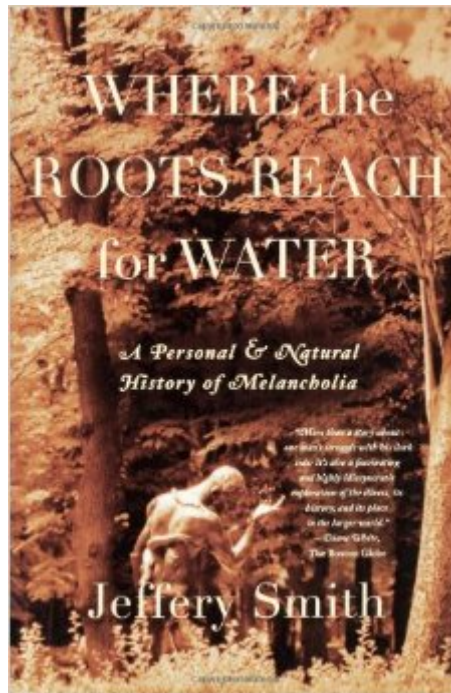


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Where The Roots Reach For Water: A Personal And Natural History Of Melancholia



Synopsis

Winner of the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir Jeffery Smith was living in Missoula, Montana, working as a psychiatric case manager when his own clinical depression began. Eventually, all his prescribed antidepressant medications proved ineffective. Unlike so many personal accounts, *Where the Roots Reach for Water* tells the story of what happened to Smith after he decided to give them up. Trying to learn how to make a life with his illness, Smith sets out to get at the essence of--using the old term for depression--melancholia. Deftly woven into his "personal history" is a "natural history" of this ancient illness. Drawing on centuries of art, writing and medical treatises, Smith finds ancient links between melancholia and spirituality, love and sex, music and philosophy, gardening, and, importantly, our relationship with landscapes.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: North Point Press; 1st edition (February 15, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 086547592X

ISBN-13: 978-0865475922

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (21 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #784,560 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #134 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Mountains](#) #321 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Social Scientists & Psychologists](#) #446 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > West](#)

Customer Reviews

Reading Jeffery Smith's memoir on depression is like watching someone attempt to assemble a pitch-black jigsaw puzzle: how, one wonders, will he differentiate a jig from a jag? How will he ever have the patience to root around for the answer in a crowded sea of clues which all resemble one big blot? Thing is, Smith sees his topic with a particular set of eyes, eyes which can discern color and pattern with only shape for guidance. His astute, complex and compassionate understanding of melancholy reaches out to the reader in an effort to share information on a practical level, but ultimately his exploration will have you so engaged in his personal struggle that you may forget you're reading non-fiction. In the tradition of memoirs that read as compellingly as fiction (i.e.,

Tobias Wolff's "This Boy's Life"), Smith has created as ebullient a meditation as is possible on the subject. This is a roller coaster ride of sometimes absurdly heart-rending seeking. I finished it with a long sigh, and said out loud to myself, "Now, THAT'S a book!" Highly recommended for anyone struggling with depression, but also simply for readers who enjoy an intellectually stimulating read on a subject in a previously predictable genre.

The author, thankfully, recognizes that clinical depression, having a low-key or melancholic personality, or having a reason to be down in spirits, are different. As a cognitive psychologist, I interact with people in their day-to-day work environment, and I find that lately we too freely call persons depressed when they may only be sad/angry because of something haunting them in the past or concerning them about the future (they need to talk about it), or when it is just their nature to look on the grim side of things (they need to have their outlook accepted and appreciated), or when they have learned that being sad is a protective mechanism against disappointment or cruelty (they need to be comforted). These are natural manifestations of natural human emotions, and they should never be medicated out of existence or forced out of existence by our modern, ebullient, and shallow society. Nor should natural personality traits be labeled as mental illness either. However, clinical depression needs to be addressed as well. From my experiences, some of those who are mildly clinically depressed may heal naturally given time, rest, emotional support, good nutrition, regular exercise, and fresh air, as well as something to be hopeful or happy about, which is a motivator toward wellness. The worst thing about being clinically depressed is the sense that you are all alone, and so depressed persons need compassionate (not forced) inclusion in caring society, as this author supports. I haven't finished the book yet prior to writing this review, so I don't know if the author has a chance to talk about some irritants that can cause seemingly untreatable depression -- not just medical conditions like glucose-intolerance, anemia, or thyroid activity, but we have published findings on chemical fumes in poorly ventilated industrial environments or at home from man-made materials (plastic items, rugs), questions about chemical leeching from plastic containers like soda bottles, or concerns about our air quality and nutritional content of foods. Food allergies, which many medical professionals refuse to accept, can also be culprits (an astoundingly fabulous book about this, available through [Amazon](#), is *IS THIS YOUR CHILD?* by Rapp). There is a reason why we get depressed, and if it is a biological discrepancy (profound sadness or lack of motivation which lasts too long, or sadness with no basis), we need to find what it is rather than try to erase it with a pill (medication doesn't always work in the long run). However, if we are sad by nature or circumstance, I agree with the author that that is no reason to classify us and medicate us. In the

book, the author is a pioneer in supporting a traditional attitude that has fallen out of favor -- being kind enough to accept yourself as you are, to accept that what you feel may be natural and right. What a wonderful idea, in our technological society, to say that emotions are okay to feel.

This book has changed my whole outlook on depression. Jeff used the word melancholia and explains its traditional meaning as one of four basic personality types. What I came to realize is the extent to which I had bought into the idea that I should not be who I am -- that I would be better off if I were whatever it is that anti-depressives can make me. Instead, Jeff presents an alternative perspective -- accepting that one has a melancholic personality and working with it rather than fighting my Self. In his book, Jeff instead talks about HOW TO LIVE AS A MELANCHOLIC and even lists positive characteristics of a melancholic personality with examples. So, now I have begun to approach my self differently -- with acceptance. I don't need to try to be gregarious and outgoing, instead I can accept my inwardness and focus on gardening, walking, art -- all practices for which the melancholic personality is well adapted. I highly recommend this book interested in an alternative take to the modern practice of "fixing" what, perhaps, "ain't broke" after all.

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