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About A Mountain



Synopsis

"Unquestionably art, a breathtaking piece of writing." •Charles Bock, The New York Times Book Review
When John D'Agata helps his mother move to Las Vegas one summer, he begins to follow a story about the federal government's plan to store nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain; the result is a startling portrait that compels a reexamination of the future of human life.

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (February 7, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393339017

ISBN-13: 978-0393339017

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

The critical reviews I have read of D'Agata's *About a Mountain* have been substantially the same: this is a book that shows incredible breadth of perception and seemingly bottomless insight on human nature, all in a really well-written essay, BUT...where are we going in the end? NYT was also critical of some of the artistic liberties that D'Agata took with the facts. I share the former concerns and was less troubled by the latter. In fact, for me the biggest criticism is that the book was almost too virtuous on D'Agata's part. Early on, I felt that I was reading a transformative piece of nonfiction literature. D'Agata sets out on a very promising path, writing a piece of really compelling nature/environmental literature that is only enhanced by his ability to make the point without descending into pedanticism, as so much of today's advocacy lit does. Unfortunately, the tenuous threads that connect D'Agata's observations and meanderings to the Yucca Mountain story in the beginning only fray as the narrative progresses. He leaves behind the bar room and the environmental advocates that he joins to watch the CSPAN debate over the mountain's fate, and the tangents and associations that his mind makes are never quite as persuasive. Of course, a piece of literature need not be convincing or argumentative at all to be enjoyable and here is to what

Phillip Nobile called "intellectual skywriting." Still, the beauty of a piece achieves full flower when it delivers both on its intended persuasion and artistry. Without a doubt, there are moments where the reader is awed by D'Agata's skill. For example, describing a rag-tag Potemkin parade commemorating Vegas' founding, D'Agata recounts "An Elvis showed up briefly. Turned out he was lost.

It's about a mountain. It's about Las Vegas. It's about language change and nuclear waste and semiotics and traffic patterns and Senator Harry Reid and disaster preparedness. It's about living in a new town and Mayor Oscar Goodman and Edvard Munch's The Scream and building demolition and bringing water to the desert. It's about a boy. A 17-year-old boy who jumps off the tallest building west of the Mississippi. It's not easy to pin down what About a Mountain is about, despite the name. It moves quickly and covers a lot of ground. It never drags and I found that I was interested in everything author John D'Agata had to say. His explanation of the Yucca Mountain controversy was the most enlightening I have read, making a complicated political football perfectly understandable. The proposed nuclear waste site is about 90 miles from Las Vegas. The problem of storing nuclear waste safely is difficult, maybe impossible. In addition, transporting all the country's nuclear waste, a massive amount, probably by truck, would hold its own set of dangers. But even if your eyes glaze over at the prospect of Yucca mountain, you might be interested to learn about the culture of building demolition as spectator sport in Las Vegas, and the special complications of imploding a tall building like the 1,149 foot high Stratosphere. You might be fascinated to learn about the Boneyard, the dusty lot in Las Vegas where historic and not so historic neon signs are stored. Or about the remnants of the early days of Las Vegas that are being revealed as Lake Mead, the city's major source of water, drops to lower and lower levels.

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