



Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods

Christine Byl

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A lively and lyrical account of one woman's unlikely apprenticeship on a national-park trail crew and what she discovers about nature, gender, and the value of hard work

Christine Byl first encountered the national parks the way most of us do: on vacation. But after she graduated from college, broke and ready for a new challenge, she joined a Glacier National Park trail crew as a seasonal “traiłdog” maintaining mountain trails for the millions of visitors Glacier draws every year. Byl first thought of the job as a paycheck, a summer diversion, a welcome break from “the real world” before going on to graduate school. She came to find out that work in the woods on a trail crew was more demanding, more rewarding—more *real*—than she ever imagined.

During her first season, Byl embraces the backbreaking difficulty of the work, learning how to clear trees, move boulders, and build stairs in the backcountry. Her first mentors are the colorful characters with whom she works—the packers, sawyers, and traiłdogs from all walks of life—along with the tools in her hands: axe, shovel, chainsaw, rock bar. As she invests herself deeply in new work, the mountains, rivers, animals, and weather become teachers as well. While Byl expected that her tenure at the parks would be temporary, she ends up turning this summer gig into a decades-long job, moving from Montana to Alaska, breaking expectations—including her own—that she would follow a “professional” career path.

Returning season after season, she eventually leads her own crews, mentoring other trail dogs along the way. In *Dirt Work*, Byl probes common assumptions about the division between mental and physical labor, “women’s work” and “men’s work,” white collars and blue collars. The supposedly simple work of digging holes, dropping trees, and blasting snowdrifts in fact offers her an education of the hands *and* the head, as well as membership in an utterly unique subculture. *Dirt Work* is a contemplative but unsentimental look at the pleasures of labor, the challenges of apprenticeship, and the way a place becomes a home.

Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods Details

Date : Published April 16th 2013 by Beacon Press (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9780807001004

Author : Christine Byl

Format : Hardcover 256 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Environment, Nature, Adventure, Outdoors

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From Reader Review Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods for online ebook

Hannah Notess says

She thought she was going to become a philosophy professor. Instead, she made a life out of really, really hard physical labor and wrote about it I got to live vicariously through it because let's be honest I am just not that tough.

I liked her meditations on the act of physical labor, the tools she uses, and what it's like to be a woman doing a so-called "man's" job.

It did not make Alaska sound appealing (sorry!) but I did want to check out Glacier, for sure. Someday...

PJ says

I am tempted to run through a thread of adjectives describing how much I enjoyed this book, but I'll settle for "wonderful". Reading it was a wonderful experience.

As a fan and frequent visitor to many National Parks (including Glacier, which is featured here) it was a real joy to read about the "behind the scenes" life of a TrailDog. A true slice of life.

Obviously written by a woman who has lived and experienced the true outdoor life, a woman who has found love and appreciation among the trees and logging roads - this book grabbed me from the introduction and never let go.

Any book that can describe the beauty of our National Parks back-country and the poetry in swinging an axe is an instant classic for me - and this book does just that.

I strongly recommend this book - my only complaint was that I wish it were longer, I wish I could keep reading and enjoying the cadence and words of this author.

If you have any kind of affinity for the outdoors, for our National Parks, then you won't regret a single second spent reading this title.

Debbie says

I had a hard time thinking at all while I was reading. It was like my brain went numb. The Intro was well written and interesting enough but then, the rest. I couldn't take it. I had to just stop trying to finish it after 1/3 of the way through. It explains mostly details of the job but does not tell a good story. It jumps all around. Some parts interesting then others sooo boring. Actually started to dread picking it up to read, like it was work. I have only not finished one other book in my time. I guess I was expecting more after reading the

jacket and intro.

John Kaufmann says

Good book. As the parent of someone who has become a traildog over the last several years, I had to read this book when I saw it. We hear a lot of stories from my daughter about life on the trail, but I'm sure we don't hear it all - I know she spares us some of the more dangerous or wilder stories so we don't worry. This book gave a glimpse of the "other side" that we don't hear about, as well as the daily grind. In addition, the author, Christine Byl, was a philosophy major, and you can see her reflective bent somewhat in these pages. An enjoyable read.

Barb says

Ah, I really thought I would like this book -- sounded great. And then I read the intro -- the writing was terrific. I liked how Byl turned a phrase, told a story, talked about her work.

So, who wrote the intro versus who wrote the remainder of the book? Will the real Christine Byl please stand up?

The story itself is a disjointed mishmash of events, phrases, and quotes. You're reading about some event and then there is a quote that has nothing to do with anything. You get back into her week in the woods on a job and suddenly she's talking about something completely unrelated.

In short, a disappointment. Glad I borrowed it from the e-library and didn't pay kindle fees.

Madeline Mullen says

I was eager to read this book since I worked as a seasonal fire lookout, field ecologist and forest fire fighter during college and grad school. I wanted to see if it was presented the way I remember seasonal work, and it seemed true to life. I like the way the author started chapters by describing various tools. The differences between the Park Service and Forest Service were very interesting. I wondered how the author would portray the reality that is often left out of such romantic recollections. For the folks who embrace life as seasonal workers, the stark reality includes four months of hard work and a life of poverty. There is no health insurance, eight or nine months a year of unemployment benefits and food stamps, high rates of alcoholism, and other difficulties. She mentioned the appeal of a job with health insurance and the cost of two hernia surgeries. Perhaps the surgeries were covered by workman's comp. I never saw seasonal work as a way of life because of the grim reality of poverty. I felt especially sorry for those seasonal workers who had kids. Some of the appeal of this book was it provided insight into a different point of view. I enjoyed it.

Katherine says

An intriguing, raw, and lyrically poetic book of Christine's life as a seasonal trail laborer in our National

parks honoring our human journey of discovery and "dirt work" of the laborer.

Publisher's Weekly says it better, "(It) blends beauty and crudeness, grit and grace... With language that is lyrical despite the earthiness of its subject, Byl turns the words of work into found poetry ("brake on, choke on, pull, pull, fire"), offering a bridge for readers to those "who would not speak like this themselves"—a beautiful memoir of muscle and metal."

One of my best reads in recent years!

Djamila says

I was so disappointed in this book. I thought it was going to be similar to Wild (a great book everyone should read) but it really felt like a job description and some key terms for a test and not like a story or memoir.

Angela Risner says

I've often wondered how people end up choosing a life that embraces the outdoors. I grew up loving the outdoors then slowly became more of an indoor person as my education and career kept me locked up inside. It never would have entered my mind to look for a job in a state park. Now, twenty years later as I face trying to finally figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life, I wish I had.

Christine Byl and her eventual husband, Gabe, took jobs with the National Park Service in Glacier National Park. The job is a tough one - and one I didn't even know existed - as it involves clearing and maintaining the trails that millions of visitors use every year. Building steps into the terrain? They do that. Fixing natural bridges? They do that.

Many will think that this is a woman in a man's world. Men still dominate the profession, but more and more women are choosing to take on these seasonal jobs. The schedule is 8 days on, 6 days off. I would LOVE that! I wouldn't mind having my hiney handed to me for 8 days, knowing that I would soon have 6 off to recuperate and enjoy my surroundings.

In time, Christine matriculates to the University of Alaska-Anchorage and takes an outdoors job up there as well.

I loved how the book was organized and how she described each tool used in her job. It made it so accessible to those of us who don't know the difference between a bulldozer and a Bobcat. The machine kind of Bobcat. I know what the animal one is.

Completely enjoyable. Highly recommend.

Melody says

Such a lovely book. Byl is the real deal, make no mistake about it. She worked trail for 16 seasons, some of

it interspersed with getting her Masters. She's a helluva writer, by turns lyrical and profane. At the beginning, I thought how much I'd love to do this sort of work. By the end, I'd acknowledged that I'm too old to start, but I can admire from a distance. Wildlife, clueless tourists, clueless government, hard damn work and interesting people- it's all here, plus the aurora. Highly recommended.

Sarah says

I received an ARC courtesy of Edelweiss and the publisher.

Dirt Work is Christine Byl's frenetic homage to the experience of labor and nature. While the narrative of her years as a trail dog in Glacier National Park and Alaska often changes subjects rapidly, it also perfectly captures the swagger and pride of a young woman hard at work. I remember my own short-lived days on the construction site, bristling at the ongoing hammering lessons despite far outpacing my older male volunteers. Byl is a kindred soul, expounding on the empowering feeling of building muscles, hauling one's weight in materials, and desperately trying to prove oneself all while falling in love with the force and impact of seeing physical work come to fruition. Her contemplative reflections on the satisfaction of work give this book depth, looking beyond just the work itself to examine how such labor connects us to the world. She implores the reader to revel in the beauty of the physical world - be it the callouses on your hands or the changing seasons. It's a chaotic, somewhat unfocused memoir, but one that resonates with its earnest authenticity.

Jonathan Hiskes says

Fresh out of college, Byl signs up for a summer on a Glacier National Park trail crew, imagining an outdoorsy jaunt before grad school. She falls in love with trail construction and spends the next 16 years on seasonal parks work in Glacier and Denali. The book is a riveting balance of stories and meditations on a life of physical work, which she finds no less rewarding, educating, or elevating than the academic life she had planned. It's unsettling, because it makes me want to follow her out for a job in the wilderness. It's also affirming, a testament that an attentive life can be lived anywhere. Funny, profound, piercing.

Ridge Runner says

Contemplative and funny, bawdy and smart, lyrical and lovely, this book is one of a kind! As a traildog myself, I can honestly say I never imagined I would read a book about my particular subculture, especially not one that gets it so exactly right! From backcountry anecdotes from the collective canon to riffs on food, boots, weather, wildlife, and, of course, tools, it is all here. Byl captures perfectly the camaraderie, drudgery, and delight of life working in the wild mountains, on a crew, doing trailwork.

The unusual and original structure of this fantastic book might feel foreign to some expecting a continuous linear narrative, but I find it perfectly captures the experience of learning to know and love a place, as well as balancing two (or more) worlds as part of a seasonal workforce.

As entertaining as Byl's storytelling is, this is no casual traipse through the lilies of the field. *Dirt Work* gets at the heart of what it takes to live an authentic life. Byl's narrative is ripe with hard questions, real seeking, and refreshingly honest, clear-eyed thinking-- instead of tired platitudes-- about gender, labor,

apprenticeship, self-sufficiency, wilderness, spiritual practice, and community. I loved it!

Sabine says

Being in the woods with Christine and learning how those trails that I love so much, are made and maintained was very interesting. I loved to read how she got along with her mostly male coworkers and how life as a seasonal worker in general is.

What I did not like was the writing style. It made it very hard for me to read for an extended period of time and not trying to skip a few paragraphs here and there (a thing that I normally not even consider).

Nicole says

A unique memoir of a woman who fell into the role of "trailand" as a summer job to do before finding what others would coin as a real job, Byl relays nearly two decades working with her hands in the great outdoors. It is at times an empowering testament for other women but it does not sugar coat the sweat, the pain, and the arduousness of the actual labor involved for such a career. Byl writes of years of indoctrination within Glacier National Park and then relays a move to Alaska, initially for graduate level studies during the scholastic year and more dirt work in the summer. Alaska has subsequently been her home with her husband ever since. As one who enjoys the outdoors as well, I thought her lyrical prose regarding nature and its wildness to be both beautiful yet respectful. There is an appreciation for using one's hands but also for admiring the surrounding view. However I have never performed any of the work she describes other than ordinary yard chores growing up so I appreciated the depictions of tools used and what some of an actual trailand career would entail. Byl's background in philosophy shines through in this work but it never feels forced and I enjoyed how she occasionally interwove smatterings of poetry and other authors' work. All in all, quite an enjoyable vicarious romp through nature.

PS I absolutely loved the quote she attributed to a co-worker: "Duct tape can get you through times without money a lot better than money can get you through times without duct tape". True that.
