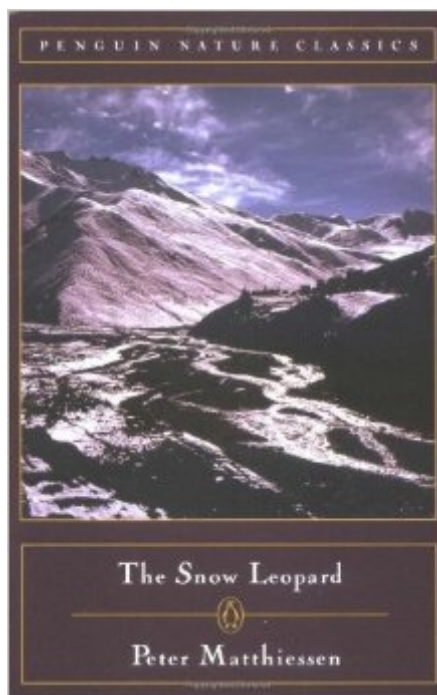


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The Snow Leopard (Penguin Nature Classics)



Synopsis

When Matthiessen went to Nepal to study the Himalayan blue sheep and, possibly, to glimpse the rare and beautiful snow leopard, he undertook his five-week trek as winter snows were sweeping into the high passes. This is a radiant and deeply moving account of a "true pilgrimage, a journey of the heart."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read this book the first time back in the 70s, shortly after it was published. I've re-read it every two years or so since then. As in reading any number of times lines from Shakespeare, I never tire of their inherent beauty; my heart soars again and again re-reading Mattheissen's lines of ice-like clarity. The book on one level is an extraordinary travel documentary, describing brilliantly one man's experiences during a trip into a recently opened area in Himalayan Nepal. On a profoundly different level, the book also is a diary of his journey into his own heart and soul, one, perhaps, calling for more true bravery than any mere physical experience. There are many moments of exquisite beauty and intimacy that have left me sobbing, longing to be on the journey with Matthiessen and his travel companions. Matthiessen is an Everyman, seeking he really knows not what, searching for what may only be the quest itself. Perhaps he and his fellow Buddhists have the answer: their goal is ultimate acceptance of what each moment brings us, not wanting or desiring anything but what is now. In closing, if one is looking for some answers to how to live a good life, without being told what to do and not to do, I find that this book is a far more useful guide to being a human being than any religious text that I know. By all means, even if you think you have all the answers, buy this book.

The Snow Leopard is not just a book, rather a marvelous mental holiday one can return to as often as one needs, like a literary hitchhiker, to get away from the modernity and electronic technology that swamps us. Matthiessen illuminates the mystery and silence of the Himalayas, and the human need for nature and its transformational powers. I read this book every year, and for two years taught it on a college level to over 500 freshmen. Yes, freshmen, at 7:00 a.m., who have never even seen snow. Being a public college and teaching a book with overtly religious themes, I suggested they skip over the "Buddhist bits" if it did not interest them, and stick to the journey, paying attention to PM, George Schaller and the mixed bag of porters and Sherpas who guided them. Funny thing when you tell students not to read something, they go right for it. To my amazement, they got it. They understood Matthiessen's flaws: the drug use, failed marriages, parental doubts about leaving family once again to pursue "nothing" in one of the remotest places on earth--the Land of Dolpo, where lamas rule and people obey. Students are intimate with the concept of to work for the sake of work; be it one foot in front of the other on a trail in Nepal, or their own path of study; these young people easily saw how humans transform themselves through their work and passions. They were also quite politically savvy, impressed by the results of this remarkable and timeless journey into the heart of the wilderness where it's okay to get lost, make mistakes and fail. Readers should not ignore the after affects, literal shock waves, both literary and political which came out of this simple journey between a writer and field biologist, who submitted his report on the wildlife numbers to Kathmandu who ten years later created the Shey-Phoksumdo National Park, the largest preserve in Nepal. The snow leopard still lives and is protected because PM and GS walked that path, and more importantly freely shared their observations, not just writing within their fields, but about themselves as human beings and the role human beings play in protecting or destroying what's left of our environment. Matthiessen much deserved the National Book Award for Contemporary Thought in 1980, and many people do not know The Snow Leopard was to be the cover story for the New York Times Book Review the Sunday the pressmen went on strike for the first and only time in its history. The review was never run. It did not become the best seller it seemed destined to be, given the glowing reviews of the time. It has become a cult classic instead, with a karma all its own. It's okay not to "get it" all the first time you read it. It unfolds, like a lotus blossom.

Spare, lyrical and honest, the Snow Leopard lifts the reader's mind to the high deserts of Nepal. Reading it is almost like spending an afternoon in quiet contemplation. I've read several books that

deal with Zen and what makes this book work is that the author is unflinchingly honest about the internal journey that is at the heart of the book. He shares with the reader the mental baggage he brings with him, and that makes the external journey -- described in vivid detail -- seem all the more real. I can understand why other reviewers say they went to Nepal after reading it.

THE SNOW LEOPARD is the best book I've ever read. Period. Read this book. In sum, it is Peter Matthiessen's recounting of his trek in the Himalayas with the naturalist George Schaller to establish a new national park on behalf of the Nepali government. In substance, it is a luminescent prose poem of a spiritual journey through a universe in which the mundane is holy, the sacred is the commonplace and the profane is touched with glory. My copy has traveled throughout the world with me, the one indispensable item I take with me when leaving home. No review can do such a magnificent book justice. Read this book.

At first glance, the novel appears to be a travel diary, or an exotic safari journal. Perhaps Matthiessen thought the same when he began the journey. But this is a novel that is penned from the heart and not by any distance travelled. The journey that the author relates is as intangible as the snow leopard itself. As you can see above, the editors of *deftly* describe the beauty and storyline of "The Snow Leopard". But no amount of praise can impart to the reader what truly lays waiting inside the pages of this novel. Matthiessen expertly transports the reader into his shoes. The author ceases to exist less and less with each chapter. The reader becomes the first person. Halfway through the story, it is ~we~ who are the ones making this journey deep into the wilds of the Himalayas. And by the end of the book, it is ~you~ who just may have found something you did not know you were searching for. Enlightenment. The snow leopard Matthiessen speaks can be found by the reader, if you let it find you. Read this book with an open heart and open mind, and it just may change your life forever. One reviewer bluntly summarised his opinion of this novel as "THE SNOW LEOPARD is the best book I've ever read. Period." I agree.

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