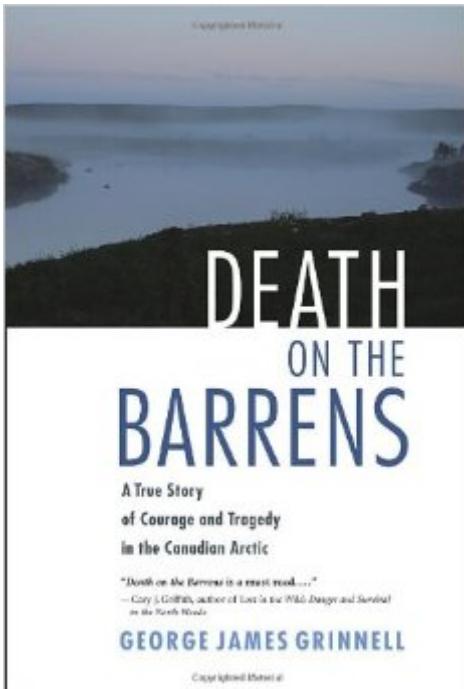


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Death On The Barrens: A True Story Of Courage And Tragedy In The Canadian Arctic



Synopsis

Set in the remote arctic region of Northern Canada, this book takes readers on a harrowing canoe voyage that results in tragedy, redemption, and, ultimately, transformation. George Grinnell was one of six young men who set off on the 1955 expedition led by experienced wilderness canoeist Art Moffatt. Poorly planned and executed, the journey seemed doomed from the start. Ignoring the approaching winter, the men became entranced with the peace and beauty of the arctic in autumn. As winter closed in, they suddenly faced numbing cold and dwindling food. When the crew is swept over a waterfall, Moffatt is killed and most of the gear and emergency food supplies destroyed. Confronting freezing conditions and near starvation, the remaining crew struggled to make it back to civilization. For Grinnell, the three-month expedition was both a rite of passage and a spiritual odyssey. In the Barrens, he lost his sense of identity and what he had been conditioned to think about society and himself. Forever changed by the experience, he unsparingly describes how the expedition influenced his adult life and what powerful insights he was able to glean from this life-altering experience.

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Customer Reviews

I simply loved this book. I found it an interesting and entertaining read-- if one can say that such a tragic trip can be entertaining. It's an account of a river journey made by five youngsters in their early twenties and late teens, and 36 year-old 'leader' through the wilds of northern Canada. Between you and me it's surprising that the whole lot of them didn't perish, they were so ill-prepared. Not only did they leave without the supplies they intended to take, but they left late in the season .AND. then

they dallied along the way. Traits which, if you've read about any adventures in northern climes, are pretty much tantamount to a death sentence for someone if not everyone. Never-the-less, they paddled for what they were worth and tried to do what they could to find food along the way. They fished and hunted and scavenged along the shore. But really their physical trip down the river isn't really what grabbed my interest. What really caught me up and kept me flipping page after page late into the night, was Grinnell's insight into what was going on in their little group; as well as his own reflections on his life and the upper class he belonged to. He doesn't, in fact, focus on descriptions of 'the barrens' so much as how being there made him feel. And his work ends up being more about group dynamics and sociology, religion and culture, than it is about a canoe trip. For example, one of the things that Grinnell talks about is that nearly all of the young people underwent a profound change. Partly this was because their leader, Arthur Moffett, refused to lead them, and partly this was because they were put under so much pressure.

Under the leadership of Art Moffatt, an experienced wilderness canoeist, five young men from privileged Ivy League backgrounds set out in 1955 to cross the Canadian Barrens in northern Canada. The Barrens are a vast, harsh and uninhabited landscape where trees grow only a foot tall, where the aurora borealis casts cold green and red lights upon the frozen tundra, where the vast panorama of stars overhead are close enough to touch. Little did they know, although leader Moffatt should have, that they were on a razor's edge between life and death and insanity and sanity. In a trip so poorly planned that there was not enough food to last the trip, amid childish squabbles among the men over petty things, they begin a leisurely trip with many days off from the chore of paddling north. Unforgiving winter was staring them in the face, a winter which comes in September, a beast ready to pounce, a beast that can easily destroy them. But still they loiter. Author Grinnell writes eloquently. The crew is hurtled into the very jaws of death when their canoes are swamped by freezing water and they are barely able to crawl onto land because their fingers and toes are frozen. The description of the men trying to warm each other up inside their sleeping bags, Grinnell inside his cheap six dollar one, is horrific. They pummel on each other trying to get the blood into their frozen limbs, they are a team, now, not a band of quarreling young men, but brothers trying to save each other's lives. However Art, with his rather frail physique, succumbs on September 14, when he literally freezes to death. They tuck him into one of the canoes and carry him up to a hill, and turn the canoe upside down where his body will be safe from marauding wolves.

I like stories of courage in the wilderness, fortitude in the face of adversity, and determination

winning against great odds. I've read about Shackelford's incredible success in bringing his crew to safety after being marooned in Antarctica, a truly unbelievable feat; I've read Jon Krakauer's heartbreakingly true tale of the young man who died in a bus in the wilds of Alaska. This book does not come close to the pure nature of both of those expeditions; I hesitated even to give it four stars, for many reasons, but it is well-written. George Grinnell, at the time a young man fresh from an exclusive school and with some experience canoeing in the wilderness, joins the expedition of Art Moffatt, an older (to Grinnell) explorer (Moffatt was 36) who is planning to canoe the Barren Grounds near Churchill on the Arctic Circle and down Dubawnt River to a Hudson Bay station. There were five young men plus Moffatt making up the team; all seemed to get along reasonably well, but I did not get the feeling that anything was allowed for; no limitations on food or equipment was made; no accounting, aside from Moffatt's mathematical calculations about how much would be needed for the trip, for use; and the calculations must have very early on gone by the wayside as whenever Moffatt wanted to declare a 'holiday' - which he did with alarming frequency - the whole team parked for sometimes days at a time. I also did not get the notion that anything was done for a purpose, other than the mere journey itself; and the word 'hedonism' must have come to my mind dozens of times. The team seemed to treat this journey, through some of the most inhospitable, uninhabited territory in the world, as an extended class trip.

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