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Essays on beauty of Northeast Kingdom

"Drunk in the Woods"

by Tony Whedon,

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Drunk in the Woods is a collection of 16 essays, of which all but the first and last have been previously published in journals of essays, fiction, and poetry. Many of the essays describe the harsh beauty of the Northeast Kingdom, where Whedon and his wife have lived near the Canadian border for over a quarter century in a cabin which, during their early years, had no running water or electricity. The shadow of Thoreau hovers metaphorically behind Whedon's withdrawal from society, and stylistically behind his delicate descriptions of the woods, its animals, and its vistas, but another shadow looms more closely. For "drunk in the woods" is not just the state of being its title essay describes. Collectively, the essays portray a narrator who, despite years of recovery, presents himself as a drunk in the woods.

The woods is more than a setting: it's a state of mind, an inspiration. The second essay, "Nightwalk," meditates on the woods' darkness, which a person accustomed to electricity thinks of simply as "the absence of light." But after long winter evenings lit by stars or, inside, a kerosene lamp that throws light only a few feet, darkness attains a texture, "an eerie dark silence in a dusk that doesn't fall, but emerges from the hollows, the dark wet riverbanks, the mounded snow." Whedon's intimate perception of landscape appears again in "Deer Park," a meditation on an ancient hemlock grove, its 800-year-old trees, and its changes over the seasons. These two essays, however, are exceptional in that they contain "pure" nature writing – some of the finest in the collection. The other woodland observations are intermingled with the narrator's reflections on his years of alcoholism and recovery. The mixture is achieved in short linked scenes whose flickering tense shifts mirror the movement from sights presently beheld – a pond, a garden, a woodpecker -- to memories that the sight calls up

spontaneously. The result is a gracefully ambiguous hybrid of memoir and nature writing. In "Drunk in the Woods," for example, memory is tinged with regret for "an alcoholic landscape – a drunk landscape, as opposed to the sober one I live in now, the same trees, years later, the same brook, but with more clarity." Behind

the syntax hovers the distant possibility that the drunken landscape, not the sober one, allows more clarity of vision.

Whedon's hybrid allows him to avoid the cliché of "I was a sinner, but now I'm saved" and instead capture the complicated inter-relationship of drunkenness and sobriety. On the one hand, sobered memory invokes deep regret for the pain he has caused – the brawls, the arrests, the broken bones, the fights with the loyal woman referred to in the objectifying phrase "my wife," possibly to protect her from his inner self. Nor can sobriety be simply assumed after long periods of abstinence; husband and wife are tacitly aware that

"the farther away I am from drinking, the closer I am to another drink." The threat appears most clearly in "Hunter's Moon," in which distaste for hunting season it tinged with the fear of

the drinking that often accompanies hunting. But Whedon also captures a romantic yearning for an aspect of drunkenness that he associates with inspiration: identification with the Chinese poets whose poetry is touched by wine to the point of being "falling down drunk"; communion with Coleridge's depression and addiction; portrayal of Darwin in his garden, memories of his travels inspired by "having drunk more than his share of Armagnac."

Together, the essays portray a narrator who regards himself as an "Imposter," a man (the sensibility is entirely masculine) alone in the woods, observant, literary, musical, but always aware of the past's "tenacious hold" on him as he lives, physically and spiritually, in a deep woods where there is no visible line to mark the border crossing.

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One-Minute Book Reviews

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