



Cabin Fever

by Emily Sohmer Tai

Full disclosure: I have always harbored mixed feelings about Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). On the one hand, who could not love the man who urged “civil disobedience” to protest the American government that hesitated to ban slavery and waged the Mexican-American War (1846-1848)? Who joyously celebrated nature, and erudition, proclaiming that “books are the treasured wealth of the world?” (*Walden*, Chapter 3).

And yet, there has always been a nagging corner of my consciousness, egged on, perhaps, by a cranky allegiance to feminist theory, or even the gossipy account Susan Cheever provides of the American transcendentalist movement in *American Bloomsbury* (2006), that finds the “deliberate life” Thoreau set out to embrace in *Walden* ethically problematic to the extent that he elevates the journey toward self-discovery over the care of others. Where, I’ve always wondered, does a deliberate life leave those of us who labor to support families, care for children, or for elderly parents? And where does it leave the community college faculty member, whose craft of teaching often represents an intervention in the lives of “quiet desperation” so many of our students lead, and that Thoreau asserted was experienced by so many of his contemporaries? Maybe it’s just me, but when Thoreau, ostensibly a passionate abolitionist—and therefore well-aware of the genuine horrors of American slavery—writes, in the opening chapter of *Walden*, that “keen and subtle masters enslave both North and South,” when men drive themselves to meet society’s standards of success, and laments the absence of a “Wilberforce” to bring about “self-emancipation” from the “West Indian provinces of fancy and imagination,” I can’t help but marvel at such colossal self-indulgence.

Imagine, then, this reviewer’s delight, when Tom Montgomery-Fate, a professor of English at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois; author of five books; essays that have appeared in a variety of scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *The Boston Globe* and *The Chicago Tribune*; and veteran of an American Landmarks seminar on Concord, Massachusetts sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the CCHA, takes Thoreau’s *Walden* as inspiration for the thoughtful reflections he shares in the nineteen essay chapters that make

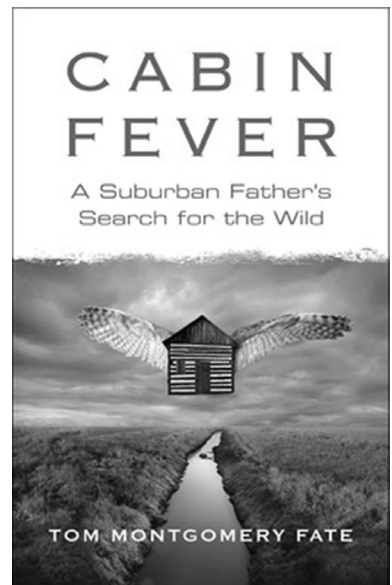
up *Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father's Search for the Wild*, but wonders, as I have, “how marriage and children would have affected Thoreau’s otherwise deliberate life,” (p.60). Unlike Thoreau, who remained unattached as an adult, Montgomery-Fate is “harried and married,” but affirms his choice to marry and raise a family as central to his own search for ethics and meaning. The essays of *Cabin Fever* thus take up an originally-conceived challenge: to reconcile Thoreau’s theory with the author’s practice

Like Thoreau, Montgomery-Fate builds a cabin in the woods—in the author’s case, a fifty-acre plot of forest and meadow in Michigan, equidistant between an interstate highway and the polluted Galien River. Like Thoreau, Montgomery-Fate’s subject is the “sauntering” of his mind, as he contemplates the abundance of the natural world; his reservations concerning the advances of modern technology; and the encroachments upon “unspoiled wilderness” they facilitate; the materialism of American society, and the violence that devastates societies at home and abroad (pp. 143-151; 178-185)

Unlike Thoreau, however, Montgomery-Fate brings a layer of rueful self-awareness to his essays on “living deliberately” that allows the author to confront a conflict less clearly discerned by Thoreau between what Montgomery-Fate terms “the I,” and “the eye” (p.21). And along the way, Montgomery-Fate’s essays expose the humor and poignant tragedy in subjects Thoreau might well have disdained. There’s the highly amusing chapter in which Montgomery-Fate describes his attempt to achieve Thoreau’s ideal of self-reliance by trimming a mulberry tree alongside his house, trashing his bedroom and nearly electrocuting himself in the process (pp.101-107). There are essays about Montgomery-Fate’s relationship with his son and daughters; about his wife’s hysterectomy; and the courage of a family friend struggling for dignity in the final stages of cancer (pp. 63-72; 121-133).

To be sure, Montgomery-Fate revels in Thoreau’s extraordinary language, which is liberally quoted throughout the book, but is no less skilled in waving his own. There’s poetry on every page of *Cabin Fever*, whether Montgomery-Fate is evoking the trill of birds; the thunder of distant trucks (pp. 4-5); a hail of frantically mating cicadas over suburban Chicago (pp. 63-72); or the intersection of the mystical and the mundane that Montgomery-Fate, like the transcendentalist he admires, confronts in the self-appointed task to write nature itself (pp. 91-97). What’s more, Montgomery-Fate’s considerations of nature shine with substantive observations about the dangers we humans pose to fellow animals with whom we share the planet. “To be human,” Montgomery-Fate asserts, “is to be an animal” (p. 190). Where Thoreau’s engagement with nature often seems self-referential

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(“I rejoice,” Thoreau writes, in the fourth chapter of *Walden* “that there are owls”), Montgomery-Fate and his family spend hours observing various species of birds, mating, feeding, and caring for their young, emailing an ornithologist friend with questions (pp. 37-50). Where Thoreau’s “Battle of the Ants,” described in Chapter 12 of *Walden*, is a brilliantly rendered personification of ants as Homeric warriors, Montgomery-Fate tracks the ants he studies to the epicenter of a teeming colony, and offers a meticulous description of their movements (pp. 27-35). Montgomery-Fate’s essay on the “natural migration” of “coyotes at the mall,” (pp. 135-141) wisely asks if those who might decry the danger these animals now pose to pets and young children can really “blame them for excelling at adaptation and survival—a knack they share with people?” (p. 12).

It's Walden meets Silent Spring meets Dave's World

“I am looking less,” Montgomery-Fate explains at the beginning of his collection of essays, “for a pure subject than a moment of pure vision to see what is in plain sight—a glimpse of the wild within the ordinary.” And while the author attributes his search to Thoreau’s exhortation to cultivate his “adventurous spirit,” (p. 15), Montgomery-Fate has stumbled upon something beyond Thoreau’s insights when he observes that “it matters *how* we write about nature.” (p. 14). In *Cabin Fever*, Montgomery-Fate has skillfully managed to apply a transcendentalist sensibility to the varied projects of marriage, parenting, and environmental activism. *It's Walden meets Silent Spring meets Dave's World*. For Montgomery-Fate, “living deliberately” doesn’t mean fleeing society for a cabin in the woods, but returning home to apply lessons learned. As I read Montgomery-Fate’s essays, I kept wishing Thoreau could have read them. I wondered what he’d have thought.

Tom Montgomery-Fate, *Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father's Search for the Wild*
Boston: Beacon Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8070-0096-0