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Consolations Of The Forest: Alone In A Cabin In The Middle Taiga



Synopsis

In *Consolations of the Forest*, Sylvain Tesson explains how he found a radical solution to his need for freedom, one as ancient as the experiences of the hermits of old Russia: he decided to lock himself alone in a cabin in the middle taiga, on the shores of Baikal, for six months. From February to July 2010, he lived in silence, solitude, and cold. His cabin, built by Soviet geologists in the Brezhnev years, is a cube of logs three meters by three meters, heated by a cast iron skillet, six-day walk from the nearest village and hundreds of miles of track. To live isolated from the world while retaining one's sanity requires a routine, Tesson discovered. In the morning, he would read, write, smoke, or draw, and then devoted hours to cutting the wood, shoveling snow, and fishing. Emotionally, these months proved a challenge, and the loneliness was crippling. Tesson found in paper a valuable confidant, the notebook, a polite companion. Noting carefully, almost daily, his impressions of the silence, his struggles to survive in a hostile nature, his despair, his doubts, but also its moments of ecstasy, inner peace and harmony with nature, Sylvain Tesson shares with us an extraordinary experience. Writer, journalist and traveler, Sylvain Tesson was born in 1972. After a world tour by bicycle, he developed a passion for Central Asia, and has travelled tirelessly since 1997. He came to prominence in 2004 with a remarkable travelogue, *Axis of Wolf* (Robert Laffont). Editions Gallimard have already published his *A Life of a Mouthful* (2009) and, with Thomas Goisgue and Bertrand de Miollis, *High Voltage* (2009). In 2009 he won the Prix Goncourt for *A Life of a Mouthful*, and in 2011 won the Prix Médicis for non-fiction for *Consolations of the Forest: Alone in Siberia*.

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Customer Reviews

I've become an immense fan of the works (as well as the actual travel experiences) of Sylvain Tesson. This is the fourth work of his that I have read. I commenced with *Sur les chemins noirs* (French Edition), which concerns his 76 day hike, south to north, across France, from the Italian border to La Manche. Then I read *Bâfâzina*, his bicentennial retracement of Napoleon's disaster retreat from Moscow, in 1812, which Tesson undertakes (in winter to make it a fairly precise bicentennial) on an Oural motorcycle, with sidecar. And most recently I read *L'Axe Du Loup* (French Edition), which was inspired by Slavomir Rawicz's *The Long Walk: The True Story Of A Trek To Freedom*, a purported true story, subsequently proven false, of his escape from a POW camp in Siberia, and walk to the Bay of Bengal. There was certainly nothing false about Tesson's journey (I've posted reviews of all three on .) Conceptually, Thoreau's *Walden and Civil Disobedience* immediately comes to mind; retreat to nature, shorn of modern "conveniences," and mediate on the beauty of nature and one's place in the universe. That comparison concerned a fellow reviewer friend, but he was reassured by Tesson's rather dismissive quip about Thoreau: "the preachy-preachy of a Huguenot." Nonetheless, *Walden Pond* was one of the 60 books Tesson took with him for company over those six months of (relative) seclusion. Other authors included Romain Gary, Kundera, Youcenar, and Aldo Leopold, a naturalist more to Tesson's taste, and whose name is on the first designated wilderness area in the United States, right here in New Mexico. Five of the 60 books are by one author, Ernst Junger, who regrettably I have not read. He also quips that it was not all Hegel, who does not go down well on a lovely snowy afternoon; he took a number of mysteries. Lake Baikal is quite a "pond"; in fact, due to its depth, it is the largest body of fresh water in the world, 700 km long, 80 km wide and a kilometer and a half deep. And from February to July, 2010, Tesson had a "front

row of seats on the lake: a cabin, three meters by three meters, built (roughly) by geologists in the 1980s. The cabin is now part of a nature preserve.

Tesson's principle improvement: two modern double-glazed windows. He first saw Lake Baikal in 2003, and fulfilled his dream of living along the lake, through three of the seasons, seven years thereafter. Tesson does not just sit in his cabin and gaze at his navel. He gets out and about, with his snowshoes, obligatory in the first months of his stay. In early March, when the temperature is minus 30 C, he walked 130 km from his cabin to the island of Ouchkany, out in the middle of frozen Baikal. He would walk about 30 km a day, to the next inhabited cabin. Overall, it was a 10 day trip, with two days on the island. He routinely climbed the 1000 meter mountains behind his cabin. In the summer, he used his kayak. He is a naturalist in his own right, with beautiful descriptions of the natural world, including his beloved tit birds that kept him company in the winter. Wry and sardonic insights on the human condition abound. He pries up the linoleum in the cabin, noting how ugly and shabby most aspects of life are in Russia, remarking that esthetics was considered to be reactionary deviationism in the USSR. Tesson, in his (relative) isolation repeatedly critiques one of my personal *bête noire*: overpopulation. He quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss that the "worm in the flour" is the billions of people heaped on a planet too narrow for them, making all predictions for the future impossible. Tesson himself cannot console a couple who cannot get pregnant since he thinks of our human "termite colony." Another of my *bête noires*, long before "fake news" became a routine expression, is the prominent American newspaper published in Europe. Two Dutch visitors leave a copy with him; he quotes the titles to some "news stories," and concludes with a familiar formulation as to the paper's best use: providing some cover for the sustenance he extracts from the lake. He provides some insightful comments on the various books he is reading, and has convinced me that I did to read Chateaubriand's *Vie de Ranc* (French Edition). He understands his chief problem, and essentially states it: Must get out of the womb of the cabin and explore, otherwise, one's state regresses, and the amniotic fluid of the womb is replaced by vodka! However, he provides no insights as to why he did not bring the love of his life with him to the lake, and she breaks up with him while he is there. Shared solitude, with a soul mate, would enhance any future visit to this vast body of water. I believe this is the only work of Tesson that has been translated into English, and it is entitled: "The Consolation of the Forest: Alone in a Cabin on the Siberian Taiga". Meanwhile, I need no vodka. Seems that I am drunk on Tesson himself, and have ordered my fifth book: *Vie a*

Coucher Dehors (Folio) (French Edition). 5-stars, plus for Tesson's stay in the taiga, on the shores of Lake Baikal.[Note: I posted the above review to the French edition of this work, on June 16, 2017. A fellow reviewer recently read and posted a review of this work in English. He had some valid criticisms, some of which related to the English version, but not the French. Rather amazingly, the English version does NOT contain the maps that the French version does. Thus, it is understandable that most readers of the English version would be confused as to Tesson's location, and the distances of which he spoke. Furthermore, the English title puts a "spin" on the text that, in part, was not there. A straightforward translation of the French title would be "In the Forest of Siberia, without the stress that he was alone, which he was only part of the time. There are "consolations" but, after all, he left after six months, back to that human termite heap (to use one of his expressions) that is Paris. I checked the translation of four passages, and felt they were correct and straightforward. For the English version, without the maps, and with a "spin" title, I'd give it 4-stars, though I have not read the entire work in English.]

I thought this book would be more of the nuts and bolts of solitary living and initially was frustrated by the philosophical bent to it. However, the more I got into the book, the more I appreciated that. Why else would someone choose to live in such remote solitude for six months unless they are searching for much deeper meaning. If you want to read a book that neatly ties up all thoughts this would not be it. This book is so much richer for that. Do we really need all things answered? Should not we occasionally read something that leaves much to think about? There were moments where you just hold your breath and pray he doesn't come to some sort of horrible end. After living in Minnesota for three winters and having experienced walking on frozen lakes I just held my breath when spring came that he would not fall in. I was impressed by his far and wandering hikes in the cold, subzero weather. Myself, only hiking in snow if the temps were above zero. Sylvain put me to shame! Another thing that was a bit of a surprise was that his solitude seemed to be constantly interrupted by visitors. Another worry, would he pickle his liver from all the vodka? This is a book that I will read again and again as there is much to mine for.

I quite enjoyed this book -- more than I thought I was going to. What I found frustrating was the author's reluctance -- no doubt arising from a poetical cast of mind -- to divulge quotidian details of

how he did it. What I mean is that the majority of people who would pick up a book like this are those who fantasize about themselves being able to pull off the the shoulder of life and spend 6 months in an isolated cabin. But there are several issues to be considered. It's hard for me (you too, I imagine) to enjoy the author's philosophical musings until he at least implies how he resolved these issues. Mainly, where did you get the money to do something like this? Were your parents paying? Did you save up, like Jodi Ettenberg? (There's actually a book out there -- "A Forest, a River, and Me" -- where the author does essentially the same thing as Tesson but makes it clear from the get-go that all this was made possible by virtue of his having made a pile in the stock market right before living in the cabin.) Did you have an apartment during this time? Was somebody else living in it or did it simply stand empty? Or did you put all your stuff in storage? What about your bills? Did you automate payment? What about medicines? Did you need any? Did you stock up? And how did you find out about the cabin? On the internet? How did you haul boxes of stuff way over to Siberia? On a plane?! Did you have a friend who essentially set this up? If so, how did you meet them? And since when do you speak Russian? No answers to these questions are implied. Why don't authors answer them? Sheesh. Instead, the author pretty much gets right into his philosophical musings: "There was a titmouse at my window," etc. I do not find this satisfying. It's no problem to me if you're rich: I'd just like to know so those of us down here working 9-5 jobs can put it out of our mind and focus on your philosophical musings. (I remember the author's reluctance to divulge the source of his funding also ruined another perfectly good book: "A Year in Provence." Where the heck did you get the money for that?!)

To be sure, Tesson's philosophical musings are not unwelcome. But for me to get a groove going with them, other questions need to be answered. Even had he answered the questions above, there would still remain logistical questions about life in the izba: Did it have electricity? Running water? Where did you get drinking water from? Was there an indoor toilet? An outhouse? If there was an outhouse, did you have to bundle up to go outside every time you needed to make number two? And what about your laundry? Did your cabin have a washing machine? Did you wash your clothes in the sink? A creek? Did you simply wear the same clothes for all 6 months? And on and on. All this would be of interest to me. If I ever do something like this, I'm going to make darned sure the reader knows how I did it. That way I think they'll enjoy my poetic reflections a lot more.

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