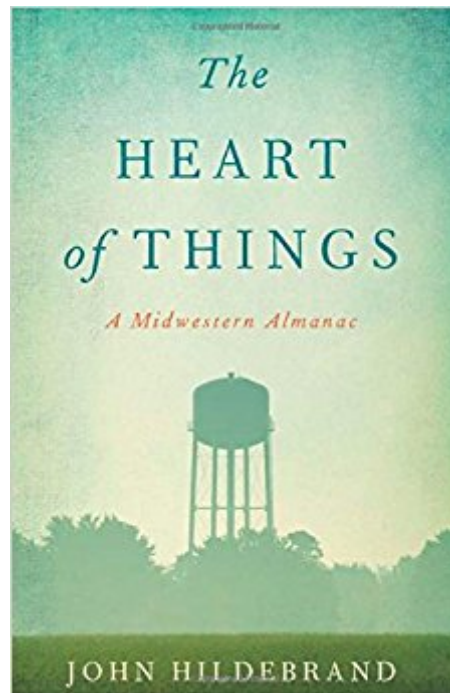




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The Heart Of Things: A Midwestern Almanac



Synopsis

I've never believed that living in one place means being one thing all the time, condemned like Minnie Pearl to wear the same hat for every performance. Life is more complicated than that. In this remarkable book of days, John Hildebrand charts the overlapping rings of home, town, countryside of life in the Midwest. Like E. B. White, Hildebrand locates the humor and drama in ordinary life: church suppers, Friday night football, outdoor weddings, garden compost, family reunions, roadside memorials, camouflage clothing. In these wry, sharply observed essays, the Midwest isn't The Land Time Forgot but a more complicated (and vastly more interesting) place where the good life awaits once we figure exactly out what it means. From his home range in northwestern Wisconsin, Hildebrand attempts to do just that by boiling down a calendar year to its rich marrow of weather, animals, family, home; in other words, all the things that matter.

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Customer Reviews

No writer has challenged and sharpened my sense of place more than John Hildebrand. Throughout these essays rooted in Wisconsin but relevant the whole world wide the heart wrestles the mind, and both emerge strengthened. We are lucky to have this man writing on our behalf. (Michael Perry, New York Times bestselling author of *Visiting Tom and Population 485*) In the tradition of Annie Dillard and Aldo Leopold, the elegant chapters of John Hildebrand's *The Heart of Things* comprise a spiritual autobiography set forth in terms of nature and community. Full of peace and notice and quiet moral authority, this

beautiful book demonstrates what it means to pick a world and become a citizen of it. (Lorrie Moore, New York Times bestselling author of *A Gate at the Stairs* and *Bark*) This work is not just heartwarming; it is also instructive. A celebrated creative writer, Hildebrand...not only understands the Midwest and makes it understandable to those who do not live here, but he also teaches midwesterners to be curious about and reflect on the rich meanings of their own lives. He conveys the honest emotions that are the heart of things. (Barbara J. Dilly, *The Annals of Iowa*) Where *The Heart of Things* could easily veer into sentimentality, Hildebrand brings his prose back down to earth. He writes, "Every face within the campfire's glow belongs to someone I've known the better part of my life. I'd tell them how much they mean to me except it would spoil the mood, so I crack another beer instead." Emotional and restrained, humorous and solemn, open-minded and opinionated, this book is as complex and charming as the Midwest itself. (Elizabeth Wyckoff, *Wisconsin People & Ideas*) What impresses me most about *The Heart of Things* is Hildebrand's power of observation, especially in those passages dealing with the natural world • the vivid details with which he describes something as surprising as a snapping turtle in the road, for example, or as commonplace as lilacs in a field; from the intricate patterns of deer or dobsonflies to fishing, before it "became a branch of applied electronics." (Mark Vinz, *Middle West Review*) ...a beautiful book that I think every Wisconsinite should consider reading. With little fanfare and tons and tons of beautiful adjectives, Hildebrand shares his journeys of being so present in the moment I found it hard to stop reading...It's what brings this book together, the weaving of sight and sound, of water dripping off oars, eagle's wings taking flight, of a river flowing away, how the horizon sits low and hope is found in every sunrise. (Jay Gilbertson, *Dunn County News*)

John Hildebrand is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He is the author of *Reading the River: A Voyage Down the Yukon*, *Mapping the Farm: A Family Chronicle*, and *A Northern Front: New & Selected Essays*, and his articles and essays have appeared in *Harper's* magazine, *Audubon*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Outside*, *The Best American Sports Writing*; 1999, and *The Missouri Review*. He has been awarded a Minnesota Book Award, Banta Award from the Wisconsin Library Association, Bush Fellowship, Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship, and a Friends of American Libraries Award.

The Heart of Things By John Hildebrand I listen to WPR a ton. Recently I was tuned in to a Larry Meiller show and author Hildebrand was on sharing from his new collection of short stories and I

was so impressed. His stories have appeared in the Wisconsin Trails magazine (which is now only available online) and have been organized by seasons into a beautiful book that I think every Wisconsinite should consider reading over the long winter. With little fanfare and tons and tons of beautiful adjectives, Hildebrand shares his journeys of being so present in the moment I found it hard to stop reading. This is a book that reminds me of a box of chocolates. You need to savor one, then consider the next. Like taking a step forward, finding your way while the sun slowly sets.

"...Given the option, I'll take a paper map over an electronic navigation system anytime--unless I'm circumnavigating the globe or traversing the Alps--because following a GPS amounts to tunnel vision." "Place matters but probably less than other externals like family or friends or work. That's because the space we carve out for our lives is more about time than geography, and since most lives follow a similar trajectory, it's reasonable to assume you can be happy (or not) anywhere." I'm working on a new novel, as I seem to every winter, and the setting is always a crucial character in my work. Because of that, I noticed a story called 'Lilacs' in this collection and it hit me square in my writing-heart. Not only am I intrigued by the reality that an island SW of Eau Claire, in the Chippewa River, now lies in ruins, but that there's proof of a town. I can now wield my magic adjective-filled keyboard and rediscover place all thanks to Hildebrand's curious hunger to know more and to listen to his wife's wisdom. "Against the canopy of river birch and silver maple, the domestic lilac looked as out of place as a racehorse among a herd of zebra. How did it get here? I found the answer: a ruined silo and a cellar full of brambles. So the lilac had once shaded a now-vanished farmhouse. Until 1900 farming community had once thrived on the island...Someone had brought the lilac as rootstock to the island and planted it precisely here between farmhouse and river. A woman, my wife, corrected me the next day. A woman would have planted it." Is that not the most amazing seed for story? It's what brings this book together, the weaving of sight and sound, of water dripping off oars, eagle's wings taking flight, of a river flowing away, how the horizon sits low and hope is found in every sunrise. These are snippets of us, peeks into our lives as we unfold the starched cloth for Thanksgiving and appreciate all our gifts.

This is really a great collection of short essays that I would recommend to anyone. It's very well written and packed with heartfelt emotion without being overly sentimental. I grew up in the Midwest, so this book really rang true to me. But whether it's taking you back to summers at water parks and family reunions, or winters ice skating and cross country skiing, the book evokes a very specific place that anyone who grew up in small town America could relate to. More than just a place, though, this book is about the people that fill our lives and make the place we live important. Each

one originally published as part of a regular column in Wisconsin Trails Magazine, these essays are very succinct and seasonally-organized as the "almanac" in the title suggests. It was easy to read one essay when I had just a few minutes to spare here and there. Or before bed, I would read one or two and then find it hard not to read the next because I was enjoying it so much.

A wonderful evocation of Wisconsin's sense of place. I only wish I had sought the author out for a conversation while an undergrad at UW - Eau Claire.

This is a superb book by a Midwestern outdoorsman and cultural observer. It lifts the spirit and says many things that we all feel but can't put into words as well as John Hildebrand. Buy it! In fact, buy a number of copies and send them to your friends on the coasts--they'll learn something.

As a person who was born in the suburbs of Minneapolis and raised on a farm in Wisconsin since my sophomore year in high school, I can relate with so many of Mr. Hildebrand's stories. I particularly enjoyed those from his grandfather's farm.

This is a wonderful book. I am reading it to my elderly mother who grew up in the Eau Claire, Wisconsin area and it is bringing back many nice memories for her of familiar places and events.

Good read!

Unique and interesting stories

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