



## Girl in the Woods: A Memoir

*Aspen Matis*

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## **Girl in the Woods: A Memoir** Aspen Matis

"Girl in the Woods "is Aspen Matis s exhilarating true-life adventure of hiking from Mexico to Canada a coming of age story, a survival story, and a triumphant story of overcoming emotional devastation. On her second night of college, Aspen was raped by a fellow student. Overprotected by her parents who discouraged her from telling of the attack, Aspen was confused and ashamed. Dealing with a problem that has sadly become all too common on college campuses around the country, she stumbled through her first semester a challenging time made even harder by the coldness of her college s conflict mediation process. Her desperation growing, she made a bold decision: she would seek healing in the freedom of the wild, on the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail leading from Mexico to Canada.

In this inspiring memoir, Aspen chronicles her journey, a five-month trek that was ambitious, dangerous, and transformative. A nineteen-year-old girl alone and lost, she conquered desolate mountain passes and met rattlesnakes, bears, and fellow desert pilgrims. Exhausted after each thirty-mile day, at times on the verge of starvation, Aspen was forced to confront her numbness, coming to terms with the sexual assault and her parents disappointing reaction. On the trail and on her own, she found that survival is predicated on persistent self-reliance. She found her strength. After a thousand miles of solitude, she found a man who helped her learn to love and trust again and heal.

Told with elegance and suspense, "Girl in the Woods "is a beautifully rendered story of eroding emotional and physical boundaries to reveal the truths that lie beyond the edges of the map."

## **Girl in the Woods: A Memoir Details**

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## **From Reader Review Girl in the Woods: A Memoir for online ebook**

### **TK says**

A much better memoir than WILD. Much like Cheryl Strayed, Aspen Matis sets out to hike the Pacific Crest Trail as a way to heal herself, to grow stronger, and to become unafraid. When I read WILD, I was never truly convinced of the author's transformation or personal growth, but in GIRL IN THE WOODS, I am thoroughly convinced that this woman walked through her fears and her character defects to emerge in Canada a more mature and capable person. Matis's writing is beautiful, she clearly adores the trail, and I admire her determination to hike the trail in its entirety despite sickness and inclement weather. I am glad I read this book.

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### **Susan Shapiro says**

As Aspen's writing teacher I'm not unbiased, since the book started with three beautiful short pieces in my class in the New York Times Modern Love column, Tin House and Psychology Today. At 25 years old, Aspen has done what many authors never achieve -she's written a gorgeous, honest, intense, serious and poignant memoir and published it with one of the best houses in the country. While I fear the knives will come out because of jealousy and her provocative subject matter (surviving date rape at college), I'm glad that luminaries like Nicholas Kristof and such published memoirists Lena Dunham, Cheryl Strayed, Alice Feiring, Gabrielle Selz and Abby Sher have already weighed in on Aspen's clear gift and impressive poetic talent. I hope everyone reads this brave book -a young WILD - to see for themselves what all the controversy is about.

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### **Theresa Smith Writes says**

I've taken my time reading this book, not because I wasn't enjoying it, but because it gave me much to think over after each session. It's not the best written book, nor is Aspen/Debbie immune to the flaw of getting on your nerves at times. But when you reach the end of this book, you reach a place of understanding that only comes from the most honest of writers. Within the pages of this memoir, Aspen opens herself up to the harshest of scrutiny, and it's to be nothing but admired. It's not until the end of this book that you realise the enormity of the story you've just read. This girl walked from Mexico to Canada, often times alone, in a journey of self discovery. The place she arrives at when she finishes is different even from what she envisaged, and that's what makes this book so good. This is not a story told in hindsight. It's a story that unfolds, changes, changes again, and then again. I am absolutely stunned by the fact that people walk this type of journey all the time. I can hardly comprehend that. The generosity of those who help these hikers all along the way is humbling; just incredible. Overall, this an excellent memoir. I would have liked a little more clarity on some of the details of her life post walk, but other than that, I highly recommend this book to readers of all ages.

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### **Meg - A Bookish Affair says**

"Girl in the Woods" is a memoir by Aspen Mattis, a girl who decides to hike the Pacific Crest Trail by herself after she is raped on the second day at college. Her rape sends her into a tailspin, which is easily understandable. She feels like there has to be something that she can do in order to feel like herself and feel safe again. She decides that a trip on the PCT is the best way to do that. I love hiking but the thought of hiking that much is incredibly daunting to me. Aspen goes into a lot of detail about the reasons that she decided that it was best for her to step away from college and try to hike from Mexico all the way up to Canada. This is a story about picking up the pieces and finding yourself.

I love memoirs especially when they are written by people who do things that I could never never fathom doing in my own life. I love to live vicariously through those authors. This is definitely one of those books where you do live vicariously through the author because they give so much detail about everything that they have to face on this journey. This book in a lot of ways reminded me of "Wild" by Cheryl Strayed, another one of my favorite books. Aspen is definitely running from a lot of different things when she takes on her hike but the hike helps her come to terms with some of the more difficult things she had to face in her short time at college. I liked how honest she was with the reader. You feel as if you are reading somebody that you know's innermost thoughts and they are holding nothing back.

This is definitely an extreme version of someone trying to find themselves and I don't think that the way that Aspen does it is necessarily going to be for everyone but this is such an important book for anyone who has gone through something where they think that they're never going to recover. I read it very quickly because I could not tear myself away from the pages. This was a great memoir and I definitely recommend it to readers looking for a good adventure story and a story of redemption!

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### **Rebeka Burdon says**

This book took me a long time to read, for a number of reasons...

To be frank, it was quite dull at times. Despite being an avid reader I found myself having to pause, merely to try to re-gain interest. I would describe this book as being a stream of consciousness, it's not a real novel. It's incredibly disorganized. Aspen repeats the same thoughts again and again, there's really no difference between the first few chapters and the last. Would I say she "grew" as a person throughout the novel? Honestly, no. She just gets more self-righteous. She claims independence, yet relies on her parents (who send her food, shoes, supplies, unlimited money...) throughout the novel (not to mention Icecap, Dash, and the many other people she meets along the trail). I would rather walk the PCT myself than read this again. It was boring, self-indulgent, uninspiring nonsense. Aspen may be many things but she is not a writer. It's a shame "Wild" came out so recently because it makes this look even shittier than it is. This book is not worth your time or money.

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### **Carolyn says**

I disliked this book. The author walked about 2,500 miles along the Pacific Coast Trail from Mexico to Canada. She comes across as self absorbed, immature, overly dependant, entitled and spoiled. She decided to walk after being raped on her second night at college and away from home which was a traumatizing experience. It is clear that she was emotionally damaged long before this. During her hike she is vitriolic towards her mother, and says she hopes her walk terrifies the mother, but often wishes she was there with her. she also blames her father and brother for not responding to her conversations and behaviour the way

she would wish.

During the hike her mother sends her expensive parcels at every stop along the way, provides her with equipment, plane tickets, money, a credit card, etc. Her father drives her to the starting point. It is clear that she was over protected, her mother dressing her until she was 16. This may be true, but it is evident that she was loved, and I got the impression that she would complain about any family in which she grew up. She whines about not being able to swallow vitamins or needed prescription pills, and being incapable of inserting contact lenses. She hates the need to wear glasses, and considers herself overweight and ugly.

These repetitive thoughts interfere with the narrative.

She begins the walk poorly equipped, takes unnecessary risks, but endures to the end of the very long hike. An impressive achievement. She is afraid to be around fellow hikers, but yearns for someone who 'gets her' and on whom she can depend to take care of her. She is afraid of groups of other hikers she encounters, and frequently runs off on her own. Some of her conversation and behaviour with others seems quite inappropriate. .

Towards the end of the hike she meets a fellow traveler and falls in love. He tells her that she is beautiful and that she has great talent as a writer. Again, dependant on others to establish her self worth and take care of her. He also seems to do all the cooking. They later marry, but in the afterword they seem to be no longer together. As she walks she transforms herself from Debbie to Wild Child and finally to Aspen Matis, the writer.

It is unclear how much she matured during the long hike, but she is convinced that there was a great transformation. I found the descriptions overwrought and the descriptions overly dramatic. The book seemed rushed and needed more editing in my opinion. It is recommended reading Wild instead.

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## **Debi G. says**

It's a challenge to find a well-written trail narrative. This one is better than most, though a proofreader would certainly have helped. More on that later.

It's unusual for people to change their names, yet both this author and PCT hiker Cheryl Strayed did so. The similarities end there, however, and it's particularly interesting how different--how much more populated--Aspen Matis' trail experience is from Cheryl Strayed's and others.

It's both exciting and alarming to read about the weather, food, and footing risks that Aspen Matis took. I frequently wondered what I'd have done in her place, which makes for enjoyable reading. Readers get to know few of the people encountered on the hike, and those who are fully drawn are distasteful. Because of this, the information about other hikers is more problematic than magnetic. (I despise Edison and cannot believe she consented to be in his presence as long as she did.)

By the end, the author achieves her quest for peace and a fuller sense of self. She comes to understand her parents' motivations and to accept their quirks. (I know we're all just doing the best we can, but the over-mothering leaves me incredulous; what a disservice to deliberately incapacitate a child under the guise of care.)

Valid as it is, the emotional journey of this book does not entice attention as well as details about the trail, the logistics, and the navigation. Somehow, I'm more intrigued by tiny bits of mysterious information dropped in the acknowledgements than I was by the rest of the book. (Mystic's death, Justin's disappearance) I also would have liked to learn more about her childhood backpacking excursions, to fully appreciate the role that hiking played throughout her formative years and adolescence.

I realize that by picking on a book's errors, I open myself to scrutiny, but that's not going to stop me. Examples of my proofreading and editing concerns include pages 330-331, on which four novels are mentioned by title. Three of the titles are placed in quotation marks (one mark is missing) and the fourth is properly italicized. Such inconsistencies are common in this book, though most have to do with comma errors. Problems of unclear meaning and awkward construction often turned my reading pace sluggish as I slogged through clunky, cumbersome sentences like this one until I was able to parse it: "Inside the odd young hippie lounged--people about my age, everyone from Germany and Korea, the Netherlands and Prague" (241). (Lynne Truss, have at it!)

It's difficult to critique a memoir or travelogue without falling into the error of judging the writer. Aspen Matis seems like a lovely person (with or without "thick glasses") with much to offer. She shows promise, but linguistic inexperience and lack of education are apparent.

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### **Esther Bradley-detally says**

I couldn't put it down, and I had the vague recollection I had read parts of it before. I don't think her mother was overbearing, but she overcompensated as so many mothers have for generations. I think the author did not whine (you can tell i've skipped thru some reviews), but she was social inept and overprotected. that is not a war crime. She wrote a good book. She had tremendous courage, and her relationship was interesting. I felt towards the end; is this all true; but still spunky young girl; good writer. Sure Cheryl Strayed wrote Wild; but there's a lot of room int he world for books by people who have had traumatic events and overcome them. i won't go on, but I will read her next book with great interest and i wish the author well!

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### **Leah says**

Mixed, mixed feelings.

I'll start with the good: it was a page turner. I wanted to know what happened and neglected a day of work to get to the end. The descriptions of the trail angels and trail magic were just that: magic. (Although some people sounded seriously crazy and addicted to drugs/alcohol). The idea of walking the whole trail, from Mexico to Canada, was quite magical. She did a wonderful job conjuring the allure of the outdoors. She also did an excellent job discussing her rape, evolving feelings towards what happened, and her treatment when she told people. I think her experience is unfortunately all too common and will give others strength when they see themselves reflected in her words. That's a great service, as is advocating for a rape advocacy network.

Now to the problematic.

First, I think the author's editors were seriously neglectful in their duties. The book needed both a structural edit and some serious copy editing. It was repetitive when it could have been profound and suspenseful. Second, the author was dishonest. Not in the discussion of her legitimate rape, but in the treatment of her

parents and the narrative arc with her husband. She claims she was sheltered and yet the two years prior to this story she hiked 1000 miles alone. She tells this romantic story with her husband, and then if you read the acknowledgments they aren't even together! Bizarre. It didn't make sense! She claims she is hiking super light, but then we read in the acknowledgements she had books with her... Huh. Never mentioned those. Things were exaggerated and missing and the author was not honest. I think in part (the husband part) this had to do with her book contract, so again I partially blame the editors. But ultimately, it hurt the book. A book about rape, where integrity is always the central issue (UNFORTUNATELY) needs to show that integrity. The editors should have realized this!

In addition, the author showed a complete lack of maturity in how she responded to men around her. For example, she hiked with a racist guy who disrespected her for hundreds of miles. Why? Because she couldn't identify that this guy was bad news and do something about it. Even when she's writing the book years later she doesn't really reflect on how racist this guy was! Crazy. And her big a-ha moments were not about growing into her mind or autonomy, but into her physical looks -- wearing make up and contacts. I understand that she was coming to terms with a serious violation, and that's legitimate, but it didn't connect back. Instead it seemed like vanity when it should have been about her autonomy and sense of self.

I also found that she idolized very problematic men, while consistently blaming women. Her dad was neglectful and aloof, yet she finds way more fault with her mother and romanticizes her dad. Same with her brother. Same with idiot/offensive men on the trail. Same with Muir. It's all about men for the author. And the women (e.g. Silverfox) are damned. I don't know if that's competitiveness or what, but this was hardly a feminist book.

What frustrates me is that I think this book was rushed and that the author had a lot of potential for a great story, both in terms of her rape, her growth as an individual, and the hike. She is an alright writer -- needs a good editor, though. An editor who honors truth and integrity while making prose sing.

The book was still a page turner and interesting. If you love memoirs, stories about women and hiking, then it's worth it. Otherwise, not.

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## **Karen Adkins says**

While Matis has real descriptive skill, I found this book irritating, and compares poorly to Wild (its progenitor). I'm deeply empathetic for what she suffered and why she decides to hike the PCT, and passages were really lovely to read, but she is so self-involved that the memoir part of this was the opposite of engaging, frankly veering into the range of bad self-help at times.

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## **Mindy says**

### **DNF @ 30%**

I can't be in this person's head one more minute. I have a huge fascination with hiking the Pacific Crest Trail and even though I wasn't enjoying the writing, I thought the hiking would carry me through. Well, I was wrong. It wasn't enough. I just can't go on. Really a bummer because I had picked this for a challenge and now I can't use it. Grrrrrr!!!

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## **Ilana says**

I'm going to give this 2.5 stars. It had an intriguing premise and I did enjoy reading about the actual PCT hike, but the writing was redundant and heavy-handed. Though I respect her motives and her courage to be so open about her rape, the author was spoiled and unlikeable throughout most of the book. However, she must have done something right because I wanted to know what would happen to her and kept reading until the end.

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## **Gyde says**

While there's no doubt that Aspen Matis is a very talented young writer, I found myself extremely irritated with her for most of this book. There are so many things that don't make sense that I wonder how much of it is really true. How, if her mother is such a helicopter that she can't even dress herself, did she manage to get away for months in the summer before college to hike the JMT? That's mentioned almost like an afterthought, but it's hugely important! My immediate reaction was that she was overdramatizing her relationship with her mother to make the story more compelling. She makes it sound as if she has never done anything for herself, but obviously, she has. It's not like she's taking on the PCT without a good amount of experience with long trails, and yet she STILL makes terrible decisions and puts her life in danger.

She quotes herself interacting with her mother, and it made me cringe - she comes across as terribly self-indulgent and rude. Her mother doesn't have the reaction to the news of the rape that Aspen (or shall I say Debbie?) is wanting and needing, but thank God by the end of her harrowing hike she finally realizes that the world doesn't revolve around her and that her mother, too, has her own issues that are reflected in the way she has mothered Debbie. She comes across as both needy and whiny, eviscerating her parents with criticism, while at the same time depending completely on them for financial and logistical support.

The good thing about the book is that there are moments of excellent writing - descriptions of the trail, the wilderness, and her increasing capacity to self-reflect on the choices she is making.

But I was deeply disappointed in the ending. Even though she has spent the better part of the book analyzing her feelings about sex and her various dysfunctional relationships, at the end, she hasn't in my opinion reached a point of self-awareness that doesn't involve dependence, both emotional and financial. She needs to feel pretty and smart, as reflected in the eyes of a man. She's never not had a financial safety net. That's fine, it's a stage in life. Yes, she's young. But the end, that relationship with Dash? The vodka in the hotel room? They were supposedly deeply in love, but he leaves her behind to hike the last part of the trail, apparently with no communication (she gets to the bus stop and he's just GONE?) What's that all about? And in the epilogue I read that he's gone for months to do another long thru-hike? Obviously, this story is just beginning.

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## **Jennifer ~ TarHeelReader says**

Bravely and poignantly written, this important memoir beautifully depicts Aspen Matis' journey from utter recklessness to salvation. Thanks to Goodreads' First Reads for the review copy. This was my unsolicited



review.

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### **Lara says**

This book has a lot of problems, but I'm intrigued by the story of thru-hiking women and that is what drew me to the book and kept me reading it. I'm surprised by the number of reviewers who thought this was better than Wild. Both women hiked the PCT trail alone following personal trauma (although Matis joined up with other hikers for much of her journey) but the similarities end there. Strayed took much longer to write her book after her hike and I think that was a good thing. Matis' book at many points reads like writing-as-therapy ramblings, and while she spends page after page saying the same self-congratulatory things over and over again, many of the more interesting events that happen (hiking through a forest fire, for example) are glossed over with only a few sentences. The book was too long, uneven, with a rushed and unclear ending. Matis exercised terrible judgment several times over, not learning from her mistakes but instead framing it as something admirable. She is lucky to have survived.

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