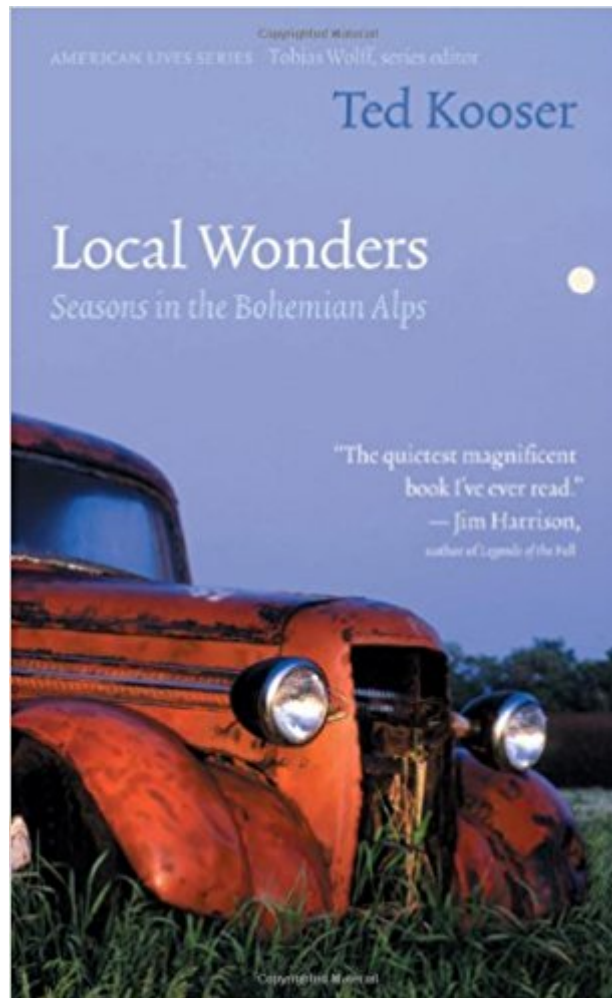




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Local Wonders: Seasons In The Bohemian Alps (American Lives)



Synopsis

Ted Kooser describes with exquisite detail and humor the place he calls home in the rolling hills of southeastern Nebraska – an area known as the Bohemian Alps. Nothing is too big or too small for his attention. Memories of his grandmother's cooking are juxtaposed with reflections about the old-fashioned outhouse on his property. When casting his eye on social progress, Kooser reminds us that the closing of local schools, thoughtless county weed control, and irresponsible housing development destroy more than just the view. In the end, what makes life meaningful for Kooser are the ways in which his neighbors care for one another and how an afternoon walking with an old dog, or baking a pie, or decorating the house for Christmas can summon memories of his Iowa childhood. This writer is a seer in the truest sense of the word, discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary, the deep beneath the shallow, the abiding wisdom in the pithy Bohemian proverbs that are woven into his essays.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Season by season, Kooser reflects upon life in, around, and beyond his home nestled in the rolling hills of eastern Nebraska, an area he slyly calls the "Bohemian alps," then honors the German and Czech immigrants who originally settled the area by liberally scattering their inspirational homilies throughout his essays. His are sweet little observations, nothing monumental or earth-shattering, just the everyday kind of occurrences we've all been privy to: the satisfaction that comes from cleaning the garage, the possibilities that can occur when answering a wrong number. An artist and

poet, Kooser takes delight in the ordinary treasures found in one's own backyard: "If you can awaken inside the familiar and discover it new," he says, "you need never leave home." Kooser is full of other such gentle, homespun wisdom: what it takes to be a good neighbor, what it means to be a dutiful son. Through his eyes, we learn to see, then appreciate, the beauty and grace in everyday miracles, the comfort and sanctity in local wonders. Carol HaggasCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Eloquent meditations on country pleasures, the rhythms of the seasons and the lingering presence of Czech folk culture in rural Nebraska."—Dan Cryer, *Newsday* (Dan Cryer *Newsday*) "Clear, generous, and imaginative, *Local Wonders* increases the sum of the world's best goods."—Patrice Koelsch, *Speakeasy* (Patrice Koelsch *Speakeasy*)

Although Ted Kooser was the United States Poet Laureate from 2004-2006 and won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2005, I was unfamiliar with him until a friend shared one of his poems on an forum. She mentioned that she had discovered him through this prose book. The idea of "Bohemian Alps" in Nebraska of all places captivated me so I opted to pick up "Local Wonders" first. That lucky impulse led me to a book that is an unmitigated joy. A true "hap" according to Mr. Kooser: "To be happy, according to Webster, is to be favored by luck or fortune, and the first syllable of happiness, hap- with its luckiness, its chanciness, its sudden surprises- is a source of much delight in my life." The eponymous "Bohemian Alps" are the low rolling hills north of Lincoln, originally settled by Czech and German immigrants, where Kooser lives in the small town of Garner. Superficially the book is a journal of a year in Kooser's life there but is in reality so much more. There is no traditional structure to the book, just simple divisions into Spring/Summer/Autumn/Winter and within each section there are observations of nature and small town life, poignant memories and quiet appreciation jumbled together by a poet. And it is abundantly clear throughout that this is written by a poet. The heavy use of both simile and metaphor paints vivid pictures of the changing seasons and life through Kooser's eyes. I think many paragraphs could be lifted whole and formatted to read as a standard modern poem. But like Kooser's poetry, it is all very accessible, written in modern, casual syntax making it easy for anyone to read and enjoy. While it is tempting to compare "Local Wonders" to Thoreau's "Walden" that would really be a disservice to Mr. Kooser. While great in its own right, besides being difficult to read, Thoreau did have a decided tendency to pontificate and lecture. There is no pretention here and it was easy for me to become totally wrapped up in Mr. Kooser's corner of the world. Mr. Kooser's gentle sarcasm toward a school board that decimated their small

school system and quiet sorrow over the incursion of wealthy subdivisions of McMansions (in spite of the objections of residents, environmentalists, planning boards, Fish & Wildlife officials) left me outraged and wanting to do battle for "my" community. So... I want to move into that abandoned farmhouse with the massive old lilac bush. I want Mr. Kooser to be my neighbor and visit the small town shops and hear about old Czech recipes. But I could no more survive one of their winters than I could fly, so I will have to settle for occasional "visits" with this lovely little book.

Ted Kooser grew up in Ames, Iowa and spent much of his adult life in Nebraska. Most Americans are inclined to give a mental yawn when Iowa or Nebraska are mentioned, but Kooser finds many "local wonders" there. In *LOCAL WONDERS*, Kooser writes about life and nature in the heartland, as well as people and incidents from his personal past. It is a quiet and often charming book. The "Bohemian Alps" of the sub-title is a north-south running range of low hills (about one hundred feet from bottom to top) in eastern Nebraska, about seventy miles west of the Missouri River. It was settled in the late nineteenth century by Czech and German immigrants from the region of Europe known as Bohemia. In the early 1980s, Kooser and his wife bought a sixty-eight-acre spread in the Bohemian Alps, with an old barn, an outhouse, and other assorted outbuildings. To the extent that *LOCAL WONDERS* is a book of nature, its subjects are the seasons and the flora and fauna found in the Bohemian Alps, such as wild plums, Osage orange, coyotes, geese, pheasants, and box elder bugs. I am not a huge fan of nature writing, so I enjoyed more Kooser's tales of people, most of them conservative in values, rather unassuming, very hard working, thrifty yet surprisingly generous. Kooser is a noted poet (he is a past Poet Laureate of the United States), and his prose is often poetic in feel. In truth, however, I find Kooser a better poet than prose stylist. As mentioned, the book is quiet, so quiet that I occasionally was bored. Although Kooser is for the most part quite congenial, I also found him smug at times and in a few instances rather mean-spirited and derisive towards Americans from a more urban and less relaxed background. Still, some of his off-kilter observations about his fellow humanity are rather amusing, such as this one about the students he observes in a public library in Lincoln, Nebraska: "These young people toss their hair and glance about a lot, as if they were looking for mirrors. Theory has it that there was a time during the evolution of the human brain when people became aware of themselves. Before that, we grazed through the days like fat cattle. It never occurred to us to think of ourselves. The story of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden may allude to that sudden awakening. If evolution is a continuing process of change and refinement, our self-awareness will also continue to evolve. Someday there may be mirrors everywhere you look." The book is sprinkled with adages of the long-time local

Bohemians. Here is one of my favorites: "An old man sees better behind himself than a young man sees in front of himself." I also like the proverb that Kooser uses as an epigraph for the book, the touching personal meaning of which is revealed at book's end: "When God wishes to rejoice the heart of a poor man, He makes him lose his donkey and find it again."

My own fault: I had been looking for a Ted Kooser poetry CD & neglected to read the description. Kooser's prose is not on a par with his poetry. *Local Wonders* is more like leaning-over-the-fence conversation with a neighbor than his evocative, uniquely descriptive poetry that stays with you. Sort of snack rather than a great comfort food meal.

I recently reread this book with my memoir class, and again it was a joy. I love how it is organized by season, and how you can just pick it up and read a short reflection. It will sharpen your eye for your own life if you're willing to settle in and pay attention. I perused the winter section this time and was enchanted by Kooser's short-lived sharing his reading hour with a bothersome beetle, which soon enough dies and leaves his reading nook oddly quiet. Many of the animals and equipment on Kooser's Nebraska farmstead come to life in this book - his tractor, for instance, is a force to be reckoned with. It will start even without an engine heater in subzero temperatures. This prose reflects Kooser the poet - concise and brilliantly observant of the everyday.

Order for the book was fulfilled in a satisfactory timely manner. The content of the book was interesting, at times very, very touching and sometimes though not often, a bit of a stretch (fanciful). But I liked it. It is a book about the author's personal day to day observations and impressions gained from living in that particular part of Nebraska and it included occasional glimpses of his family and boyhood in Iowa. The author is someone I would like to be neighbors with----he's obviously a great guy with a warmth and sense of humor that places him well above most of the slobs who inhabit this earth (including myself). Is this review long enough? Can I stop now?

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