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Finding peace on earth

MEMOIR | Author's stay in small cabin leads to big thoughts on nature

BY PATRICK MCGUIRE

William Powers' *Twelve By Twelve* (New World Library, \$14.95) is a naturalist's book. It is written in the tradition of Thoreau, of course, and of Aldo Leopold, John Muir, John James Audubon and others. Each of these men is named by Powers as an "earth mentor." Humans, says Powers, are a form of nature, but with consciousness. But "civilization forgets this natural connection. Earth mentors not only maintain this consciousness but can spark it in others."

Like Thoreau at Walden, Powers spends a short duration living on a friend's small plot of land. Jackie, another earth mentor, has created an idyllic farm that allows her to live off the grid. She has no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no television, no car. And yet she has made her farm a comfortable, happy haven from the absurd emptiness of consumeristic life. Jackie grows her own produce. Her neighbors are organic farmers who raise free-range fowl. To this farm comes Powers, to live in her 12-by-12 cabin while she is away. And this is where Powers' words take on their true energy. When he describes Jackie's place, or the little things he observes at it, we see the virtue of his ambition. He is right: the earth talks to us, shows us, nurtures us, just as Powers' prose would do.

His description of a snake:

"The snake ribboned its way into a bit of bush and climbed the nearest tree, a twenty-foot oak sapling. My mom and I stood in rather awed silence as it muscled straight up the thin trunk. The tree had few branches, so the snake utilized any available niche to hold its lower body as it arched and wound itself skyward until its pointy head rose above the sapling's tip. Then it turned quickly into a right angle, eyeing a larger pine tree several yards away. "It eased itself up still higher, now seeming to defy gravity. Half its length rose as a straight broomstick above the tree, and it shook the tree back and forth, trying to get within jumping range of the pine, but its efforts were in vain."

Such descriptions are far more persuasive and far better earth mentoring than those moments — all too frequent — when Powers fulminates on American excess, from which "living 12×12," as he calls it, frees us. Here is a less vehement attack: "Trickier are all the ways our relationships and emotions are entangled with the corporate economy, such as how we give gifts. Consider that the average American spends \$900 on Christmas gifts, not counting the shocking \$120 per person for dog and cat gifts." Besides, Powers is preaching to the choir — who is going to read this book?

Powers makes such criticisms, but he does have enough irony to include himself in such shocking behavior. One chapter opens with the following take on all the travels he's done for his cause: "I've burned incredible amounts of fossil fuels trying to save the planet from environmental destruction."

Powers' preachiness may be his attempt to become our earth mentor, but it rather reminds me of the last line of Kerry Temple's similar, though less sermonizing, book *Back to Earth*: "... now we have come about as far as words

can take us." It is the processes and natural events that Powers describes that really bring us face to face with what we've lost. And I applaud him for that.