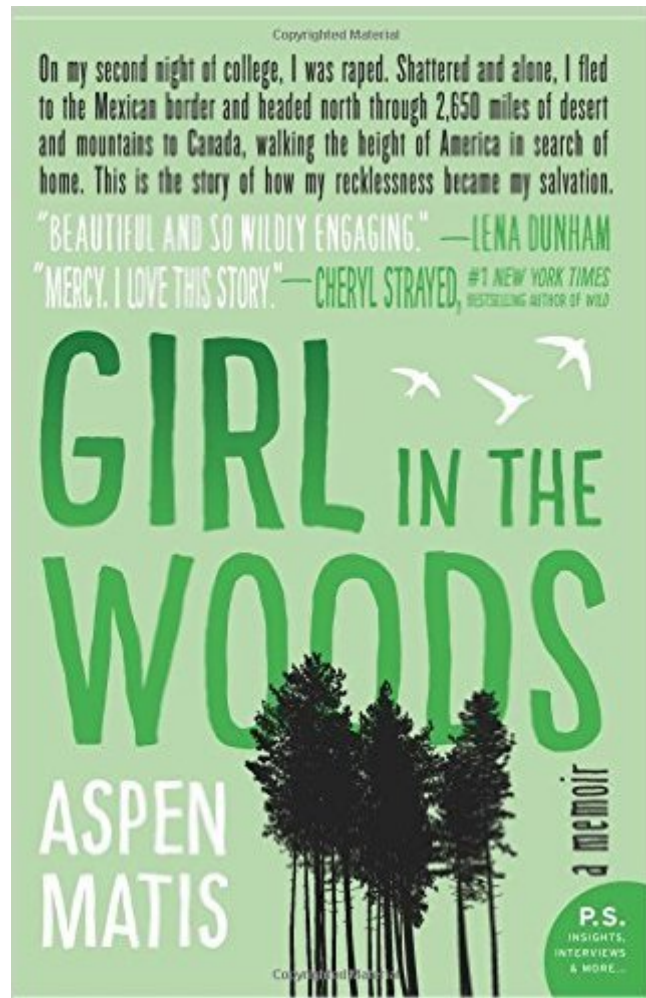


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Girl In The Woods: A Memoir



Synopsis

Girl in the Woods is Aspen Matis's exhilarating true-life adventure of hiking from Mexico to Canada—a coming-of-age story, a survival story, and a triumphant story of overcoming emotional devastation. On her second night of college, Aspen was raped by a fellow student. Overprotected by her parents who discouraged her from speaking of the attack, Aspen was confused and ashamed. Dealing with a problem that has sadly become all too common on college campuses around the country, she stumbled through her first semester—a challenging time made even harder by the coldness of her college's conflict mediation process. Her desperation growing, she made a bold decision: She would seek healing in the freedom of the wild, on the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail leading from Mexico to Canada. In this inspiring memoir, Aspen chronicles her journey, a five-month trek that was ambitious, dangerous, and transformative. A nineteen-year-old girl alone and lost, she conquered desolate mountain passes and met rattlesnakes, bears, and fellow desert pilgrims. Exhausted after each thirty-mile day, at times on the verge of starvation, Aspen was forced to confront her numbness, coming to terms with the sexual assault and her parents' disappointing reaction. On the trail she found her strength, and after a thousand miles of solitude, she found a man who helped her learn to love and trust again—and heal.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

On the whole, this book had a great deal going for it. The writing was vibrant and descriptive, engaging the reader in the wonders and perils of Matis' hike. The information dedicated to the trail with its ever-changing scenery and dangers, the trail angels (those individuals who provide food,

shelter, and transportation to those along the Pacific Coast Trail), and the various hikers was written in such a humanistic, accessible way that it's almost as though the reader was able to traverse the path right alongside her (for better or worse). Anyone who's interested in hiking will find every facet of the PCT, as well as the challenges faced by its hikers, to be absorbing. Personally speaking, it made me want to put on a pair of running shoes and find the nearest trail so that I could begin a hike of my own. In that way, as well as the physically harrowing accounts of her time on the trail itself - with episodes that included extreme dehydration, starvation, hypothermia, and a very dangerous infection - the story was gripping, as the young woman who maneuvered her way through all of those obstacles and found her way to the end of the trail was very different from the girl who began it. Unfortunately, it's the time the reader spends with the latter that leads to the downsides of the tale. That she was a victim of sexual assault makes one feel a great deal of sympathy for her, which makes this part of the review all the more difficult to write. For a vast majority of the piece, she did not present herself in a way that was all that likable. Her life up until the start of the hike had been characterized by an upbringing that led her to be almost entirely dependent upon her mother in a great many ways.

I have mixed feelings about this book. I really wanted to like it because I loved Wild and generally books about women hiking are my jam (not that there are many out there). I read it in two days. It's definitely the type of book you don't want to put down. The language is lyrical and evocative and moving. I enjoyed the writing style tremendously. What I did not enjoy is that the book, particularly the ending, seemed more about finding love than finding oneself. The ending basically became a romance novel. I have to wonder if Matis would have enjoyed her journey as much if she hadn't found her future husband on the trail. There was a real lack of maturity, not just in the author at the time, but in how the author writes about her experience now. I was not surprised to find out that she's only 25 or 26. I think waiting a few more years to tell this story might have benefited it tremendously. I also found her views on her parents to be hard to swallow. I walked away with the impression that despite providing for her every physical need, spending money on expensive lessons, publishing thousands of books of her artwork, and providing her with a loving home full of security and safety, she was still ungrateful. Honestly I felt really bad for her parents. All of our parents, for the most part, do their best to raise us in the best way they know how. Some fail miserably. Some succeed wildly. It seems like the only thing Matis's parents really failed at was dealing with their daughter being raped - which isn't necessarily something a parent can ever prepare for. No doubt it was painful for Matis to feel like her parents didn't support her afterwards,

but I'm sure they did the best they could, from a place of love.

Warning: This review contains spoilers. When Aspen Matis sent off on the Pacific Crest Trail, which stretches from Mexico to Canada, she hoped to recover from the trauma of being sexually assaulted her first week at college, and also prove to her overprotective parents (and herself) that she could truly be independent. After her college dealt poorly with the aftermath of the rape (though that would not be the end of it), Aspen decided to rekindle a recently discovered love of hiking in the wilderness, and armed with a few items of clothing, a backpack and a GPS navigator (which her parents insisted on), she set forth. On the way, she would face various challenges, including running out of water and food, struggling through snow shod just in running shoes, and catching a nearly fatal disease. She would also deal with sexism from some of her fellow hikers (which make up about eighty-five percent of the thru-hikers). As a child, Aspen had been dressed by her mother and frightened to go places on her own, but by the end, she became a young woman who wasn't afraid to step over rattlesnakes and past nearby bears, make trips solo in harsh conditions, and even find a man who would eventually become her husband. Oh how I wanted to love this book. From the description, I pictured it as a kind of feminist manifesto. However, the reality (and I suppose the author can't be blamed for how it's packaged) was quite different. The author is a gifted writer when it comes to conveying the natural environment of her journey. The setting springs to life through her vivid prose, and if the rest matched that, this would easily be a five star review.

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