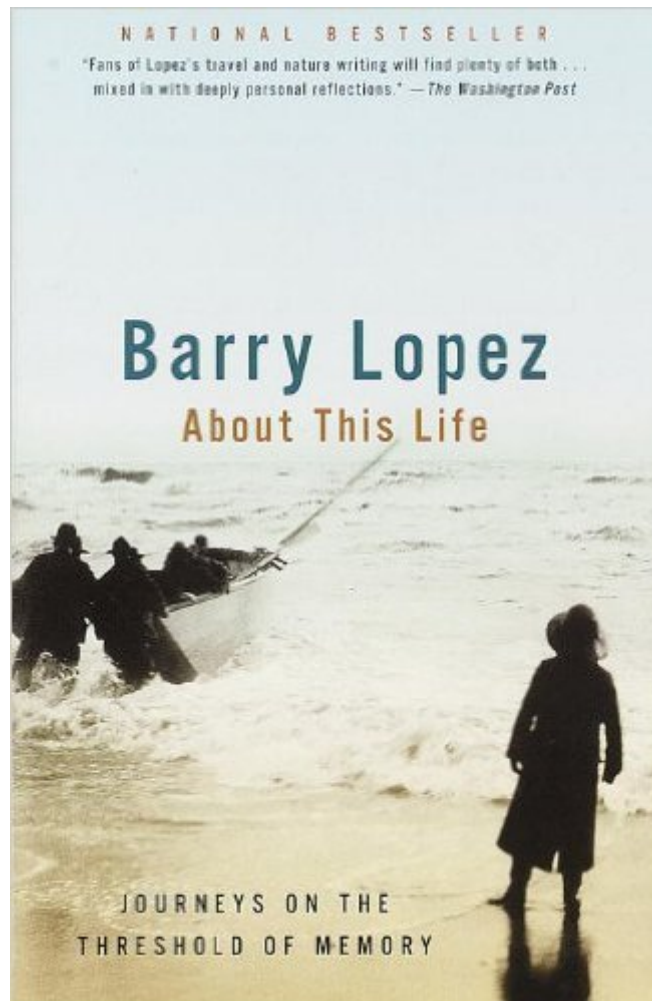


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# About This Life: Journeys On The Threshold Of Memory



## Synopsis

The acclaimed National Book Award winner gives us a collection of spellbinding new essays that, read together, form a jigsaw-puzzle portrait of an extraordinary man. With the publication of his best-selling *Of Wolves and Men*, and with the astonishing originality of *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez established himself as that rare writer whose every book is an event, for both critics and his devoted readership. Now, in *About This Life*, he takes us on a literal and figurative journey across the terrain of autobiography, assembling essays of great wisdom and insight. Here is far-flung travel (the beauty of remote Hokkaido Island, the over-explored Galápagos, enigmatic Bonaire); a naturalist's contention (Why does our society inevitably strip political power from people with intimate knowledge of the land small-scale farmers, Native Americans, Eskimos, cowboys?); and pure adventure (a dizzying series of around-the-world journeys with air freight everything from penguins to pianos). And here, too, are seven exquisite memory pieces hauntingly lyrical yet unsentimental recollections that represent Lopez's most personal work to date, and which will be read as classics of the personal essay for years to come. In writing about nature and people from around the world, by exploring the questions of our age, and, above all, by sharing a new openness about himself, Barry Lopez gives us a book that is at once vastly erudite yet intimate: a magically written and provocative work by a major American writer at the top of his form.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Lopez redefines memoir by arranging a number of previously published essays with new ones to tell us about his life. We are taken from what are current interests back to his childhood where we

discover how he learned to look at the world. Initially he was fortunate to have been given a mother who, though she was left by her husband with two young boys, was a woman interesting to interesting men. The mother continues to weave in and out of the essays, including the one about her death. We sit in the cold in Hokkaido, Japan, with three naturalists, who communicate from the soul (yes, maybe that is it!) because they have so little of each others' language. We find the Galapagos more volcanic than imagined, the coral reef in Bonaire more damaged than expected, and marvel that here is someone who stops his car and gently carries animals killed by drivers to grassy areas off the road. Lopez used to be a photographer so sees the earth and all in it illuminated by varying kinds and angles of light. He discusses the power of memory. And we enjoy the elegance of his prose. We watch the almost mystical work of a potter called Jack and hear how necessary it is to walk in the river sometimes. Yet all is not romance from this naturalist who insists we look at nature straight on. It is not a theme park and cannot be made to behave as one. This is a strong, beautiful book. Many vicarious journeys to be taken here with the expert.

I understand some people like this book very much, but I have a dissenting opinion. I did have the pleasure of hearing him read in person and he is indeed very captivating. But keep in mind what this book is about. It is basically a set of essays about places he has been and his insights and knowledge of those places. When it works, it works brilliantly. The essays I liked I could read several times over--he does some fascinating things (traveling on a cargo plane for several weeks comes to mind, or staying with a pottery community also comes to mind). However, when it doesn't work, you realize that not much is really happening and it feels very slow, maybe even unreadable. I just had to stop reading some of the essays after awhile. So it was really hit and miss with me. What the other reviewers say about his attitude towards life and nature is right. He is very concerned with geography, not just the physical geography of a place, but also the emotional geography of a place. In a time when we don't always feel very connected to places, reading this book could help you feel connected again, to glimmer what it is like to really feel a part of the place in which you live.

This book covers a wide range of subjects that cross the threshold of memory and stop the reader in her tracks. A whole chapter on the wonder of hands - A Passage of the Hands - causes the reader to consider their own hands and those of a young child with a sense of their history and their possibility. I recommended the chapter on wood firing of pottery - Effleurage: The Stroke of Fire- to friends who are potters. The world of anagama kilns was opened to me. About traveling, Lopez states: "If I were to now visit another country, I would ask my local companion, before I saw any

museum or library, any factory or fabled town, to walk me in the country of his or her youth, to tell me the name of things and how, traditionally, they have been fitted together in a community. I would ask for the stories, the voice of memory over the land. I would ask to taste the wild nuts and fruits, to see their fishing lures, their bouquets, their fences. I would ask about the history of storms there, the age of trees, the winter color of the hills. Only then would I ask to see the museums."Read this book and enjoy the journey.

Most books of essays don't keep every reader captivated. With a writer of a grand reputation (like Lopez), I assume that the fault for this lies in the reader--and not the writer. And so this reader is now the reviewer. Me. With all my faults. As such, I've been bored to tears by Annie Dillard, Wallace Stegner and Wendell Berry--even Thoreau can make me yawn here and there. So, when I pick up a book of essays, my expectations are generally low; if I find two or three pieces that made me think, or awakened an emotion or two in me, then the book is a success. I don't think a writer should suffer a bad review just because I'm not bright enough to grasp what he/she is writing. Or whether I'm interested in the subject matter. And so four essays in this book jumped that personal hurdle of mine: the 747 piece is masterful; the essay on picking up road kill made me sad; the personal piece on the woman who jumped into his car was haunting; and the honest autobiographical piece at the beginning (where he goes to camp with John Steinbeck's kids) is good in that it gives a glimpse as to what access to, what recently has been called, the one percent can mean to a young man. The hurdle was leaped. A success in my book.

This book is full of beautiful imagery, a must for people who crave to go places and see things. His essays/memoirs excel above all others. The writing reflects his thoughts so vividly you would swear you were there. If you like reading about far away places and the experiences and adventures of a very cultured and passionate writer, than this is the book for you.

For me, Mr. Lopez always provides a cerebral and emotional journey with his amazing use of the written word. I was introduced to Barry Holsten Lopez's writing in 1982 with "River Notes" and became a fan instantly. This latest work is less poetry and more prose; focusing on personal revelation. It provoked several emotions, including a sense of loss, throughout the chapters. The book will be a reward for fans as he reveals some personal history in the last set of chapters. When he was a visiting scholar at the University of Georgia, I was sorely disappointed to not meet him personally, so these chapters were a consolation prize. It was also a challenge to read - more than

once I had to dive for the dictionary to discover the nuances in his choice of words. Enjoy.

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