

Cultural Daily

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Robert Redford – A Walk in the Woods

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, August 12th, 2015

Having examined Robert Redford's commitment to preserving the unspoiled beauty of the American wilderness, in my 2007 critical essay "Robert Redford and the American West," I was not surprised that he had been fascinated by *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson's humorous account of hiking the Appalachian Trail, ever since reading the 1998 book in 2002. Redford bought the rights and wanted to produce the film as a vehicle to reunite on screen with Paul Newman, having become friends with him while shooting *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), then *The Sting* (1973). Newman's failing health and eventual passing in 2008 put the project on hold until 2012, when Redford directed Nick Nolte in *The Company You Keep*, and offered him the role.



Robert Redford, Nick Nolte

Nolte's disheveled appearance and devil-may-care attitude fit the personality of Bryson's travel companion, the fictional Steven Katz, in contrast with the uptight and successful author, a family man, happily married to the no-nonsense Emma Thompson in the film, who doesn't seem to have anything to prove, but is bored with his life and wants to take on the challenge of the 2,200 mile trek from Georgia to Maine.

While Nolte is a man of few words, it falls upon Redford to deliver the lines from the book about the amazing beauty of nature. He quotes environmental philosopher John Muir, marvels at the geological stratification of the variously colored rock formations, laments the decimation of the chestnut trees caused by a fungus, the thinning of East Coast's hardwoods like the helms. As the two friends admire the starry night sky, Redford/Bryson informs, "There are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on earth."

Both men learn from this experience, challenging to their aging bodies; they revive their youthful friendship and return home with renewed appreciation for their lives. Redford proves once again the point he has been making throughout his career, as actor, director, producer of films like *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), *A River Runs Through It* (1992), *Electric Horseman* (1979), *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), as founder of the Sundance Institute and as a vocal environmentalist: being in touch with nature has the power to regenerate your soul.

P.S. If you are curious to read the book before seeing the movie *A Walk in the Woods*, directed by Ken Kwapis and photographed on 35mm film by John Bailey, in theaters September 2, you may also check out Bill Bryson's insightful and concise volume, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*.

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