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My Walden: Tales From Dead Cow Gulch

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Baumgartner, Susan. *My Walden: Tales From Dead Cow Gulch*. Illustrated by Claudia McGehee. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1992. 129 pp. US\$12.95 paper ISBN: 0-89594-552-5.

My Walden is a refreshing change from most books by "Thoreauvian disciples [who] retire to the woods to live in a cabin and then bore everyone by writing about it" (p. 8). Baumgartner describes the joys, but also the problems, with the simple life in the woods. Days and nights are beautiful, but it is dark a lot, kerosene lamps are too dim to be much good, and propane lights are noisy. Delicious solitude sometimes becomes lonely and edges into depression. Soothing and beautiful nature is sometimes brutal, as when a storm knocks over not only the stovepipe and outhouse -- somewhat acceptable since both are intruders in the natural world -- but also large, old trees that were the author's favorite landmarks.

Baumgartner even deals with the usually unmentionable issue of needing money to live. The two-to-five page chapters are vignettes of Baumgartner's life in a small (9' x 12') cabin near Genesee, Idaho, over a ten-year period. Material is not presented chronologically, but there is a sense that earlier chapters reflect her earlier experiences. Block prints in black and white by Claudia McGehee fit well with the tone of the book. Baumgartner describes her life as the middle ground between city and country, between the woods and the fields, between nature and civilization.

The major theme that emerges is that no choice is perfect and that compromises are necessary. The heart of her philosophy is the chapter "Solitaire," in which she plays cards alone in her cabin by light too poor for reading or other activities. Although she cheats, there are definitive rules for when and how to cheat. Throughout the rest of the book, there are examples of the rules Baumgartner has set for cheating at living the simple life: she delights in hauling water, but showers in town; she has no phone and no electricity, but has solar power for her beloved computer; she loves her isolation, but buys a car and finally chooses to work part of each week at the University of Idaho in order to live in her cabin on weekends. I suspect that all of us who have chosen to live the Walden life cheat, but in our own ways -- our family had a telephone and running water.

This is not a book that teaches the reader about nature. Unlike most Thoreauvian disciples, Baumgartner lives with nature, but is not and does not try to be a naturalist. Her goal is to see nature as nature sees itself, not to reveal its secrets. She may describe what she sees, but she is never pedantic. The publisher, Crossing Press, specializes in feminist works, and there may be a subtle feminist tone to *My Walden*; however, Baumgartner's gently humorous description of her experiences, problems, and successes should appeal to both men and women.