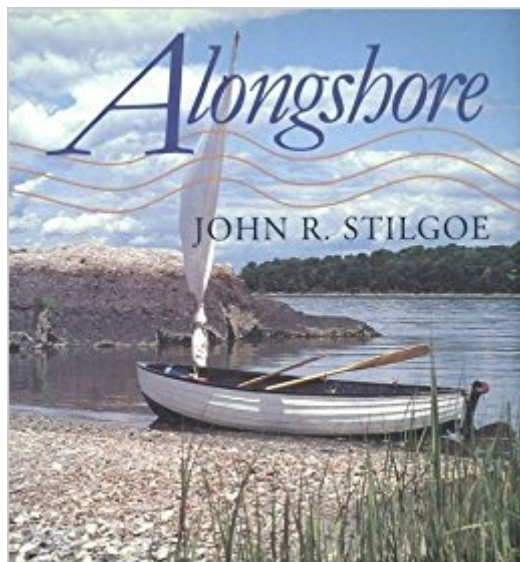


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Alongshore



Synopsis

Along the shore are fishing boats and lighthouses, wharves and piers, resorts and shipwrecks - picturesque vistas that are visited and photographed but have never before been scrutinized from a historical or cultural perspective. In this enchanting book, John R. Stilgoe takes us on a tour of the seacoast, evoking its sights, sounds, and textures, and showing how it illuminates issues of landscape and of American culture. Drawing on sources as diverse as Thoreau and Kate Chopin, agricultural newspapers and the Hardy Boys, and always emphasizing his own hikes and small-boat passages along the coast, Stilgoe provides a guidebook for anyone intrigued by the seacoast, "the last place in which adult Americans walk barefoot." He describes guzzles (configurations of sand), gunkholes (unfrequented harbors), and loomings (optical phenomena on the horizon). He explains why watchtowers stand guard all along the Atlantic coast; why wharves are perennially decaying; the different ways that pirates have been perceived through the centuries; and why local women of the shore towns wear bikinis. Like the sea itself, Stilgoe's *Alongshore* invigorates and exhilarates, drawing us back to its pleasures again and again.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Landscape historian Stilgoe presents an intimate look at the Massachusetts seacoast. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Stilgoe (who teaches history of landscape at Harvard) brings to seashores the same mystique,

erudition, and pleasure he applied to railroads in Metropolitan Corridor (1983). His charming, informative, profusely illustrated tour of the northeastern shoreline--beaches, marshes, dunes, wharves, lighthouses, harbors, boats, inhabitants and their social conventions--appears in time for summer holidays. Indeed, the volume offers a summer holiday itself with its lyrical descriptions of the wonder and allure of the seashore; the taste, smell, texture of this special place between low tide and high; the forces of nature that shape and repossess it; the seasons, history, and attitudes it fosters. Stilgoe provides an array of information, anecdote, and fantasy, as well as answering some puzzling questions--such as why a man taking pictures on the beach is considered a violator of the unspoken etiquette developed by shore people (as opposed to tourists). He explains how salt marshes are formed and how culture impinges on them, how marshes are dissected by railroads and bridges, how fiberglass boats have turned yards where the wooden boats wintered and were refitted into condominium developments, why wharves have criminal associations and are eaten by small sea creatures that no one wants to study. A chapter on treasures turns into a history of pirates--real and imaginary--and their place in the "American maritime psyche." He similarly juxtaposes reality with perception in a chapter on quaintness, or how what was poverty to the natives is being preserved by historical societies and rediscovered by affluent moderns who can afford to live in what they think is a natural way. Reflecting on bikinis, he considers how human beings interact with nature, how ocean "bathing" in the 19th century became "swimming," and how that change generated the whole vacation culture. Eloquent, personable, absorbing, a book to read while the seasons are changing and the tide is turning. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I give the author credit for writing about such a unique and exact topic. Some of the chapters are interesting, some I'd call "wandering", and some would probably interest a person with the same philosophical "wonderings".

Nature's "edges" brim with intricate lifestyles and habitats: the succession margins between wood and meadow; the neither-nor pockets between mountain and plains; and of course, the dynamic shorelines between land and sea. Author John Stilgoe uses his home base of coastal Massachusetts to explore in detail each and every nuance of the latter. More specifically, his narrative dwells most often on life in and around Scituate, Marshfield, and Duxbury, several bayside towns lying between Boston and Plymouth. (The Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean shorelines are specified on occasion; but in most instances, the information presented here is somewhat

universal.) Referring to himself as "the barefoot historian," Stilgoe analyzes the ongoing relationship between humans and the water's edge. The subject has a language all its own, with words like looming and chartreuse, not to mention glim, guzzle, and gundalow gunkholing. Stilgoe additionally uses sociology, history, science and literature to explore every aspect of the place he calls "alongshore." He expounds on the virtues of the salt marsh. He lists the qualities of a proper skiff, and ponders the differences between a boat and a yacht. He peeks into a WWII observation tower. He describes the fate of the wooden wharf. He notes the continuing lure of discovering treasure trove. He documents the visitor's desire to take home part of the sea, which results even today in inland aquariums and decorations for knick-knack shelves. He debates the issues of swimming suits vs. bathing suits, to tan and not to tan, and the acceptable forms of near-nudity on public beaches. He tells potential beachside builders that the land they see is "not real estate, but realm." He scrutinizes alongshore portrayal by writers, artists, and the popular media. (What is a seascape? A sea-story?) In doing so, he presents an exhaustive study of the literature, both fiction and nonfiction, and leaves us with a stack of suggestions for further reading. Surely he has left no stone unturned. His pre-2001 perspective about possible attacks on American soil is eerie to see in print. Yes, we are familiar with our continuing it-can't-happen-here mentality. But to read a quote from an 1884 Army officer report that "Manhattan is an island, an island trap," is to remember scenes of towers falling, dust whirling, and people running. It is all too true. Many b&w photos and illustrations are scattered amidst the text; and they serve to keep the reader interested in each one of the author's themes. Stilgoe has obviously spent much time in this environment and is entranced / mesmerized by it. Still, it takes a dedicated reader to stay with his ramblings -- not because the writing offers rough going, but because it is chockfull of details. You must be a shoreline aficionado yourself to continue to turn the pages. And those sheets are bound in a book that is almost square. It's a bit tricky to hold comfortably, thus requiring again a deliberate undertaking by the reader. The experience is well worth the effort, however. You will never again give a mere casual glance to any sand-blown beach or murky marsh. In fact, upon finishing "Alongshore," you may want to drive to the nearest ocean and dash into the surf, just to honor it.

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Alongshore

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