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**David Guterson**

**East of the Mountains**



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Author: David Guterson

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## Description

Were there no author's name printed on *East of the Mountains*, fans of the bestselling *Snow Falling on Cedars* would know within 20 pages that this new novel is also by Pacific Northwest wunderkind David Guterson. Reverent of place, carefully detailed of character, the author's second novel -- his first book was nonfiction, and he has published a collection of stories -- is as deeply felt and minutely evoked as his first. It will likely solidify his reputation as a latter-day old-fashioned writer, the kind of novelist who lovingly and carefully introduces his characters to his readers with the understanding that given enough time, they're sure to get along.

In *East of the Mountains* we meet Ben Givens, a recently widowed, retired heart surgeon in his 70s. As the book opens, Ben has just found out that he has terminal colon cancer. Since he's not the kind of guy who allows himself false hope -- he's a doctor, remember -- and even less one who allows himself to be a burden to others, Ben devises a plan. He will have a goodbye dinner with his married daughter and his adult grandson (although they think it's just a regular family meal) and then go off on a central Washington State "hunting trip" -- a trip from which, of course, he will never return. The way Dr. Ben Givens sees it, suicide is not only the most expedient solution to his problem, it's the most moral.

This is a setup that is, of course, begging to be knocked down. (I can't help but think of Alison Lurie's recent *The Last Resort*, in which a crotchety old man -- in that case, an eminent nature writer -- tries to off himself to spare his family the horror of watching him die.) Is it ever acceptable to kill -- even when death is imminent and the victim is oneself? Even more, when someone has devoted one's whole life to staving off death, can he ever bring himself to cause it?

Knowing what an old-fashioned moralist Guterson is -- his nonfiction book is in praise of home-schooling for kids, after all -- it's hardly surprising that his Ben Givens soon discovers he can't go through with his plan. While Ben is out in the wild, he does a lot of thinking -- much of it about his beloved wife, Rachel, who died just a little over a year before; he recalls their courtship, their lifelong passion, the promises they made to each other (none of which include an acceptance of suicide). And then, Ben meets some real, live folks -- among them a young couple in a van; a drifter who offers strange, elliptical solace; and a pregnant migrant worker who needs Ben to bring her child into the world -- who make him question whether it is yet his time to go.

Those are the bare bones of the parable, but it is the hearty meat Guterson puts on those bones that makes *East of the Mountains* such a satisfying read. There's a bit of everything here: a boy's wilderness adventure story (except that the boy is a grown-up man), a love story, a saga of aging and missing connections (the scenes in which Givens is offered marijuana by the young couple who pick him up hitchhiking are among the most hilarious -- and most believable

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-- in the book), a tale of hubris and humility. You don't necessarily like Ben at the beginning -- he's an arrogant doctor know-it-all, you think -- but as he comes to discover hidden depths in himself, you, the reader, do too. There's also a matter-of-factness to Guterson's prose that slowly becomes irresistible and, interestingly, almost poetic in its laconism; it'll be a wonder if Clint Eastwood isn't tapped to play Givens in the film version. ("So why did you change your mind?" an acquaintance asks Givens about his failure to commit suicide. "Cowardice, mainly," Clint-as-Ben will reply: "Try shooting yourself. It isn't easy.")

OK, so maybe the critics will complain that the story takes too long to begin and that once begun, it ties up just a tad too neatly; there was that criticism of *Cedars*, too. But Guterson has a lovely, head-on way with a description that makes whatever initial wading in you have to do worthwhile. (Try this: "Ben opened his one good eye to a still and empty October morning in a motel room in Quincy, Washington. A nimbus of light, a gray corona, formed a halo at the curtains. The heater fan made a terrible racket. The air smelled of saffron and from the bathroom the toilet sang.") And once you get to know Ben, you'll be as taken with him as are the myriad strangers he encounters on his journey from and back to himself. Guterson fans have been waiting quite a while for a worthy follow-up to the beloved megadebut that was *Cedars*; *East of the Mountains*, in more ways than one, will reward them for their patience.

—Sara Nelson

## Insightful reviews

Susan B.: Guterson is an extraordinary writer and storyteller. I read his first novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars* while spending one extremely snowy winter in Chicago with my dear Aunt Cassie as she fell ill with cancer and spent her last days in a hospice. The staff was nice enough to let me stay overnight anytime I wanted, so I often stayed up late watching the snow fall reading this book, keeping my Aunt company as she rested.

I'm in Chicago again this year, so I decided to mark the (eighth) anniversary of her death by reading another one of Guterson's books, *East of the Mountains*. As it happens, the main character in this book is coming to terms with having colon cancer, trying to decide whether to tell his family or to go off on his own and end it all. Ok, it's grim material, but it's also a really well written book with some great insights about aging and death. On the lighter side, my Aunt warned me not to visit her grave or else she would haunt me. When we did go to visit her this year, a big white goose confronted us in the middle of the road, looking right at us and blocking the way for the car to move forward for a few minutes. I can't help but think that was my Aunt, urging me to go out and live, rather than wasting time in a cemetery. Now that's a haunting worth experiencing :)

Chuck: I have only read two of Guterson's books, but have been impressed with both. This novel reads like a memoir except that it is fiction. The story is about the life of a doctor that

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served in World War II, had a great romance and life until his wife's recent death. The story centers on the fact that he is now diagnosed with terminal cancer and how he deals with this final blow. He escapes into the wilds of eastern Washington, where he was raised and commences to hunt, hike, hitchhike and make a difference in many lives. It is a redeeming story of how one deals with tragedy and death, but most important taught me of the kind of person that I hold in high esteem.

Sheri: This was a hard book to read. It was 85% or more sad and depressing. Ben Givens is 73 years old and dying of colon cancer. He has been a widower for 19 months now and still thinks about and misses his Rachel everyday. It's time, he thinks, to end this painful journey he's on. He doesn't want his daughter Renee or grandson Chris to have to go through the agony of watching him die.

He grew up an orchardist in Washington state. It's been a good life. Hiking with Chris in the mountains, hunting, meeting Rachel, falling in love and marrying her.

Going to war was hard, especially on his father, who already had one son overseas, had lost his wife and now his remaining son was off. There are at least 30 solid pages of the cold brutality of war. The unveneered stark truth, with no rounded edges whatsoever are revealed here. I applaud the author for his honesty, but at the same time, I like a veil over the hard things in life sometimes, you know? That's just me. I am in no way criticizing the writing or the content. It is a beautiful and melancholy story. And the last page made me smile.

Don: enjoyed this book, even supposing i believe it was once designed as a honeytrap for the slightly depressed middle-aged humans frightened obsessing in regards to the subsequent levels in their decline. Ben Givens is an efficient guy who has led an outstanding life. notwithstanding his spouse died a number of years ahead of he has family in the neighborhood that loves him and he performs a key position of their lives. yet he's loss of life of a very nasty melanoma and, being a retired doctor, he understands precisely what the subsequent months have in shop for him. So he comes to a decision to take as soon as final searching trip, within the apple-orchard state east of the mountains in Washington state, that is additionally the rustic he was once raised in. His purpose is to faux an twist of fate and shoot himself, yet different injuries intrude and his regulate over his personal ultimate future unwinds. This might simply be a mawkish and mawkish story yet Guterson so impressive at describing the panorama round the rolling kingdom round the Colombia river, and how its good looks merges with the unhappy songs of the human heart. you just overlook the story's flaws and simply benefit from the ride. The flaws? Well, simply why does Givens simply need to be so damned good? Why did the entire tragedies in his existence (death of his mother, his WWII experiences) figure out to place him at the correct path? What the hell - lovely, gorgeous story....

Gale: the tale used to be stable and Dr. Ben was once given desire back from overall strangers that's consistently an uplifting feeling yet I first learn "Snow Falling on Cedars" and there's no comparison. Snow is way better.

Linda Hart: Eloquent, appealing prose, yet boring, sluggish story. placed it this way: if I have been in the midst of a bankruptcy and the telephone rang it would not hassle me to place the booklet down and ignore it till I dusted the desk it used to be sitting on.

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