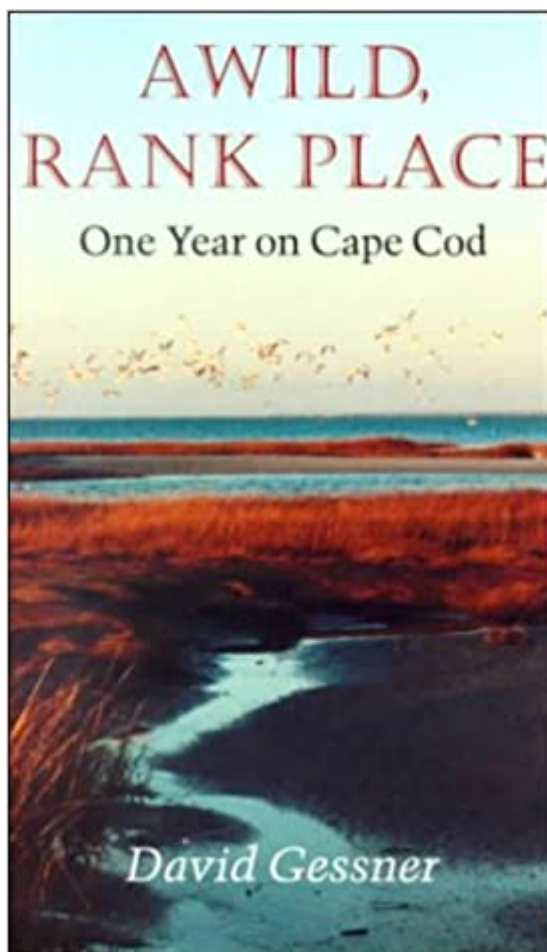


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# A Wild, Rank Place: One Year On Cape Cod



## Synopsis

Cape Cod, that sandy, wind-swept enchantress, has captivated many writers, among them Henry David Thoreau, whose descriptions of that "wild, rank place" have fired the imaginations of not one but many generations. Among Thoreau's literary progeny is David Gessner, but this book goes far beyond the naturalist's focus on the transcendent beauty of the landscape. Rather, Gessner combines his deeply felt sense of place with observations of the Cape's people and with insights about his family, himself, and his art. In a series of interconnected personal essays, he explores his response to his own recently cured cancer and to the lung cancer that is killing his father. Issues of life and death intertwine with images of a land that Gessner finds curiously healing: "Here thoughts are swamped by the smells, sounds, and sights of place. The gentle hypnotic lapping of waves. A prehistoric cormorant on a slick black rock. The delicate lacework of sea grass roots breaking down through a ledge of sand." Gessner's introspection during a year spent writing in the family's weathered cottage portrays another struggle, too. For a young writer just beginning his career, such mighty literary forebears as Thoreau can be imposing, if not paralyzing. Yet the process of sorting through and making peace with the memories of his genetic father gives Gessner the power to declare artistic independence from his literary one. Seeing "something tremendously heroic" about his father's determination to perform mundane tasks in the face of imminent death brings Gessner to realize that "our minds have minds of their own. Reality is fabulous, yes, but we also crave something more. Symbol, perhaps. Meaning." In the end, what Cape Cod comes to mean for Gessner is not just freedom from the past, but love and nobility in the face of death.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gessner spent a year writing a book of essays in his family's home on Cape Cod. The result is part natural history, part literary history, and part personal history. He reflects on his father's death from cancer and his own recovery from the disease; he writes of his walks through the salt marshes, observing the grasses, flowers, birds, and trees. He fondly reviews such writers as Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, and Joseph Wood Krutch, and bemoans the existence of Dairy Queens and convenience stores. Reveling in the smells of the sea, freshly cut grass, honeysuckle, sawdust, and even dead kelp, Gessner quietly provokes us into a heightened understanding of both nature and ourselves. George Cohen --This text refers to the Digital edition.

While spending a year at the family cottage on Cape Cod, Gessner (a journalist and political cartoonist) aggressively mulls over life, death, and the literature of his elected place. Gessner came home from the Rockies, back to the place where he grew up, after a tangle with cancer. Forget broccoli and phytochemicals. To ward off cancer, he knows his route: "I'll take salt water." The ocean, he believes, will cleanse him, body and soul, but nearly everywhere in this collection of essays--from his anger over the inorganic, hubristic new Cape architecture to a marsh walk while under the influence of psychotropics to a spirited defense of the political cartoonist's pamphleteering art--decay and death insistently preside in the "stench of the sea," a death in the family, the very title of the book. There are moments when Gessner displays a witty, light touch, as in his preoccupation with Thoreau, who pops up again and again, among the stinkhorns, on hikes, beside Gessner's writing table, goading, educating, inspiring. But for the most part, Gessner is a brassy writer, four-square to his issues--environment, literature, family-- subjective and romantic in a quietly effective way, for his personal obsessions translate well into universals, as when he witnesses the last months of his father's life, this time cancer claiming its quarry. His father was very much his own man, fastidious by day, refulgent by night after the wine went to work. It is an unflinching portrait Gessner paints of his parent, though also the only time in the book when he allows notes of tenderness and understanding to color his judgments. It must have been an uneasy year on the Cape for Gessner; if this book is any reflection, it couldn't have been a year better spent. (18 drawings, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Digital edition.

Cape Cod. That says it all.

David Gessner isn't your typical nature writer. Not simply content to give lip service to "birds and trees," Gessner enters the landscape as an animal, swilling and raging and chortling his way across Cape Cod with glee and guts. He isn't afraid to tackle tough material either: he receives news of his father's malignant carcinoma after, ironically, beating his own cancer successfully. In the face of such significant life issues, Gessner worries about place---his own as son and native to Cape Cod, and the strength of his writing voice in the shadow of his real and literary fathers. This book does for fathers and sons what Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* did for mothers and daughters. I found Gessner to be charmingly self-absorbed: he allows the reader to view him ("the thing itself") and his landscape, warts and all. And just when some might dismiss him as another Abbey-wanabee who goes about the motions of outrage for outrage's sake, Gessner shows his talent and unique writing strength: he writes movingly and memorably about his own father's death in a stunning journal section simply titled, June. The last sections of the book are a Hymn---for Gessner's father, for the place of his birth, for life. In the end, Gessner shows how grace and real beauty rise from fiercely loving ALL the parts of the world, even the ones which pain us most.

I had the pleasure of meeting Gessner at a bookstore he made an appearance at. I bought two of his books, "Wild Rank.." and "Return of the Osprey." I was almost unable to put down "Wild Rank." It was so moving...so touching...so brilliantly honest, I kept the pages open as I did mundane things so I could peek over occassionally and be mesmerized by his essay. The book is a mix of so many things -- there's a little "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" in his brutal honesty. Then there's a little Thoreau when he briefs us on what the marshes and the "Suet" mean to him. This book is a must read for anyone who understands or wants to understand that life on life's terms is the only way we can exist -- and one of life's terms is that we take care of the land. Another of those terms is that our parents, for whatever faults they have, shape us in ways we can neither forget nor sometimes identify. David, I'm so glad I met you -- the book has been one of those wonderful surprises in life that change you a little bit when you encounter them. Kudos!

I found this book a disappointment because the author allowed his personal issues and problems (e.g. family problems, illness, drug use) to interfere with the picture he was trying to paint. Henry Beston's *THE OUTERMOST HOUSE, A YEAR OF LIFE ON THE GREAT BEACH OF CAPE COD*, is much more to my liking, because of the beautiful prose and the full concentration of Mr. Beston on

the topic at hand (i.e. the Cape, its history, its beauty, its wildness). I find it incongruous for this author, David Gessner, to make the effort to get in touch with nature by living out in the wilds by the ocean, and then to take the unnatural step of using drugs while doing so. It offends my senses almost as much as do the actions of people who play boomboxes at the beach while supposedly enjoying nature. I guess I like my nature natural and without the distractions of these other modern day intrusions. And I like my information and insights gleaned from my readings to be based on reality not drug induced fantasy. These personal issues (which in another context, might have been appropriately raised and interesting) seemed only to be undesired distractions in this context.

Rich, heartfelt narrative of author's overcoming cancer, then discovering and dealing with his father's unsuccessful battle; it's like listening to a beautiful song, with melodious prose and rhythmic construction. Gessner's keen, humorous details balance descriptions of nature at work on the Cape with the disease at work on his Dad. This short piece, packed with potent images, is a great read, especially for anyone who is interested in Cape Cod, or has had health struggles or lost someone close

David Gessner will undoubtedly emerge as one of the 21st century's most important writers. He combines great story-telling ability with extensive literary knowledge, and adds to it a passionate love of place. *A Wild, Rank Place* reads like a compelling novel about family and personal growth. I absolutely loved it -- and so will anyone who appreciates high tide, wind swept bluffs, and the joy of a healthy, uncompromising life!

An inspiring narrative about a young man who survives cancer, only to watch his father be taken by the same disease. In the tradition of Beston and Thoreau, Gessner brings the Cape to life in all its seasons. But this book should not be tied to one place: readers from all over the globe will identify with Gessner, his family, and his love of home. *A Wild, Rank Place* is a very special book. You'll be glad you read it.

Mr. Gessner has created a powerful memoir of his childhood on Cape Cod, the loss of his father and his love for the harsh Cape environment that is emblematic of personal struggles Gessner has faced and, with humor and intelligence, ultimately overcome. A thoughtful and thought-provoking work from a promising young author.

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