

Review of:

Springer Mountain: Meditations on Killing and Eating

Wyatt Williams. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pp.114, notes, bibliography.

Review By: Taylor Jackson

A loosely woven autoethnographic account of investigative reporting on meat production, *Springer Mountain: Meditations on Killing and Eating* stands out as a richly descriptive investigative narrative by author and food critic Wyatt Williams. The book follows Williams across approximately five years as he insatiably seeks an answer to a simple question: why do we kill and eat meat and what does this tell us about ourselves as a species (24)? A philosophical think-piece strung as a chronological retelling of his investigative journey, each chapter is peppered with narrative vignettes, historic quotes, and facts pertaining to meat production. The poetic and interwoven writing often veils the more pragmatic details of Williams' fieldwork, inviting the reader to wander through the pages in a spiraling momentum, always returning to the central question as each chapter bleeds into the next.

Parsed into three main chapters, each chapter feels as though it cleanly represents a part of the story – a beginning, middle, and end to the authors questioning. The introductory chapter, titled 'Etymology,' contends with various historic and cultural definitions and representations of meat, all intentionally partial and incomplete. This fleeting definitional voyage works to establish the affective landscape that carries throughout the rest of the book with smatterings of information alluding to an elusive bigger picture while refusing to be self-evident until much later. Chapter One begins in 2011 and moves toward the catalyzing event which begins our story. Setting off in Georgia searching for a well-known but intentionally evasive chicken farm known as Springer Mountain, Williams soon finds himself consumed by his desire to understand why we kill and eat meat. To answer this question, Chapter Two explores the question of *how* we kill and eat.

Having located and toured Springer Mountain, Chapter Two introduces a series of new settings for Williams to inhabit: working on the kill floor of a meat packing facility, living in a trailer on a chicken farm, roaming the woods in search of a deer to kill, and herding cows in a pasture. True to the winding style of the book, the stories in Chapter Two are interwoven with a diverse array of disjunct information that ranges from chilling details of animal slaughter to puzzling historic accounts of vegetarianism. In his concluding chapter, Williams brings us to a literal and metaphorical final frontier, one of the northern-most towns in Alaska, in search of whale-hunters. Set against a frozen and relatively barren backdrop, the burning question—why do we kill and eat meat?—builds in intensity throughout the final pages, as I became increasingly aware of my own anticipation for the big reveal.

Once I had arrived at the concluding argument, however, I found myself disappointed by a reductive and far less compelling conclusion than the stories that preceded it. We kill and eat meat, according to Williams, "because they can tell us who we are" (103). He argues that every time we eat meat, we reaffirmed our identity as predators and our pleasure in

killing and eating through the flavor and satisfaction of the taste (103). Though it may be true that we kill because we like the taste of flesh, there is a critical difference between a rich cultural history of whale hunting with minimum environmental impact versus the systemic killing and mass environmental harm of industrial farming for profit. The nuances of killing are evident in his investigative reporting, yet are seemingly absent in the author's reflections on and analysis of his research. Williams seems to evidence a commitment to discussing politics of killing in some instances, such as when he asserts the vilification of whale hunting to be "plainly foolish" (89), and shows clear support for the deep cultural history associated with whale-hunting. Yet, in other instances, Williams fails to commit to discussing these politics, even when it so clearly feels necessary. This is exemplified by the fact that Williams writes about the impacts of climate change on this small Alaskan town, lightly alludes to the notion that industrial chicken farming, "accelerates our coming climate apocalypse" (89), and yet fails to meaningfully discuss this in any of the chapters more related to industrialized farming and meat production. As many food scholars would argue, food is always political. The selective inclusion and omission of food politics throughout the text ultimately take away from the author's final revealing truth, making the end of the book feel more like a shadow to the fleshier body of the previous chapters.

Argument aside, *Springer Mountain* finds its strength in Williams' rich storytelling and accessible, evocative writing style. After finishing the book, I immediately wanted to read it again. Williams takes care to neither laud nor condemn vegetarian discourses, instead masterfully assembling information to showcase the paradoxes within those discourses. As I read, I regularly found myself moving between the text and the concluding notes, always craving just a nibble more of each vignette. The author's storytelling evidences a great deal of time spent experiencing farm facilities, interviewing, reading, and questioning that is sure to be generative for food scholars engaging with topics related to the production and consumption of meat. Though sometimes overly self-indulgent, the use of performative writing made this book a very pleasurable read, ripe with metaphors alluding to larger truths about what it means to be human. The question-driven narrative provoked a persistent desire to know where the story was headed and compelled me to keep turning pages. Aptly titled as a "meditation on killing and eating," *Springer Mountain* is a richly detailed and thought-provoking work with a general appeal, inviting one to dwell within the human practices of carnivorous indulgence.