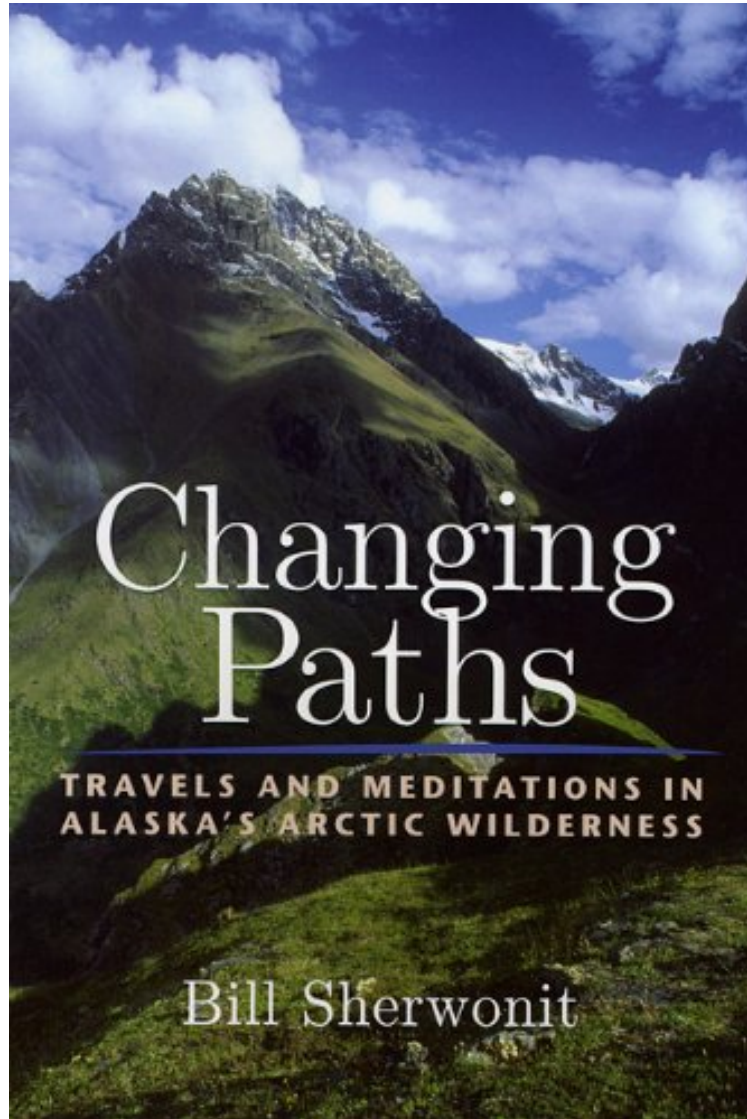


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Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness

Bill Sherwonit

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Bill Sherwonit : Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Journey both literal and metaphorical. By NHreaderI was sad to finish this book. Every morning last winter I sat by my fire as Mr. Sherwonit guided me through the Brooks range, and

through a meditative look back on his unique journey in life. It is a book to read slowly, like poetry, progressing at a tundra pace, going not for the destination but rather the journey. I wish I'd taken notes, because there has been so much along the path that I wanted to comment on. I'll try to remember a few things: First, Mr. Sherwonit opened my eyes to good nature writing. I often have trouble with the leisurely, poetical pace of nature writing and I get impatient with detours and long respites. But in the case of *Changing Paths* I was able to just enjoy the moment to moment trip through the Brooks, and all the side trips Mr. Sherwonit took me on. I'm impressed with the depth of his contemplation and the sophistication of his wilderness ethic. I experienced this as a journey into the soul. I'm sure he intended this. Leaving Anaktuvuk is like leaving the literal or the superficial, or like leaving the day-to-day of life, travelling at that laborious tundra pace that allows you to penetrate deeper and deeper into the the what? The soul? The metaphysical? The spiritual? Whatever. It reminded me of *Heart of Darkness*, this way, except that Conrad's story is joyless while Sherwonit's seem to tell a story of change and growth. But just as Conrad propels us along the Congo in his penetration of the dark continent to reveal to us the horror, I felt Sherwonit brought us along on this tussock-hopping penetration of the northern wilderness the blank spaces on the map, the unnamed peaks, etc to reveal rejuvenation and discovery. This journey into the Brooks range is not just literal, but it is the topography Sherwonit's life and, if we think it through, perhaps of our own.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Sherwonit's *Inspiring Solo Journey* By Kathleen Tarr Most of us will probably never realize this: At age fifty, we grab a backpack and tent, fly by bush plane into Alaska's central Brooks Range to begin a 50-mile solo trek, while lugging 70 pounds of supplies and gear on our back--and with packets of only decaffeinated coffee. That's why we turn to reading books and essays by great writers like Bill Sherwonit. Through Sherwonit's compelling storytelling, we feel the deep passion for this kind of rare solo exploration with its ensuing physical challenges, trepidation, and precious solitude. He reminds us about that "lost" part of ourselves, when it seemed more possible to "let go" and to be fully engaged with the landscape, whether it was Iowa farmland or a vacant city lot in Chicago. Bill Sherwonit's latest book, *Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaska's Arctic Wilderness*, is a thoroughly engaging story from a man who is a true inhabitant of the untamed world. He lives it, breathes it, and writes it. Sherwonit tells us about Robert Marshall, an early explorer of the Brooks Range, and someone for whom Sherwonit naturally has much admiration. Marshall's biography and the history of his mapping and exploring of parts of the Brooks Range is seamlessly woven throughout the narrative. As a female reader, I was especially drawn into Sherwonit's reflections about Marshall, the Nunamiut Eskimos, and his own need to occasionally pull away from the everyday trappings of society. To leave people behind. Marshall spoke about those "men of action" and how they "felt a longing to retire from the encompassing clutch of a mechanized civilization." But even though I'm a long-time Alaskan myself, I know this kind of Brooks Range adventure is not something I'm likely to endeavor on my own, no matter how much I fantasize about it. In *Changing Paths*, we learn how such a solo trek was accomplished, and for me, these logistical details further enriched the story. I liked knowing about what kind of freeze dried food the author ate, what kind of propane stove he relied upon, what he packed, what he wished he hadn't.

Bill Sherwonit writes in the literary tradition of Barry Lopez, Richard Nelson, and Loren Eiseley. *Changing Paths* is not simply "a nature book" nor is it a "travel chronicle." The best books can never be reduced or summarized in one pithy sentence. *Changing Paths* is for readers who want to learn about unfamiliar, remote environments, and who want to reconnect with the deepest part of themselves--the side that wants to strap on a pair of hiking boots and begin the quest.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A Small Miracle of a Book By C. Wallace Bill Sherwonit's "Changing Paths": Bill Sherwonit's "Changing Paths" (Snowy Owl Books) is one of the little miracles that come along every so often in the busy and impressive field of American Nature Writing. Like many of America's great naturalists, Sherwonit started as an unlikely candidate for the wild - a sickly young boy growing up next to an industrial city where nature had all but disappeared. The young Sherwonit battled asthma and a loving but over protective mother who watched over him and restricted his play with the other boys in the neighborhood. Living at the edge of the rusty city, Sherwonit's property fronted a small forest that ran into the foot of nearby rural Trumbull, Connecticut. From his bedroom window he heard the music of a next door swamp filled with bullfrogs, spring peepers and snapping turtles. Despite his illness, the swamp and the woods called to the boy, and he soon found himself sneaking out of the house to keep company with the woods and the rich wildlife around the pond. These childhood experiences, both comical and ecstatic, became the basis of Sherwonit's late vocation as a naturalist in the great tradition of American seekers and explorers. He has taken his life to Alaska and joined the ranks of travelers who explore the wilderness as they trek into their own souls. "Changing Paths" is about the writer's journey from the quaint Connecticut countryside to the grandeur of the Alaskan wilds. It is a story of pain and transformation, and a "True North" experience of both the heart and the foot in the American landscape. When Sherwonit left home for good during his college years he studied geology and then wandered west to work for chemical companies prospecting the vast resources of Alaska. He was considered a rising young star in the field, but found himself growing more and more distracted by the beauty of these great ranges rather than their mineral and economic possibilities. Always a sensitive soul, he found himself growing attuned to the energies and spirits of the wild. During one job along the Ambler River he has a classic epiphany looking into the river, "the clearest, most sparkling stream of water I have ever seen, or can imagine." Here, his Fundamentalist Lutheran boyhood merges with an almost ecstatic experience of

the wild, and a writer of power and inspiration is born. His books all have the feelings of clear, fresh seeing vision, and this one paints the shining world of nature better than any of Sherwonit's 11 other books. It is a giant step forward. "Changing Paths" chronicles the trail of Sherwonit's two weeks pilgrimage into the Brook's Range at the age of fifty years old. It is a thoughtful and rich journey into the woods as well as an introspective mapping of his past. Like all of the best nature writers, Sherwonit is great company (and a solitary at the same time). The narrative weaves in and out of the present to the past and back to his foot journey from the Anatumuk Pass to the Gates of the Arctic National Park. Sherwonit treats us to exquisite descriptions of tundra plants, bear stories, golden eagles and the quietly humorous experiences of blistered feet and wet clothing. As a reader I find myself traveling with him, grunting with the 60 pound back pack, fording the rippling cold rivers where one false step could be his last, swatting legions of mosquitoes, ducking dive-bombing gulls and sliding down slick ledges. Sherwonit's prose is clear and vivid. The diaries he keeps yield a smooth flow of detail and breathtaking panoramic vision. Two weeks following the trails of the native Nunamiut (as well as un-trailed terrain) is no picnic. He is pelted by rain and heavy winds. It is a relief to get inside the tent with him and read his torn pages of Bob Marshall's "Alaska Wilderness; Exploring the Central Brooks Range" (Sherwonit's literary inspiration for his journey) and Loren Eisely's essays. Pasta and chocolate never tasted better than on Bill's small stove with a hot cup of coffee. Sherwonit's own musings form the interior part of his travels. He takes us from his enchanted yet difficult boyhood in Trumbull to his discovery of Alaska and its place in his soul and imagination. These interludes aren't incidental to his mid-life journey into the Brooks Range. He casts a keen eye on his own life as well as the timeless and lethal beauty he traverses. He has come to the woods to understand himself and to shed the ego and the past. From one end of the continent he looks back to the other. He sees his close knit German-American family, the rigors of a Fundamentalist faith that he questions and leaves behind, and a boyhood that opens the doors to wonder in all things. Sherwonit is unsparingly honest and humble. Nature isn't a substitute for lost faith; it is the ground of our being to believe in the goodness of creation and man's special place in the cosmos. The latter part of the book surveys the prophetic voices of nature writers and brings home Sherwonit's theme that we can't afford to cut ourselves off spiritually from this great teacher and healer - the wild. Most of all "Changing Paths" is a wonderful adventure. I have always felt that nature writing is one of the genuine American literary expressions and some of the best writing done in the 20th Century. At its best it combines the virtues of the personal essay, the musings of the philosophical mind, and the pleasures of narrative and descriptive writing. This is Bill Sherwonit's best book to date, but it promises the full development of the real thing - another great voice in the long line of naturalists who explore our wilderness and our humanity in fresh and memorable ways. Read "Changing Paths" and you will wonder what you've done with your life and where the trail will lead next.-B. Wallace, Fairfield Citizen News

Changing Paths: Travels and Meditations in Alaskas Arctic Wilderness is an autobiographical exploration of author Bill Sherwonit's relationship with the Alaska wilderness. Written in three parts, it first describes Sherwonit's introduction to the Brooks Range and his years as an exploration geologist. Taking a step back, the author then takes us into the past to explore his childhood roots in rural Connecticut and his recognition of wild nature as a refuge. He concludes with his emergence as a nature writer and wilderness advocate. An engrossing, fascinating, and eye-opening tale of one man's life and of wilderness conceptions, this vivid description of an area of Alaska that few people get to experience is authentic and enlightening. It is an extraordinary contribution to the literature of place from one of Alaska's most accomplished nature writers.

"Changing Paths is a fetching and affecting backcountry chronicle by a humble and unassuming man who loves low adventure as much as high, and loves the wilderness as much as anyone I know. Bill Sherwonit, a pillar and a pro among Alaska writers, walked deep into the Brooks Range and brought back what he found with naked honesty and keen attention. . . . If Sherwonit's is a journey of the heart as much as tussock and ledge, full of his own doubts, demons, and dooneraks, it is also a report of rare and informed constancy, perception, and reverence. . . . I feel much the richer for this clear-eyed naturalist's devoted account. I am certain it will lure me back to this none-too-barren ground."