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# Becoming Wild: Living the Primitive Life on a West Coast Island by Nikki Van Schyndel

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***Becoming Wild: Living the Primitive Life on a West Coast Island* by NIKKI VAN SCHYNDEL**

Caitlin, 2014 \$24.95

Reviewed by **MAUREEN SCOTT HARRIS**

At 29, Nikki Van Schyndel went to the Broughton Archipelago off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island to live out her childhood dream of running away to the wilderness. Young Nikki had wanted to be Sam Gibley, hero of Jean Craighead George's *My Side of the Mountain*; she had often imagined herself surviving alone after a disaster—able to light fires without matches, build a shelter, feed herself. *Becoming Wild*, written for her mother, is derived from a journal she kept while living off the land. Van Schyndel is a self-described primitive survivalist and expert in nature awareness, trained in herbalism and survival skills; she operates Echo Bay EcoVentures and Tours, based in the Broughton Archipelago. The company offers outings, introducing visitors to local flora and fauna and teaching skills like collecting wild edibles. *Becoming Wild* is not a literary memoir but an adventure story. I found it both compelling and troubling to read.

If the adventure was rooted in Nikki's childhood reading, it began when the sponsored snowboarder rediscovered nature: captivated by the look of a mountain ash outside her mother's house one morning, she heard it ask if she knew its name. "Embarrassed, I realized how little I knew of the natural world, the world I had loved as a child. I couldn't name most of the plants I saw, not even the ones I passed every day" (17). So began her determined immersion in field guides, herbalism, and survival skills.

After some years of training and dreaming, Van Schyndel met Micah Fay, also adept at survival skills, who shared her love for *My Side of the Mountain* and the dream of living off the land. For 18 months, the two of them, with a rescued feral cat, Scout, lived wild. They lit fires, built shelters, and fed themselves, all without modern equipment. They made tools (knapping flints, weaving cedar baskets), stalked, hunted, and trapped animals (including bear), fished, harvested shellfish and other sea animals, gathered plants and berries. Their experiences, documented in the journal, were often not paradisa—

. . . We obviously needed to improve our makeshift shelter. It received only dappled sunlight; the result was cold, damp gear and restless nights, with the chill dampness settling into our bones regardless of how many layers we wore. (50)

—and—

It was a gargantuan effort to row two miles to reach the prawn hole, and every time we went, we broke the cardinal law of food gathering: input must be greater than output. . . . We took turns, one of us rowing there, the other back. Most days I would close my eyes to ignore the pain, plodding home one stroke at a time. (90)

As their knowledge and skills expanded, Van Schyndel's attentiveness to and curiosity about the world around her mitigated the realities of exhausting labour and limited food supply. With varying degrees of grace, the two lived in close

proximity under enormously stressful circumstances and have managed to remain friends. There's much to admire in what they accomplished: their practical skills and discipline, genuine resourcefulness when faced with crises, the drive to see the project through. Van Schyndel's willingness to trust her intuition—building on her growing knowledge and understanding of the world around her—and her openness to visionary experience are enviable gifts.

Nonetheless, I found the book troubling. Though I'm moved by Van Schyndel's engagement with the world, her project seems essentially romantic, enacting an old cultural narrative about the relationship between humans and the wild. Her impulses are a mix of a growing awareness of nature and insistence on proving she can live self-sufficiently. Van Schyndel achieves her goal, and along the way gains insight into herself, but any larger level of reflection that might situate her project is missing. Her adventure falls uneasily somewhere between a vision quest (without that ceremony's framework of tradition and community) and the hero's journey.

Perhaps most troubling, after two readings of *Becoming Wild*, I remain unclear about its message and about Van Schyndel's intention in writing it. This lack of clarity is vividly illustrated in its final chapter, which gives a brief and not very coherent overview of Van Schyndel's life since her adventure. In it she refers to, but does not enlarge on, being hunted and attacked, nearly dying as a result, and her subsequent struggle with fear. I don't know

why this material is included—it wasn't part of the adventure the book has recounted and leaves the reader hanging, wanting to know what happened. I find myself wishing an editor had stepped in.

One of the great pleasures in reading personal narratives is the encounter with what Phillip Lopate calls the double perspective, which brings together the self written about and the self writing. Through it, the writer writes his/her experience and also reflects on and interprets it. I wish Nikki Van Schyndel had been more able to exercise that double gaze, something a good editor might have enabled. The raw material is here for a deeper understanding of her project, one that might imagine a different encounter with nature at a time when we are badly in need of radically new narratives about where and how humans fit in the interconnected web of beings that is the planet.

In the end, the book's central message may lie in a statement from Thoreau that Van Schyndel quotes: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours" (51). But there are indifferent and even bad dreams as well as good ones. It's time we dreamed dreams that reach beyond the individual to serve the Earth as a whole.

**MAUREEN SCOTT HARRIS** is a poet and essayist who lives in Toronto. In 2009, she won the WildCare Tasmania Nature Writing Prize for an essay on Toronto's Don River.