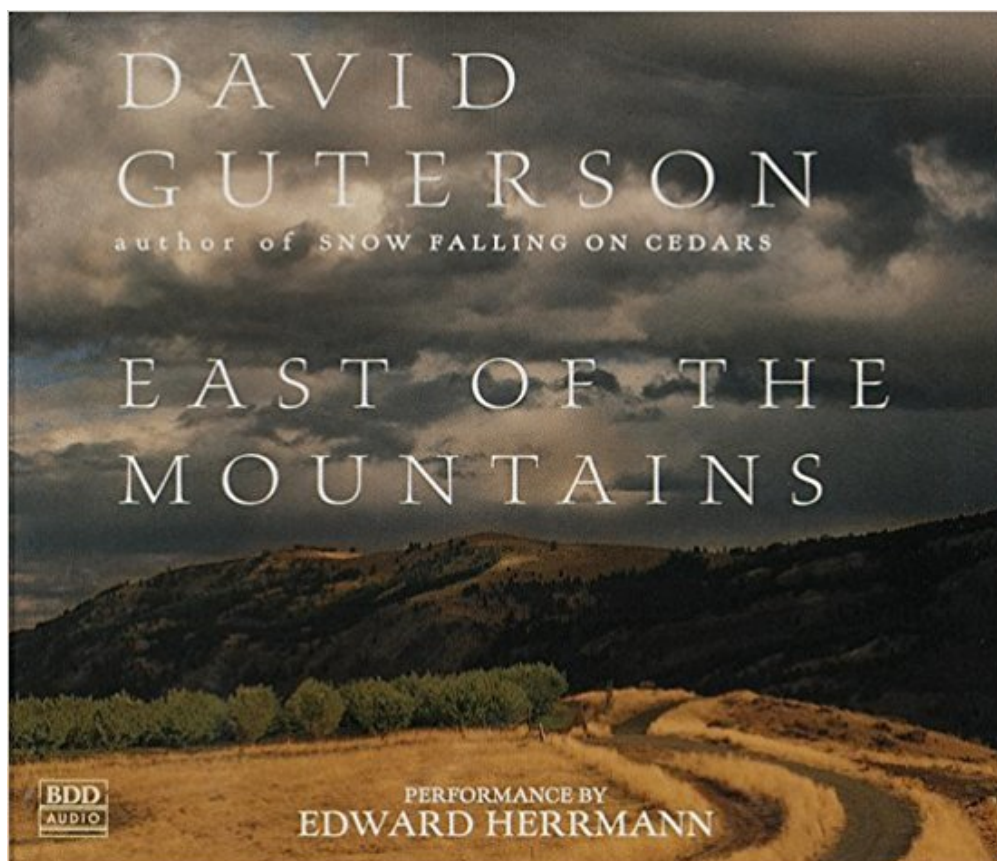


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East Of The Mountains



Synopsis

It is mid-October, 1997, harvest time in the Columbia Basin of central Washington state, a rich apple- and pear-growing region. Ben Givens, recently widowed, is a retired heart surgeon, once admired for his steadiness of hand, his precision, his endurance. He has terminal colon cancer. While Ben does not readily accept defeat, he is determined to avoid suffering rather than engage it. And so, accompanied by his two hunting dogs, he sets out through the mythic American West-sage deserts, yawning canyons, dusty ranches, vast orchards-on his last hunt. The main issues for Ben as a doctor had been tactical and so it would be with his death. But he hadn't considered the persuasiveness of memory-the promise he made to his wife Rachel, the love of his life, during World War II. Or life's mystery. On his journey he meets a young couple who are "forever," a drifter offering left-handed advice that might lessen the pain, a veterinarian with a touch only a heart surgeon would recognize, a rancher bent on destruction, a migrant worker who tests Ben's ability to understand. And just when he thinks there is no turning back, nothing to lose that wasn't lost, his power of interventions is called upon and his very identity tested. Full of humanity, passion, and moral honesty, *East of the Mountains* is a bold and beautiful novel of personal discovery.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

David Guterson's first novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, was a true ensemble piece, in which even a high-stakes murder trial seemed like a judgment passed on the community at large. In his eloquent second novel, however, the author swings dramatically in the opposite direction. *East of the Mountains* is the tale of a solitary, 73-year-old Seattle widower. A retired heart surgeon, Ben Givens

is an old hand at turning isolation to his advantage, both professionally and personally: "When everything human was erased from existence except that narrow antiseptic window through which another's heart could be manipulated--few were as adroit as Dr. Givens." Now, however, Ben has been dealt a problem entirely beyond his powers of manipulation: a diagnosis of terminal cancer. With just a few months to live, he sets out across the Cascades for a hunting trip, planning to take his own life once he reaches the high desert. A car crash en route puts an initial crimp in this suicide mission. But the ailing surgeon presses onward--and begins a simultaneous journey into the past. Between present-tense episodes, which demonstrate Ben's cranky commitment to his own extinction, we learn about his boyhood in Washington's apple country, his traumatic war experience in the Italian Alps, and the beginning of his vocation. Guterson narrates the apple-scented idyll of Ben's childhood in a typically low-key manner--and orchards, of course, are seldom the stuff of melodrama. Still, many of his ambling sentences offer miniature lessons in patience and perception: "They rode back all day to the Columbia, traversed it on the Colockum Ferry, and at dusk came into their orchard tired, on empty stomachs, their hats tipped back, to walk the horses between the rows of trees in a silent kind of processional, and Aidan ran his hands over limbs as he passed them with his horse behind him, the limbs trembling in the wake of his passing, and on, then, to the barn." The wartime episodes, however, are less satisfactory. Clearly Guterson has done his research down to the last stray bullet, but there's a second-hand feeling to the material, which seems less a token of Ben's detachment than the author's. There is, alas, an additional problem. Begin a story with a planned suicide, and there are exactly two possible outcomes. It would be unfair to reveal Ben's fate. But as the forces of life and death yank him one way, then another, Guterson tends to stack the deck--particularly during a bus ride toward the end of the novel, when Ben's fellow passengers appear to have wandered in from a Frank Capra film. Yet *East of the Mountains* remains a beautifully imagined work, in which the landscape reflects both Ben's desperation and his intermittent delight. And Guterson knows from the start what his protagonist learns in painful increments: that "a neat, uncomplicated end" doesn't exist on either side of the mountains. --James Marcus --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A good and decent man's passage through life as reflected in his memories and his experiences on what he intends to be his last day on earth is the burden of Guterson's (*Snow Falling on Cedars*) deeply felt, honest and quietly powerful new novel. Dr. Ben Givens, a 73-year-old retired thoracic surgeon in Seattle, has terminal colon cancer, a fact that he has kept from his daughter and grandson. Widowed recently after a loving marriage, he decides to forgo the ordeal of dying in

stages, and instead to commit suicide in what will look like an accident during a day of quail hunting in the apple-growing country where he was born. But fate interferes with Ben's plan. His van is wrecked when he runs off a slick road, and he is rescued in the first of several encounters that turn into a two-day ordeal. During the cold October night in the sagebrush desert, the narrative rises to a harrowing crescendo when Ben's two dogs are the victims of a marauding pack of Irish wolfhounds. With subtle symmetry, Guterson uses Ben's darkly picaresque misadventure to provide graceful segues into the events of his past. A series of poignant memories occur in flashback: Ben's mother's death; his tender courting of Rachel, who became his wife; his soul-lacerating experiences in combat in WWII and his life-defining epiphany at an army field hospital in Italy; which chart the growth of a man with a strong sense of humanity and responsibility and a steadfast work ethic. The novel begins slowly, and at first one fears that Guterson's attempt to establish a sense of place will result in a dense recital of geographical names. But his unsparingly direct, beautifully observed and meticulously detailed prose creates an almost palpable atmospheric background. At the end of his journey, Ben achieves an understanding about the meaning of life and the continuity of commitment. Wise and compassionate about the human predicament, Guterson's second novel confirms his talent as a writer who delves into life's moral complexities to arrive at existential truths. Agent, Georges Borchardt. 500,000 first printing; \$500,000 ad/promo; Literary Guild main selection; author tour; rights sold to U.K., Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Holland, Norway, Finland, Sweden and Denmark; simultaneous release by BDD audio. (Apr.) 1999. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The book has two interwoven themes: life in the apple growing country of eastern Washington and the struggle of a man trying to deal with the pain and suffering of incurable cancer. Guterson's prose presents the action and the setting in mesmerizing detail. Details that paint the picture and record the action with fascinating realism. The reader gets caught up in the life story of only real character of the book and how he came to be "east of the mountains" coping with approaching death. Guterson presents his two serious themes with a light touch.

Stick with it....while the plot is a bit morbid, the writing is good and the story well written.

Nice end of life story that manages to be reminiscent and decent without sentiment. Wonderful portrait of Washington State, literally, East of the Mountains. As a non-Hunter and a gun control advocate I found understanding and sympathy with that culture...lived with a pure ethic by the main

character at least. An enjoyable coming of age with the grim- reaper.

This book was an interesting read. It covers many controversial issues but it merely mentions them and then moves on without any real discussion. However, the book was very well written. The descriptions were beautifully done and made you feel the woods around you and smell the smells he described. I'm glad I read it but I would say that it is not as good as *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

Guterson uses the beautiful form of the journey -- the bildungsroman, the journey at the beginning of life, the foundation journey, is seen in retrospect-- while Dr. Givens is taking a journey at the end of life. As is seen in his own flashbacks to childhood, war years, marriage and family, Givens is confronted by the unexpected. It is said that late in life one gets a respect for those events in life that one couldn't control and the effects they had on what one could. I am among the few reviewers who respected this book more than *Snow Falling on Cedars*, but perhaps that is because I worked on a cattle ranch in eastern Oregon where the rancher was dying of cancer, my grandmother had an apple orchard, and my whole professional career has been about family adjustment to illness. Guterson talks movingly about where we live -- in landscapes, inside of larger historical events, and among surprising and varied fellow travellers with biographies as complex as our own.

I'm quite surprised by the reviews that rate this book a poor follow up to *Snow Falling on Cedars*. They are very different books, and *East of the Mountains* is intentionally more focused on an internal journey of an individual man. If you understand that going in, the book completely lives up to what we expect from Guterson's writing. It does lack the intricate weaving of multiple characters and storylines of *Snow Falling on Cedars*, but I really enjoyed the attention Guterson gives to Ben's character development. And no one has ever captured the essence of Eastern Washington like this author has--having lived there for 5 years (now in Seattle, much like the lead character), his visual portraits of the land are both accurate and stunning. If you appreciate understanding what motivates characters, and enjoy rich, descriptive detail of landscapes, you will like this book.

An American doctor's misadventures on the way to learning compassion with no guru required. The sentences flow short and vivid. The prose clean, at times poetic. I'm better for reading this book.

Fully as satisfactory as "*Snow Falling on Cedars*," in a totally different time and milieu. You find yourself turning the pages faster than you ought, eager to see how the protagonist will deal with

each new situation. But Guterson's writing deserves to be read slowly and savored. By the time you're finished you'll feel you'd know Ben Givens if you saw him on the street and you'd like to ask him how he's doing.

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