat on the state capital relocation committee's helicopter. He somehow charmed the irascible Joe Vogler into candor. I talked with Vogler - who has since been murdered in a gun deal gone bad - about McPhee's interview, and he told me that McPhee took no notes during interviews over a week, and yet "pretty much got it right." I've lived in Alaska most of my life. I've read the gushy stuff (Michener, for example), the political diatribes (Joe McGinnis, for example), and the gee-whiz tourist fodder. McPhee, instead of trying to paint the whole state, paints a series of miniatures which give you a much accurate glimpse than the writers and hacks who try to "describe" Alaska. Maybe it's that America's best non-fiction writer brought his special tools and skills to the right opportunities; maybe it's just luck. It all came together in this book.

In the mid 1970s, John McPhee turned his powers of description toward Alaska at a time when the "Alaskan way of life" was under siege. Alaska had been a state less than 20 years. The claims of natives to the land had been resolved by putting millions of acres in the hands of native corporations. The old "tradition" of immigrants to the land being able to plop down and build a cabin almost anywhere was disappearing under the burden of new regulations. Huge new national parks were designated, and at the same time the pipeline was being constructed, highlighting the old conflict between development and ecology, between preservation and self-determination. Sadly, the Alaska that McPhee wrote about no longer exists. In the first segment, he writes about the Brooks Range wilderness, and discusses the controversy around establishing the "Gates of the Arctic" National Park there. That park is now established. In the second segment, he writes about the aftereffects of the decision to move the state capital from Juneau to somewhere north of Anchorage. That move never occurred. In the third (and longest and most compelling) segment, he reports on the lives of the people of isolated Eagle, Alaska, a town that today boasts a fax machine. The third segment is where McPhee's writing really shines: I don't think anyone has ever conveyed the personality of Alaska and Alaskans as well as McPhee has. My favorite was the story of how one man and his son managed to get an entire C9 Caterpillar bulldozer into the middle of nowhere, clearing their way through 70-foot winter drifts, to set up a gold dredging operation. McPhee conveys the extreme beauty and wildness of the place, and the fire and determination of the people to belong to it.

Again and again we hear it, but it's true: John McPhee can interest a reader in anything. He manages to combine a richly sedimented prose, which frequently rises to a level of virtuosity of

which 95% of novelists would be envious, with a tangible involvement in the activities of the people he writes about. And he does always write, first and foremost, about people. 'Coming into the Country' is McPhee's longest single book and contains about ten capsule biographies (and quite a bit of modest autobiography, too) in addition to observations on the hibernation of bears, the various techniques of panning for gold, the advantages of sled-dogs against snow-machines, the failings of bush-pilots, and three-dozen other disquisitions. Without wishing to carp, I do think that the book is a shade too long -- the final section 'Coming into the Country' could profitably have been pruned of about forty pages -- but the greater length does allow the reader to see the effort McPhee goes to to provide his stories with an aesthetically pleasing structure. The first section, 'The Encircled River' deposits us, in medias res, halfway down a tributary of one of Alaska's northernmost rivers. McPhee and his companions travel downriver to the confluence of a larger river, and then we head back to the headwaters of the earlier river -- the story describes an encircling pattern. The second part 'What they were looking for' is a very funny record of a helicopter trip taken by a committee established to decide on a new capital for Alaska. Here the story skips around the theme as the chopper skips around proposed sites for the new metropolis.

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