

On Circuses, Old Men, And the Wild

"The self-filling person radiates playfulness and creativity. The word 'radiate,' in fact, is characteristic of him; life seems to emanate from him, to come out along the radii that center in his being."

—Psychologist Abraham Maslow

The essay as a literary form is supposed to be dead, remembered only by certain-foot nuns and a handful of their pupils, now middle-aged and muddled, who once weekly in the great long-ago, dipped pen in inkwell and wrote on the white composition pads (in the approved Palmer method): AN ESSAY.

The very word can still trigger fear, ("recite" will do it too) and thus I hasten to assure you that **these** essays are not like **those** essays.

This is a collection of nineteen pieces — all right, essays — ranging from the suicides of New York to the Big Woods of Maine and including closeups of Barnum & Bailey clowns, city dogs, a hippie commune, jury duty, mountain lions on the rocks, marriages likewise, etc.

They are purely and simply **delightful**.

Author Hoagland must be what Abraham Maslow calls a "self-actualizing" person — the person who lives in a self-fulfilling way all the time and not merely in occasional moments of "peak experience."

Hoagland, who was born in New York (in 1932) and grew up in Connecticut, explains in "City Rat" why New Yorkers are venerated with callousness.

"It's not any single event, it's the cumulative number of them — shouted arguments, funerals, playground contretemps, drivers leaning on their horns, adults in tears, bums falling down and hitting their heads, young men in triumph over a business deal . . ."

He writes that one of his upstairs neighbors lent him a "white-sound" machine, an instrument which like an aural sun lamp, manufactures a sense of neutrality and well being. He notes too that the devices are becoming commonplace as people seek to disengage, get out of town, or at least stay indoors and regale themselves with surfy sounds.

When Hoagland gets out of town, chances are he heads for New England (where he owns property) and hangs around with the like of Fred King, a Maine guide on the Allagash.

In Fred's book, the Sierra Club characters who travel the Allagash are most of them "lefties" with their "tin, bang, bang" canoes.

"They look like internees as they stand in a row waiting for reconstituted soup to be ladled into the tin bowls they hold. Instead



BOOKS of the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

Walking the Dead Diamond River

By Edward Hoagland. Random House, 340 pages.

of enjoying a meal, they study their maps as if they were eating them."

His affinity for Fred King is understandable for in "Passions and Tensions" Hoagland tells us that he's always had a special liking for old men.

"Once when a boy," he writes, "I saw some friends catch a fish and clean it first without killing it. I found myself thinking that an old man wouldn't do such a thing."

Old men, he feels, are usually joyful men at heart. Ulcers and hypertension have winnowed away the more fretful fellows to the peace of the grave.

"Old men," he concludes, "are those who have bobbed to the surface in time of flood, who have smiled to themselves and let their hurts heal."

His love for the circus shines through in a couple of beautifully crafted pieces, one, "Two Clowns," paying tribute to the late Otto Griebling, whom Hoagland calls **"the best little American clown . . . his role madder, more paranoid and ruined than Emmett Kelly's famous tramp was; less lachrymose . . ."** and Pio Nock, the Swiss master clown who works the high-wire.

The other circus piece speaks for children and loyal fans alike.

"Even more than the theatre or sports," he writes, "it is a way of life. The clowns are odd loners, the roustabouts are sometimes headed for prison or fiery ends, the performers are clannish; yet they all team up with a collection of candy butchers, night club girls, homeless Negroes and Germans and cowboys and Indians and put on a permanent itinerant show."

In "On the Question of Dogs," Hoagland takes us back to New York City into the Fang and Claw Pet Shop on 14th Street, where

you can buy Burmese and Ceylonest pythons, button quail and stump-tailed macaques.

He allows that if he "went in for wildlife" he would get an iguana **"with a mouthful of teeth and a face like a god's palace guard, carved by the millennia . . . more sculpted than sculpture, an iguana's face is really a great double take, reacting maybe to what was going on in the room forty-five minutes ago and maybe to what was happening in the Triassic Age."**

My personal favorite is the 80-plus page study of "The New England Wilderness" — a wide-ranging tour of the puckerbrush and the people who love it and the people who hate it.

"Despite all the fuss about wilderness," Hoagland says, "people nowadays don't really want to be in the woods alone. If they did, there would be less wildness in the woods and in the end none of it. Even faster than the woods go, people are losing their taste for the woods."

I can't recommend the book too highly. Hoagland is an honest to God writer. No porno. No plot. Just some of the most beautiful, unfaked writing around. He could start a whole new thing.

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(Edward Hoagland is the author of three novels, *Cat Man*, *The Circle Home* and *the Peacock's Tail*. More recently he wrote a journal of travels in British Columbia, *Notes from the Century Before* — and the widely-acclaimed collection of essays, *The Courage of Turtles*.)