

ALLISON ATWILL

Baizhang's Fox, 2011
Acrylic on birch panel with silver and copper leaf,
30 x 40 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

DAN WHITE

Wild Victorian Ladies

Women Campers a Century
before Cheryl Strayed

Back in 2008, I was in Portland, Oregon, on a book tour to support a memoir I'd published about walking all 2,650 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail across California, Oregon, and Washington. My talk was set to begin at seven o'clock sharp, and I was getting self-conscious and twitchy because there were forty seats and only ten people. I hid behind a row of books in the children's section and watched the bookstore staff circulating through the aisles, rounding people up and practically shoving them into those folding chairs.

Just before seven, fifteen more people sat down. Two of them drew my special attention: a stringy-haired teen who sat in the center of the third row, only to bury his face in a manga book with an ultraviolet cover; and an athletic blonde woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. She was wearing, if memory serves, a Polartec-type dark fleece zip-up jacket. I enjoy honing in on people at my readings and guessing their occupations to amuse myself and ease my nervousness. By the time my talk was over, it was clear this woman had a sense of stillness and watchfulness, and a talent for deep listening. She was most definitely a psychoanalyst or animal trainer.

After the talk, she waited in line to have me sign her copy of my book.

"So ... you live and work around here?" I asked her, eager to test my guess about her occupation.

"Yes," she said. "In Portland." She mentioned her husband and two young children.

"What's your job?"

"I'm a writer."

"Cool. Part-time?"

"Full-time."

"Really? *So cool.* What's your husband's job?"

"Independent filmmaker."

"Oh my goodness. And you can survive on an author's salary and a filmmaker's salary?"

"So far," she said. "We keep our costs down."

"Nice. What's your name?"

"Cheryl Strayed," she said.

"Really?" I said, because she looked nothing like the pale and stringy-haired vision I conjured from her essays, which mentioned hard living and drug experimentation. I told her this. "You're not what I expected."

Victorian camping women were, if anything, discouraged from writing about their acts of bravado.

This was not the first time someone had told her this. She joked about “readers who expected whips and chains. I’m a soccer mom!”

I’d not only heard of her; I’d studied a couple of her essays in graduate school. She was what you called a *writer’s writer*. That is industry-speak for a writer admired by other writers but little known outside the writing-conference circuit. “Holy guacamole,” I said. I walked up to the live microphone to address the stragglers in the crowd. “Hey, everyone, guess what? Cheryl Strayed is in the house. Cheryl Strayed, the writer? She’s got skills.”

She smiled indulgently. A couple of people turned my way, gave me blank expressions, and kept on browsing the aisles. No one had any idea who she was.

We wound up talking for a couple of hours at a Chili’s restaurant in the charmless development that contained the bookstore. Cheryl Strayed ordered no food or beer. She accepted one limp French fry after I nagged her to try it. She wanted to tell me about a book she was kicking around in her head. It involved a very long walk on the Pacific Crest Trail. From the sound of it, a lot of the book had to do with her mom, and her past, and what happens to a woman when she delves into the hazardous territory of men. She told me she hadn’t decided how much weight to give the trail, and how the various pieces of the narrative were going to talk to one another and fit together. Just before the meal was over, she looked disapprovingly at the remains of my disgusting burger. She seemed surprised that I’d eaten so much of it. “Portland is one of the great food cities of America,” she said.

“Now you tell me,” I said, feeling the onset of a stomachache.

We continued that restaurant conversation over the next few months through a series of long e-mails. She gave me more information about her work-in-progress. I came to believe that the sometimes testy Pacific Crest Trail community—and perhaps the rest of America—would gang up on her. Even now, in the twenty-first century, the story of a woman camping and hiking alone feels like a provocative gesture to certain people, a jab at the status quo.

“*Wild* is certainly about hiking the PCT,” she told me during one long online missive. “But it’s also really very much a memoir about my life before the hike. There are long, long ‘flashback’ passages, and what goes on inside of me is in some ways more front and central than the trail (though of course the trail is huge in the book, too—when you read it, you’ll see what I mean). Plus—oh, and *this* is going to drive those PCT purists nuts!—I did not thru-hike the trail. I hiked about 1,200 miles of it. That’s a *long way*. How this idea formed that if you didn’t hike the whole thing you somehow didn’t really hike the trail is utterly absurd. I never intended to hike the whole thing. I set out to spend about a hundred days on the trail, and that’s what I did. It was hard, amazing, and life changing. I wasn’t prepared for the hike (this too will incite the hiker purists!), but I learned a lot. And that, of course, is the story. Or at least part of it.”

Years passed, we fell out of regular e-mail and Facebook communication, her book was released, and of course it did *not* turn out to be the disaster I worried it might be. It did *not* get buried beneath a pile of hatred and male opprobrium. In fact it became one of the bestselling memoirs of all time, and certainly the bestselling book that devotes so many pages to a woman’s solo camping adventure. As the book muscled its way onto the bestseller list, it occurred to me that *Wild* was damned lucky to have been born in the twenty-first century. Of course, the huge success of this book has much more to do than just timeliness. Strayed wrote a beautiful, candid and unsparing piece of work—an unsentimental and gripping story of redemption in the wilderness. But it also occurred to me that if Strayed had been unlucky enough to be born just a century earlier, the book, regardless of its excellence, would have enjoyed a small private printing at best. Why would I think such a thing?

By the time her book became a bestseller, I had developed an unusual—some would say strange—perspective about American outdoor adventures and camping-themed literature since the nineteenth century.

As part of my research for my upcoming personal history of camping (set to be published by Henry Holt in 2016), I have traveled back to Victorian times to examine America’s attitudes toward the wild over the past couple of centuries or so. Part of my task involved reading a teetering pile of redemptive wilderness memoirs dating back to the 1830s. A great many of these Victorian-era books were written by privileged white Ivy League-educated men. The basic shape and setup of *Wild*—a troubled Romantic seeker travels deep into the wilderness seeking not an escape from the world but to discover a more sensible and “wild” way to engage with it and confront it—is part of a longstanding literary tradition. It’s just that this redemptive journey has been, until very recently, a largely male and elitist endeavor. (*Wild* has a more populist appeal, with passages indicating the hardscrabble way Strayed hiked the PCT, without credit cards and sometimes with little more than a few dimes in her pocket.)

Back in the 1840s, the Reverend Joel Headley created a model for the genre when he became well known for writing about an “attack on the brain” that drove him into the Adirondacks, and wrote about the way the woods “healed” him. *Wild* is not the first book a woman has written about a life-changing camping trip into the unknown, but it is the first to resonate so strongly with the American public. Over the past century, countless women have either written about such journeys themselves or their adventures have been the subject of other people’s writings in newspapers and magazines. It’s just that no one—until fairly recently—has cared about women’s camping-out-in-the-wilderness stories in quite the same way.

In the Victorian era, when Americans were just starting to develop an environmental consciousness, women occupied a strange position in American culture. “The history of American women is about the fight for freedom, but it’s less a war against oppressive men than a struggle to straighten out the perpetually mixed message about women’s role that was accepted by almost everybody of both genders,” wrote Gail Collins in her *America’s Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*.

The backseat position of women with regard to the backcountry took shape, and solidified, after the Civil War. America’s population was fewer than forty million people in 1870. By 1920, the number grew to 105 million, and most of those people were living in cities. As the historian Nancy Unger points out in her thought-provoking book, *Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*, only fourteen cities in 1870 had populations of 100,000 or more. In 1920, nearly seventy cities were that big or larger. Life was becoming more anonymous, mentorship traditions were fading away, and men’s occupations were changing. Fewer men devoted their lives to craftsmanship as life became more urbanized. There was more drudgework. Fewer livelihoods were considered strenuous or “manly.” It’s no wonder men were feeling insecure and were looking for a place to reassert suppressed machismo. The woods were just the place they were seeking. A recreational woodsman subculture developed in response to industrial changes. Long before there was a “men’s rights movement,” males set up a new realm of defense in the backcountry, with influential magazines like *Forest and Stream* magazine telling stories of life and survival in their newly reimagined frontier. They embraced a managed form of savagery that was supposed to be an aggressive answer to cities and feminine influences.

Around this time you started hearing men—notably, Theodore Roosevelt—talk about their worries about an “effeminate” American culture, and their hopes that camping and “the strenuous life” would address those problems. Camping, when it started as a twentieth-century American activity, was considered a repudiation of women-dominated forms of relaxation such as going to a resort or hotel. Camping, and stories about wilderness adventure, were reactionary. At first, camping became an all-male endeavor, a way to escape feminine influence. Later in the nineteenth century, men were more open to women going into the woods with them, so long as they stuck to their established roles.

“Women were not necessarily excluded from these forays into nonhuman nature,” Nancy Unger writes, “but a camping vacation ... required that women cede control to men.” While Strayed worried, many years later, that male hiking “purists” would feel she hadn’t hiked “enough” of the enormous trail, Victorian camping women were,

if anything, discouraged from writing about their acts of bravado. The more miles they walked, the more mountains they climbed, the more they were told to understate their accomplishments and give most of the credit to male companions.

No one kept them out of the woods, but once they were there, they faced a maddening duality—a double standard they could not escape. On the one hand, the woods gave them a taste of freedom they did not know at home, while exposing them to the wild country. It was easier for them to get away with unconventional behavior in the woods than at home. Women joined the ranks of campers and even sports hunters in those days. They were allowed to take part because they gave these activities a veneer and an image of virtue and decency by association.¹ On the other hand, liberation came with a price. All the while, the voices of camping and the voices of preservation were overwhelmingly male. Consider the most influential people involved in wilderness preservation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it is hard to find the name of even one woman who made her way to that upper echelon, although women often influenced the visions and philosophies of those wild men.

We've all heard of John Muir, but it's a lesser-known fact that a strong-willed woman named Jeanne Carr greatly influenced him. She not only curated his reading list but also encouraged and helped shape his writing voice. Muir, for a while, was her pet project, and she was his perfect audience long before he had a mass readership. He was always trying out ideas on her, and constantly reporting back from camp-outs and explorations. She even went camping with him. It's safe to say that the John Muir we love would not be the same man without her. Perhaps he would have lived all his days as an eccentric hermit in Yosemite.

There was no mechanism in place for a woman to live her own life in the woods, or tell her own story. For women to have a strong voice in the wild, they needed to change the way they saw themselves in the woods, and the way others saw them. America had to move beyond the point where it equated femininity with wimpiness. In

the buildup to Muir's humiliating defeat at Hetch Hetchy Valley—he tried to save the valley from a campaign to impound the Tuolumne River and create a new reservoir to serve San Francisco—development interests slandered him as “impotent and feminine.”² In a political cartoon that appeared in the December 13, 1909, issue of *The San Francisco Call*, the great conservationist is shown dressed in dowdy drag, desperately trying to sweep away the floodwaters of Hetch Hetchy with a dust broom.

In spite of all this, some women *still* found a sense of freedom and rapture in the woods—and if they knew how to play the game and not push too hard against the stereotypes and expectations, they had their run of the backcountry. The early Victorian period was a time of constricted movement for women. Any sort of long walk was strictly forbidden for all respectable ladies. In those times, doctors commonly thought that exercise would sicken any female (doing the equivalent of the Pacific Crest Trail would be an almost unimaginable form of hardship and madness), even while books and articles were claiming outdoor activities could cure men of a nervous condition called “neurasthenia.” Certain pundits of the time thought that such strenuous, sweat-inducing activities actually caused neurasthenia in women. Some doctors also believed that exertion of any kind could make them subject to a condition that made them “delicate and high-strung, subject to fits of anxiety or even hysteria that could erupt at any time,” wrote Sheila M. Rothman in *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present*.³ “By virtue of their anatomy, all women were susceptible and therefore had to avoid anxiety-producing and enervating situations.” All this was happening at a time when women were more likely to be physically harmed just by standing around wearing the standard-issue clothes of the day—bone-crushingly tight corsets and thick, misery-inducing skirts—than by climbing a mountain. Their clothes were so awful that the pioneering female doctors of the time started to notice a few side effects of Victorian fashion—among them, corset-induced “displaced or pro-

lapsed uterus, atrophy of abdominal muscles, damage to the liver, displacement of the stomach and intestines, and constriction of the chest and ribs.”⁴

In this absurd climate, the woods became a kind of carnival realm for women, a place where the normal rules of living did not apply, and daring women could be seen wearing “bloomers,” that mid-nineteenth-century innovation that looks goofy now but represented, at the time, liberation of movement. On the one hand, camping adventures gave them freedom from those corsets and other restrictive clothing they wore in their day-to-day lives. They were encouraged to hunt and fish and even bag high peaks in the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, when the perilous day was over, they were expected to fall back uncomplainingly into the role of helpmeet, housewife, and camp cook. Even the landscape around them was broken up into boy-girl classifications. Mountains in the Victorian era were considered male and robust. Lakes were female and nurturing. Water bodies were passive and reflective. The names of these landmarks reflected this. Exceptions to the rule were often sexualized—for instance, the “Grand Teton.”

These restrictions did not stop a growing number of remarkable women from finding their way into the forest anyway. Some of them took pains to deflect criticism by characterizing their camp-outs as respectable “botanizing” expeditions, or created some other alibi that would stop men from scolding them. More than a century before Cheryl Strayed wrote about her encounters with strangers along the Pacific Crest Trail, including a run-in with a sexually menacing hunter, newspapers all across America wrote about the incredible camping and long-distance hiking exploits of Helga Estby, who lit out on May 5, 1896, from Spokane, Washington on a walking journey across America. She and her teenage daughter, Clara, planned to walk 3,500 miles to New York City on the promise of a cash reward; a sponsor put up \$10,000 and said the money was theirs to claim if they made it to Manhattan. The journey was an adrenaline rush for Estby, especially when she slept out in the Red Desert, thrilling to the sound of the

wind and narrowly escaping from a gray mountain lion “as big as a man” that followed them for twelve miles. “Being acquainted with the animal's traits, we knew they never attacked from behind and never except by running and springing upon a victim,” explained Helga to a reporter.⁵ Men were much worse than any panther; at one point she cocked a firearm at a brigand, and attacked another one with bug powder.

She cloaked this reckless adventure with a practical purpose and personal mission: she claimed she was going to use that money to save the family farm. But Estby's trip ended poorly for her. A sponsor cheated her out of a promised cash award. She had to scramble for funds just to get back home. By the time she got back, two of her children had died of diphtheria.

At the end of *Wild*, the healing process begins in earnest for Cheryl Strayed, who even meets the love of her life close to the end of the journey. The end of the trail was much different for Estby, who faced public shaming and sour faces, not celebration, when she arrived in her hometown. There was a prevailing sense that she was responsible for the tragedy that awaited her, a sense that her journey was flippant and self-destructive. She won no points for heroism—and received no meaningful posthumous recognition until her rediscovery in the early 2000s.

Estby, unlike Strayed, did not have a chance to tell her own story in detail—the job was left to mostly male newspaper scribes—but some camping women have left vivid recollections of their journeys into the unknown. One of the best of these is by Kathryn Hulme. Her wonderfully written 1928 outdoor memoir, *How's the Road?*, reflects the newfound freedom women found in the outdoors because of the invention and newfound mass popularity of the automobile. Suddenly women did not necessarily have to tag along on a macho camp-out in the White Mountains' or the Adirondacks' high peaks to get their taste of the wild (and scrub someone else's dishes); now, their wheezing metal contraptions could get them out to the edge of the wilderness unaccompanied. “Women even went on trips with other women, the car offering a freedom not neces-

¹ Paraphrased from Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*, page 81

² *Nature's Housekeepers*, p. 98

³ New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1980, p. 24.

⁴ *Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk across Victorian America* by Linda Lawrence Hunt, referring to M. Knauff, the move toward rational dress

⁵ *Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America*,

sarily available in non-motoring society,” Robert Sullivan writes in his book *Cross Country*.

Granted, Hulme wasn’t backcountry hiking like Cheryl Strayed, but one could argue that her auto-camping journey was a small step in the direction of a twenty-first-century woman’s solo hike. The author revels in the freedom of the outdoors. Like Thelma and Louise, Hulme and her girlfriend, Tuny, were bold, independent, on the lam from boredom, and fated to run into many of the same problems that bedeviled Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis: the endless come-ons of confidence men—most of them not so good-looking as Brad Pitt—hints of sexual menace, and constant unwanted offers of help. You can’t blame them for hiding firearms in their purses. She and her companion had access to places usually reserved for men—garages and stables, for instance—and they got to do things that women did not normally do. They camped out on an open prairie where two cowboys teased them for the tiny pistol they brought to protect themselves against varmints and assailants. In Choteau, Montana, a blacksmith invited them to watch him work in his forge. The moment is erotically charged; in a modest way, this is a sex scene without any actual sex. “He found a rod,” Hulme reported, “scanned it critically, seeming to see through its rusty stiffness, the curving bracket he could make of it. Then he thrust it in the live coals of his forge. He pumped the bellows and a spurt of red sparks shot up the chimney. And while the rod heated, he led us around his shop, exhibiting specimens of his wrought-iron workmanship.”

Hulme’s book is compromised every so often by the author’s social snobbery, but it contains moments of fear, sexual menace (and titillation), and camaraderie that reminded me time and again of *Wild*. What puzzles me is the fact that Hulme, who went on to become a bestselling fiction author in 1956 with her novel called *The Nun’s Story*, which was made into an award-winning movie with Audrey Hepburn, either could not succeed in having the camping memoir published or didn’t even try to get it out into the wider world. It was privately printed. Only a few copies exist today; to get my hands on it, I had to go through Interlibrary Loan and read it in the Special Collections room at UC Santa Cruz. It just makes me wonder why she chose to deprive American readers of her voice. Why did she feel the time was not right to tell her story

to a larger audience? Nevertheless, we can thank her for her candor now; the book has a cheeky revelatory quality that Hulme might have suppressed had she known the book was meant for mass consumption. If only Hulme had been born six or seven decades later, she might have had some chance at the big time. Maybe she’d be headlining AWP conferences now. Maybe Michelle Dockery and Laura Carmichael from *Downton Abbey* would line up to play Kathryn and Tuny.

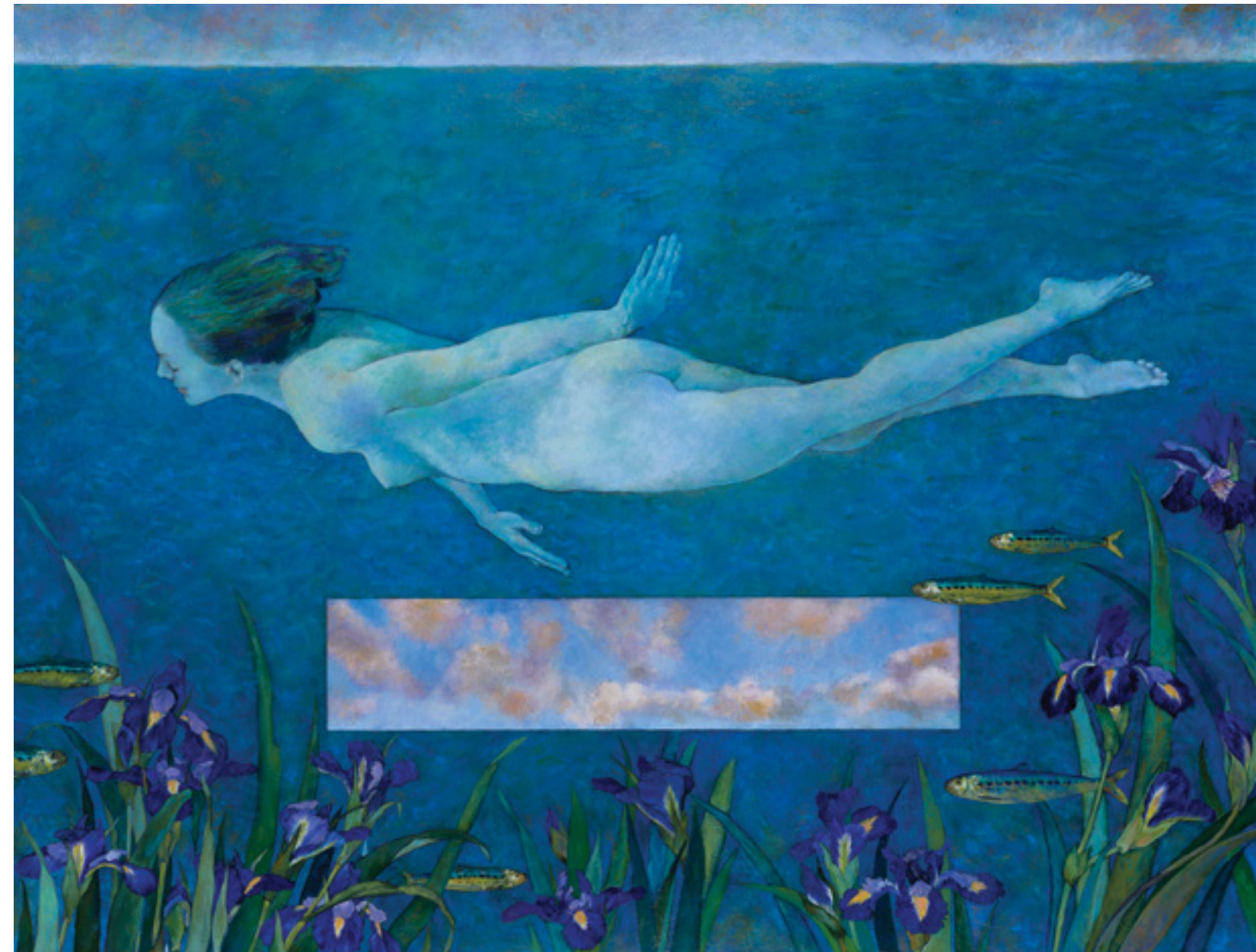
But perhaps the fame and notoriety of these books is not, ultimately, the point; the fact is these women -- in spite of all the discouragement and double-standards, and even without the promise of an audience, or the assurance that their words would make their way in the world at all, still took it upon themselves to climb mountains, hike on their own, and camp with other women.

In doing so, they claimed a piece of the wild for themselves.

Dan White’s second nonfiction book, *Soaked to the Bone*, which he describes as “an embodied history of American camping,” is set to be published in 2016 by Henry Holt & Co. His first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, (HarperCollins) was an indie bookstore bestseller and a *Los Angeles Times* “Discovery” selection. He was a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University in 2007–8.

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