

Indian Creek Chronicles by Pete Fromm

Named a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book of the Year when it was published, Pete Fromm's account of his seven months in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness of the Idaho panhandle reads at times like the story of the mountain man he played at being when he signed up to keep watch over a couple of million salmon eggs at the remote hatchery. When Fromm came to the University of Montana from his native Wisconsin to major in wildlife biology and to participate on the swimming team his roommate, who had worked as a seasonal ranger, introduced him to books like A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky*, and before he knew it Fromm fell in love with the mystique of Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson. At age twenty he accepts a job with Idaho Fish and Game on the very "romantic whim" the warden warns against, but he soon proves himself a capable outdoorsman. Fromm splices his narrative, which reads much like a novel, with self-deprecating humor, but in fact he proves equal to the challenges of isolation and intense cold. He turns out to be an excellent shot, supplementing his diet with rabbit, grouse, and finally an illegally bagged moose. About midway through the book Fromm observes a mountain lion hunt led by a group of outfitters, and in that context we detect some misgivings about his mountain man values, but generally he does not confront the issues. That matter is left to the reader. And in this respect, Fromm's book varies considerably from Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, to which it relates as something of an anti-type.

Author Information

Born in 1958 and raised in Shorewood, Wisconsin, Pete Fromm majored in wildlife biology at the University of Montana, where he attended on a swimming scholarship, graduating with honors in 1981. He worked for several years as a seasonal ranger for the National Parks Service. An avid reader, Fromm says in an interview (2001) that he stumbled into a couple of creative writing courses while at UM and began writing full-time in 1990 after his first publication. Attracted to Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, Fromm notes that he was struck by "the stunningly literate line," "Nick liked to open cans." His wife, Rose Powers, is a mechanical engineer. His first book, *Tall Uncut* (1992), was a collection of short stories about "hunting and fishing, of long car trips through open landscape." Most of his subsequent books have been collections of short stories usually involving the out-of-doors, including *King of the Mountain* (1994), *Dry Rain* (1997), *Blood Knot* (1998), and *Night Swimming* (2000). Two of his recent novels, however, have drawn particular attention. *How All This Started* (2000) joined *Indian Creek Chronicles* as a winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association award, and *As Cool as I Am* (2003), a coming-of-age novel set in Great Falls, Montana, where Fromm currently lives, has been praised as a "beautiful and evocative" tale of young womanhood narrated in a voice that is "provocative, gritty, erotic, hilarious and genuine."

Discussion Questions

1. Described by the publishers as “a rousing tale of self-sufficiency” and “a modern-day *Walden*,” *Indian Creek Chronicles* may strike you as neither of the above. He is given provisions, after all, and the connections with Thoreau’s classic may be more contrastive than comparative. The fame of Thoreau’s classic resides in his insights and meditations. When do we see what is on young Fromm’s mind? Does he strike you as being very thoughtful at all? Do you think we as readers are expected to criticize or judge his behavior?
2. The subtitle of this book is “A Winter Alone in the Wilderness,” but Pete Fromm often appears beleaguered by wardens checking up on him, outfitters and hunters, and college chums. Moreover, he has the companionship of his “little rat-like dog” Boone. So how “alone” is the narrator? How does he handle his sense of isolation? What role is played by the books his parents and sister send with him?
3. What problems does Fromm have to confront when it comes to his romantic fantasy of living like a mountain man? He succeeds in trapping a snowshoe hare, for example, but then what? How does the moose he kills fit in here? Why does he show himself thinking of it as poaching in the context of the mountain lion hunt (112)?
4. If Gretel Ehrlich’s memoir (*The Solace of Open Spaces*) is “gendered female,” Pete Fromm’s is surely “gendered male.” What similarities and differences do you detect in these encounters with nature? Does either strike you as likely to appeal exclusively to one set of readers rather than another? Put another way, do you think men are more likely to enjoy Gretel Ehrlich than women are to enjoy Pete Fromm?
5. What does Pete Fromm learn from his months in the wilderness about how humans should relate to the natural world? Does he make these lessons explicit, or are we as readers expected to read between the lines of what appears to be mostly an adventure story? What are we to make, for example, of the deer and bobcat episode in Chapter Sixteen?
6. After carefully reviewing the final chapter (and the epilogue) of this book, what are your thoughts? What range of images, events, and people does Fromm leave us with? Why does he leave his dog with the bear hunters? His job guarding the salmon eggs connects Fromm with an important role in conservation, but how aware of that has he been throughout his stay?