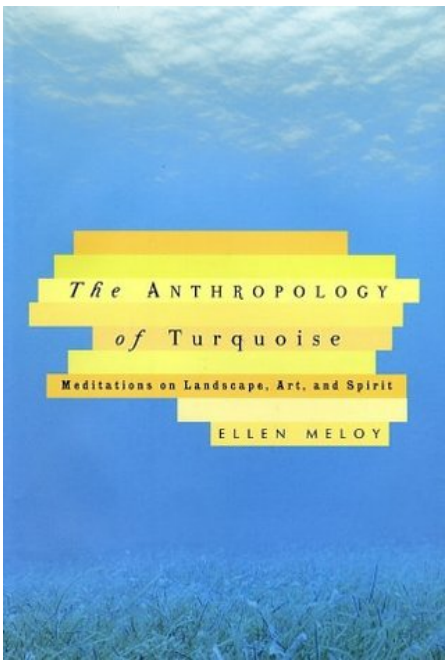

The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit

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What color is a life? Ellen Meloy looks at her place in the world and time in *The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit*, and her experiences outweigh her conclusions--which are, after all, only tentative. Whether musing about family history, exploring the high Utah wilderness, or diving in the Gulf of Mexico, Meloy takes in more than most with her energetic senses, and her gift for articulating the sensuous keeps the reader looking over her shoulder. Life's ugly bits are also strewn herein; turning a blind eye to nuclear test sites and border crossings would be almost sacrilegious to someone who so venerates light and vision. *The Anthropology of Turquoise* is perhaps best read as a nonfiction novel. Patching together pieces of memoir, travelogue, and spirit quest into a uniquely blended visionary document, Meloy finds the world in a grain of sand. --*Rob Lightner*

The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit Details

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From Reader Review The Anthropology of Turquoise: Meditations on Landscape, Art, and Spirit for online ebook

John-Nathan says

I'm reminded of a college professor, and friend, who said of Joyce's Ulysses, "I didn't know you could do that with words," upon his first read of the book and his thoughts therein. Similarly, I feel toward The Anthropology of Turquoise. The parsimonious use of colourful (please forgive the pun), phrases, lyrical and vivid words paint pictures easily in the readers mind.

Maybe it's the Southern-Utah whore in me that is drooling for her words that describe her life, landscapes, and essays about her past. She writes as an artist talking about the virtues and symbolism, for example, of one shade of blue with respect another--romanticized, self effacing, witty, and intelligent.

What colour would my life be?

I'm on page 44, I'm slowly soaking this book in, it's succulent. Orange cantelope, olives, sticky red raspberries, and chocolate, in the desert, sunsetting, with wine and a friend; this is how I feel when I enjoy this book. I'm doubting that the rest of the read will fail to dissapoint, as I'm a complete and total sucker for succinct, vivid, accurate writing. I'm seriously reminded of looking at artwork in a museum when my eyes fall over her letters; she speaks to more than one of my senses and I find that I have sensations of being tickled and am experiencing Joy. John Irving's Garp was the last author to make me feel connected to a story like this, not that anything about their writing styles are even remotely similar, but they're both wonderful.

Patty says

I am on the fence about whether this gets 4 or 5 stars, I am still so blown away by Meloy's writing. I haven't given many books 5 stars. I have a feeling that this book deserves another reading, but I borrowed it on ILL so it has to go back to the library.

Almost every day I get an email called Shelf Awareness. It is written for independent booksellers, but anyone who loves books would enjoy it. Awhile back, Philip Connors mentioned Ellen Meloy as an author he is an evangelist for. I don't know why I felt compelled to find one of Meloy's books, but I did. I am so grateful to Connors - I know it was serendipity, but this was a wonderful book.

Melroy reminds me of all the authors I have read (Annie Dillard, Gretchen Erhlich, Terry Tempest Williams, etc.) who know their place in the world. They know the landscape, the animals, the air that they breathe. They make me want to move to wherever they are because they have described the place so well. Ellen Meloy has done this for the US southwest.

Her writing seems effortless and is beautiful. Meloy has taught me about turquoise, the land around western rivers, burros and other aspects of life that I never knew that I wanted to know. Now that I have read this book, I am amazed that I was living without this information. My life definitely was not complete.

I am so sad that Ellen Meloy has died. However, her presence will live on for a long, long time.

Lara says

When I came across this book, I had been hoping that she would focus more on how things actually connected through turquoise in different cultures. I was hoping that she would spend more time actually focusing on the actual idea of turquoise. I found that the book was more about her than turquoise. I didn't actually finish the book, mostly because it didn't maintain my interest enough to continue. I may try to pick it up again later. She spent so much time focusing on her own travels to research it that it bothered me.

Robyn says

A collection of fifteen essays, this is a book meant to be savored. I didn't plan on spending nine months with Meloy, but my book club meeting came and went. And I was only one-third of the way through.

If your idea of enjoying nature is checking birds off of a list, or achieving a personal best in mountaineering, this book will be too meditative for your liking. If, however, you prefer to listen and discover what nature can teach, especially over time, you're in for a treat.

Some critics dislike Meloy's descriptive writing. It can make for a sometimes challenging read. But I appreciate her words, and the time I can share with them, because she can no longer add to the conversation. She passed away in her sleep, just two years after writing this book.

When I first visited New Mexico, I felt something that is difficult to describe. Perhaps everyone feels this pull. I have returned repeatedly, although it is never enough. In light of this, I'll share a favorite passage from "Heron Bay" (p. 210):

"Of all the things I wondered about on this island, I wondered the hardest about the paradoxical contrast and affinity of redrock desert and turquoise ocean, the seduction of certain geographies that feel like home not by story or blood but merely by their forms and colors. How our perceptions, as someone once said, are our only internal map of the world, how there are places that claim you and places that warn you away. How you can fall in love with the light."

Unexpectedly, Meloy infuses her essays with humor. In "Swimming the Mojave", she recounts an experience with the police in an upscale neighborhood. Her offense? Walking. This was an obvious example of her feeling otherness -- something many of us experience in life, and combat by heading into nature.

Amy Beatty says

It took Matt and I over a year to finish this. But it was such a treat. I love her words and stories and life

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Ms.pegasus says

Our lives are compressed by change. It took centuries for the symbol zero to migrate from India to Italy. Even then, the idea did not immediately take hold. It took half a century for the westward expansion to change forever the face of the American west. Was it only a generation ago, Meloy asks, when you could find a vantage point on the Colorado Plateau and see for a hundred miles? Today, forget to update your GPS and the new houses and roads you see will appear on your screen as a vast swathe of blankness. The calibration of change has shrunk too quickly to even process: *"It has come quickly, this crushing, industrial love of paradise. The pervert-free, less-trammeled, hundred-mile-view days were little more than two decades past, not so very long ago. Yet, already, my own history sounds like another country."* (Essay #3: "Waiting Its Occasions," p.74)

Unlike Edward Abbey, Meloy is not an enraged purist. She simply asks us to step back from this disorienting myopic pace. Not all of us crave the life of outdoors solitude she cherishes. Instead, she generously lends us her painter's eye and invites us to share her vision. It's an organic vision comprised of layers: history, personal memory, family lore, myth, and above all, sight. As she describes the constantly changing hues of the rock, sky and river, she reminds us that colors excite powerful emotions. She summons eloquent quotes from Jorge Luis Borges, Pliny the Elder, Goethe, Kandinsky, the Persian scholar Muhammed ibn Mansur, Loren Eisley and ecologist E.O. Wilson to expand her vision.

She also permits the reader to glimpse how this landscape may have looked to others. The Mojave were travelers, walking as much as 200 miles from the desert to the ocean. Their geography was localized. Their place names recorded not just appearance, but history and emotion: fear slough, duck water, whispering place. Still, history and archaeology cannot permit us to see the world through Mojave eyes. *"When we forage for stories, we may end up telling our own. When we cannot possess the thoughts of past cultures, we possess their <u>things</u>"*. (Essay #4: "Aha Makav Walkabout," p.94) Even the geography John Wesley Powell saw no longer exists. *"I bore no delusions that the river beside me [the Colorado] still flowed through Powell's <u>terra incognita</u>. From Rocky Mountain headwaters to the Sea of Cortez, the Colorado shoulders the weight of our needs, the thirsts of our farms and cities, and the affection of thousands of recreationists who ply its waters."* (Essay #9: "The Silk That Hurls Us Down Its Spine," p.214. This is writing that will unleash the imagination of even the most cosseted reader.

Meloy finds occasional moments of subtle humor. She battles a flicker bent on pulverizing a stucco wall of her modest Utah desert dwelling. She turns to two mules for calming therapy when her mind remains stuck on the future. Inspired by the basket-weaving Yokut, she roasts griddle cakes from ground acorns. *"The cakes were bitter and needed a throat wash of cold Dos Equis. I had not known to leach the tannin from the ground meal. In the night a masked raccoon picked up the left over cakes in its tiny child's hands and carried them off."* (Essay #3: "Waiting Its Occasions," p.65). For much of her professional life Elroy was a technical illustrator, and she includes some delightful drawings of desert plant life. "Prickly Pear" shows the whimsical outline of the Thumbelina-sized author languorously reclining in the cupped petals of the cactus flower. (Essay #10: "A Field Guide to Harlotry," p.236)

This book was published in 2002 but speaks with uncanny prescience to today's fear-saturated culture: *"Scarier than the ...lack of sensory intimacy with nature, or perhaps a direct result of this estrangement, is a dark side, an undercurrent of escalating hostility verging on violence. It is as if disagreement — over lifestyles and land use, politics and technology — is no longer enough. The argument must also become personal to the point where resentment is so concentrated against <u>someone</u>, usually the wrong someone or someone amorphous and "different," it becomes dangerous and obsessive."* (Essay #13: "The Angry Lunch

Café," p.291)

Like a riverbed, these essays meander over a wide terrain. Even the title is misleading. Desert, water and stone lead the author to free-associate into stories about her childhood, genealogy, anthropology, the significance of turquoise across cultures, and variations in color taxonomies. I have tried to indicate some of the connecting themes of these essays. Some of my favorites were the ones that referenced Navajo myth, Yokut basketry, and the Topcock Maze, a geoglyph believed to have been built by the Mojave Indians. According to one myth, the spirits of the dead traversed it in order to confound evil spirits pursuing them. Another story explains them as a purification path for returning warriors on their path home. I loved the specificity of the geological terms she uses to describe the landscape of the Colorado Plateau: slickrock, talus, alluvial fan, bajadas and pediments. Take the time to look up some of these terms and you will be treated to some spectacular photos. I loved her contemplations on the emotional content of color. She stretches blue into a circular continuum flowing from turquoise into jade, from cerulean into violet, from pearlescence into gray and from indigo into iridescent blue-black. However, she also meanders into long stories about past generations of her extended family and a road trip from Santa Monica to Monument Valley which reminds her of John Cheever's short story, "The Swimmer." This is not a book for the impatient reader. It is not meant to be read quickly in a few consecutive sittings. It is, however, lyrical, though-provoking, and enlightening.

NOTES:
The author died two years after this book was published. The Ellen Meloy Fund for Desert Writers was founded in her honor, and is a good starting point for discovering a new generation of environmental writers.

The sense of the desert as a breathing organism conveyed in one of Meloy's passages reminded me of Hari Kunzru's very different fictional book set in the Mojave Desert, GODS WITHOUT MEN

Meloy mentions passages from Alfred Kroeber's book, HANDBOOK OF THE INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA. Kroeber's wife Theodora also wrote a book, a biography of the last Yahi Indian, ISHI OF TWO WORLDS

Vivienne Seaman says

I wanted to read this book for the portrayal of the Southwest. Meloy did that, it was, however, a challenge for me as her education is far above my own.
It did challenge me to look up words I have never used so for that reason I gave it 4 stars. She was a very descriptive writer and I could easily picture her settings to each essay.

Interest wise, it did not meet my expectations.

Bronson says

I read this book over a decade ago and recently decided to revisit it. I think it's one of the most beautiful books I've read in a long time. Her love of nature and desert landscapes is deep and personal. She should be compensated by the Monument Valley tourism department.

Its deep and personal and deserves some time. It's best enjoyed if you have a chance to visit this part of the country.

Yaaresse says

Beautiful. Exquisite. Captivating.

For the record, Ellen Meloy and I have almost nothing in common – except perhaps our disdain for Las Vegas and a preference for solitude. She was an outdoorswoman who thought nothing of sleeping under the stars with only a sleeping bag or spending a week alone canoeing a canyon river; my idea of camping involves room service. She would spend hours marveling at whatever moths, centipedes, snakes, and bats found their way into her house or across her path; I, as she so aptly put it, move through life with a can of Raid in my hand.

No matter. I can appreciate her writing, the almost synesthetic way she described her surroundings, her self-deprecating humor when she knew something she did was absurd (like stapling her hair to the roof), the melodramatic daydreams she indulged in sometimes. (The one about the well-meaning redneck warehouse worker and the orange swimsuit screw-up made me laugh out loud.) The essay “A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry” is half-erotica, half a psychedelic trip. Who knew prickly pears and globemallow led such lurid lives?

I read this collection of essays the way some people read psalms each evening, as a way of centering myself with something evocative and meditative. Meloy penned canticles to her beloved red rock canyons, hymns to the phenomenon of color and visual texture, and even eulogies to the solitary, open spaces and animals that are becoming ever more extinct. She managed to do this in a way that was not pretentious or preachy, but simply appreciative, reverent, and even humorous.

This is a book I will read over and over.

Dayna says

This took me quite a long time to plow through. Her imagery is dense and her thought process is not like mine, so I found myself having to very deliberately read. She and I share a love of the outdoors (and for some of the same places, actually), so it made it worth it. I did not read every single essay, quickly exiting those that were either too focused on anthropology or places I didn't care as much about.

Jessica says

After finishing this book I found, to my absolute delight, that Ellen Meloy lived in Mexican Hat! That was it. I was set. On my way down there to show up on her door step and sit at her feet...or at the foot of her raft, either way. Then I found out she was dead.

I've been robbed. you have too, though you may not know it. The fact that no matter how long I wait...there won't be any more books by Ellen just plain sucks.

I have felt that most of my life has been a struggle between my academically trained, degree seeking, order wanting brain and my body/heart that screams and laughs and sighs and runs around outside wanting to make love (yes really) to rivers and rocks and trees. Ellen Meloy had two PhDs and an MA...biology, art history, and painting. She lived in one of thh smallest towns in Utah where she floated rivers with her husband (BLM river ranger), worked in her Salsa garden, and consulted with her lamas. She writes about sitting quietly on the Green river, watching the desert bleed in bursts of flash floods,bringing the world down to sound. In her essays, she rages and dreams about turning into ivy and trees. She researches plant origins and visits the Navajo who live across the river. She is my teacher for how to blend my passions, for how to bring them together peacably.

Elly Sands says

I am so sorry this author's life was cut short. Her writing showed her vitality and insatiable curiosity for life. The detailed writing took awhile to get into but once I surrendered to it the flow of exquisite, brilliant words won me over. Her great sense of humor had me laughing out loud. Living in the southwest I've become somewhat tainted about the commercial side of turquoise. I now see it with new eyes since learning of it's history. This book is like a fun to read text book as the reader is continually learning something new and not just about turquoise. It's filled with her discoveries and explorations of the natural world. I love the southwest. It's in my blood and bones so this was a delicious book to read.

Natalie says

So this compilation of essays on a theme had some really really beautiful parts, some hilarious parts, and some really insightful parts. Even so, there were a lot of chapters that were a total slog. This was an extremely slow read for me, and sometimes it didn't feel worth it. If I were to recommend the book to someone, I would probably pick out specific chapters. But, of course, that might compromise the experience of the read. Needless to say, I'm torn because I'm so glad that I've read the parts of this book that stood out as points of excellence, but I'm also soooo glad I'm finally done.

Jon says

Ellen was a close friend of my family's for many years--in fact, my father had lunch with her only a few weeks before her sudden passing in 2004 at the age of 58. Needless to say, her death hit us rather hard--hard enough that, though she gave me **The Anthropology of Turquoise** on my birthday in 2003, it took me until mid-2007 to begin reading it. Journeying through these pages was thus a very intimate experience for me: full of sadness at the memory of a lost friend; laughter at the ridiculousness of Ellen's quirky passages; joy at the opportunity to hear her voice once again; and wonder at the beauty of her writing.

If you've never read any of Ellen's work before, you're in for a real treat. She writes about the southwest U.S. with passion and ferocity--a welcome change from many such environmental works which are as dry as the deserts they describe. It's odd to think that a series of essays that work to subtly build an environmental ethic

could be enjoyable, but in fact I quite often found myself laughing out loud. How could you not enjoy a book with essay titles such as "A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry," and chapter-opening sentences like, "I have just stapled my hair to the roof"?

Ellen's work is not just about humor, however; there are also long passages decrying the destruction of the natural world, an entire essay on the horridness of Los Angeles, and beautiful lover's notes to the red sands that shift through open doors at dusk. I can't say that **Anthropology** is the *best* environmental work I've ever read, but it's certainly one of the *best-written*.

If you've ever tried to get through **A Sand County Almanac** or **Walden** and found the style and writing too austere, pick up one of Ellen's books. She's just as deep, in her own way, but far more readable.

Dlmrose says

3+

Rebecca McNutt says

The Anthropology of Turquoise is a powerful and creative travel memoir, showcasing the natural world and human life in impressive and artistic ways.

Kate says

I wanted to love this book, its meditations on nature and dessert and animals and Mexico and my favorite color blue, but her writing style was felt so encumbered that I plodded along, skipping over parts hoping in vain to find some language that would open up and breathe.

Grady McCallie says

Lyrical, dense, rewarding of a slow read. These essays use a rich and self-consciously literary voice - not what I expected of a book set primarily in the severe desert southwest (of the US), with excursions to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and the islands of Barbados. Meloy writes with lush and devout love for her chosen place, and a clear-eyed awareness of the ways we have used the environment and one another unsustainably. Yet, she also writes with a lighter touch than some of the region's better known nature writers - Edward Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams. Meloy invokes a rainbow of precisely identified colors. If you can summon colors to the mind's eye by name, the book dances with them.

Some of the essays are especially poignant - for example, 'The Silk That Hurls Us Down Its Spine', describing a life-threatening circumstance during a solo trip down the Colorado River - when you know that Meloy died, relatively young and unexpectedly, just two years after this book was published. It's impossible to read these deeply personal essays without feeling that loss, but I'm grateful for images and insights she shares here.

Ray Ziemer says

This is an outstanding book of reflections, as the subtitle explains, on Desert, Sea, Stone, and Sky. Ellen Meloy was an excellent writer, that much is apparent - every chapter here is a joy to read, the prose just savory. But she was also clearly a student not only of the Desert Southwest, but a well-read scholar of words written on the subject as well. I found myself reacting to the epigrams as little semi-precious nuggets with their own value. Here are a couple:

"I used to wonder why the sea was blue at a distance and green close up and colorless for that matter in your hands. A lot of life is like that. A lot of life is just a matter of learning to like blue."
-- Miriam Pollard, The Listening God.

"There are nine different words in Maya for the color blue in the comprehensive Porrua Spanish-Maya Dictionary but just three Spanish translations, leaving six butterflies that can be seen only by the Maya, proving beyond doubt that when a language dies six butterflies disappear from the consciousness of the earth."
-- Earl Shorris, The Last Word.

Meloy comments that much modern nature writing is either an angry declamation or sorrowful lamentation over a tragic loss. Her own book here absorbs the emotions and makes them personal, so that the reader can relate to the author with an intimacy I've never felt for an essayist or observer of the natural world. Edward Abbey, for example, though a passionate writer, never made me want to put my arm around him and sit with him to watch the river flow. I wish I'd known Ellen Meloy -- and I feel like I have, to a great extent. I can picture her lean and bronzed on the green San Juan River, rowing solo through a burning desert afternoon; I can see her still as a lizard on slickrock, watching wasps buzzing among sego lillies and desert paintbrush.

She is sensual - describing the "brazen harlotry" of the desert flora, she unabashedly (well, she professes SOME abashment) describes the short spring on the Colorado Plateau as "a passion of flowers so accelerated, you feel their demands on your heart, the mounting pleasure, the sweet exhaustion... warm and soft, already engaged in rampant foreplay."

Meloy relates so much to her own life, her background in the "human paella that is greater Los Angeles" where "the desert is scraped away in a naked shriek until time and trees soften it." (I can see the hillside next to our grandmother's little house, the sandstone gouged by steel fangs of a backhoe).

Perhaps an attraction for me was the way Meloy wove in her own family stories -- like her father's Depression-era upbringing and economic sense creating in her an unquenchable thirst for the turquoise swimming pools of the Southern California lifestyle. Or the history of settlers like her Scots-born grandfather in the Sierra Nevadas, where a Yokuts Indian woman created a basket that the author prized. OR farther back, surrounded by Bahamian turquoise waters, she travels deep into the slave-holding history of her ancestors on an island neighboring Nassau.

As the title explains, it's an Anthropology, so what matters is the human element as it relates to the blue mineral, the color, the sky, and everything it suggests. Meloy is wonderful describing the Azul Maya of the Yucatan, and quotes everyone from Goethe on color ("...we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it") to Shakespeare on the stone's properties: (Shylock learns

that his daughter has traded the cherished memento of his turquoise ring: "I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys."

But Meloy is at her best describing her home in the desert, where the "menagerie of wildlife surrounds our house" and they "live in compatible anarchy." She brings the reader along through red dust to a Navaho Fair where, because she is one horseback, she is asked to escort Miss Many Farms, a princess on her white horse, and Miss Navajo Nation, a princess on the hood of a Chevy. We read spellbound as Meloy sits motionless, the rising sun coloring her campsite and revealing a small band of desert bighorn sheep -- the "brides of place" who have internalized their devotion to the range of desert where they forage, mate, and raise their young.

Since this precious little book is ultimately about people, we can sympathize with Meloy in her visit to the "Angry Lunch Cafe" and her encounters with a few of the human denizens of the desert: a glaring cafe waitress and her sorrowful mother; friends who over dinner idly plan guerilla protests; and the camo-clad jeep posse armed with rifles, sidearms and GPS units who suspiciously confronted her on the river: "Each of us had a comfortable cluelessness. I was lost but knew where I was. They were not lost but did not know where they were."

That describes the attitude - Meloy knew where she was, all right, but she was far from clueless. This book offers clues for all of us. I recommend it to any and all of my paddling friends as well as desert rats, other lovers of the Southwest culture, and anyone who enjoys fine writing.

Cindy says

Loved this book! *The Anthropology of Turquoise* is lyrical and exquisite, containing Meloy's meditations on everything from the childhood euphoria of spending long hours in swimming pools to the visceral beauty of colour. It'll make you want to immerse yourself in nature (esp. the United States' desert Southwest).

A few favourite quotes:

On the desert horizon at dusk, where red rock meets lapis sky, at the seam of the union, runs a band of turquoise, recumbent upon the land's great darkness...Before night falls, blue-green is the last quantum of visible light to pass through the atmosphere without scattering. It can draw a person right down to the skin of the world. The tidal pull of light can shape an entire life. Every heart-warmed pulse of blood and breath.

Although I am certain I swam with my brothers or with friends, I recall instead a solitary, private world of sun and turquoise, leaving behind the sultry summer air...to slip beneath the surface and stroke along the silent bottom of the pool - agile and fearless in water honey-combed with light.
