



Where Rivers Change Direction

Mark Spragg

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It is a voice that echoes off canyon walls, springs from the rush of rivers, thunders from the hooves of horses. It belongs to award-winner **Mark Spragg**, and it's as passionate and uncompromising as the wilderness in northwest Wyoming in which he was born: the largest block of unfenced wilderness in the lower forty-eight states. **Where Rivers Change Direction** is a memoir of childhood spent on the oldest dude ranch in Wyoming—with a family struggling against the elements and against themselves, and with the wry and wise cowboy who taught him life's most important lessons.

As the young Spragg undergoes the inexorable rites of passage that forge the heart and soul of man, he channels Peter Matthiessen and the novels of Ernest Hemingway in his truly unforgettable illuminations of the heartfelt yearnings, the unexpected wisdom, and the irrevocable truths that follow in his wake.

Where Rivers Change Direction Details

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Author : Mark Spragg

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James Gash says

I cannot disagree with the bulk of reviewers who found this book beautifully written, except to note that the last third of the book does not fit. The disjointed last chapters almost seemed to be added to fill it out as a complete book-sized book, but left me wincing for their inclusion. I had judged it a near-perfect work, tonally, until those last anticlimactic essays. I would guess they came from another time of writing, another place in his development. Whatever, they drag the last impression of the book downwards after such an impressive show earlier. A good editor might have prevented this.

Tifnie says

I love, love, LOVE this book. This book reminded me of something Robert Redford would pick up and make a movie about. It was calming, poetic, earthy, and it had a rhythm of the land that you fail to find in most stories.

Where Rivers Change Direction is about a boy growing up on the family's Dude ranch in Wyoming. It's about his relationships with horses, the land and water, his family, and the customers who come through looking for an adventure.

Mark Spragg, the author, gave the reader such an amazing detail of the land that you felt like you with him in Wyoming. You felt his fear, elations, smells, and his love of animals.

It was a pleasure to read a story that brings the reader back to simpler times, back to the Earth, and back to open land.

Lori says

I wish that every book I read came half as close to being as good as this one.

What is astounding about this novel is how simple it is. It is prose in its most delightful form- a poetry that is straightforward, honest, and whittled-down bared emotion in its purest, rawest form.

Each and every sentence is to be savored.

He verbally seduces the reader with his stark and vulnerable imagery of the western landscape.

Spragg rightfully deserves a place at the table with McCarthy, McMurty, and Enger as a master of a boy's journey into manhood while traversing wildly beautiful and savage lands.

I'm made speechless by how exquisite this novel is. You must run to a library or bookstore and secure a copy for yourself. This is literature at its very best.

Rae says

This book started beautifully, it lost me late in the game, and then I finished it in tears.

It is a collection of stories/essays about the author's upbringing in the wilds of Wyoming. Great stories. His working life on his parents' dude ranch started well before he hit his teens. Mr. Spragg's love for horses and the solitude of nature rings through in all of his writing.

The best stories involve the responsibilities of the author and his brother, both serving as hands on the ranch. Many other ranch employees are memorable characters, and the boys share life-threatening, true-life adventures as they work as employees of the ranch. It left me feeling awed, soft and pampered in my civilized life. With tinges of regret.

I picked this book after loving *An Unfinished Life* and reading many positive reviews. I was not disappointed.

David Carr says

Our primary impulse to read may be to enter another life, or to see another place through other eyes. Not to imagine it, but to see it. We abandon whatever or wherever we are and become a spirit, able to occupy a writer's strands of mind, thought, memory. In my experience, there are few, if any, writers whose written life I would more want to occupy my own thoughts than Mark Spragg. On the book cover, Terry Tempest Williams says it is "blood writing, every sentence alive," and I agree. We tend to mis-read the memoir as a form, ascribing its form to autobiography or memory, when in fact it is about becoming someone separate from others, experiencing enduring but invisible changes. It's not about the time or the place (although here Wyoming is magnetic to me, and the brutish elements seem to have identities of their own), but rather about the situation of a life found in and bound to that time and place. The person within this life has no choice except to be there and to live up to what is required and what is meant by the flawed human relationships within reach, including the relationship with himself. Such books are not about growing up but about growing through. Here it is growing through grasses, horses, cowhands, bears, winds, and snakes, but as I list them they are too specific, not subtle, nor really accurate. Always, in this writing, the wind (for example) is about the person who stands within it or near enough to hear it, or acute and perceptive enough to feel it within himself -- because it is always within himself. For a reader who understands how much he has missed, one who particularly missed the kind of living and breathing Mark Spragg tells here, the experience of reading is, as I say, becoming a spirit.

brian tanabe says

I listened to this author at a reading last night and I've never read any of his work. This apparently is his best though. (He also wrote the book that turned into the movie, *Unfinished Life*, which he apparently is not entirely happy with.) His achingly humble way of speaking and subtle wit were a pure joy to listen to. He said he could go on speaking all night and I felt like I could have scooted closer in my chair and listened to him all night.

Update: I finished the book a while ago, and while I find it completely lazy in others to quote another review, I shall do that here.

"Here is a book for women to read to learn the hearts of men. Here is a book for men to read to curse what they have lost. This soulful book walks us to a place of restoration, the big wide open of Wyoming. Mark Spragg's words, his stories are a fine example of blood writing, every sentence alive." --Terry Tempest Williams

Bronson says

This was the best book I'd never heard of. I picked it up at a bookstore because I liked the cover and was absolutely blown away. It's a collection of essays by the author about growing up in Wyoming on a dude ranch, his love of horses and the outdoors. It reminded me a lot of Ivan Doig's "This House of Sky" – it's that good! At least until you get to the last 3 essays. I wondered as I was reading if there had been a long break between his writing the first $\frac{3}{4}$ s of the book and the last $\frac{1}{4}$. It almost felt like a different author, the young boy who showed so much promise and was so capable became an average unhappy middle aged man. Overall I'd recommend this to anyone. I think the good far outweighs the bad but I was personally a little disappointed by the final chapters. So my star rating is 5 stars for the first $\frac{3}{4}$ and 2 stars for the final $\frac{1}{4}$. I averaged it out at 4 stars overall.

Jon Manchester says

I failed to grasp until pathetically deep into the book that this is a collection of essays...that explains the loose connection from chapter to chapter. My 3-star rating is partly due to my experience in reading this from that (lack of) perspective. This was a lesson that I should try to understand the book broadly before launching in to read it cover-to-cover.

At any rate, some of Spragg's essays really resonated, while others I lost interest as he delved fairly deep into the details of the environment/landscape in Wyoming. One of his best essays is entitled "Adopting Bear" in which he describes tracking a bear through the woods that they had shot, but not killed. It evoked the "fight or flight" that all of us feel as the narrator and his hunting companion realize the bear has circled around and is now tracking them:

"We stop and we listen, and then we move again. I can hear the thrumming of our hearts without stopping, even above the sounds of the forest. When I think of it I take out my sandwich and drop it behind me and walk away. I think of chunks of muscle stripped from ligaments; my blood staining a bear's coarse, silvery fur. My blood on a bear's nose. In his nostrils."

Another very good essay was "Wintering" in which he chooses to take a caretaker job of a ranch near Yellowstone for a (long) winter. Because the winter snow blocks the road(s) to the ranch, he is essentially alone for 5 months and Spragg makes you feel the desolation:

"I wonder about madness. About definition. I try to summon my mother's face, my father's, my brother's, the girl I thought I'd loved just a year ago, but they seem too far away to reimagine. As though they have all died, and I am left without their photographs. My body remembers emotion and demonstration, but vaguely: anger, affection, even caress seem blunted to my memory. They come as soft tappings on a roof - that disparate."

Scott Carles says

This is a memoir that, while reading, I was hoping wasn't one of those "adorned" memoirs, you know, fictionalized autobiographies. The book is now ten years old and I don't think there has been any "revelations" about the improprieties of the author in the telling of his life.

Why was I concerned about this? It is such a heartachingly good read, that it just seemed too good to be true. Most of the essays in the book were written at least 30 years after they took place. Spragg does such an excellent job of looking into the thoughts and feelings of his eleven year old self, and those thoughts and feelings are so deep, lucid and emotion-laden, that it is easy to imagine they are fictionalized. But, keeping in mind that a memoir is an examination of one's life after the fact, one can see that it is easy to project an adult's interpretation of events from childhood.

This book is an excellent example of writing about the American West and how it was so recently, and in some places still is. Spragg's family moved to Wyoming to run a dude ranch and eleven year old Mark was expected to be part of the business. In his words:

When I was a boy my father had horses, over a hundred of them. He believed that horses were to use and that boys were nothing if not used.... I went to work for him when I was eleven. I was paid thirty dollars a month, had my own bed in the bunkhouse, and three large, plain meals each day. (p 1)

...It was my daily job to remind our horses of the union of man and horse, to gather them, halter them, grain them, doctor them, handle them, ride them, to ride the younger ones again and again until they became convinced that I was part of them and other men a part of me. They were my father's horses. I was my father's son. (p5)

It was this belief about boys working put to practice that gives Spragg the stories he has to tell, the stories of being a boy among men and growing to manhood himself.

Horses became an integral part of his life and character:

I was a boy and I believed in the sightedness of horses. I believed that to have a horse between my legs, to extend my pulse and blood and energy to theirs, enhanced my vision. Made of me a seer. I believed them to be the dappled, sorrel, roan, bay, black pupils in the eyes of God. (p7)

I think that walking is different from riding. I am connected to the earth differently, more aware of the strike of my bones against the land, more aware of the surface. My breath comes sharp and strong. I think that when I am walking it is as though I am speaking each word of myself to the mountain's ear. Aloud. I like the sensation. I also like being on a horse. When I am mounted it feels as though I must draw my breath through half a tone of animal to fill my lungs. My breath comes fuller, hotter; the breathing expanded, drowsy, and meditative. When I am older I will think of the difference between walking and riding to be the difference between prayer and the effect of prayer.(p36)

The book deals with the how raw and brutal nature can be and the men who live on the land. It shows that

masculinity isn't just about the way men behave, but that the reason they behave in certain ways is because there is no other way. When he was 13, while out hunting elk with a ranch hand in his forties, John, Spragg has to be a man. As they are skinning the elk, John cuts his arm to the bone. They are on horses miles from home. They aren't just hunting, but getting food for the winter. It is Spragg's responsibility to bandage the man and continue skinning the elk. They spend the night and butcher the elk in the morning. During the night, as Spragg is awake, he takes the knife that skinned the elk and John, and hones the blade as he has seen John do it, reflecting on the sound it makes:

It is the sound John makes with the knife. It is the sound of flesh slippery against flesh. The sound of a man's arms working against his sides in the sun. A shirtless man bent into his work, Loading hay. An old sound. The sound that an animal makes at the end of a day. A sigh. Again and again. Metronomic. I pause. There is always a pause. I bring the blade away from the stone, examine it, reverse the stone and spit again. (pp50-51)

He continues working the blade, then

I hold it to the light. I think of it in the sun: the small curved white reflection it casts; a thing become so polished that it mirrors the heat of the sun, and if held steadily to the dry, bent underfluff of the grasses it could ignite a fire simply by throwing the curve of that reflected heat. It feels hot and right in my hand. (p51)

Life in the American West is not always easy. The book is unapologetic in its rawness of life, death and work. Spragg's father guides hunters. For grizzlies. They bait bears into an area so the hunters can shoot them. They use old, dying horses as bait. When the horse, Socks, 15 year old Spragg has ridden for two years gets cut with a wire and his leg is gangrenous, his father asks him to take the horse out to the grizzly blind and shoot him to use him as bait.

I stare at the reddish brown mound seventy-five yards in front of me. I have killed Socks in good place. Close to the timber that borders the meadow. A bear will safe in his approach. ...And then I remember that I should have cut a window in his gut. Sawed through the hair and opened him to decay. A sore that coyotes and ravens can worry. A place that will help him rot. My father will be disappointed....I wonder suddenly why I am not crying. I think a boy would cry. I think maybe I have begun to be a man. I feel only quietly blunt, and desperate. (pp107-08)

Spragg's early life was not without a woman's influence. In speaking about a photograph of his mother standing next to Mark and, his brother who have a stringer of fish hanging between them, he says:

My mother has brought us to the river to further our instruction. It has never occurred to us to wonder why she knows how to fish. She is our mother. She teaches us how to manage in the world. We watch her smooth hands grip the rod's cork above the reel. We watch the rhythm of her arms paying out the line in arcs over the river, working into the length of her cast. We follow the last presentation of line and breathe out as the fly settles on the river's surface. If she were not our mother we would be struck by her beauty. We would argue to stand close to her. We would become nervous at the scent of her clean, sun-warmed skin. We would not have

learned to fish. (pp240-41)

Spragg has a way of not finishing narratives, but rather focusing on the feeling and emotions of the piece to let each essay carry it to its conclusion. Because it isn't necessarily the storyline that he is writing about, it is the inner experience. With all the masculinity of the book, there are plenty of times for tenderness as well. His mother had a hard time having children. She had a daughter a year before Mark was born. But the girl only lived a few months. He reflects on having an older sister:

I think about my sister when my mind is quiet; almost always when I am watching water. I see my sister as an encyclopedia of feminine advice. I see my sister as a doorway to the second half of the world. I wish I could call her name and have her turn her face to me and smile. (p27)

This book is a collection of essays, most of which, I believe, were previously published individually. The first three quarters or so of the essays are about his childhood, and for me are the most compelling and strongest of the book. The remaining several essays are about his adult life, and while excellently written, didn't have the emotional impact on me as the others.

George Seaton says

How do I describe this treasure? Significant that I've read it three times. Significant that I'll probably read it another three times.

This is a beautiful coming-of-age story, set in the Wyoming Yellowstone plateau where the protagonist, as a boy, works his daddy's dude ranch with no special consideration (he is the son, after all) because of his lineage. And, AND there are horses; reflections on the worth, the essential worth of horse. How best to capture my interest!

A favorite passage: "I was a boy, and I believed deeply in the sightedness of horses. I believed that there was nothing that they did not witness. I believed that to have a horse between my legs, to extend my pulse and blood and energy to theirs, enhanced my vision. Made of me a seer. I believed them to be the dappled, sorrel, roan, bay, black pupils in the eyes of God."

Again--as with other reviews I've provided--this is a writer's lesson, as well as a reader's dream.

This is a precious read. Savor it. Please. Dare I say your soul will be enriched.

Lauryn says

This is a beautiful collection of essays based on the author's childhood spent living and working on a dude ranch in Wyoming. There is a visceral power to these essays, as Spragg writes with unflinching honesty and not a trace of sentimentality about his relationships: relationships with his family and the cowboys that work the ranch, but even more poignantly, his relationships with the unforgiving and inhospitable landscape of the American West and the animals, both domestic and wild, that share this landscape. Although a gifted novelist and screenwriter, it is in his nonfiction work where Spragg truly shines. Read this book.

Lindsay says

I hate to sound like a broken record, but I heard about this book on TTBOOK and knew I had to pick it up soon. Spragg spent most of his childhood growing up on the oldest dude ranch in Wyoming, and he chronicles the formative experiences of this unique opportunity in such loving and heartbreaking vignettes.

I wasn't expecting for it to take me back to my childhood like it did. For a few years at least, my parents indulged my obsession for horses by sending me to camps to take care of them and go on the occasional trail ride. I got caught in my own flood of memories for part of the reading, remembering the ranch-hand lingo and the feel of the change of pace when devoting so much time to animals. Spragg's tenderness comes through so vividly and compassionately, it's hard not to get overly romantic about life on the range.

However, perhaps realizing the danger of getting too schmaltzy (and indeed sometimes his words did become a bit *too* poetically sentimental), Spragg also made quite clear the extremely harsh realities of this kind of life and that of one in Wyoming. I may have appreciated this side a little more despite that (or because?) it brought tears to my eyes on more than one occasion. Just as I was about to lose myself in planning an escape from a trivial corporate job for one so organic and fulfilling as working with animals, Spragg grounded me with his passages concerning the wind and cold, taking care of his dying mother, and having to kill his beloved horses (or learning how to swiftly kill an animal in general).

This book serves as a forgiving reminder that being away from the hustle and bustle of city life is in no way an escape, but also as a paean to a land and life the few of us have the opportunity or will power to endure. Recommended for the starry-eyed naturalist.

Tamra says

Best book I have read in a long time. Life story of a boy raised near the Shoshone River in Yellowstone. His family ran a dude ranch. The cowboys he hangs out with on the ranch remind me very much of my father and his colorful language and actions. It is written beautifully. Not really in story form; more like essays that string together his life and longings. Here are a couple of my favorite lines. "I lose my belief that anything changes gradually. I realize that there is only the flash of accident and the level times afterwards where we are allowed to gather our strength for the next." and "She will feel starkly alone in the world, singular in her misery. I will not be strong enough to absorb the whole demon of her pain. I will try, and it will beat me back and return to her, and snarl as a vicious dog snarls to protect its mistress. My love of her will not seem enough."

Garlan 🐾 says

Where Rivers Change Direction (Across the Great Divide) – is a deeply personal memoir of the author's life growing up on a dude ranch in Wyoming. From early childhood, through adolescence, youth and young manhood, Spragg captures the emotions, thoughts, hopes and fears of every young male, regardless of where they grew up. This is a paean to the male rights of passage, using the beautiful but harsh wilderness of

Wyoming as the backdrop. Some of the stories deal with the brutal realities faced in nature, or the fears of a young boy growing up in a man's world, but all are written with such honesty, and with a critical eye for the natural beauty of the region, that one only feels the poetry in the words. In one passage, the author sums up his experience with the following "I did not know that I lived on the largest block of unfenced wilderness in the lower forty eight states. That is what I know as a man. As a boy, I knew only that I was free on the land". Of the 14 stories/essays here, only a couple didn't ring true, and they were stories of the author as a middle aged man, looking back on his experiences.

Larry McMurtry - "This is a book that deserves many readers."

Terry Tempest Williams - "Here is a book that women can read to learn the hearts of men. Here is a book that men can read to curse what they have lost."

I wish I had said that....

David says

I like Spragg's laconic-feeling style and how he can bring that to this kind of a nonfiction book the way he can in fiction. There's some good stuff here, plainly moving. I do feel a little much of the pull resides in "manliness" and an enchantment with the cowboy that I perhaps do not completely share, but I think that blunts the book only a little for me, much less than I feared. All in all this was a good and moving book.
