

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

The Tracks of an Author's, and a Reader's, Tears

By Dwight Garner

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It's not very manly, the topic of weeping while reading. Yet for a book critic tears are an occupational hazard. Luckily, perhaps, books don't make me cry very often — I'm a thrice-a-year man, at best. Turning pages, I'm practically Steve McQueen.

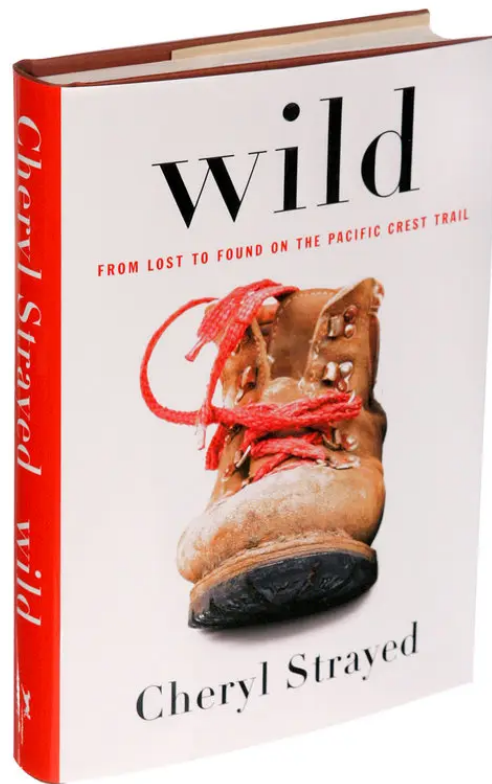
Cheryl Strayed's new memoir, "Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail," however, pretty much obliterated me. I was reduced, during her book's final third, to puddle-eyed cretinism. I like to read in coffee shops, and I began to receive concerned glances from matronly women, the kind of looks that said, "Oh, honey." It was a humiliation.

To mention all this does Ms. Strayed a bit of a disservice, because there's nothing cloying about "Wild." It's uplifting, but not in the way of many memoirs, where the uplift makes you feel that you're committing mental suicide. This book is as loose and sexy and dark as an early Lucinda Williams song. It's got a punk spirit and makes an earthy and American sound.

"Wild" recounts the months Ms. Strayed spent, during the summer of 1995, when she was 26, hiking alone on the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State. There were very frightening moments, but nothing particularly extraordinary happened to her.

The author was not chewed on by bears, plucked dangling from the edge of a pit, buried by an avalanche or made witness to the rapture. No dingo ate anyone's baby. Yet everything happened. The clarity of Ms. Strayed's prose, and thus of her person, makes her story, in its quiet way, nearly as riveting an adventure narrative as Jon Krakauer's two "Into" books: those matey fraternal twins, "Into the Wild" and "Into Thin Air."

Ms. Strayed began her hike because her life was in meltdown. "I was living alone in a studio apartment in Minneapolis, separated from my husband and working as a waitress, as low and mixed-up as I'd ever been," she writes. Her mother had recently died, effectively rendering her an orphan. (Her father had vanished when she was 6.) She was using heroin; she had, she says, slept with too many men.



Alessandra Montalto/The New York Times

Her grief, early in this book, is as palpable as her confusion. Her portrait of her mother, who died of cancer at 45, is raw and bitter and reverent all at once.

“She dated men with names like Killer and Doobie and Motorcycle Dan,” Ms. Strayed writes about the woman who sometimes had to feed the author and her two siblings on food stamps, government cheese and powdered milk.

Yet when Ms. Strayed went away to college, her mom came along and enrolled too. She got straight A’s. “Her love was full-throated and all-encompassing and unadorned,” Ms. Strayed writes. “Every day she blew through her entire reserve.” When her mother became ill, the author says, “I folded my life down” to care for her.

“Wild” is thus the story of an unfolding. Ms. Strayed went walking in search of what she calls “radical aloneness.” She had no cellphone and no credit card; often she had only a few coins in her pocket to last a week. What felt profound, she says, “was how few choices I had and how often I had to do the thing I least wanted to do. How there was no escape or denial. No numbing it down with a martini or covering it up with a roll in the hay.”

Physically, she was unprepared for this adventure, and she recounts a great deal of physical pain: that of setting off with a ridiculously overstuffed backpack she comes to refer to as Monster; losing most of her blackened toenails to ill-fitting boots; having her feet become “a throbbing mass of pulp.” After a few weeks on the trail, she writes, “my stench was magnificent.”

In a comical scene, a reporter for a journal called The Hobo Times mistakes her for one of his tribe and attempts to interview her. “I did not so much look like a woman who had spent the past three weeks backpacking in the wilderness,” she admits, “as I did like a woman who had been the victim of a violent and bizarre crime.”

Ms. Strayed got tougher, mentally as well as physically. She tells good, scary stories about nearly running out of water, encountering leering men and dangerous animals. About bears and other carnivorous woodland beasts, she asks, "Why did they always have to run in the direction I was going?"



Cheryl Strayed
Joni Kabana

An aspiring writer, she keeps a running tally of the books she reads (Faulkner, Drabble, Coetzee) and recounts how, to lighten her load, she burned each morning the pages she had read the night before.

Eating cheap, dehydrated meals on the trail, and sleeping in a tiny tent, she is absurdly vivid about the comforts she misses. Bottles of cold Snapple lemonade become talismanic in their import. About a cheeseburger and fries she cannot afford, she declares, "I was devastated by the sight of them."

She is even better on her own lust. Parts of this frank and witty book belong in "Best American Sex Writing 2013." There's a moment when a stern and upright fellow is helping her lighten her backpack and finds a dozen ultrafine condoms in their crinkly packaging. He holds them up and asks, "Do you really need these?"

Ms. Strayed doesn't — at least not a dozen. At one point she meets a young man on the trail, begins talking to him and says to us, as if she were a randy Doonesbury character in hiking boots, "There was no way I was going to keep my pants on with a man who'd seen Michelle Shocked three times."

Two things almost kept me from picking up this book. Why did Ms. Strayed wait 17 years before committing this story to paper? As in any memoir, some of the interior life here has to have been reconstructed. She never explains the delay, but the aging of her notebooks and memories seems to have, as with casked whiskey, only strengthened her book's complicated flavors.

There's also the matter of her made-up surname, Strayed, which sounds like the punch line from an old joke. (Mae West: "I used to be Snow White, but I drifted.") The author doesn't reveal her original name, but "Strayed" strikes me as a deft stab at self-reinvention. (She changed her name from Nyland in 1995, according to her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf.)

"Growing up poor had come in handy," the author says near the close of her book. "I probably wouldn't have been fearless enough to go on such a trip with so little money if I hadn't grown up without it."

The lack of ease in her life made her fierce and funny; she hammers home her hard-won sentences like a box of nails. The cumulative welling up I experienced during "Wild" was partly a response to that too infrequent sight: that of a writer finding her voice, and sustaining it, right in front of your eyes.