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*The Best of the Adirondack Tales* is edited by Randall S. Beach, W. H. H. (William Henry Harrison) Murray’s great-great-grandson, who also contributes an insightful introduction to the volume. The introduction provides a helpful summary of Murray’s life and accomplishments as well as briefly contextualizes the stories that follow.

This collection follows Murray’s previous works, including *Holiday Tales: Christmas in the Adirondacks* (1897), *Adventures in the Wilderness, or Camp-Life in the Adirondack* (1869), *The Busted Ex-Texan and Other Stories* (1889), and more. Many of the tales in *Best of the Adirondack Tales* have been previously published; thus, readers familiar with Murray’s extensive bibliography may be somewhat underwhelmed by this volume. However, for readers new to “Adirondack Murray’s” work, this collection serves as an ample introduction, both to his work and to literary depictions of the Adirondacks.

Given that Murray wrote in the latter half of the nineteenth century, readers will perhaps be unsurprised to find many of these tales infused with spiritual reckonings that, at times, border on becoming lessons on morality. While the inclusion of spiritualism found in nature is typical in the transcendental writings of Murray’s era, because of his background as a clergyman, these moments take on a particular Christian flavor rather than the more global, almost Taoist or Buddhist angles of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and their ilk. From our modern-day lens, like many of his white male contemporaries writing in the Northeast, Murray largely painted the racial and political landscapes as a white settler-Indigenous binary and used terms for Indigenous peoples that may upset some readers.

Many of these stories are on the shorter side, some being barely more than a single page, and thus are easy to teach in a secondary or postsecondary classroom. Even the longer stories, such as “How John Norton the Trapper Kept His Christmas” and “The Story the Keg Told Me,” are roughly fifty pages long, so not overbearing for most readers. There are certainly benefits from a pedagogic-
al perspective in teaching the text as a whole, primarily in how readers are able to engage with characters like John Norton and Henry Herbert across the collection. Because of the Christmas story and “Henry Herbert’s Thanksgiving,” some tales can be chosen to meet seasonally themed modes of organizing a syllabus as well.

In considering how these stories might be approached from a pedagogical angle, one aspect to keep in mind is Murray’s use of dialogue, particularly the dialect used by Norton. The northern and central Appalachian dialect Murray invoked is quite similar to the dialect used by eastern Kentucky writer John Fox Jr. in the local color literature he penned toward the end of the nineteenth century. These similarities suggest a certain accuracy in these mountain modes of communication, but some students from outside of Appalachia, particularly central and northern Appalachia, may do better reading certain parts aloud, as reading them silently on the page flattens the characters a bit.

The book contains a dozen images that appear to be from the original publications of these stories. While most of these images focus on the characters, which helps readers to envision them in all their rough-and-tumble glory, several more are of the Adirondack landscape. These landscape illustrations, sometimes containing snowy pastures, images of deer, or desolate pines on a hillside, help readers unfamiliar with the region to get a sense of place, especially through the seasons. Even the indoor images are helpful in picturing the cabins in which many settlers resided in the rural northeastern New York mountains in the mid-nineteenth century. The actions depicted in the images, such as sledding, hunting, and gathering for family meals, further help readers existing nearly two centuries later picture what life might have been like for Murray and his characters.

From an environmental perspective, Murray’s works featured in this collection run the gamut from short arguments in favor of camping and outdoor activities to eerie campfire tales to a song about snow to short stories full of adventure. He did not shy away from the hunting and trapping that are often part and parcel of land-based living, yet these instances are not gratuitous in their violence, simply described matter-of-factly with emphasis on limiting animal suffering. To cause an animal to suffer unnecessarily was, to Murray, a moral failing, as was taking more than what one required to survive.

Importantly, Murray’s tales, while featuring humans, do not feel anthropocentric. While some versions of Christianity propose man having dominion over all the earth, the version clergyman Murray seemed to hold is that humans are just one part of the equation, one aspect of the total ecology, and we must all work together if we want to thrive. Thus, Murray’s stories do not fit within a sort of natural history or deep ecology nor even in the romantic tradition, as Murray did not shy away from the brutality of living off the land; indeed, “How John Norton the Trapper Kept His Christmas” features children crying in hunger and their mother praying that her children will not starve to death over the winter. Murray’s realism, however, does not make these tales less engaging; if anything, this sort of straightforwardness makes it easier for readers to step into the shoes of the lad, Norton, or the many other characters peppering these pages.

The Best of the Adirondack Tales brings the works of Murray, whose work has generally found an audience in regional studies, to a much larger readership, and rightfully so. While many of his contemporaries are frequently taught in literature and the environment courses, Appalachian studies courses, or American literature classrooms, this accessible collection makes it easy to incorporate Murray’s attention to detail and knowledge of the landscape into a multitude of educational settings. His down-to-earth style and storytelling are compelling and transport readers quickly into the
nineteenth-century Adirondacks and all they have to offer.

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