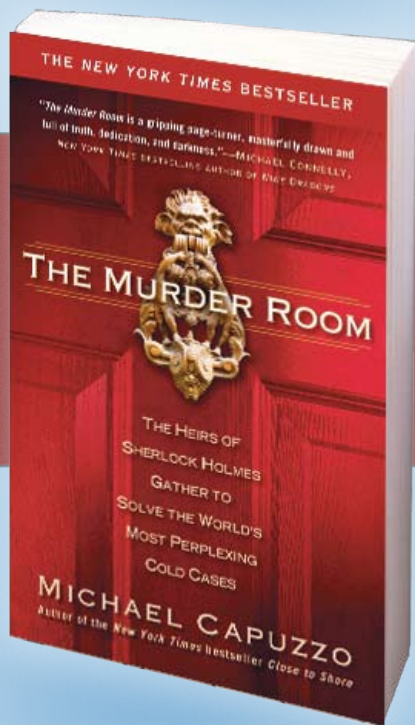


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Reading Nature

After the Drill is Gone

By Tom Murphy

Our dog, Terra, and I walked in our woods the other day while work at the well pad over the hill rumbled on. As we passed the pink streamers marking where the seismic testing wires will run, I remembered a book I had read many years ago, John McPhee’s 1968 classic *The Pine Barrens*. I was struck by the contrast between the almost frenzied effort to get at the gas deep below us, and McPhee’s description of how all the fresh water just underground in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, so close to New York City and Philadelphia, has been left alone.

Like Tioga County, Pennsylvania, in the nineteenth century, the Pine Barrens were once an industrial site, alive with the gathering, smelting, and casting of bog iron during the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries.

But even when business was booming, the Barrens still projected a sense of wildness and isolation, again like Tioga County back in the lumber and coal days.

McPhee is a master at dramatizing statistics: New Jersey is the most densely populated state (in 1968 it was 1,000 people per square mile; today it’s almost 1,200), but in the Pine Barrens it was only 15 per square mile. The undeveloped area of the Pine Barrens is “nearly as large as Yosemite National Park. It is almost equal in size to Grand Canyon National Park.” Yet “the Pine Barrens are so close to New York that on a very clear night a bright light in the Pine Barrens would be visible from the Empire State Building.”

But McPhee’s character sketches are what make the book compelling as he carefully paints portraits of people

shaped by the challenging economic and social environment of the Pine Barrens. Fred Brown, who is seventy-nine when McPhee meets him, lives in Hog Wallow, has a name for every hill and crossroads in the Barrens, and can tell stories about experiences in towns that have melted into the ground. McPhee gets to know Bill Wasowich—a self-reliant, shy, young man who dug his cranberry bog by hand—and McPhee talks about the folks who gather at the Chatsworth General Store.

The more profound environmental threats of this new industrial boom dominate our concerns, but McPhee reminds us that gas development threatens not only the character of the place, but also of its people. That character is embodied in people who have been shaped by the scarcities in this area, who have had to depend

on their skills to make and fix things themselves, who patch together work doing this and that, who hunt and fish to feed their families—-independent, self-reliant people who, like those who live in the Pine Barrens, have their roots stuck deep in the ground here. In fifty years after the boom has played out, jobs and businesses will disappear, and hard times will come again through which a new generation of people will need to relearn becoming native to this place. McPhee’s book reminds us of that link between people and place. 📖



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