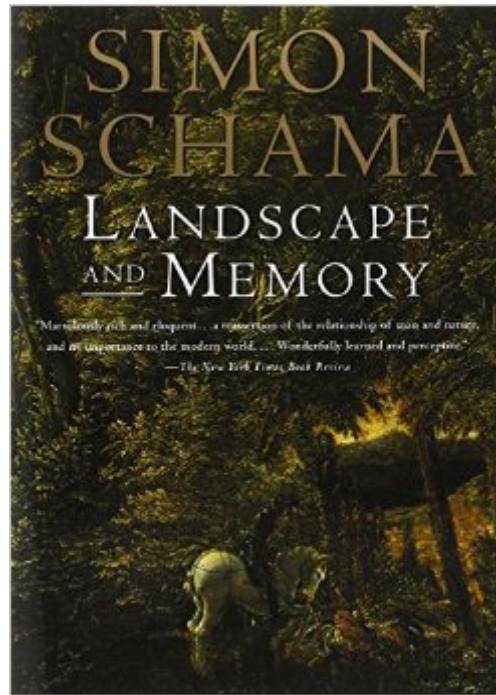


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Landscape And Memory



Synopsis

One of Time Magazine's Best Books of the Year In *Landscape and Memory* Schama ranges over continents and centuries to reveal the psychic claims that human beings have made on nature. He tells of the Nazi cult of the primeval German forest; the play of Christian and pagan myth in Bernini's Fountain of the Four Rivers; and the duel between a monumental sculptor and a feminist gadfly on the slopes of Mount Rushmore. The result is a triumphant work of history, naturalism, mythology, and art. "A work of great ambition and enormous intellectual scope...consistently provocative and revealing."--New York Times "Extraordinary...a summary cannot convey the riches of this book. It will absorb, instruct, and fascinate."--New York Review of Books

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Simon Schama's book, *LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY* is a work of philosophy, mythology, history, art history, and a personal reflection of his life as a Jew. He says he has written a history, and "like all histories, this is less a recipe for action than an invitation to reflection." *LANDSCAPE* is his most autobiographical book to date. It is not a detailed history of a particular place and time (like *PATRIOTS AND LIBERATORS*), but rather a synthetic work discussing nothing less than the meaning of life. To support his thesis that aesthetic and religious expression and nature have always been and remain interconnected, Schama weaves together a variety of elements from many Western historical periods and places. Although on one level his book could be viewed as a survey of Western art it is not. His premise is that our cultural legacy is the veneration of nature, that we do not inhabit a nature versus cultural world. Our culture is formed from our experience and our

memory of our natural world. God is in the details and the impression of the Creator is impressed on the face of her creation. LANDSCAPE has four main sections: Wood; Water; Rock; and Wood, Water, Rock. He begins with a backward journey to Eastern Europe, where his Jewish ancestors lived long ago. He searches for the family roots, and is reminded by a colleague, "Jews have legs, they don't have roots." Schama describes the great forest of Poland, oddly named Bialowieza--the realm of the Lithuanian Bison. Over the centuries, the forest has provided sustenance and sheltered many. During WWII, it became the hunting ground of the Nazis. His travels take him to Buchenwald the forest of beeches, once worshiped humans and now linked with the horrible deeds of men. Later, with his family, he stands in awe at the base of the giant redwoods--trees the Americans venerate and that the great naturalist John Muir urged Teddy Roosevelt to protect for future generations. Schama discusses the various myths associated with the forest--many of them tied to the German and Celtic people. His stories include the 'Green Man' linked during the Middle Ages to Robin in England, and the sacrificed Lord whose flesh was nailed to a tree. He ends the section with a discussion of the great work of Sir James Frazier, the old stouthearted conservative Scot and adherent of rational thought who in his wildest dreams never realized what he unleashed in his efforts to prove the uselessness of nature myths in his book THE GOLDEN BOUGH. The second section of Schama's book covers water, wide rivers, flowing streams, and discusses the culture of the Nile with its legends of Osiris and Isis. He tells the reader the word for palm and immortality are identical in the old Egyptian language. The palm is the tree of life whose waters flow in the form of oil and other liquids. He tells of Cleopatra and her lovers, Caesar and Mark Antony, and Napoleon's infatuation with all things Egyptian. He ends this section with a sad reflection of the destruction of the various temples of antiquity wrought by the building of the Aswan Dam and the flooding of the Nile River valley. In the third section, we follow the exploits of those who attempted to conquer Mont Blanc and the highest wildest peaks of Europe. We see Byron and Shelley on Lac Lemman searching for various mythological sites and lamenting the drowning of prisoners at Chillon. Oh what is it about the mountain that sparks memory and drives humans to scale it, to embrace it, or in the case of a few deface it (Mount Rushmore, Stone Mountain in Georgia where a KKK rider was planned). In section four, Schama wraps up his book with a discussion of Acadia--which Acadia? The Europeans alternated between terror and awe in their search for Acadia. "Et in Acadia Ego" -- what does it mean. There is the Acadia of Eden where two trees grew and the land of milk and honey where lion and lamb co-exist, and there's that other Acadia, the wilderness that some still want to protect. In LANDSCAPE, Schama has described the multiple forms of artistic expression that depict the relationship between nature and culture. He covers poems, prose, stories, painting, sculpture from

Rodin to Rushmore, gardening from Eden to the dead spaces people call front lawns. He describes the various attempts to shape the landscape from Karnak to Capability Brown to Olmstead in Central Park. His stories range from the Italian clergyman who designed "Holy Land America" just off the Connecticut freeway, to the "wild forests" at Hampstead Heath in London, Fontainebleau just outside Paris, and Walden Pond just off the commuter rail line in Connecticut. This is a wonderful, wise, and sad book--read it.

In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama embarks on an epic journey across countries, through mountains and forests, and over time to create a panoramic exploration of the impact landscape has made on culture and in turn how the culture has formed and manipulated the land. Painting, sculpture, printmaking, architecture, rural and urban planning are merely a few of the means by which society has interpreted the world around them, often to conform to its own needs and desires. Schama does not see this as negative, for it is the "cultural habits of humanity" that "have always made room for the sacredness of nature." Schama does not treat the landscape as isolated and individual expressions, but as part of a historical and transcontinental continuum. The spirituality and nationality imbued in the land and rivers transcend time and space to embody a powerfully universal mysticism. Schama's distinctive meandering writing style gives the reader the impression that he or she is in fact taking a journey through woodland trails or down winding rivers. He combines the narrative elements of storytelling with a historical accuracy and specificity in order to describe a vivid and imaginable past. The forests of Lithuania, the elaborate Fountain of the Four Rivers of Italian sculptor Bernini, the mystic landscape paintings of Casper David Friedrich, and Mount Rushmore are just a small sampling of the rich variety of subjects Schama discusses in his authoritative yet intuitive work. Schama begins and ends the book with the words of Henry David Thoreau, thus creating a cyclical feeling quite similar to the turning of the seasons or the movement of one river into another. He ultimately shows that there truly is a primordial connection between the land and the animal human, a connection which can be illustrated in the aesthetic creations of civilization. We become quite aware that our artistic manifestations are rooted in our past and the land which defines and sustains a universal society with a collective memory. This memory, as shown in Schama's memorable book, interprets the land in myriad ways, but the powerful mysticism of our past transcends boundaries of time and space to appear in paint, stone, paper, and the land itself. I shall end by stating that *Landscape and Memory* is a cerebral and highly detailed historical work, which is dense, but rich and enjoyable.

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