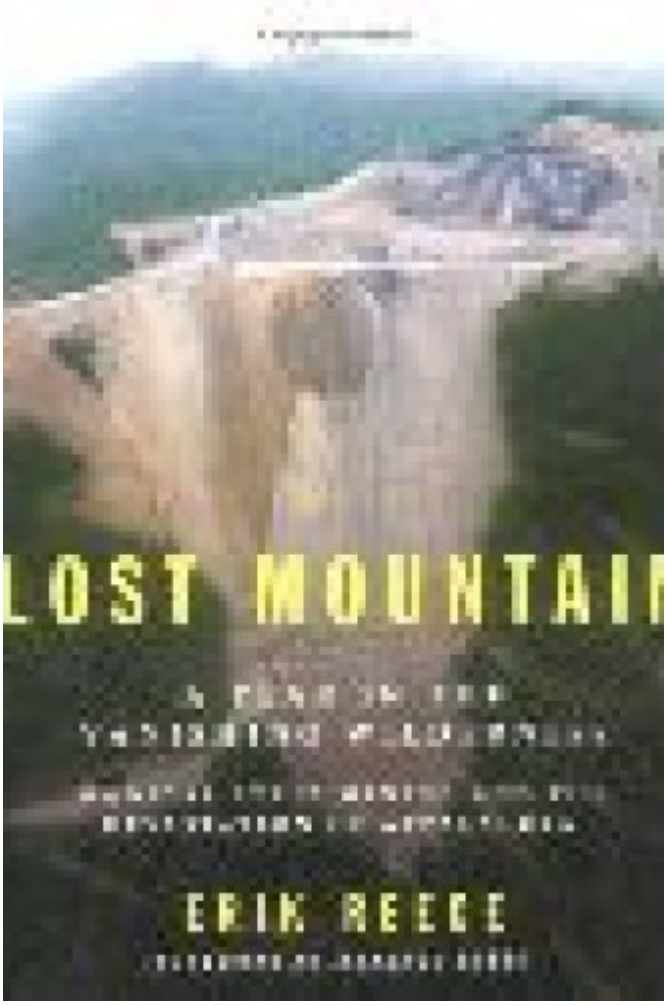
De-creation

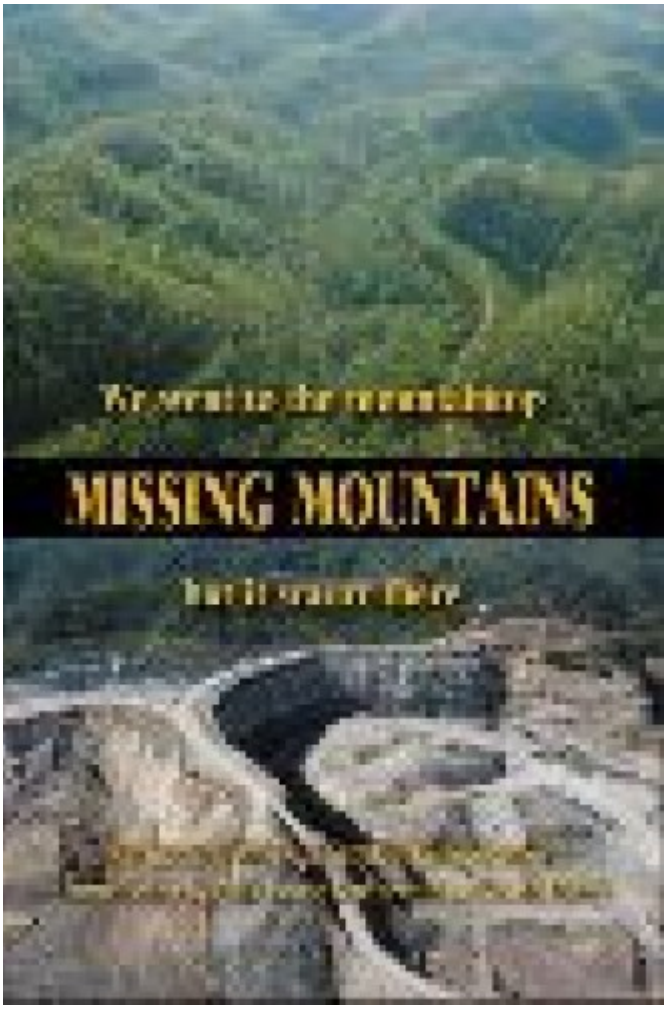
By Bill McKibben in the August 22, 2006 issue

In Review



Lost Mountain: A Year in the Vanishing Wilderness

Erik Reece
Riverhead



Missing Mountains: We Went to the Mountaintop but It Wasn't There

Kristin Johannsen, Bobbie Ann Mason and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, eds.
Wind

If there is one sure curse in this world, it’s mineral wealth. Is there gold or diamonds or oil beneath the surface of your land? Then count on poverty, gross inequality and autocracy above. Of all the possibilities, coal is the worst, dirty in every way. When it’s burned, it fills the air with carbon, powering the global warming now unhinging the planet. But before that silent tragedy can take place, there’s a noisy horror—the kaboom of exploding mountains across the southern Appalachians.

Mountaintop removal, as these two sterling books make clear, may be the single most outrageous environmental assault now under way on our continent. In the past few decades, big coal operations have ceased much of the traditional subterranean

mining (which at least compensated for its myriad dangers by providing lots of union jobs). Instead, they now simply blast mountains down to the coal seams (see also Scott Williams, Mine wars, May 31, 2005). For the coal companies this has the single advantage of being cheap: some high explosives and a few giant draglines replace hundreds of men, allowing mine owners to compete with the producers of cheap surface coal from the strip mines of Wyoming's Powder River Basin.

Most of the money they make, of course, leaves these communities, where the poverty rate is about the same as when LBJ visited in the early 1960s to launch the more noble of his two wars. What is left behind is a desert. Erik Reece, in *Lost Mountain*, describes his first aerial glimpse of the area: ". . . and then the color drained away, the trees dropped back. I suddenly was watching a black and white movie. All I could see below me was a long gray flatland, pocked with darker craters and black ponds filled with coal slurry. It wasn't just here and there—the desolation went on for miles. . . . A vast circuitry of haul roads wound through the rubble. It looked as if someone had tried to plot a highway system on the moon."

The search for similes occupies everyone who sees this landscape—it's like the results of a slow-motion Katrina, a bomb blast or a scouring glacier. It's mostly like hell, unredeemed by anything alive. Reece, a very talented journalist, spent a year making repeat visits to one particular hill, the aptly named Lost Mountain, as it was reduced to a mesa, and his account of the destruction of rich forest is grimly funny (a backhoe operator is "Sisyphus with a driver's license"), but mainly just grim. To watch a 300-million-year-old mountain destroyed over the course of a year becomes, in his telling, an experience as harrowing as watching a parent die over the course of a year. Or more harrowing, because it is so unnatural.

Reece's book—a true classic of recent environmental writing—details the human cost of this kind of mining as well. The soil and rock—*overburden* is the term of art—that once constituted the mountain has to go somewhere, and the cheapest and easiest somewhere is the hollows in between the ridges. Even as the mountains are made low, those valleys are raised up. In the process hundreds of miles of streams are buried, water tables altered, wells poisoned. Home foundations crack as the explosives shift the ground; if the charge is too big, boulders come hurtling down slopes and crashing through walls. Overloaded trucks (cheaper that way) kill dozens of residents as they careen down bad roads. It's the kind of scene that you can come across fairly regularly in the developing world, but it's hard to imagine it here at home.

You really do have to see it to believe it, which is why advocates last year organized a tour of the area for Kentucky writers. Led by Wendell Berry, the state's (and the nation's) deepest moral voice, they flew over the devastation, interviewed local residents, hiked wasted streams. *Missing Mountains*, the resulting collection of testimony, short story, poem and essay, is a model of engaged witnessing—art in service of community. It is the opposite of public relations—it is truth telling.

The search for images to describe the carnage nearly overtaxes literary invention—the land has been raped, it's like a beaten woman; the sterile acreage is "worse than Chernobyl," more desolate than Death Valley.

In fact, the only literary weakness of these stories is that the mountaintop removal is so comprehensively evil that there's almost no dramatic tension. The only defender of this vandalism is the head of the industry group, a lobbyist named Bill Caylor, who repeatedly insists that mountaintop removal benefits the region because it leaves flat land that will be useful for real estate development. Of course, this is nonsense of the most obvious sort, as one writer after another sputters to point out, describing the federal prison that started listing on one filled-in plateau ("Sink Sink," the locals called it) and the lonely golf course a developer built on another wrecked tabletop. The best summation of all this craziness is probably the ironic statement that a mine opponent posted on a sign on a lawn:

GOD WAS WRONG
SUPPORT MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL

Indeed, carnage on this scale demands theological reflection. Reece describes his final journey to the top of Lost Mountain, when he stood on the line between the still-intact glory of a diverse forest and the ruined spoil of the mines: "The sharp contrast between these two landscapes, heightened by the fall color and the gray mine site, gives me the strange sensation that I am standing on the edge of Creation, on a thin membrane between the world and the not-world. It's as if the Creator had been busily composing this variegated forest and then suddenly knocked off for the day, right where I'm standing."

Or it's as if the de-Creator had been hard at work destroying God's world, and stopped—for the moment—right there. But we will take many another bite in the years ahead, unless appeals such as these somehow summon our better angels, and those angels turn out to be good at political organizing.