

and colonization of the Americas. With the guidance of Professor Harley's insightful gaze even the most reluctant navigators will begin to look at the maps of the encounter in a new way.

*Margarita Zamora, a professor of Spanish and Latin American and Iberian studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is author of Reading Columbus, University of California Press, 1993.*

## The Island Within

by Richard Nelson.  
New York: Vintage  
Books, 1991. 284 pp.  
\$11.00.

by Curt Meine

The focus of *The Island Within* is an uninhabited island off the Pacific Northwest coast. In his account of his excursions among the forests, bays, and beaches of the island, Richard Nelson records what he was able to learn, not only of the island's special inhabitants and atmosphere, but more generally of the changing ways in which we perceive, live within, and draw upon our environs. Winner of the 1991 John Burroughs Medal for natural history writing, *The Island Within* is thus more than a vivid description of a place; it is an *exploration* of place, and of the ties that bind.

The island provides enduring moments: bays and coastlines turned turquoise by the eggs and milt of herring; a timber slug's mucus trail, "like a ribbon of wet cellophane laid over plumes of moss"; a dead sperm whale on the beach, its carcass marked "in neat rows of four" by the clawings of bears; the "dreadful, hypnotic beauty" of an expired salmon run; the eyes of a marten, "like droplets of obsidian . . . still burning with the volcanic heat that fused them into their sockets."

Nelson, who grew up in Wisconsin, has a style that fits well the forests and coastlines he describes. His prose is rich, cool, intense but subdued, dense but not ponderous, and intricate beneath its prevailing shades of deep blue, green, and grey. Walking the moist forest, he writes that "the sense of life in this temperate jungle is as pervasive and palpable as its wetness. Even the air seems organic—rich and pungent like the moss itself. I breathe life into my lungs, feel life against my skin, move through the thick, primordial ooze of life, like a Paleozoic lungfish paddling up to gasp mouthfuls of air."

For Nelson, the island is a place both of confrontation—with self, with nature, with modernity—and reconciliation. In a digression midway through his narrative, Nelson recalls how, as a young student with an interest in natural history, he felt frustrated by the methodological approaches that had come to dom-

inate most modern sciences. He found refuge in anthropology, with its strong emphasis on descriptive methods. His studies of Native American life (in particular, the Koyukon Athabascan people) "revealed traditions of natural history that seemed richer than anything accessible in Western science . . . I gradually realized there are many paths to a meaningful sense of the natural world."

This tension between Western and Native American worldviews pervades Nelson's descriptions and reflections. Like the whales he encounters, it is a constant presence, looming beneath the surface, breaching regularly into insight. It is, in the end, a creative and even restorative tension. Nelson's perspective is especially salutary in this the quincentenary of the Columbian "encounter": "Perhaps certain things about the world are best discovered by engaging the senses completely and leaving the analytical mind at rest."

In finding his way to and through the island he loves, Nelson alludes often to his extensive experience among the Koyukon people, who no doubt face the same challenges as all late twentieth-century cultures (indigenous or otherwise) in maintaining equilibrium amidst rapid transformation. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the reader occasionally wishes for further information on the Koyukon people themselves and how they are faring in the face of the same social, economic, and environmental pressures that Nelson identifies and faces in his island context. This, however, detracts not at all from Nelson's evocative explorations. Especially for those who know the waters and diverse forests of the Pacific Northwest only through media accounts of threatened salmon runs, spotted owls, and old growth remnants, Nelson provides a compelling survey and a fuller appreciation.

*Curt Meine works for the Natural Resources Council Academy of Science in Washington, D.C., and is the author of Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work, University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.*

## Out Harmsen's Way

by Gianfranco Pagnucci. Madison: Fireweed Press, 1991.

by Joan Johannes

*Out Harmsen's Way* is a comfortable visit to places and with characters that the poet knows well. These rural people are lovingly portrayed and delightfully understated, and the reader shares in the life/death experience of modern, rural America though such simple and beautiful lines as, "the cows already miss him," "The cold is outside for awhile anyway," and

an empty house is like a swallow  
bank in fall. After the birds are gone  
the dark holes are the dead  
rooms of my father's house.