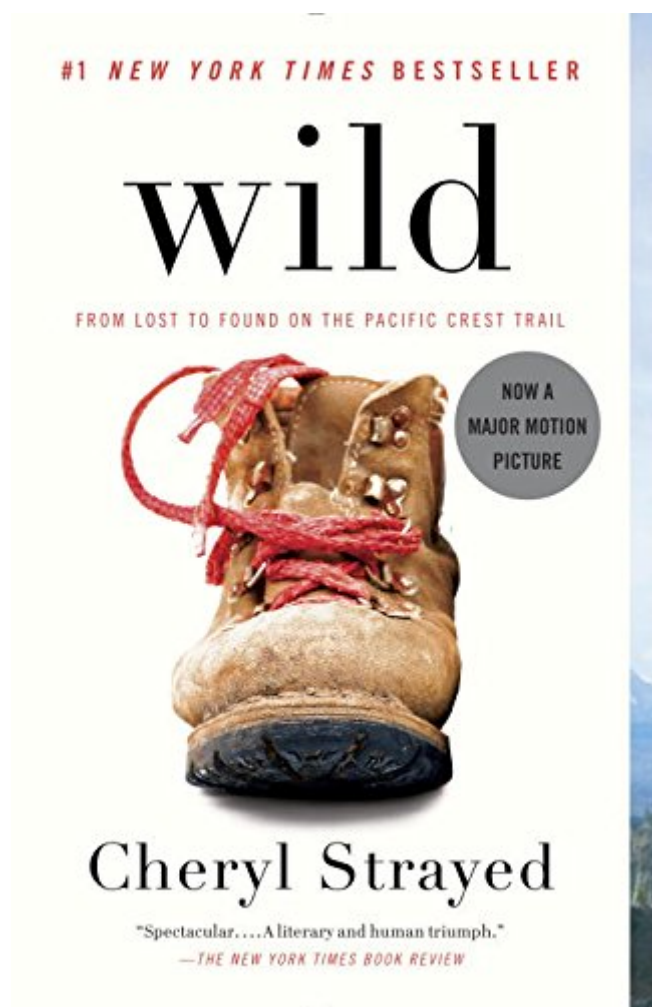


The book was found

CHERYL STRAYED Wild



Customer Reviews

If I had known that every few pages I would have to see passages underlined by Oprah I would not have bought this edition. Not only does it bump me out of the narrative, but it deprives me of experiencing the book on my own; instead forcing me to think Oprah's underlines are the important parts. It makes what could otherwise be a beautiful story feel like a cheap used textbook. I should at least be able to hide the obnoxious underlining and get to experience the story on my own. I love the story, and I love Oprah, but I hate having her perspective forced on me as I read. I'll never buy an Oprah digital book again.

There is a vast amount of trail literature, a type of writing that is uniquely American. I am not aware of any other book in this genre, however, that has received the public acclaim accorded to Wild, Cheryl Strayed's recent memoir of her life on and before her hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Wild is one of the top selling books of the year and will become a classic of trail literature in the future. But why is Wild so successful? It helps, of course, that Strayed is already a critically acclaimed author. A grant from the Oregon Arts commission to write the book certainly improved the text. Unlike many trail memoirs, this is a polished affair and clearly not composed as an afterthought to the day's work. But the main reason this book is so successful is the story of redemption it tells. Strayed's life fell apart when her mother died while she was in her early 20s. Unable to deal with the grief, she first cheated on then divorced her husband (I was unable to stop feeling bad for Paul throughout the book), took heroin, and went through some gut wrenching events while slowly trying to self destruct. But when she began to hike, her life began to change. She forced all her material concerns out of her life, helped in part by two overaged boy scouts who removed many items from her pack, and focused on the immediate activities that allowed her to survive in harsh conditions. And conditions were tough in 1995. My wife and I began hiking the trail together that same year and like Strayed, we made the decision to avoid certain sections. But Strayed perserved and by the end of the trail was a changed, more confident person. She went on to start writing, got married and had children. People like redemption stories, and this book will remain popular for a long time to come because of how well this one is told. But I worry that this book's very popularity will prevent people from seeing the bigger picture. As one prominent long distance hiker noted to me, most hikers are not messed up when they begin a trail, nor fully healed when they end. But hiking itself, especially for long distances, does profoundly shift one's perspective on life. Almost everyone who writes about the experience feels the need to say how they are changed by the trail experience, and yet in almost every case, including this one, words do not seem adequate to describe what has happened.

Strayed herself has changed, but after 250 pages of reflection on how miserable her life was before the trail, a few pages on how nice forgiveness (of oneself) and settling down in life after the trail seem almost like magic. Strayed has substituted listing the differences in her pre and post trail life for explaining them. But it is not magic. Trail life is a form of modern mystical discipline. Hikers do not have words to adequately express how their lives are transformed because our society, with its focus on material wealth and abundance, lacks the language necessary to convey the experience. Nevertheless, mysticism is a common, albeit minority experience in the human condition. It changes perspective and leads to balance and peace. Strayed's book details how dramatic the change was to her life, but truly, this sort of experience is available to anyone. You don't need to divorce your husband, shoot heroin, or try to self destruct first. All you need to do is lace up your boots and go.

I had mixed reactions to this book. As a disclaimer, I would like to point out that I am not in the target audience for this book. I am 58 and male. I read the book because I am a backpacker. The book sells mostly to young, slim (probably athletic) women. Why do I make this assertion? I went to Cheryl Strayed's event and book-signing. 95% of the large audience (Ms. Strayed is a rock star) fit this target market. The other 5% probably came for the electronic, new-age musician. If I were in the target market, if I had identified more strongly with Ms. Strayed (or her 24-year old self), I would probably have loved this book. If you can identify with Cheryl Strayed, then you may love this book. If you cannot form this bond, you may dislike the book because of the following reasons:

1. The language and metaphors are fairly pedestrian. I kept thinking, I have heard that analogy or phrasing in many books (often self-help books, no accident that Ms. Strayed was a self-help columnist). The author usually avoids obvious clichés, but if you reflect upon media discussions that focus on personal growth, you will recognize most of the language. For example, the author loves the adverb, "profoundly." She also uses some obvious tricks to make the writing seem compelling: sexual obscenities (not an objection for me, but more of an author tic) and exaggerating verbs -- "destroyed" for tired and "shattered" for distraught or depressed. Not terrible, but not Joan Didion or Dave Eggers.
2. Cheryl Strayed likes metaphor as the primary tool in story-telling (call it approach A). She made this comment in the event that I attended. Many authors, however, focus upon precise, sensory detail to show depth of character, point of view, voice and story development. For these authors (call this approach B), focusing upon metaphor creates overwrought story-telling. Approach B is not a law (no laws in story-telling). I, however, like approach B. If you like approach A, then read the book. To be fair, the author did use a lot of good detail, but it was not the primary driver for the story.
3. Almost all of the flashbacks to Strayed's last few years (of her drug-use,

frantic-sex, relationship-destroying period) were linked to the on-the-trail narrative through metaphor. In addition to liking approach A, Strayed did not have much chance to really reflect or think about her mental or social problems on the trail. As she wrote, she was surviving -- wrestling with some incredible discomforts or worrying about some big problems (enough water or possibly woman-eating mountain lions). To weave her recent life problems into the narrative, Strayed, the writer, needed her thematic or metaphorical links. For example, coming upon a long, snowed-over section of the trail gives her an image and loose theme (snow and hardship) to write about how she had to shoot her beloved horse in the snow to euthanize the poor creature. That description would have stood better on its own; it was perhaps the most powerful mini-story in the book. It did not gain as a flashback from her trail problems. Moreover, the trail flow was broken unnecessarily by the horse story. She switched back and forth, through metaphor, repeatedly. Chopping up the PCT trail narrative this extensively diffused the trail tension. The metaphors were not strong or original enough to overcome the structural problems. If you, however, feel a deep, powerful identification with the author, this structural point will probably not be a problem for you.⁴ While focusing upon metaphor, the author avoids some obvious problems and explanations: Her pre-trail use of heroin ballooned into an almost daily habit for months. People become strongly addicted when using heroin at this frequency. Ms. Strayed never mentions withdrawal after stopping the habit almost cold-turkey. If she had suffered withdrawal, it would have been a horrific experience. Why did she avoid mentioning that issue? Likewise, when she takes a serious fall, dropping down a rocky trail with her impossible-to-carry pack, she writes about the aftermath as if she had suffered a painful but superficial knee-scraper. Reality check: when I have suffered falls that severe on a trail, I have torn ligaments or cartilage, effectively ending my trip. It seems that Cheryl Strayed is blessed with extremely good luck after a number of ordinarily crippling events (high frequency injections of street heroin, falling hard down rocks with a 50 lbs. backpack crushing her, almost getting raped by some lunatic, getting her feet so blistered that most skin peeled off...). Are all the escapes and endurance-of-crippling-pain possible? Yes. If you are a Navy Seal. Memory is subjective, and any of us can enhance a story from repeated retelling.⁵ The author's pre-trail behavior (extreme impulsiveness) fits borderline personality disorder (BPD). This impulsiveness suggests much more than just Strayed's explanation -- grief. Grief could have triggered this mental illness, but not explained it. I can understand that Strayed did not want to crimp her character's possibilities with a psychiatric diagnosis. BPD, however, is a serious and real mental illness, and its treatment almost always means a much longer ordeal than a three month hike. Although a three month wilderness journey can be life-changing, it is almost never a cure for serious mental illness. Again, the author

endures almost unbelievable mental and physical hardship, and never slows in her forward motion. Finally, what kept me reading was not the description of the wilderness (which was interesting), but rather my curiosity about how Cheryl Strayed would tie together all of her themes and potential solutions. She did it, characteristically, with some metaphors. (Crater Lake was a mountain with a heart torn out, that eventually healed -- like her.) As far as how she got herself together enough to stop life-threatening impulsiveness: inexplicable trail-magic transformed her -- somehow loosening the grief inside of her. (She wrote that the trail was not just a journey outside, but more of a journey inside. I think of literary types advising: show, don't tell. The words "inside" and "outside" are lackluster figures of speech and poor substitutes for "showing" descriptions of the internal or external.) I came away thinking that Strayed was waving some magic wands of metaphor, and not telling the whole story -- perhaps in many ways.

The Kindle format -- one final point: The quotes from literature under the section headings on my Kindle (a new, basic version) are garbled. These same quotes in the print version are right justified, and are readable. The quotes in the Kindle version are crushed as a one-character column on the right margin and continue, scrambled, for multiple pages. They are unreadable. and readers need to do something about shoddy publishing products. We are paying \$12.99 for this e-book. Readers need to demand more -- have an old iPad for example to buy a clean version if it is available. Also, protest when publishers deliver this crap. Likewise, needs to get publishers to deliver well-formatted ebooks. Or, in the long run, writers need to bypass these publishers.

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