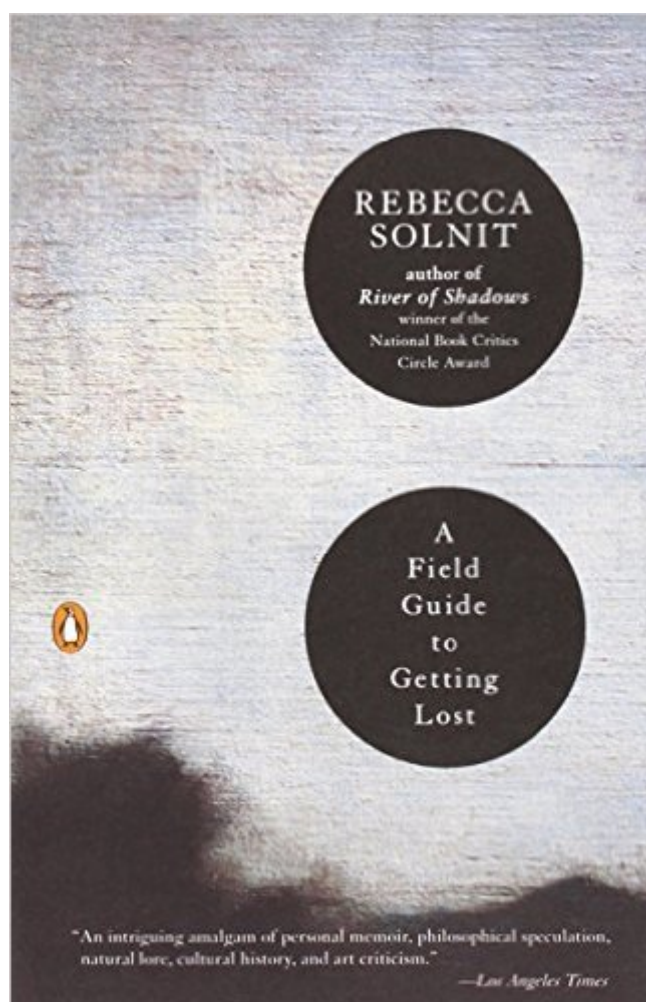


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A Field Guide To Getting Lost



Synopsis

Whether she is contemplating the history of walking as a cultural and political experience over the past two hundred years (*Wanderlust*), or using the life of photographer Eadweard Muybridge as a lens to discuss the transformations of space and time in late nineteenth-century America (*River of Shadows*), Rebecca Solnit has emerged as an inventive and original writer whose mind is daring in the connections it makes. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* draws on emblematic moments and relationships in Solnit's own life to explore issues of wandering, being lost, and the uses of the unknown. The result is a distinctive, stimulating, and poignant voyage of discovery.

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Customer Reviews

The first question is, what is a field guide to getting lost? Field guides help us with finding, not losing or getting lost. We use them to classify the unfamiliar and figure out what surrounds us. They reassure us that the bewildering array of natural phenomena has an underlying order. Solnit's title suggests we might also want our schemas to break down. Can we catalogue the various ways of getting lost as we might catalogue songbirds? The paradox feels whimsical, mocking, alluring. Like the title, the tone of the book will hover between the urge to know and the urge not to know, between rationality and mystery. In the middle of the first chapter, Solnit gives us a manifesto: "Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction." "Lost," for her, means we lack a narrative for what we are experiencing. Getting lost is a kind of Zen rebirth because "to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in

uncertainty." Getting lost also has connotations of spiritual longing. Solnit titles every other chapter "The Blue of Distance." Blue "represents the spirit, the sky, and water, the immaterial and the remote, so that however tactile and close-up it is, it is always about distance and disembodiment." Voila the tone of the book--grand, abstract, sensual, yearning and inexorably aloof. With a topic like the beauty of longing and loss, it is surprising how rarely Solnit lapses into cliché. Her prose is as smooth and bare as polished stone. It creates the feeling of waking from a dream and encountering the world, dazed and receptive. If Thoreau is the most cerebral of the philosopher-poets and Whitman the most sensual, Rebecca Solnit belongs at the midpoint.

In this "field guide" Rebecca Solnit - activist, poet, philosopher, polymath - ruminates on a question that rankles our solution-obsessed and risk-averse society: how to get lost? At the least to get lost enough to offer yourself the opportunity to discover the truly transformative things in life. The leading question emerged at some point from a Plato dialogue: "How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?" Solnit argues that there is no sure-fire method to find an answer to that question. The motto is: school yourself in Keats' "Negative Capability" to be in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after truth and reason. Obviously this is not a self-help book, far from it. It is an echo of a most adventurous and idiosyncratic life journey. Solnit merely redraws her own maps, re-opening sore wounds, reassessing facts, revisiting places, revitalizing relationships. In that process possible meanings of "getting lost" are holographically revealed and refracted. Impressive how the narrative doesn't cease to change register. Seemingly effortlessly it traverses a motley of topographies, human pursuits and intellectual disciplines. The prose is, as always, accessible, limpid and infused with a genuine poetic sensibility. At heart, Solnit is a naturalist. Many of her stories and similes are drawn from the natural world. As, for instance, here where she dwells on our inability to predict the future: "People look into the future and expect that the forces of the present will unfold in a coherent and predictable way, but any examination of the past reveals that the circuitous routes of change are unimaginably strange."

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