

REVIEWS

Kirk's account of her family's year camping in the southwest is both an inspiring travelogue and timely clarion call. The average school-aged child spends nearly seven hours per day in front of a screen and less than thirty minutes per week outdoors in unstructured play. Beautifully written and joyfully illustrated, *The Road to Beaver Park* will help you see nature with new eyes.

Nancy Sleeth

Author, *Almost Amish*; Managing Director, Blessed Earth

It is no accident that this book's genesis was a sabbatical experience, for Kirk's prose and sketches are the fruit of a prolonged Sabbath. By slowing down and stripping away non-essentials, Janice and her family discover the transformative power of rest, silence, and contemplative time spent in the outdoors. In this she offers a likely solution to our ecological crisis: natural settings inspire wonder, which reveals beauty, which instills a reverence that leads to stewardship.

Paul Stonehouse

Associate Professor Adventure Education, Green Mountain College

Can a person find God in nature? Winona author Janice Kirk did not set out to answer that question in her travelogue of a year spent camping in the American West, "*The Road to Beaver Park*," but the theme keeps popping up amid her children's lizard-catching exploits, her late husband's biological observations, and Kirk's own transcription of landscapes into artwork.

Kirk's book chronicles a year-long tour of national parks her family took in 1976 across Southwestern deserts, mountains, and plains. Her biology-professor husband managed to combine sabbatical field research and a year of family camping trips, and Kirk took the opportunity to sketch and paint everything she could. As she tried to copy the shapes and shadows of pine cones, scrub brush, and canyons onto the page, Kirk found that her sketching hand kept repeating the same shapes. Smoke billowed from her family's campfire in the same way that water roiled in whitewater rapids they passed. Ridges and peaks were staggered in the mountain ranges Kirk painted just like ripples across a campground lake, like ancient ocean currents fossilized in the sandstone beneath her feet, and like the striations of cirrus clouds far above her head.

"So many things are put together using the same patterns. You get this incredible sense of unity," Kirk said. These observations, and the simple act of spending time outside and feeling connected to the natural world, made the sabbatical a trip of spiritual renewal for her. A pilgrimage, she calls it in the subtitle of her book. "I was not seeking anything like that. I was not looking for it ... We just went out there to enjoy ourselves," she explained. "It was very gradual. You just begin to get this feeling that there is something more out here, and you get these epiphany moments," Kirk said. "Pretty soon you find yourself talking to God," she added.

"I liked the fact that in that particular book, you have the two perspectives operating next to each other, her husband's perspective as a scientist and her the artist. They were totally integrated," said Winona Poet Laureate Ken McCullough. Kirk excerpts large chunks from her husband's and her daughter's journals from the trip. That fills the book with multiple people's perspectives and sets it apart from most memoirs, McCullough explained.

From Tuscon to Telluride, Redwood to Bryce Canyon, Kirk's book combines nature writing with an artist's journal and a guide to national parks. Kirk has written other books on nature and spirituality and helped illustrate her late husband's handbook on wild edibles, and she is a believer in the importance of marveling at nature preached by Rachel Carson's "*The Sense of Wonder*" and Richard Louv's "*Last Child Left in the Woods*." While few may be able to afford the luxury of a year off to go camping, Kirk hopes that others will find opportunities to get outside, even if it is just in the backyard, and benefit from a closer relationship

to the natural world. Kirk also hopes that her writing may pass on to readers some of the joy and peace she experienced from her communion with nature.

It worked for McCullough. "I think light is the predominant theme in the whole book," he said. "For many writers, it's the troubled side of their nature that kind of compels them to write. That's the thing that drives them. I guess I just don't feel any of that going on in her work." Kirk's narrative lacks the darkness on which so many writers fixate, and her book is more uplifting and "nourishing" for it, he stated. Asked about the conventional wisdom that dark material makes for better writing, McCullough explained, "I guess I spend enough time under the moon rather than out in the sun, and whenever I come across a vision like hers, I feed on it ... It does nourish one's soul to read that kind of material because it gives you personal hope that you need to do more to incorporate more of the light into your own dark vision of things."

Chris Rogers
The Winona Post