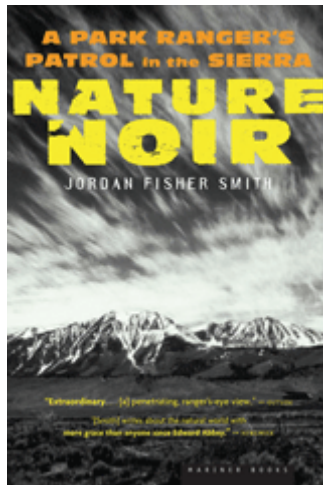


## A Reader's Guide



### Nature Noir

by Jordan Fisher Smith

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### About the Book

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"Gracefully weaves scenes and stories with context, history and reflection, in ways recalling the best of John McPhee." —*Los Angeles Times*

A nature book unlike any other, Jordan Fisher Smith's startling account of fourteen years as a park ranger thoroughly dispels our idealized visions of life in the great outdoors. Instead of scout troops and placid birdwatchers, Smith's beat — a stretch of land that has been officially condemned to be flooded — brings him into contact with drug-addled squatters tweaked out to the point of violence, obsessed miners who scour the canyons for gold, and other dangerous creatures.

In unflinchingly honest prose, he reveals the unexpectedly dark underbelly of patrolling and protecting public lands.

"*Nature Noir* is a smart, magically written lament for a lost land . . . is a nature book unlike any other. This nuanced, pain-wracked elegy for a lost land is at the same time infused with wonder, laced with heart-stopping descriptions of natural beauty and peppered with gritty, anti-romantic, all-too-real tales of cops 'n' bad guys in the great outdoors. That the book works in so many ways -- as a tempered jeremiad, a heartfelt memoir of a dedicated if often conflicted man, a thumbnail political history of the California State Parks system and the Sacramento flood plain, a series of thrilling vignettes -- testifies to Smith's exquisitely controlled prose and, just as important, his well-placed confidence in the cumulative wallop of understatement . . . real . . . powerful." —Arthur Salm, *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"So why am I so dazzled by a book about a park . . . gloriously unlike anything I've ever read before . . . so vividly told, and so full of feeling, you'd have to be a kitchen hammer not to be captivated . . . gives entree into a strange, dark, and mesmerizing outdoor world that's absolutely unforgettable . . . Smith's a brilliant writer. He

doesn't make you just see and hear all the things he does, he makes you feel what he feels, too, in prose as revealing as a mountain of stream and as startling as the thousands of orange migrating ladybugs flying over it . . . Daringly original and gorgeously nuanced *Nature Noir* shows us the dark side of park rangers, but in doing so, Fisher makes us appreciate the startling beauty and power of the outdoors all the more." — Caroline Leavitt, *Boston Globe*

## About the Author

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Jordan Fisher Smith has been a park ranger for more than twenty years in Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, and California. *Nature Noir* is his first book. He lives with his wife and two young children in the northern Sierra Nevada.

"Extraordinary . . . *Nature Noir* marks the debut of a terrific new nature writer, one whose penetrating, ranger's-eye view of the Sierra Nevada recalls the plain-spoken timbre of Edward Abbey and David James Duncan." — *Outside*

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Nature Noir* for every reader.

1. In *Nature Noir*, Jordan Fisher Smith describes astonishing events that occurred during one fourteen-year stretch he spent as a park ranger in the Sierra Nevada. Did these events match up with the perceptions you had, before reading the book, of what a ranger's duties are? How so or how not? Did Smith's experiences fulfill his own notions of what his career would be like? Why do you think he kept going as a ranger?
2. Smith and his fellow rangers are charged with protecting 48 miles of river canyons that have been officially condemned to be flooded. Why was it important that rangers be assigned to this area? Do you consider their presence there an efficient use of government resources? How so or how not?
3. Throughout the book, Smith introduces many of his unforgettable colleagues on the American River. How would you describe the other rangers there? How are they like and unlike Smith? In what ways have people such as McGaff, Finch, Bell, and Jeffries adapted to the paradox of their work as "permanent rangers on a temporary river"?
4. Which female characters in *Nature Noir* did you find most memorable, and why?
5. How is the American River's canyon's condemned status reflected in the way people use it and in their attitudes toward it? In what way does the canyon resemble other neglected or abused places, such as a struggling neighborhood in a city?

**6.** The author writes of the American River, which follows an ancient fault in the rocks, "*Rivers sometimes keep doing things long after the reasons for doing them are gone.*" How does this geological observation apply to the behavior of people in the book?

**7.** Through the juxtaposition of stories of human violence and natural struggles, Smith seems to be commenting on the relationship between people and ecology. What happens to some of the unfortunate human victims in *Nature Noir*, and what parallels can be drawn to the landscape of the American River?

**8.** How has the rapid development in the foothill counties of the Sierra Nevada brought us into conflict with animals like the mountain lion in "A Natural Death"? As animal populations dwindle, should we be willing to give up some of our safety or some of our land so we can coexist with them? Can the needs of predators be balanced with the needs of human beings?

**9.** As Smith points out, many official maps of the region surrounding the North and Middle Forks of the American River harbor gross inaccuracies. Do maps present "the truth" about landscapes, or do they incorporate attitudes about the land? What do location names tell us about the history of a place?

**10.** Is the Middle Fork of the American River, the flow of which is controlled by a dam upstream, still a natural object? How so or how not? Are there any truly wild places left? How would you define nature, wildness? Is total control of our planet where we are headed, or should we, as Smith seems to suggest, foster wildness wherever it still exists, even if it's mixed with domesticity?

**11.** How did the author's presentation of the history of the Auburn Dam—its engineering and its political genesis—add to your understanding of the book's characters and their situations?

**12.** The problems of Sacramento—a boom town parceled out by real estate speculators in the flood zone of two major rivers—are not Sacramento's alone. How have the processes that led to the foundation of cities such as Galveston, Tex., New Orleans, La., and other cities of the lower Mississippi River led to problems later?

**13.** Smith proclaims, "For me, the bedrock of my reality is my affection for wild nature." How does this affection manifest itself in his writing? What else can be learned about Smith in the course of the book? How do you feel about the fact that Smith had to leave his position because he contracted Lyme disease—in other words, that his contact with wild nature necessitated his leaving the job he loved?

**14.** The death toll in this book is fairly surprising to many readers. Do you think this book's focus on death, danger, and destruction is out of balance? Do we feel as acutely the death of a landscape or a species as we do the death of a person?

## For Further Reading

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The following works may be of interest to readers who enjoyed

*Nature Noir:*

*Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson

*The Wilderness World of John Muir* by John Muir

*My First Summer in the Sierra* by John Muir

*Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus

*Water: The Fate of Our Most Precious Resource* by Marq de Villiers