



The Patch

John McPhee

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An "album quilt," an artful assortment of nonfiction writings by John McPhee that have not previously appeared in any book

The Patch is the seventh collection of essays by the nonfiction master, all published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. It is divided into two parts.

Part 1, "The Sporting Scene," consists of pieces on fishing, football, golf, and lacrosse--from fly casting for chain pickerel in fall in New Hampshire to walking the linksland of St. Andrews at an Open Championship. Part 2, called "An Album Quilt," is a montage of fragments of varying length from pieces done across the years that have never appeared in book form--occasional pieces, memorial pieces, reflections, reminiscences, and short items in various magazines including *The New Yorker*. They range from a visit to the Hershey chocolate factory to encounters with Oscar Hammerstein, Joan Baez, and Mount Denali.

Emphatically, the author's purpose was not merely to preserve things but to choose passages that might entertain contemporary readers. Starting with 250,000 words, he gradually threw out 75 percent of them, and randomly assembled the remaining fragments into "an album quilt." Among other things, *The Patch* is a covert memoir.

The Patch Details

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Darwin8u says

"A thousand details add up to one impression."

-- Cary Grant, quoted in John McPhee's 'The Patch'

"...an interloper [at Princeton], a fake professor, a portfolio without minister."

-- Robert Fagles & Robert Hollander, both describing John McPhee

In my Goodreads "About Me" I'm pretty blunt:

"I won't review your self-published book. I promise. Even if your book is published by a traditional publishing house (Penguin, etc), I'm not going to read and review it UNLESS I've read you before (most likely). If your name is Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John le Carré, Robert Caro, John McPhee, etc., sure... PLEASE send me ALL your books. I'm totally game. Otherwise, you are just wasting both of our time."

That usually scares away most self-published prose pimps, but the other day I landed a REAL fish. Someone at Farrar, Straus and Giroux sent me a quick note complimenting me (I'm a whore for compliments) AND asking if I wanted a soon-to-be-published book by John McPhee to read, enjoy, and yes ... perhaps ... review?

My kids would tell you that in a choice between meeting John McPhee and God, I'd be hard pressed to choose, because to me John McPhee IS GOD. So, of course I took the book. I got it a couple days ago and just finished it today.

Ann Baldwin May's quilt 'Great Blue Heron at Dusk'

Lovely. The book is essentially a memoir, told through prose patches and resurrected scratches. Pieces that have been overlooked or published and never reprinted were culled, edited, and sewn together (at 87, there is a lot of past prose to examine).

Part I of the book contains six sporting essays that range from fishing for pickerel in New Hampshire (*The Patch*), to chasing errant golf balls (*The Orange Trooper*), to golf at St. Andrews (*Linksland and Bottle*), to coach Bill Tierney (Princeton's and later Denver's) championship lacrosse coach (*Pioneer*).

Part II is essentially a collection of small pieces (some just a paragraph, others several pages) that seem random. They span McPhee's interests and curiosities from people, to places, to science, sports, and errata. It is only as these patches come together that you begin to realize McPhee is essentially taking you on a trip through his memory as a writer, a father, and a person. McPhee's talent as a writer bubbles up, but so too does McPhee's essential humanity. His narrative nonfiction informs, seduces, and entertains.

McPhee, along with Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, etc., helped spread New Journalism through his essays and books. His writing is curiosity distilled with patience + carefully filtered through literary prose + reduced

with McPhee's unique talent of observing the crucial character in the perfect place at the exact right time. It is a gift from a literary staret, a psalm from our desert father of nonfiction. In this book McPhee is unfolding a quilt whose patern slowly transforms into McPhee. It is a love note from a father to his family (the book is dedicated to his 10 grandchildren) and most certainly to his readers and fans.

Carol Surges says

Full disclosure here, I did not read any of Part I The Sporting Scene. I skipped right to Part II An Album Quilt. It was that more tactile and relatible part that had caught my imagination. Pulling together bits and pieces of writing, much like sewing together bits and pieces of writing sounded too intriguing. McPhee was in the perfect position to pull this off. As a former staff writer for The New Yorker he had access to the many fascinating people but he also has a wide-ranging list of interests many of which began during his summer camp days, something he writes about in one of his pieces. He also has a great vocabulary which apparently was passed along to a daughter whose high school essay he shares in full. Wonderful! Anyway, the read was fascinating and while I can't replicate this meandering collection, I do have decades of memories that I want to put down on paper and McPhee has set the bar!

Text Publishing says

'A bountiful cornucopia of insightful essays that display the wide range of his interests and tastes...McPhee delights in cracking open subjects, both ordinary and esoteric, and making them accessible to the layperson in works that testify to his virtuosity as one of the greatest living American essayists.'

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

Jamie says

I can't recall how I discovered John McPhee, but I have grown to love his writing style. He is a master of the longform nonfiction piece. Books like *Coming Into the Country* and *Uncommon Carriers* are wonderful explorations into all kinds of interesting aspects of life (life in Alaska, life as a long-haul trucker).

The Patch is a deliberate hodge-podge of pieces never before collected in book form. The book is divided into two parts, the first centered around sports, and the second a patchwork of writing over the decades. What I loved about the book is the diversity of pieces contained within. From fishing for pickerel, to the best techniques for finding golf balls on or near golf courses; from bears roaming New Jersey to a profile of Cary Grant. There is a little of everything here.

McPhee has the ability to make any subject interesting. In a piece on football, he discusses where the yellow flags originate. Another piece reveals the meaning behind license plates of various members of Congress. There's a piece of Sophia Loren, and a piece on the names celebrities use in place of their real names. There's a piece on covers for *Time* magazine prepared but never run.

In a piece on a Mensa conference in the 1960s that McPhee was invited to attend as a reporter, he writes about the humorous keynote speaker, who happened to be Isaac Asimov. There were pieces on synthetic food, the lines to get into Radio City Music Hall, William Randolph Hurst, the Hershey Chocolate factory,

and a camp in Vermont that McPhee attended as a young councilor.

One of my favorite pieces was a very short one on writing. I am a writer, and a lifelong New York Yankees fan, which is why I found this so amusing:

A professional writer, by definition, is a person clothed in self-denial, who each and almost every day will plead with eloquent lamentation that he has a brutal burden on his mind and soul, will summon deep reserves of discipline as seriatim antidotes to any domestic chore, and drawing the long sad face of the pale poet, will rise above his dread of his dreaded working chamber, excuse himself from the idle crowd, go into his writing sanctum, shut the door, shoot the bold, and in lonely sacrifice, turn on the Mets game.

Mitchell says

My favorite kind of book, one that demands the reader meet the writer at least halfway. For mindless entertainment, I suggest you try the boob-tube. I did not love every piece and I fault myself for that, not the author. The essays on spectator sports gave me the most trouble as I don't truck very well with crowds. The best for me were the solitary sports of fishing, bird watching, and great actors of film. Movies, thankgod, no longer require sitting in a huge room full of noisy and distracting people as the big screen nowadays is so easily translated to a screen in one's own living room.

Here, for a taste of the rich fare of this book, is McFee "quoting" a birdwatcher friend. I suspect, however, there's more than a bit of McFee himself in the smoothness of the retelling:

"If I were to become a bird in some reincarnation, I would choose to be a cardinal. ...a run-of-the-mill suburban-commuter type, despite the bright red suit. But have you ever looked closely at his wife? Damnably attractive, to my way of thinking. Just my type. A simple but superbly tailored dress in a kind of bronze color....a stylish long tail, with which she lets you know that, while she comes from an old family and went to the best of schools, there's plenty of spirit to her. And those lips? A luscious orange you can scarcely believe is natural. ...a nice pouting fullness to them, without the exaggerated clownishness of her cousins the grosbeaks. Cardinals are very uxorious, you know. Stay together all winter, not just in breeding season. I can see why. A few weeks ago I saw a couple giving each other pumpkin seeds at one of my feeders. Sexiest performance I've ever seen."

Stacey says

John McPhee could write the description on a can of peas and I would want to read it. My father was a fan and introduced me to McPhee starting with *Coming into the Country* when it was first published. His is a beautifully engaging style of writing. These pieces which had been published in the *New Yorker* are no exception.

Mehrsa says

No one writes better than McPhee. And he's so funny. A few of his essays (most about topics I have 0 interest in) had me laughing out loud. The middle of the book is just a collection of scattered writings that are not even essays but paragraphs. Still, it's delightful.

Tom says

John McPhee is a treasure. His enthusiasm and curiosity sweep you along no matter what the subject may be. The Patch has articles on fishing, football, golf balls (far more interesting than you suspect), golf, his bedridden father, lacrosse, and bears. At this point, you are on page 95 of 242.

The rest of the book comes under the heading "An Album Quilt". Here he gathers bits of writing from many years and presents them one after another, giving them no names and indicating beginnings and endings with a small quilt pattern. It's like a box of chocolates. And since he is 88 years old, it also seems like a farewell. McPhee's writing is clear, deep, various, and funny (very). It is devoid of pretentiousness. Since he always uses the right word, you are not irritated when he sends you to the dictionary.

This book is a treasure.

Eoin says

Delightful as ever. On the greatly improbable chance that someone is only now hearing about John McPhee and wondering if this is the place to start: sure, start here. Anywhere will work. McPhee is, in my mind, a master of the conversational non-fiction tone and a first-ballot hall of famer. This loose, hodge-podge collection passes through subjects as swiftly and lightly as a canoe. A joy to read as always. Worth it for any of the pieces.

Carl says

Another fantastic essay collection by John McPhee. Informative and enlightening, entertaining and moving, and so much more. I can't say enough about him and his writing. The master who has taught dozens how to be better writers and thinkers. Read him if you enjoy nonfiction, read him if you don't, keep his advice in mind when reading and writing, and never forget to explore the world of McPhee.

Jim says

[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/ma....](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/28/ma...)

Geoff says

Anything John McPhee writes will be exquisite, interesting, personal, and educational. The "patchwork quilt" of short excerpts worked less well for me than the longer pieces, but it is interesting to see the breadth of topics he's written on and the thematic resonances over the decades.

Don Kent says

This collection of McPhee's essays is absolutely marvelous.

Mark Burris says

Magic. That's the best way I can describe McPhee's style and output. Yeah, yeah: I know writing is hard; he tells us so:

"A professional writer, by definition, is a person clothed in self-denial who each and almost every day will plead with eloquent lamentation that he has a brutal burden on his mind and soul, will summon deep reserves of "discipline" as seriatim antidotes to any domestic chore, and, drawing the long sad face of the pale poet, will rise above his dread of his dreaded working chamber, excuse himself from the idle crowd, go into his writing sanctum, shut the door, shoot the bolt, and in lonely sacrifice turn on the Mets game." (137)

He makes it seem so easy to us readers, his prose, his descriptions rewarding us beyond the everyday. We learn about, uh, things. And, lo, we are amazed. Not to mention entertained. Such as the schematic or diagram of the famous loop of holes on The Old Course. (64) "It is a sequence of holes so hallowed in the game that Amen Corner, at Augusta National, has been compared with it, but while the Loop is far more complex geometrically, as golf goes it is less difficult. Birdies are to be made, just lying there for the taking, unless the wind is blowing hard, which it nearly always is. The prow of the linksland is much like the bow of a ship in the winter North Atlantic."

This book was worth the money and the time to read for his cheat sheet on the male tennis standouts of the 70s. (149-151) For the chance to meet Marion Davies (152) and Jenny Lind (167). And for the slightly longer section of quilt about Bob Bingham and birding. (200-206) I had read much of this content before in The New Yorker, but once, twice, then yet again, I find I can never read him too much. There's always something there still.

Must be the magic.

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

There is a luminous thread of wanting that sews this quilt of essays together. Even as days pass there is the feeling of trying to bind memories tighter into a collective covering; knowing that this is what will keep you warm even as the world grows colder. John McPhee is like the traveling friend we see only once in awhile - coming home with stories that are bittersweet with longing and roads not taken.

