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A Brit's journey in America, his adopted home

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Although he moved to Seattle from England 20 years ago, Jonathan Raban still feels like a trespasser on a "battlefield of old resentments and fresh indignations," pitting city dwellers against rural folk, conservationists against free marketers, Republicans against Democrats. Raban recognizes that hopefulness seems "callow when it runs up against informed pessimism," but he cannot quite kill "the stubborn gut feeling" that America, "abused and damaged as it is," remains "the most possible landscape" around.

In "Driving Home," a collection of previously published essays, Raban addresses a wide array of (mostly) American topics, including Mark Twain's "Life on the Mississippi," the photography of Dorothea Lange, the 2008 campaign of Barack Obama, and a Tea Party convention. A splendid stylist, with an eye for the telling detail, he doesn't hesitate to

tell you where he stands. When linking floods in the Midwest to Judgment Day, Raban writes, anti-abortion activist Randall Terry had "an I-told-you-so squeak in his voice," and the tone of "the mad lounge-bar logician who can prove the moon landings never took place and Richard Nixon was a communist spy."

Not surprisingly, some of his "punditry" has not weathered well. Acknowledging that President Obama would almost certainly disappoint his most fervent supporters, Raban predicted in November 2008, for example, that the worse the crisis was, "the more latitude" it would allow the new administration.

Raban is at his best, it seems, when he examines Americans' complicated response to nature "in its fifth act," with "dying species, razored forests, and wrecked habitats." Consider his description of his adopted home. Seattle, he claims, is not a beautiful city. Failing to design a "communal artifice" to balance its overpowering geography, it is "nondescript, spread in a higgledy-piggledy, low-rise, low-density sprawl, across miles of hills and lakes that were beautiful once, framed by mountains and sea that are beautiful still."

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Although Seattle has "the essential ingredients of metropolitan life" -- restaurants, theaters, universities, major league sports teams and a rock-music scene -- it has "no consciousness of its own urbanity," and a threadbare social fabric, existing in "pockets of underground resistance to the city's prevailing tone."

Nonetheless, Raban counts himself among "the hopefuls and new-lifers" who have been drawn like a magnet to this cholesterol- and smoke-free "stronghold of the second chance, second family, second career." After all, it "does not insist on its own overbearing reality" -- and indulges those "who prefer to live in dreams and memories."

That is why Raban chooses to live there. And why reading this book will feel like "driving home" to many of his fellow Americans.

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