

The Intricate Nature of Things

The Patch

by John McPhee. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Hardcover, 242 pp., USD\$26.

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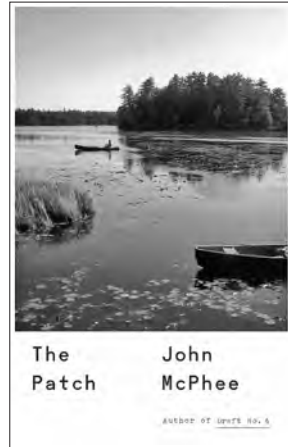
Much like the altimeter that guided him to his destination in Manhattan's Fort Tryon Park, John McPhee's recent collection of stories, *The Patch*, draws readers through a defamiliarized territory in which traditional ways of experiencing and knowing fall short.

McPhee, a writer at the *New Yorker* with a titled professorship at Princeton, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and four times a finalist for that prestigious award. This newly published book ticks in as his thirty-third, published as were its predecessors by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

McPhee's latest work in a storied career, *The Patch*, at first glance, is easily described. Part I, "The Sporting Scene," contains six essays: one each on fishing, football, lacrosse, and bears, and two on golf. Part II, "An Album Quilt," contains fifty-seven curated fragments of varying length and disparate themes, in no immediately discernible order, beginning with thoughts on Cary Grant and ending with an essay on Alaska. These pieces were selected by the author, according to the book jacket, with a purpose "not merely to preserve things but to . . . entertain contemporary readers." They range from snapshots of a mere one or two paragraphs to longer articles, constituting an erratic narrative tempo.

Though it may initially strike the reader as simple—veering, perchance, toward *innocent* in its scrambled tales of fishing poles and Neil Simon's walk-up—one gradually senses a vortex of conflating meanings and connections. That is, while we ostensibly read about ping pong and McPhee's first drink, to cite just two disparate examples, *The Patch* is busy developing a number of metaphysical themes. It suggests that the visible world only hints at the intricate, true nature of things; that one can only really *know* things in their intricacy through intellectual or experiential intimacy; that this intimacy is acquired through alternate ways of knowing; and that the true thing is superior to the imitation, the superficial, or the apparent.

Take, for instance, the first selection, "The Patch," in which the reader discovers that the title of the book refers to a specific cluster of lily pads in New Hampshire's splendid Lake Winnepesaukee. Though the lake is bestrewn with dozens if not hundreds of these picturesque glades, McPhee knows *this* patch—he has fished there. He



knows it: its forms and gaps, its moods and seasons, its lurking pickerel—and thus it becomes The Patch, with its capital T and P, *sui generis* (6). Like The Patch, its stubborn resident, an elusive chain pickerel—the pickerel that would not be caught—is no mere fish but a universe of meaning and associations. In the hands of the master storyteller, it is a vehicle for study of the creature’s responsive physiology, impetuous personality, and florid diet, but also, linked in like the fish’s patterned coat, McPhee’s childhood recollections of fishing and, framing the story, his father’s devastating stroke (3–12).

At times, the book is laugh-out-loud funny. Another selection, “The Orange Trapper” (sounding perhaps like a mountain man or an exotic river fish—but McPhee and the woman at the company in Michigan know otherwise), is as humorous as it is thought-provoking (23–38). A perfect illustration of the book’s takeaway—*the intricate nature of things*—a golf ball becomes a symbolic powerhouse, signifying the origins, personalities, and socioeconomic statuses of those who use it, as when the ball is found with a golfer’s mark or is thoughtlessly abandoned in the woods. It can reveal invisible systems of ecological connectedness, as when a ball materializes miles downstream from its course. McPhee reads golf balls like hieroglyphics, intuiting from their dimpled surfaces a multidimensionality that embraces history, economics, relationships, self-discovery, and technological innovation.

As part of his metaphysical perambulation, McPhee grapples with origins and originals. Considering the question in the context of golf, McPhee visits St. Andrews, Scotland, widely recognized as the oldest golf course in the world, dating from the sixteenth century. But McPhee traces its history further, to primeval times, when coastal linkslands emerged after the contraction of the glaciers, “good for little else but the invention of public games . . .” (48). In its youth, the game was organic, he says, with Gaelic forefathers knocking the ball one direction and then turning around and knocking it back (44). More recently, golf in the age of mechanical reproduction is played on courses crafted not by geological forces but by landscape architects, upon “countless acres of artificial biosphere [that] have to be sustained on mined water and synthetic chemicals” (49). McPhee prefers the “lyrical imprecision of playing over natural country, as the first golfers did on the Old Course, teeing up on wee pyramids of sand and whacking the ball past the sheep toward holes that grew larger by the end of the day” (49–50).

The second part of the book, “An Album Quilt,” is a nonlinear, patchwork waltz of alternate realities. Like some old box of photos, the text pulls you into corners of your memory—people, places, and things you thought you knew or should know but clearly do not: celebrities such as Richard Burton (159–67) and Joan Baez (184–86), notions departments (195–96), and government employees (197–98). McPhee recognizes our proclivity to look quickly and superficially, and disrupts that impulse by repeatedly inscribing hidden realities, as in the golf club parking lot, adorned with telling license plates (112–18), and the Nevada desert, fed by the subterranean remains of prehistoric rainfall (128–30). While the author’s task is to reify glimpses of the authentic, others may be busy, meanwhile, concocting masks, like glamorous movie stars with less-than-glamorous names (229–33), or spawning imitations, such

as synthetic foods and fragrances (137–43).

In its final segment, *The Patch* investigates authentic identity in the essay on Alaska—this time, a process of awakening not only for the reader but also for the author, who discovers a sense of being, he suggests, that transcends environmental and social constructs—that instead defies them—in a remote landscape upon which “a human being is an event” (240).

From a critical perspective, *The Patch* both supports and challenges expectations for literary journalism. The author is front and center in voice and person in much of the text, as in his tour of a subterranean gold vault (187–92) or when awkwardly infiltrating a Mensa meeting (178–83). But there are passages in which McPhee stays farther in the wings, as in his profiles of Arthur Ashe (175–77) and Thomas Wolfe (186–87). McPhee capitalizes on the verbal elasticity of the form to create expanding contours of meaning, at times taking great liberties with rhetorical conventions to produce a unique cadence or effect. Touring *Time* magazine’s vault of abandoned cover art, for example, he found so many images of Richard Nixon that he exclaims, “[E]verywhere you looked, an unused Nixon. Nixon. Nixon. Nixon. . . . [Eleven more Nixons.] . . . Nixonixonixonixonixonixonixon . . .” (128).

The book’s narrative structure, however, with its disjointed snapshots and mismatched socks, is a departure from what the reader might expect in literary journalism, telling not one but many stories, and some but slightly. Admittedly, the lack of structure and context, particularly in the second section of the book, can be a bit perplexing, but perhaps the reader’s experience is structured deliberately to mirror that of the ancient golfer, unable to see where he or she is going (50)—while McPhee seems to know all along.

Reading *The Patch* is like following familiar avenues but then being led up side streets and darting through secret passageways. To McPhee, you see, nothing is *simple*. More a scattered telling than a systematic reporting, *The Patch* is McPhee’s way of escorting the reader on a journalist’s adventure to discover the intricate nature of things. It transcends objective reporting by infusing perspective, nuance, context, and new ways of seeing, much like the altimeter that guided him in that Manhattan park. In fact, the book functions exactly as the things it discusses: simple at first glance, but replete with hidden pathways, symbols, and discoveries.