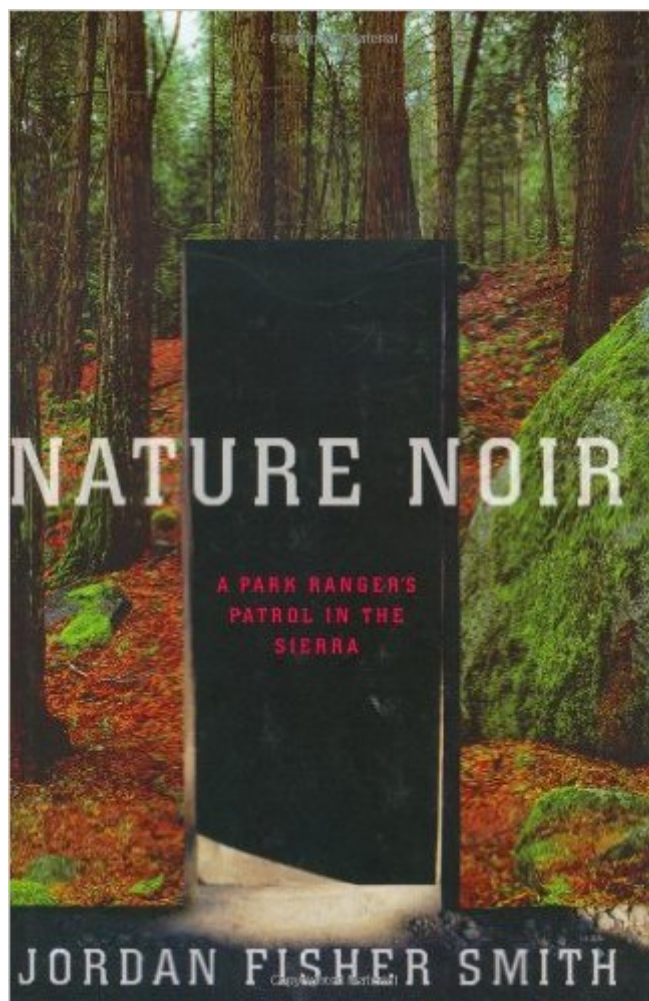


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Nature Noir: A Park Ranger's Patrol In The Sierra



Synopsis

Nature Noir is the intensely original story -- part Edward Abbey, part James Ellroy -- of Jordan Fisher Smith's fourteen years as a park ranger on forty-eight miles of Sierra Nevada river canyons. The gorgeous government-owned land along the American River that Fisher Smith and his band of fellow rangers have pledged to protect is (think Catch-22) condemned to be inundated by a huge dam. As Smith learns from his first day on patrol, the provisional quality of life here attracts the marginal and the pure crazy. Ranger work, in this place where wildness tends toward the human kind, includes encounters with armed miners who scour canyons for gold, drug-addled squatters, and extreme recreators who enjoy combining motorcycles, parachutes, and high bridges. Nature Noir reveals some startling truths about park rangers on America's public lands. In one heart-stopping scene, Smith comes across the corpse of a woman runner, killed and partly eaten by a mountain lion -- the first Californian to die in that way since the nineteenth century. Elsewhere, the predator on the loose may be human, and Smith goes looking for the bones of a long-missing woman in the surreal landscape around a half-constructed dam slowly reverting to wild.

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Customer Reviews

If you think being a forest ranger is just leading happy people on hikes and lazily watching for fires, think again. Hopefully not all state and national parks present as much danger as California's Auburn State Recreation Area, where Jordan Fisher Smith has collected many years of experience in the dark side of human communion with nature. In America's natural preserves, rangers are

getting increasingly caught up in law enforcement scenarios and saving under-prepared suburbanites from nature's challenges. With a ruminative and fast-moving writing style, Smith describes various episodes in which he or his coworkers had to deal with anarchic gold miners along the American River (a few hardy souls still think the gold rush prospector's life is possible), gangsters from a hidden meth lab, gun-toting drifters living in the campgrounds, all types of fights and domestic disputes among park users, and even a woman being killed by a mountain lion. Mixed into these narratives are discussions by Smith on the true day-to-day life of a California ranger, which features a lot of paperwork as well as hazards both natural and manmade. Smith also embodies a more insidious natural hazard, as he briefly describes his battle with advanced Lyme disease. There is a fair amount of environmental politics and conservationist history in the book, mostly applied to discussions of decades-long plans to dam the American River in the park for flood control and irrigation. This gave Smith and his coworkers a strange sense of risking their lives to protect a condemned and temporary landscape, and this brings on some pretty good philosophy of the civilization vs. wilderness stripe. The end result of all these varied stories, from Smith's direct experience, is a book that offers a surprisingly original mix of true crime, naturalist philosophy, and social observation. It turns out that a park ranger's life can be pretty wild, in all senses of the word. [~doomsday520~]

Most truly fine writers are too dreamy to be much good at anything else. Not that they lack experience, they just lack heroic competence, and generally are confined to the role of (hopefully keen) observer when the stuff hits the fan. The man or woman of action who can write--and the writer who can save your life--is vanishingly rare. Jordan Fisher Smith is that rare exception. *Nature Noir* is a memoir of place in the broadest, most catholic sense: people, politics, plants, animals, weather, and geology all are acknowledged as characters in the universal hard-luck drama we call "nature." During the last two decades of the 20th century, a handful of park rangers found themselves in the surreal, tragic, deliciously post-modern situation of risking their lives to enforce the law in a condemned landscape--California's American River canyons. The canyons, already used hard for a hundred years by miners and ranchers, had been bought up by the government as the site for a reservoir that would rise behind the still-incomplete Auburn Dam. When young Fisher Smith's tenure as a ranger on the American River begins, the dam project has stalled, leaving the land in limbo, a temporary place. The pause creates a social vacuum in the American River canyons--an opportunity for wildness--and *Nature Noir* is about what happens in that vacuum. Much of what happens is sad and absurd, and Fisher Smith's tale is partly a sympathetic but trenchant

commentary on the behavior of modern humans at the edge of civilization. A bridge built to clear the planned reservoir waits for the waters to rise underneath, presenting a spectacularly vertiginous vertical drop that proves irresistible to suicides, stunt drivers, and parachuting chickens, and the rangers are called upon to deal with the grisly post-mortems and shattered Corvettes. Down in the canyons, a Mad Max atmosphere pervades: everyone seems to be armed, drunk, or both; gold miners run afoul of drug dealers, and people get hurt. The place has become both a temporary refuge for society's misfits and a giant salvage operation as opportunists rush to loot the goods before the waters rise. No one wants to risk loving the canyons except, perhaps, the rangers, who always seem to be perversely aware of where they are in relation to the invisible line hundreds of feet above the river: the ultimate water level of the coming reservoir. The more inspiring elements of Nature Noir are found in Fisher Smith's portrayal of the rangers, each of them--the author included--improvising a raggedy existential heroism to get through the days, the hot, dusty, dangerous work that all suspect may, in the end, be for naught. Nature Noir is a wild ride, a piercing and unflinching look at contemporary American society's collision with the rest of nature, and ultimately a vector of stubborn hope. No transparent eyeball, Jordan Fisher Smith writes with the authority conferred by a life of action, the perspicacity to see that the action means something, and the artistic talent to convey both action and meaning in compelling story. His style is restrained, matter-of-fact, and when he hits you with lyricism, the effect is stunning: Fisher Smith's description of the body of a woman killed and partially eaten by a mountain lion is unforgettable for, of all things, its startling beauty. For its precision and nuance, Fisher Smith's language remains concrete and visceral, and the reader is invited--compelled--to join the rangers in the dusty, dangerous canyons. You're there with them, disarming belligerent drunks in the middle of nowhere. You help recover bodies, investigate murders, comfort bereaved families, you point out the wonders of the place and receive blank stares for your effort. You protect this doomed place and the people who come here. Hopelessness and despair lap at you like rising water, and you are tempted to leave, but you remain, risking your life for some stubborn notion of duty, a faint hope of making a difference, because you know that if this isn't good enough, what is? Then, slowly, gradually at first, you start to notice the canyons recovering from their century of exploitation, vegetation is reclaiming eroded hillsides, animals are returning. Given its opportunity, the wildness is creeping back in. At the same time, the good people of California are coming to appreciate the American River canyons as an "accidental wilderness," a place for retreat and recreation, and the political tide has begun to turn against the dam ever being completed. Climbing above the river into a side slot canyon on a hot summer day's patrol, you find the intricately woven moss nest of a water ouzel, a bird of rivers, the

first you have ever seen. Checking the invisible line on the canyon wall far overhead, you realize the place where you are standing, this secret ledge where the bird has chosen to build its nest, could be two hundred fifty feet underwater. Instinctively, just for a moment, you hold your breath.

Destined to become an environmental classic, *Nature Noir* vividly captures the reader in a tale of interactions between people and nature, and the park rangers' many roles. As each chapter relates a true story from an accidental wilderness of doomed public lands in the Sierra foothills, you feel as though you are in the jeep on patrol with Jordan Fisher Smith. As he shares his thoughts on the journey, the reader gains an inciteful view into the real world of modern park ranger work and the conflicting forces affecting all of our natural landscapes. This thought provoking book is a 'must read' if you care about our public parks and forests!

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