

Introduction

When you talk too much about a place there can be consequences. Twice in recent years I've been approached by people I didn't know, one from Texas, the other from Indiana, who confided shyly and with kind intentions that they had uprooted their families and moved to northern Michigan because I had written so glowingly about it in my books. I was shocked to hear it. That such a momentous life change could be inspired by books is surprising enough in this age when they barely make a blip on the cultural Richter scale. But to be the cause of such a change is astonishing. Also, of course, flattering. And, above all, confusing. What a responsibility! My friends are not amused. They stare into their beer mugs and mutter that the place is too crowded already. Damn it, Dennis, I can't hardly get a seat in a restaurant. Will you please just shut up?

I've tried, I really have. But apparently I can't help myself.

For as long as I can remember I've been fascinated with physical landscapes and with the lakes, rivers, forests, deserts, prairies, towns, and cities within them. I've wondered what makes a place unique, what defines it, what it is that allows us to perceive a "sense" of it and render a version of it with images and words. It's been my not very secret wish to study every place on earth, but of course one lifetime isn't enough for such a task, so I've taken to heart the words of Eudora Welty: "One place understood helps us understand all places better."

The place I understand best, and the one where I've lived all but a few of my years, is northern Michigan. It's where I grew up, where I met the love of my life, where we raised our family. I've never lost interest in it. And the funny thing is, after exploring it in every season,

in every kind of weather, on foot, on bicycle, in canoes, cars, and from airplanes, I've barely scratched the surface.

Northern Michigan is two places: the northern third of the Lower Peninsula—which is what many of us mean when we say “northern Michigan”—and the Upper Peninsula or the “U.P.” A general term for both places is simply “up north.” Thus the title of this book.

Lately I've been asking my friends what up north means to them. One said it's the place where I-75 climbs from the agricultural flatlands of the Saginaw Valley into the rolling wooded hills around West Branch, where she can “relax and breathe again.” Another said he thinks of the place in sensory terms: the scent of pines, the taste of onshore breezes from the Great Lakes, the gurgling of trout streams. For another it means crossing the Mackinac Bridge and going back in time to a post-World-War-Two America of deer camp, old hotels and bars, and supper clubs where you can still find a seven-dollar T-bone steak. Yet another said that all the things he likes best about up north—hunting, fishing, and hanging out in “good ol' dive bars where you can shoot the shit with the locals”—get better the farther north he goes.

It's a place, like all places, in change. Much of the northern Michigan of my childhood has been bulldozed, subdivided, and built upon. Climate change is warming the water of the Great Lakes at an alarming rate—Lake Superior is now the fastest-warming large body of fresh-water on the planet—creating increasingly frequent and severe storm events, altering aquatic and shoreline ecosystems, and contributing to further invasions by non-native plants and animals.

But the essence of the place hasn't changed. Millions of acres of state and national forests and other public lands remain intact, providing crucial habitat for wildlife and recreation for humans. Most of the lakes and rivers are still healthy and clean. Many small towns and much of the rural landscape have changed little in half a century. Why the place has not been devoured by the machinery of progress is not a mystery: countless dedicated people—and dozens of land conservancies, conservation organizations, and other advocacy groups—have worked very hard over the years to protect it. Their work will be appreciated for generations.

How much we see in the world depends, of course, on how willing we are to look. To get to know a place we can study its geology, botany, climatology, human history—but that’s just a start. A more profound knowledge enters through our feet and fingertips, and makes its way into our bones as surely as sand makes its way into wood grain. It takes time. Years. Decades. Maybe a lifetime.

I can’t imagine a more rewarding way to live.

