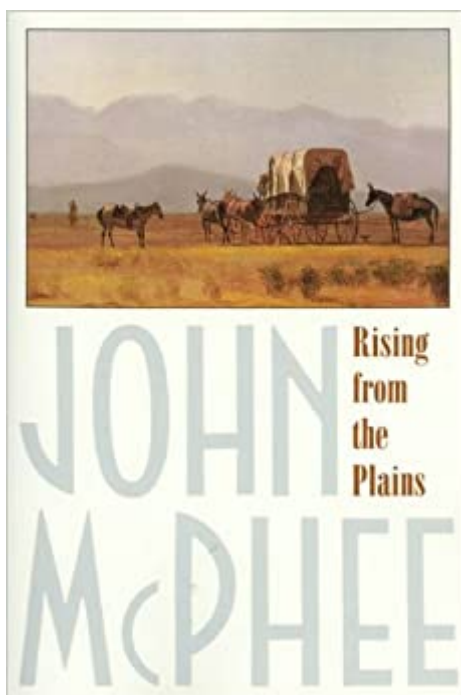


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Rising From The Plains



Synopsis

Bestselling author McPhee takes us on another exciting geological excursion with this engaging account of life--past and present--in the high plains of Wyoming.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Although it stands well on its own, this book can be viewed as a continuation of McPhee's *Basin and Range* (LJ 4/1/81) and *In Suspect Terrain* (LJ 4/1/83). As in those earlier works, the central theme of this book is the geology of an area near Interstate 80, this time the Rocky Mountains and adjacent terrain in Wyoming. McPhee skillfully weaves together the personal history of Rocky Mountain geologist David Love and his family with the geological history of the region, chronicling both the story of pioneering homesteaders and that of ancient seas, volcanoes, and episodes of mountain building. He also details the search for resources and the environmental effect of their discovery, as well as the inner workings of geology. Recommended, especially for public libraries. Joseph Hannibal, Cleveland Museum of Natural History Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc.

• Mr. McPhee has created a style--blending detailed reporting with a novelistic sense of narrative--and a standard that have influenced a whole generation of journalists. • Timothy Bay, *The Baltimore Sun* • McPhee rides shotgun across Wyoming in a four-wheel-drive Bronco while the geologist David Love steers, lectures, and reminisces.... This instructive account of the geologic West and the frontier West is a delight. • Evan S. Connell, *The New York Times Book Review*

--This text refers to the Paperback edition.

While studying general Wyoming history I learned by happy happenstance of John McPhee's 1986 book *Rising From the Plains*, which unfolds the geological story of the state from the perspective of those American Western pioneers and their descendants who have inhabited the land for the last century. Wyoming geologist David Love is McPhee's focal point. It's challenging to pin down this book. It's a portrait of Wyoming's geology, but also of David Love and his family, and occasionally it's more free-flowing nature writing. While McPhee's material is arranged in a distinctively unusual, if not idiosyncratic, manner, his writing is lovely and always riveting. Even if you are, like I, essentially ignorant of the fundamentals of geology, this book is sure to come as a revelation. I cannot imagine how anyone who discovers this book can fail to be moved by the stateliness of Love's chosen field of study, or by the greater story that the adventure of science collectively has to unfold. Through a second act of synchronicity while reading this book I stumbled across Ken Burns' 1996 PBS video series called *The West*. Episode 8 contains extended interviews with David Love in which considerable portions discussed in McPhee's book are recounted. I would advise anyone who enjoys this book to seek out that documentary as well.

Picture life during the mass westward expansion of the United States, around the year 1891. Now imagine being an early settler in the wilderness of Wyoming, a cold unforgiving land with biting wind and difficult terrain to navigate. Think how it would be without many of the luxuries that we have today; when there were not many paved roads yet, and the best way of transportation for most people was a horse and wagon, with snowy, unplowed mountains frequently getting in your way from point A to point B. John McPhee makes this vision possible in *Rising from the Plains*. Throughout the book McPhee incorporates interesting real world anecdotes about how people interacted with the geologically interesting area of Rawlins, Wyoming, while mixing in some information regarding the actual scientific formation of the area. Throughout the story the author seems to implicitly get at the idea that the earth has really used all of its 4.5 billion years of formation to get where it is, and how selfish and exploitative mining procedures have dramatically altered the land in a far shorter time than that. An explicit argument that the author makes involves how professions in the geological field have been shifting more and more into cubicles rather than in the field, and how this is not a very good thing for knowledge regarding the science of geology. The setting of this story takes place around Rawlins, Wyoming, near the Rocky Mountains in the early 1980s. McPhee enlists the help of David Love, one of the United States' most renowned

geologists, to give him a tour of the land and discuss various facets and formation processes of the area. The reason that Rawlins was chosen was because, according to Love, its geology shows the largest span of time anywhere between New York and California on Interstate 80. For about the first half of the story, McPhee concentrates on giving the reader a perspective of early settlers through stories of Love's parents, John Love and Miss Waxham, through diary entries from his mom and his own memories. It was interesting to hear of the struggles early on in the rugged environment of Wyoming, in which John Love had to abandon his horse and wagon in the snow when he first got to Wyoming, and had to walk to the nearest town to avoid freezing to death. Then McPhee moves onto David's life, and talks about how he came to be one of the greatest geologists in American history. David started off his remarkable career by giving a speech about faulting and folding rock from the Tertiary period as an undergrad student at a Geological Society of America meeting in Washington D.C., before which it was thought that this rock was only formed before this period, which took place from about 65 million years ago to 2 million years before present. Love continued his work in the geology of the Rocky Mountain area, taking a break to work for the Shell Oil Company specializing in finding areas around the United States likely to have oil. After a stint in this, Love went back to doing the field work that he loved and became 1 of only 2 people in the United States to do two complete geological surveys of a state. One of the most interesting parts of this book is its description about the various land features and repetitive nature of geological processes throughout time. The same area in Wyoming was covered in a vast sea during the Pre-Cambrian era 2600 million years ago, during which land formation started, which receded, but then was covered in a large sea again until about 100 million years ago. This same area was also once a tropical swamp, and frozen over on different occasions over its vast existence. Due to the multitudes of conditions that this area faced, it is very rich in natural mineral deposits such as gold, coal, and petroleum. The Wyoming area was very rich in organic minerals and material because 100 million years ago, the area was covered in a vast sea extending from the gulf of Mexico with its beach near Rawlins, Wyoming. In the present age, coal has the most relative abundance leading to it being one of Wyoming's top exports. Currently, Wyoming exports coal to 35 states in America, with 8 states receiving 90% or more of their coal from Wyoming. Coal is formed from dead plant and organic material that is subjected to intense heat and compaction. Petroleum, discovered in the area in 1916, is also very abundant in Wyoming. To put the production of oil in perspective, Love said that in one acre of sandstone, as much as 100 million barrels of oil could be found. Oil is formed over an extremely lengthy process (thought to be in the hundreds of thousands of years in magnitude) in which shale is trapped in some type of substance (likely bentonite in this case, a

sticky, organic mud.), and allowed to cook without any oxidation (Formation of Coal). One major consequence of all of this mining of the earth discussed in the book is that it exposes more limestone, which contains selenium, a very toxic substance to people and animals in high concentrations. This selenium is then absorbed by woody asters, a plant that is unnatural to the area. This makes finding suitable grazing land for the fauna and livestock in the area a very tough deal. Other major environmental problems that arise from mining include, but are not limited to water pollution, and destruction of habitat for the creatures that inhabit it. There is also the issue of mass depletion of resources that took an extremely long time to make through natural processes. Another issue that arises in this text is the shifting of field geologists, people who go out into the world and base their scientific results on data they collect themselves, to more and more geologists who sit in cubicles all day and base their scientific results off of modeling. Love brings up the valid point that modeling only has so much practicality in the real world. One real world example of this issue arises in the formation of the Rocky Mountains, and its relation to plate tectonics. It is widely accepted that the Appalachian Mountains were formed when parts of Europe and Africa smashed into the east coast, causing rifts in the land eventually becoming mountains. The Rocky Mountains are trickier, with the most widely believed theory according to the book being exotic terranes, which is the idea that islands such as Japan smashed into the North American continent over and over, eventually causing the formation of the Rocky Mountains. Love raises the important issue with modeling in that it often uses information from many different sources, which could be a problem if false information is compounded on false information causing false models. By going into the field one can see exactly the way things are, allowing for one to, as Love put it, "evaluate things in your own right." Overall this was a very interesting read, as McPhee incorporated tough concepts with real world examples of why things are the way they are, making it very understandable. I would recommend this book to someone with at least a junior or senior high school level of reading as the issues presented are not necessarily tough to comprehend, but can get pretty wordy, with the most interesting concepts being the implications from anthropological forces, and the major progress in the science within the last 80 years.

It took me a little while to give in to McPhee's approach to the story of Earth's history, which is narrative, storytelling; not textbook. Once he had me hooked, though, I loved this big fat book so much that when our golden retriever pup bit chunks out of a few middle pages, I cared enough to buy another copy. McPhee gives not only the geology, the rocks, tectonics, mountain-buildings and so on that those of us who see our planet as our scrapbook want to know about. He entertains with

such lines as this in his description of Wyoming's climate: "If summer falls on a weekend," the locals say, "let's have a picnic." He reminds us that even when we're complacent and ignore it, the seismology of California is still dangerous. He motivates me to visit Franklin, New Jersey, for its unique minerals. He includes human history, or at least human mythmaking, with such anecdotes as the tale of Shoshoni chief Washakie, who killed his enemy Crow chief and ate his heart; hence the the place name, "Crowheart Butte." He deserved his Pulitzer Prize.

Another beautifully written book by a master Not to be missed

John McPhee joins geologist David Love for a tour of the Wyoming countryside. Well at least, McPhee uses their drive along Interstate 80 as a jumping off point to spin a tale or two. Painting on a broad canvas, he pieces together a detailed picture of Wyoming from its rich geological history, to the hearty characters that settled there. And the focal point for all this is David Love. And why not? Love's history with the area is indeed the stuff that can fill a book. The descriptions of Love's parents (especially his dad) and how they cut their teeth in the ranching business on the unforgiving landscape proved the most entertaining for me. The time spent looking for lost sheep, and moving herds put David Love on a path to his ultimate passion.... The geology of Wyoming. For Love, the Wyoming landscape appeared more interesting and mysterious than anything else. To his credit, Love is the only person to build a complete geological survey of an entire state. Not to mention probably one of the most complex. McPhee wraps up the book by looking at the challenges that face a place rich in resources such as coal, shale, and uranium. As a geologist, Love reflects on the interesting role his life work plays in this regard. For me, the story reveals two competing forces. One being how a land like Wyoming can influence and shape a man's entire life, and conversely how that same man's life work can change our view and understanding of a complex landscape such as Wyoming.

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