

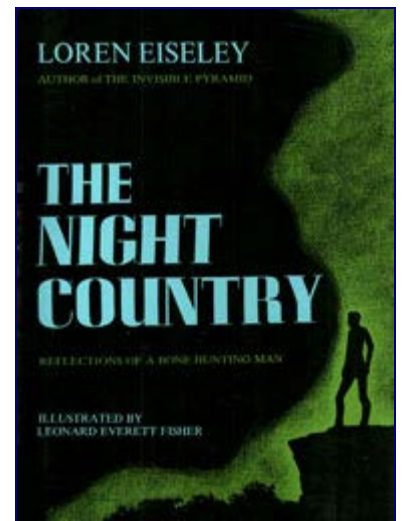
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Night Country by Loren Eiseley

Reflections of a Bone Hunting Man
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1998



While reading [The Anatomy of Memory](#) by James McConkey, a wonderful anthology

of articles on memory, I encountered the essay "The Brown Wasps" and was entranced by Loren Eiseley's writing, especially his use of the metaphor of the brown wasps to describe the old homeless vagrants who populated one corner of a large urban train station. I quickly ordered myself a copy of *The Night Country*, in which the wasps appeared, so that I might read more of Eiseley's literary essays. I was not disappointed and neither will you, dear Reader, if you choose to visit the night country where:

[page xi] There is a shadow on the wall before me. It is my own; the hour is late. I write in a hotel room at midnight. Tomorrow the shadow on the wall will be that of another.

In every essay of this book I found treasures, not the kind of treasures of gold and jewels that one finds in a pirate's chest, but the kind of treasures of golden memories that one finds in one's own chest, in the very heart of one's being. Like the treasures of wildflowers that grace the edges of highways, about which Eiseley writes:

[page 4] It takes a refugee at heart, a wistful glancer over fences, to sense this one dimensional world, but it is there. I can attest to it for I myself am such a refugee.

The night country is for fugitives from the harsh daylight world of everyday reality; it is an inner life in which one wanders freely by virtue of the camouflage of "sedate citizenship" which Eiseley calls the "ruse of the fox." The fox's secret of Antoine St. Exupery may be paraphrased thus, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly what is essential is camouflaged from the everyday eye." Eiseley trains the reader's eye to penetrate the camouflage of everyday life, to see with one's heart the wonders of the world that lies in the night country.

The night country might be in the narrow passageways of underground caves or it might be in the smoking car of a midnight train in which the conductor has just shouted, "Tickets!" and a tattered old man who was in deep, deathless sleep, his head flung back, holding onto to the paper bag between his knees, stirs into reluctant wakefulness.

[page 63] Slowly the man opened his eyes, a dead man's eyes. Slowly a sticklike arm reached down and fumbled in his pocket, producing a roll of bills. "Give me," he said then, and his voice held the croak of a raven in a churchyard, "give me a ticket to wherever it is."

The night country, with a ticket to wherever it is, is a journey all of us are on, but not all of us see the same thing. Some, like Eiseley, see with the eyes of the child.

[page 75] The Russians in their early penetration of space saw fit to observe irreverently that they had not seen heaven or glimpsed the face of God. As for Americans, in our first effort we could only clamorously exclaim, "Boy, what a ride!" During these words on a newscast I had opened a window on the night air. It was moonrise. In spite of the cynical Russian pronouncement, my nephew had just told me solemnly that he had just seen God out walking. Concerned as adults always are lest children see something best left unseen, I consulted his mother. She thought a moment. Then a smile lighted her face. "I told him God made the sun and the stars," she explained. "Now he thinks the moon is God."

As Eiseley, the itinerant bone hunter, wanders about the world searching for his treasures, some buried, some glinting in the overhead sunlight, so do I wander through his essays searching for treasures. Here is one in which he echoes my thesis that art is the process of the destruction of sameness. In his text, he refers to science in which discovery is an art, and which discovery is soon replaced by a stultifying sameness.

[page 140-141] Science, of course, in discovery represents the individual, but in the moment of triumph, science creates uniformity through which the mind of the individual once more flees away.

Further on in the same article written sometime before 1970, he bemoans the lost culture of the village in America.

[page 141-142] Gone for America is the kind of entertainment still to be found in certain of the world's pioneer backlands where a whole village may gather around a little company of visitors. The local musician hurries to the scene, an artist draws pictures to amuse the children, stories are told with gestures across the barrier of tongues, and an enormous release of creative talent goes on into the small hours of the night.

Today such a global village exists on the Internet where local artists musicians, and artists from around the world may be found by a simple search operation twenty-four hours a day.

In his "Mind as Nature" lecture to the John Dewey Society, Eiseley commented on the reception given to pioneering inventors:

[page 209] To an anthropologist, the social reception of invention reminds one of the manner in which a strange young male is first repulsed, then tolerated, upon the fringes of a group of howler monkeys he wishes to join. Finally, since the memories of the animals are short, he becomes familiar, is accepted, and fades into the mass.

Eiseley has certainly felt this repulsion from his peers for his sallies into literary writing such as in these essays. More than once he was advised to not taint his scientific reputation by writing such fluff.

[page 214] I have had the vague word "mystic" applied to me because I have not been able to shut out wonder occasionally, when I have looked at the world. I have been lectured by at least one member of my profession who advised me to "explain myself" — words which sound for all the world like a humorless request for the self-accusations so popular in Communist worlds.

In another case, a young man visited him to point out that the time Eiseley had wasted could have been better spent on his own field of scientific work. This episode leads me to note that all young men's views are narrow views, but that the blinders of youth widen with age and we may finally in time's season stray off the beaten paths in peace as we, with pioneers like Loren Eiseley leading us, enjoy random walks among the wildflowers that have braced our paths, embraced our travels, and now at last have become our loving and constant companions.

