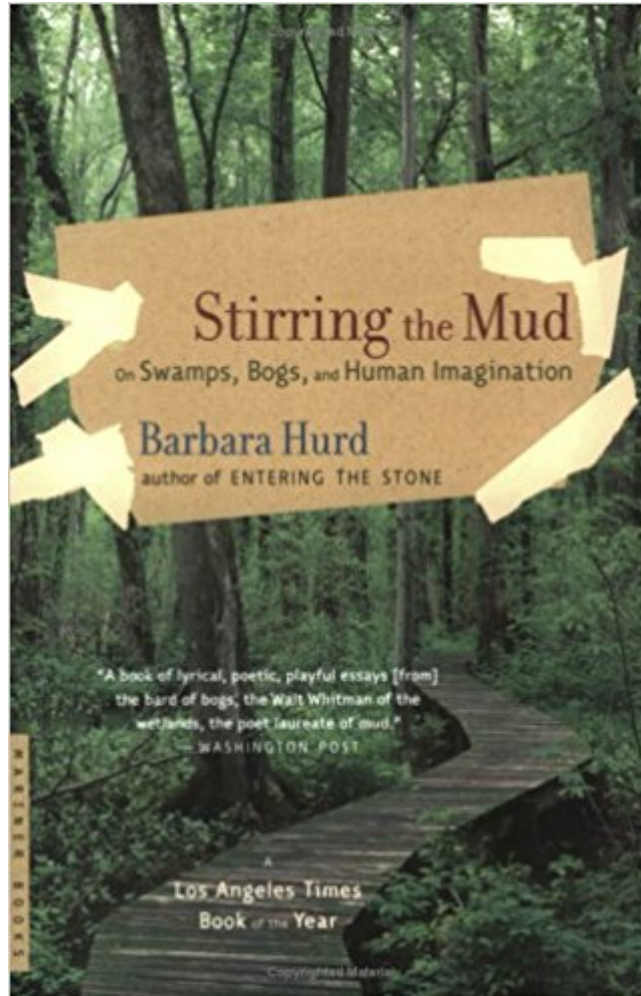


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Stirring The Mud: On Swamps, Bogs, And Human Imagination



Synopsis

In these nine evocative essays, Barbara Hurd explores the seductive allure of bogs, swamps, and wetlands. Hurd's forays into the land of carnivorous plants, swamp gas, and bog men provide fertile ground for rich thoughts about mythology, literature, Eastern spirituality, and human longing. In her observations of these muddy environments, she finds ample metaphor for human creativity, imagination, and fear.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a marvelous book, the best of its kind since Barry Lopez's *ARCTIC DREAMS*. In it, she traverses swamps and bogs with an expert's eye, and with concerns that keep resonating into the lives we live or might live, and those we repress. No one has written more lovingly (or is it fearlessly?) about sinking into the muck or enduring, even seeking out uncertainties. With language as lyrical as it is precise, Hurd speculates about "how it's possible to be on the ridge and in the thicket at the exact same time." I can't remember when I've felt so aesthetically satisfied while learning so much.

One of my favorite young writers, Marco Wilkinson, named Barbara Hurd as a mentor and recommended her collection of essays *Stirring the Mud* to me via e-mail. In recent years I enjoyed the indie movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and, though Hurd's book takes place in a country rather east and north of the action in *Beasts*, I detect something of the same slow-moving drift between

fixed and mutable identity. Have you ever lived by a swamp? Hurd has, in Maryland, and chapter after chapter shows her leaving behind her tidy kitchen and writing desk to enter the no-mans land of the neighboring bog. There memory assails her; many paragraphs begin with some variation of, "When I was twelve, I--" and it's always something that what she's doing now, in the swamp, reminds her of with the precise glow Proust ascribed to madeline consumption. By this method she gets us, little by little, to realize that swamps are not terra incognita per se, not if we can link them to sounder places through the associative power of memory. And by the end of the book one feels perfectly capable of amazing feats of swamp gallantry and derring-do. We hear much of the pursued and hunted who hid out with the lowest of the low--those like the Swamp Fox of Revolutionary War fame, and the Seminoles. We also come to understand city people who have cracked up in their daily lives and disappear into the swamps, to be spotted only seldom, like Bigfoot, by natives and tourists prowling the underworld of the swamp. Sharkmom, one of 's top reviewer's has dismissed s. Hurd's book as sophomoric, but a firestorm of comment under hers condemns such hate as hasty and ill-informed. I must say that Hurd impresses me as a stylist first and foremost. I do not know much about swamps and bogs, outside of what I heard long ago in "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" and "Born in the Bayou," but I take it that the white valley of Finzel Swamp is both typical, and unique, among other low spaces in the USA. It's chilling the way that swampland retains some features of botany and zoology left behind when the Ice Age moved out of America as a whole, but lingered on here despite climate change of as much as one hundred fifty degrees increase, Fahrenheit. Consequently swamps are often cordoned off, not only because of unstable footing, but of some age-old desire to isolate the strange, cordoned off by handkerchiefs--simple white handkerchiefs which, in one of *Stirring the Mud's* more far-fetched passages, call to the essayist's mind the handkerchief Desdemona misplaces in *Othello*--the fatal scrap of cloth. It's a racially charged image, of course (Finzel is in fact only fifteen miles away from a local outcropping known as "Negro Mountain"), but *Stirring the Mud* shies not from bringing the socially relevant into the study of nature. For Hurd, life exists not in a vacuum but rather in a multiplicity of shifting spaces, all of which seem to impinge on each other like the facets of a diamond or cabbage or fiscal policy. She notes that we grow up with swamp revulsion built into our vocabulary, for we speak of being "swamped" when busy, "mired" in overwork. "bogged down" by student debt and the like. Of the swamp, she writes that "even our language is soaked with its doom." When one prehistoric man was taken out of the swamps of Jutland, he looked so recently dead that one of the men charged with carrying his corpse suffered a heart attack and died on the spot! In this way we learn much about the swamps, and how we shouldn't be afraid of unseen depths, much like we learned much about Tuscan food

and kookiness and love from the books of Frances Mayes. Thank you, Barbara Hurd, for your work, and thank you, Marco Wilkinson, for steering me towards this invaluable primer.

Each essay in *STIRRING THE MUD* is a hybrid of poetry and prose well suited to its swampy, mysterious content, which often varies widely from paragraph to paragraph. In fact, Hurd sometimes weaves together several topics within a paragraph, traveling with the speed of poetry rather than prose. It is no accident that poets have written blurbs of praise for the back of this book's jacket. This is a book in which the gorgeous paragraphs reign. Don't miss them! The one downfall is that the book does not read well as the united whole its numbered chapters would suggest it is. We consistently and disruptively at the beginning of each chapter enter the swamp, again. And again. It would have been a welcome change of pace to stay in the swamp for two consecutive chapters once or twice. Without also having edited to further diminish repetition, better to have let them stand obviously as individual essays. I suspect that Hurd must have been torn, the naturalist in her dared not leave her beloved swamps only to the essayist but had to summon the poet also. No wonder this multiple talent struggled with form. She created a sort of hybrid that resists categorization. I hope her next work will emerge with a form even more unique.

This book is NOT meant to be a review of the natural history of swamps and bogs, though Hurd does weave that in throughout her text. There are plenty of other good books that accomplish that. What Hurd does is to take the metaphoric views of swamps and bogs that our culture presents and translate personal experiences and perspectives through that language. If you're interested in the confluence of nature and psyche, this is a book to ponder.

"Stirring the Mud" is a series of masterful essays that wade - literally and figuratively - through sometimes fetid, always dank and uncertain territory. Hurd's tapestry of remarkable facts, fascinating lore, her own exploration of the physical world, personal recollection, spiritual journey, and elegant, luminous prose create a magic carpet flight that endures. There is nothing easy about truly entering the natural world. Like every other living thing, one earns one's momentary place, and the dangers and gifts that may be found lead us always right to the edges of ourselves. This book is a fine companion for those who are hungry for that edge, or anyone who loves a great ride of the spirit. I wholly recommend this book.

A delightful read that is equal parts poetry, philosophy, history, and science. Barbara Hurd takes us

on a journey to the wet, dark, unstable places of the world - and our minds. The mysterious, sometimes inscrutable world of the swamps becomes a metaphor for our connections with the world around us and our selves. This is discovery and adventure all at once. Its a compact, quick read. I recommend it.

Barbara Hurd writes with a poet's instinct. She had a way of crafting the words that bring to mind the damp smell of the forest floor, the beauty that is nature.

Love this book!

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