

Nature's Loveliness, Overdone

by David Randall

The High Sierra: A Love Story, Kim Stanley Robinson, Little, Brown and Company, 2022. pp. xx + 537, \$40.00 hardcover.

Kim Stanley Robinson's mediocre nature book *High Sierra* probably wouldn't have been published if Robinson hadn't already established his name as a popular author of utopian and climate alarmist science fiction.¹ His works have significantly influenced college students for two generations by helping to cement the doom-laden narrative that our world teeters on the edge of collapse because of our environmental heedlessness. Robinson strikes some of those notes here. Mostly, however, he writes about his love of the Sierras and his life within them. He also layers in their natural and human history and the how-tos of backpacking.

Robinson is most attractive when he describes how he and his friends, ordinary Orange County teenagers *ca.* 1970, came to the Sierras. They were, he says, "hippie jocks." At first they body surfed in the nearby Pacific, but in college his

friend Terry Beier discovered the Sierras, and infected Robinson with his love. (20-21) They took LSD while hiking to enhance the experience.

"Boys it's time to drop."

Happily we agreed and he [Terry] handed us little squares of blue construction paper soaked in LSD. We ate the little scraps and continued up the trail. Thus began my first day in the Sierra Nevada.(19)

Growing older, hiking in the Sierras came to encompass friends, lovers, wives, and children. Robinson lived in the valley below but made a regular pilgrimage to the Sierras.

Robinson's relationship with his friend Terry Baier, to whose memory the book is dedicated, is *High Sierra's* emotional heart. Terry appears to have been intense throughout, with a private love of the Sierras he never wanted to share fully. Ill-health took its toll on him. He needed heart-bypass surgery,

and hiking was not easy for a while with a weak heart. Later his mood soured drastically, and perhaps it had something to do with his eventually fatal amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). He broke off his friendship with Robinson and died unreconciled. (375, 510-12). *High Sierra* is in many ways a letter to an absent friend, a Californian update of Montaigne's *Essays*, whose true audience was the departed Étienne de La Boétie.

Robinson ably describes the social and technological practicalities of hiking in the Sierras. He is amiable, experienced, prosaic—suburban. A slightly different Robinson could tell you how to boat on a desert lake made from a drowned canyon. The one in our timeline tells how to spend time up high. Modern technology and design make for light gear; take advantage of these advances! (281-83) Special Esbit cubes can heat food and water; you don't need to bring a stove. (290-92) Goose down sleeping bags just covering your top may make a more efficient blanket—so long as you don't roll over too vigorously at night. (286) You don't need to bring so much water, since the Sierras are full of pools. (246-48, 294-95)

We learn this from Robinson's natural history infodumps about the Sierra's geology (lightly glaciated, makes for many water catchments, the reason it's easy for hikers as they trek from pond to pond). (58-64) Robinson is fond of lightly digested exposition.

Because granite has both onion-layer cracks and vertical cracks, basin floors can end up looking pretty chaotic, like

disarranged rock mazes. Other times the glacier slid over the top of a hard onion layer of rock, polishing it to a finish as smooth as a marble floor. These patches are called glacial polish, and in the late afternoon they reflect sunlight like a mirror. Rocks carried by ice over these smooth floors sometimes got jammed down so hard they left lines called striations, or crescent-shaped indentations in the rock called chatter marks—a good name—you have to imagine the deep slow clunk of rock against rock, like teeth chattering with cold. (60)

Some part of this is his background as a science fiction writer—the “literature of ideas” lends itself to extended exposition. Some part is the genre he has chosen: travel writing frequently interleaves digressions in natural and human history. Some part is knowing his audience: Americans have a taste for informational light reading. Robinson astutely enough supplies the market for a nature book with parentheses on the life of John Muir (69-81), descriptions of how ancient Indians chipped obsidian in the High Sierras (29-43), and the effects of climate change on the Sierra range. (480-93)

These last two register how Robinson the political activist overlaps with Robinson the memoirist and nature writer. He assumes his anti-capitalist and environmentalist beliefs more than argues them. He blithely uses the language of genocide and settler colonialism. (41) He wishes to change the names of the Sierra's peaks, to get rid of all the white male racists (as he judg-

es them) he despises and replace them with Indian or modern names, the latter exemplary feminist and environmentalist. A Mount Le Guin, for Ursula, he thinks would do nicely. He wants a Mount Muir—vaguely troubled by the woke urge to unperson Muir for saying negative things about Indians and Mexicans, but able to make no better protest than *Muir wasn't that bad!* (256-57, 350-52)

Robinson's carelessness about names exemplifies his fundamental disdain for Western civilization—indeed, for all of human life rooted in the world. His blithe willingness to destroy our names, our memory, is cultural clear-cutting, indifference to the ecological complexity of our culture. Reverse the imagery: the conservative urge to preserve the tangled roots of our civilization includes the urge to preserve nature. See Tolkien, who sought to preserve the Shire's social and physical fabric together. The ecological urge takes a fragment of the conservative impulse and runs roughshod over every other aspect of human spiritual and cultural ecology so as to preserve nature. It is a sort of cancer—a natural urge that has lost all sense of restraint and proportion, and destroys the larger complex of which it is a part. *Cancer*: the more anti-human environmentalists use that image to describe mankind's relation to the planet, but that is projection. It more aptly describes their own movement's relationship to the broader currents of Western civilization.

Perhaps Robinson's taste for wilderness indicates a divorce from mankind's

roots—roots in the earth, yes, but not the desolation of the high mountains. Consider the opening of Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of the Earth*, a work that expresses particularly well how the earth is the mother of human life and labor and not its foe.

In mythical language, the *earth* became known as the mother of law. This signifies a threefold root of law and justice.... earth is bound to law in three ways. She contains law within herself, as a reward of labor; she manifests law upon herself, as fixed boundaries; and she sustains law above herself, as a public sign of order. Law is bound to the earth and related to the earth. This is what the poet means when he speaks of the infinitely just earth: *justissima tellus*.²

Western civilization is rooted in the land, too, in the earth, but in fields ten thousand years old. Schmitt, political theorist, emphasizes the earth as law, justice, and power; he also should have mentioned earth as the object of rite, dedication, love. Walt Whitman sounded that note better in *Leaves of Grass*, that deliriously broad panegyric to America's united land and people:

Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!

Smile, for your lover comes!

Prodigal! you have given me love! ... therefore I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love!³

We are not bound to the land as slaves; we are at home in it. Contrariwise,

Westerners are pilgrims to the mountains: Petrarch went up Mont Ventoux, and we have our Shangri-Las at Meteor and Montserrat. But we return freely to our homes below—to the fields of the Central Valley, to the ranch houses of Orange County, to the freeways of Los Angeles. The love of the wilderness is meant to be for a season.

Robinson writes of much of the High Sierras as a God-zone—a place where scarce life, insufficient oxygen, and great beauty give a sense of the divine. If gnostics generally want to immanentize the eschaton, to bring heaven to earth, environmentalists particularly wish to bring the mountain God-zone to the plain, to bring the raptures of a sojourn up high to our daily lives. Oh, they speak of the dangers of uncontrolled industrialism, the need to protect humanity from killing itself with pollution and climate change—but at their most attractive they are misguided monks, sufferers and beneficiaries of mental and spiritual anoxia, who wish to bring the glad word to the cities of the plain. And, alas, to force it upon them, when they do not wish to hear. One cannot condemn Robinson for his love of the high mountains—although one can say that others have conveyed their beauty more skillfully. I began by saying that *High Sierra* is mediocre, and truly it plods, sentence by sentence.

Big D, I said; carbs. Fucking carbohydrates. Now is the time. Just this once. And I held out my gallon bag of Cheez-Its to him.

Warily he eyed the weird industrial orange of those great crackers. Salt, flour, oil, cheese fla-

vor extraordinaire, color like a sun-damaged life jacket. The bag glowed in the dusky light. (327)

Grant that nature writing need not be self-consciously poetical, need not recapitulate Muir's Victorian cadences. It still should use modern English vividly. Robinson's prose is consistently readable, but none of it is memorable. Prose Cheez-Its. God made Caedmon sing; the Sierras perform no parallel miracle for Robinson's pen.

But even if Robinson wrote as well as Muir, *High Sierra* would be too narrow. Robinson conveys his love of his friends, and of his fellow mountaineers, and of that golden postwar Southern California that made him. He is insensate to broader loves—of God and man, of the West and America, of field, property, and law, of the earth as men have lived in it and made it, and everything they have made of it.

Basho wrote in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*:

the beginning of all art –
in the deep north
a rice-planting song⁴

We should preserve the fertile earth we love and remake by our labors, the source of our rice and our songs—and our factories, strip malls, and skyscrapers—and know that God is in it too. If the monks who have gone up to the mountains to see God cannot see Him from the plain, and tell us that we must raise the plain to the mountains—then we know that they love with Othello's murderous passion, not wisely but too well.

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1. David Randall, "The Apocalyptic Imagination: Climate Nonfiction and the Dream of Marxist Utopia," *Academic Questions* 29, 4 (2016), 460-61.
2. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Telos Press Publishing, 2006), 42.
3. Walt Whitman, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (Broadview Press, 2024), 44.
4. Matsuo Bashō, *Bashō's Haiku: Selected Poems of Matsuo Bashō*, trans. David Landis Barnhill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 305.