



Listening to the Savage: River Notes and Half-Heard Melodies

Barbara Hurd

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Follow the meandering of this river, listen attentively to the poetic silences of this lovely work.

The exquisite *Listening to the Savage: River Notes and Half-Heard Melodies* is a book to be savored. Barbara Hurd offers an evocative, nuanced reflection on listening and attentiveness, with an exploration that crosses the boundaries of science, history, mythology, poetry, and music.

The Savage referenced in the title is a river that traverses the Maryland mountains near the author's home, and it is the setting for many of her observations. A widely published poet and nature writer—as well as winner of five Pushcart Prizes and NEA and Guggenheim fellowships—Hurd has created another exceptionally rich study.

Her reflections move seamlessly, integrating her personal experiences with insights across a broad range of topics. In the chapter “Keys,” for instance, Hurd discusses the connection between rhythm and emotion while interweaving stories about her father and the composer Olivier Messiaen, the nineteenth-century ivory trade and piano factories, a visit to a South African elephant preserve, and several poignant verses by Goethe. Like the stanzas of a canon, each layer builds on the last and calls us to listen more deeply, more precisely, more attentively.

Whether she describes a spadefoot toad spending most of its life deep underground listening only for rain or recounts the challenges she faced in “trusting the music” during her piano lessons, Hurd strives for precision and balance. This is not a rhapsodic, romantic hymn to the glories of nature or music, and Hurd only touches on conservation themes. She is exploring, not extolling; respecting, not revering; recognizing that dissonance is as important as harmony when one is present in the moment.

Scant but intense, this is a beautifully produced volume, with a cover photo that appropriately shows a barefoot child carefully balanced on a log above a flowing brook. Follow the meandering of this river, listen attentively to the poetic silences of this lovely work.

KRISTEN RABE (Summer 2016)

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