

Walden

150th Anniversary Edition

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Foreword by TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

Wood Engravings by MICHAEL McCURDY

Shambhala, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 1-59030-088-2

Walden: redux ad finitum ...

Here we go again with yet another repackaging of the quirky memoirs of a sullen intellectual's 26-month hiatus from the concourse and commerce of humanity in search of nature, simplicity, and meaning in life. A marketplace flop when it was first published in 1854, *Walden* went on to become the flagship of American nature writing. Befitting its 150th anniversary, this celebratory edition from Shambhala boasts art-quality, acid-free paper, a foreword by Terry Tempest Williams, and 50 original wood engravings by renowned woodcut artist Michael McCurdy. So proud are the publishers of this lovely package that they are offering a collector's run of 100 slipcased first edition copies, numbered and signed by the artist ... at a hundred bucks a pop. Meanwhile, the mill-run edition is just as lovely and a bargain at \$24.95.

Regarding the familiar text ...

Like countless other youngsters, I suffered through my first reading of *Walden* in high school without benefit of informed interpretation by the teacher who assigned it. Even so, I absorbed enough from my initial tour around Henry's pond to sense a connective empathy with the eccentric son of a New England pencil maker. I admired the young Thoreau's outspoken iconoclasm ("No way of thinking or doing, no matter how ancient, can be trusted without proof"), his gentle but sturdy civil disobedience ("Any fool can make a rule, and any fool will mind it"), and his poetic compassion for nature as integral to a healthy human soul ("A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature").

But what spoke most musically to me as a formative young contrarian was Thoreau's shameless celebration of individuality and simplicity in the face of a cultural current that, even in the mid-19th century, flowed hard the other way.

Since that first go-round, I've come to consider an occasional armchair return to Walden Pond essential to the maintenance of a balanced life. No bible is *Walden*, heaven forbid, but rather a user-friendly guide to discerning between the essential and nourishing in life and the mere distracting dross.

In one insightful paragraph early in her six-page foreword, Terry Tempest Williams caps both the book's external structure and its author's inner journey:

Walden chronicles through the succession of the seasons Thoreau's awakening as a human being. "How much virtue there is in simply seeing," Thoreau records. The art of seeing becomes his practice. The act of writing becomes his meditation. The outer landscape is his teacher. And as his knowledge of the outer landscape expands, his inner landscape deepens. Walden Pond becomes a reflection of his own wild nature.

Of course, during his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau did far more than merely deepen his own life perspective. He didn't

conclude his experiences with introspection but went on to use that introspection as a tool to reassess his own and American culture's actions in light of individual and social good.

Aside from its timeless wisdom and quaintly poetical prose, *Walden* is also often a hoot. Through his ebulliently sourpuss observations of his fellow Concordians, delivered in the cocksure voice of a critical chanticleer and heretic herald, Henry makes us laugh, to wit: "Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week." But of course, you've read *Walden* too, and already know all of this.

What is new and notable this time around, in addition to the high production quality of the Shambhala product and Williams' gracious foreword, is Michael McCurdy's utterly synchronous art. I've long been a fan of this widely celebrated yet modest New Englander's painstakingly hand-etched images in whose white-on-black starkness resides a visual mystique that magically animates Thoreau's inner ventures and outdoor adventures on and around Walden Pond.

Unfortunately, when Williams was asked to write a foreword, McCurdy had not yet completed and delivered his woodcuts to the publisher; thus, unavoidably if disappointingly, Williams' tribute includes no mention of art. Months later, after she had seen the finished book, she sent me this addendum: "Michael McCurdy's woodcuts are to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as Rockwell Kent's images are to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. We experience a perfect conversation between the writer and the artist. There is a quiet restraint within each woodcut. Nothing extra. In the spare, raw beauty of Michael McCurdy's images, he takes Thoreau's philosophy, 'simplify, simplify,' and lays it bare. The sublime moments one holds in the companionship of solitude are captured: A man enters the sanctity of water; the clarity of a night sky is the contemplation of stars; we see the handwork of gardens, the movement of birds. If one can hold the grace of a good life in hand, Michael McCurdy's work makes that experience possible. Each print becomes a window where we can view those moments in a private life, a transcendence through beauty."

Indeed, even if you think you've read *Walden* for the final time (unthinkable!), the art alone earns the price of admission, not only by its mystical stand-alone beauty, but by adding a new, visually numinous layer of meaning to Thoreau's visionary explication of the importance of wilderness as an icon of life in balance, a template for social responsibility and ecologically mindful living.

My only disappointment with this otherwise singular offering is its lack of an index. Even so, no more valuable gift could be given to young readers in these troubled and uncertain times than this book and your encouragement to read it and heed. ■

REVIEWER: **David Petersen**. Of his own 14 books, Petersen's self-confessed "wannabe *Walden*" is *The Nearby Faraway: A Personal Journey Through the Heart of the West* (Johnson Books).