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The Deer Camp

by Christopher Camuto

You can't not read this book. Dean Kuipers's **THE DEER CAMP** (BLOOMSBURG, HARDBOUND, 288 PAGES, \$28) will pin you to your chair with its ferocity and honesty and then firmly hold you there with its dawning wisdom and grace. I haven't been as thrown by a memoir, so often a self-indulgent genre, since Luke Jennings's *Blood Knots* (reviewed in November 2012). Innocently subtitled *A Memoir of a Father, a Family, and the Land That Healed Them*, Kuipers's book is not going to be made into a Disney movie or show up on TV as a Hallmark Special. It offers none of the sentimentality and solace you might expect from that reassuring subtitle. It delivers much more than that. In riveting prose, Kuipers bares his soul and his family's soul to uncover the truth about himself, his impossible father, poignant mother, and struggling brothers all in a setting so deftly depicted ordinary American life glows with its true significance. As the author digs into the painful particulars of the lives strewn around him, and recalls his growth as a man and a writer, he also digs deep into the ecology of human nature and its relations to land and wildlife as well as the mysteries of soil and sunlight, field and forest.

The Deer Camp is something new under the sun, an environmental history of a family, a rough-and-ready story of unhappiness and clashing needs that works its way toward growth and understanding on a couple of hundred acres of sandy soil and struggling woods in the middle of Michigan: "The night wind blows off Lake Michigan twenty miles

to the west, smelling of algal water and sand and pines. Our camp is a worn-out farm halfway up Michigan's Lower Peninsula, near the knee-deep meander of the North Fork of the White River, a spit of blow-sand left between the swamps when the Laurentide ice sheet retreated from this spot a little more than fourteen thousand years ago, the receding blade of the last ice age. All around us are swamp and other hunting properties, mostly former farms like ours that were beamed to death a

century earlier and left in yellow, medium-coarse sand."

That sand-county farm becomes the tentative, uncertain center of a family's attempt to achieve sustainable relations among themselves between fitful bouts of deer hunting, grouse hunting, and fishing. A culture critic, political activist, and environmental journalist drawn to an urban life in New York and Los Angeles, Kuipers reveals himself

also to be a depth psychologist in

work boots, a phenomenologist who can handle a chain saw and five acres of slash, as well as a deep ecologist who never forgot where he came from: "This is the Michigan that emerged in the wake of the first wave of lumbermen, when the sawdust returned to earth and the rivers were restored by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Michigan for me of the Nick Adams stories and the poetry of Jim Harrison and Thomas McGuane's *The Sporting Life*." He is both self-taught, full of hard-won common sense, and deeply educated in subjects that matter to him—anthropology and ecology, psychology and philosophy. He has a canny sense of

*The cold night
was when I could
be who I was
in the woods.*

Dean Kuipers, *The Deer Camp*

what he needs to know to pursue his and his family's edgy version of the American Dream. Whether he's writing about his love of the woods or his love of that family, Kuipers writes with impressive emotional and intellectual clarity. And, oh yeah, you can drive a twelvepenny nail into his prose and hang your deer rifle on it.

WATERLUST: A COLLECTION OF FISHING STORIES (HARPER ANGLING BOOKS, HARDBOUND, 220 PAGES, \$40) is one of those pleasant surprises that shows up in the mail tattooed with overseas postal labels. Illustrator, photographer, and designer Robert Olsen has written and designed an elegant angling book full of eye-appeal and wonderful to read. His essays share a world of domestic and foreign angling—vivid landscapes, good companions, and telling experiences—accounts that reveal the lineaments of an admirable angling life. And Olsen's fishing is eclectic, a refreshing European attitude; he loves fishing for carp and barbel with floats and baits as much as he enjoys fly casting for trout and salmon.

Like many anglers, Olsen is a homebody who travels widely. He fishes for taimen in Outer Mongolia, for carp and bass in Spain's Ebro, for trout in France's Charente, for mahseer in southern India's River Cauvery. This may seem a bit posh, to borrow a term from the author, but Olsen has a gift for making all fishing seem ordinary, a good thing. The Yorkshire-born artist is at his best on home water—the Red Lion stretch of the River Wye, where he enjoys the quiet glory of any angling. His essay "Home Waters" is a gem, as is his boyhood reminiscence "Waterlust" and the luminous "Water," in which he recounts the varieties of waters he loves.

Two important books on my reading table assay the state of angling in our troubled times. In FISHING THROUGH THE APOCALYPSE (LYONS PRESS, HARDBOUND, 216 PAGES, \$24.95), Matthew Miller explores the state of North American fisheries with the baleful eye of someone who understands how degraded they have become after centuries of pollution, misuse, and mismanagement. But as Director of Science Communications for the Nature

Conservancy, he is hopeful about and supportive of attempts to protect and restore the fishing we have. Due to the relentless pressure of environmental stresses, much of our fishing has become, he notes, "unnatural." So he fished his way through what he rightly calls a dystopia exploring "the promises and perils of freshwater fishing in America" in our time.

The result is not the diatribe you might expect from a self-professed dystopian eco-angler, but rather a lively, informative tour of widely dispersed niches in our still varied and fascinating fisheries. Miller considers the horror of golden trout and other genetically engineered monstrosities that state hatcheries insist on producing. He covers bold restoration efforts such as the elimination of lake trout in favor of native cutthroat in Yellowstone and a project to protect Guadalupe bass in Texas. He explores the protection of fragile remnant habitat for Gila trout in New Mexico and brook trout in Iowa. For a guy who knows how environmentally stressed and biologically corrupted our fishing has become, Miller is willing to look sympathetically at efforts to make our fishing less unnatural.

Sid Dobrin's oddly titled FISHING, GONE? SAVING THE OCEAN THROUGH SPORTFISHING (TEXAS A&M, SOFTBOUND, 264 PAGES, \$30) is a well-informed and wide-ranging call to arms for saltwater sport fishermen to do their part in behalf of the world's fisheries (which is not the same as saving our troubled oceans). Dobrin weaves a mix of environmental reporting with personal narrative and philosophical reflection on sporting ethics. He argues as well as anyone has for saltwater anglers to rise to new ethical standards to protect the species they pursue and the habitats those species depend on. Dobrin documents why it's long past time that saltwater anglers stopped looking at the oceans as an "inexhaustible" resource. He admits that his "vision . . . may be idealistic, hopeful, and—perhaps—unrealistic," but he makes a good case for improved practices. Dobrin's book may do some good pricking the conscience and raising the consciousness of saltwater anglers and the sport fishing industry that profits from them. ■

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