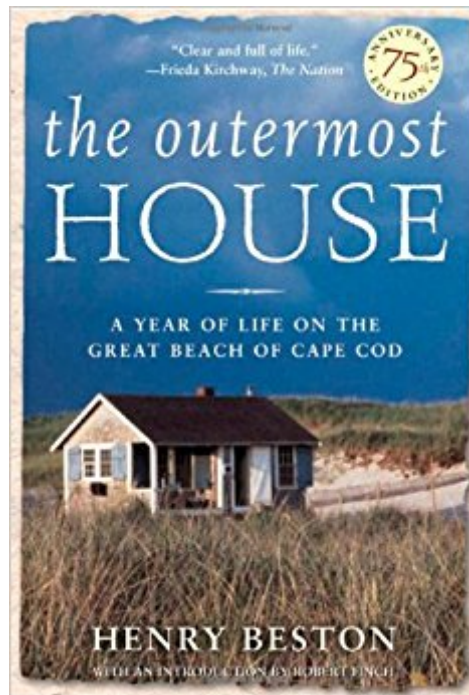




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The Outermost House: A Year Of Life On The Great Beach Of Cape Cod



Synopsis

The seventy-fifth anniversary edition of the classic book about Cape Cod, "written with simplicity, sympathy, and beauty" (New York Herald Tribune) A chronicle of a solitary year spent on a Cape Cod beach, *The Outermost House* has long been recognized as a classic of American nature writing. Henry Beston had originally planned to spend just two weeks in his seaside home, but was so possessed by the mysterious beauty of his surroundings that he found he "could not go." Instead, he sat down to try and capture in words the wonders of the magical landscape he found himself in thrall to: the migrations of seabirds, the rhythms of the tide, the windblown dunes, and the scatter of stars in the changing summer sky. Beston argued that, "The world today is sick to its thin blood for the lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot." Seventy-five years after they were first published, Beston's words are more true than ever.

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Customer Reviews

"A colorful and ever-changing chronicle of movement that approaches the magnificent." —Boston Transcript
"Clear and full of life." —The Nation

Henry Beston (1888–1968) wrote many books, including *White Pine* and *Blue Water*, *Northern Farm*, and *The St. Lawrence*.

This near-classic account of the author's year alone in a self-built cottage on Cape Cod's shore, sometimes dips a little into purple prose. "Then time gathered like a cloud, and presently the stars began to pale over an ocean still dark with remembered night." These descriptions often sound lovely and poetic, but they might tend to roll off your back like water off a duck, just because they contain no sharp particularities to stick in your mind. Nevertheless, this is undeniably a stirring account of the ritual of the seasons that Beston observed from his solitary outpost on the beach near Eastham, Massachusetts. And in among the occasionally too general sonorities, there are many, many truly telling metaphors, as when he describes a wind that was "a thing to search the marrow of one's bones." I initially felt a little frustrated reading his descriptions of his sand and sea surroundings. I wanted to turn the page and find a big glossy picture that would immediately convey the details to me. But then I realized that such a longing was a laziness, and that it was actually better to have to create the picture myself, to build it slowly from Beston's words. This made my experience of nature more interactive and ultimately more satisfying. I was forced to use my imagination. It was like listening to radio, rather than having the completed pictures of TV always there - bam - in front of me. Ultimately my having to create the scene myself in my mind's eye made me concentrate more and appreciate better the beauties being described. However, I do think that a better map of Beston's location might have been helpful to orient the reader at the outset. I remained a little confused about the juxtaposition of the different features of the sea, the beach, the dunes, the marshes, the runnels and inlets, around him. The small, cramped picture supplied at the front of the book doesn't suffice. Comparisons between Beston and Thoreau are apparent on every page. The way Beston usually capitalizes the word "Nature" reflects the Transcendentalists' pantheism. But when Beston was writing in 1926, he didn't quite seem to grant equal divinity to all living things. He has a remarkable feeling for the beauty of the lives of birds, but he doesn't always seem to be as awake to the miracle of fish. When he receives the gift of a live cod that a member of the coastal patrol found on his doorstep, Beston views with equanimity the struggling fish as it's hung on his clothesline, its continued puffing a testament to its freshness for dinner. Modern sensibility might be veering a little more to a realization of the suffering of fish as well as birds and mammals. In other areas though, Beston's words might have been taken from today's headlines. He deplores the oil slicks that were killing so many birds. The main source of the slicks in 1926 was oil refineries. Many refineries then were simply loading the dregs of their refining process onto tankers that then took the greasy cargo out past the shoals and spilled it into the ocean. Beston becomes uncharacteristically a little more specific and scientific in his writing when he describes how birds that got coated with this oil almost always died, in part because of the way the oil created big

separating creases in their plumage, exposing their bodies to the frigid air and water. Beston is prematurely optimistic about the way in which these spills were being curtailed. He said the situation was much better than it had been some years before, and he had every reason to believe that there would soon be no more oil slicks on the oceans to despoil Nature of its glories. In some other uncharacteristically analytical passages, Beston explains how one incredible night of strange phosphorescence marking his footsteps along the beach might have come about. On the whole though, you won't garner much scientific information about the species that Beston observes in his seashore retreat, nor about the geological processes that form the landscape there. This no Discovery Channel exposition. But you will come away from this very personal essay of a book with a heightened sense of the beauty, complexity, and mystery of one of Nature's most awe-inspiring ecological niches.

The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod by Henry Beston. Highly recommended. In his chronicles of a year spent in a tiny house on Cape Cod's great beach, on a dune between ocean and dunes and marsh, Henry Beston recognises something of which many of us are no longer aware—the cyclical nature of life. Even the beach itself, embattled between land and ocean, wind and wave, is the result of a cycle. Beston vividly describes the many others that take place during his year, for example, the advance and retreat of the varied plant life upon the dunes and the corresponding changes in colour and tone. Even when the dunes seem dead, Beston finds life lurking in the development phase of its cycle; of the insects he says, ". . . yet one feels them here, the trillion, trillion tiny eggs in grass and marsh and sand, all faithfully spun from the vibrant flesh of innumerable mothers, all faithfully sealed away, all waiting for the rush of this earth through this space and the resurgence of the sun." The cycle of night and day had been lost to most by 1925, the year of the outermost house, as Beston notes. He says, "Primitive people, gathered at a cave mouth round a fire, do not fear night; they fear, rather, the energies and creatures to whom night gives power . . . having delivered ourselves of nocturnal enemies, [we] now have a dislike of night itself." On the beach, however, Beston can experience the "poetry of night"—beach-combing skunks, frolicking deer, stranded skates and dogfish, and great tempests and storms that ground boats and ships and drown or carry off their crews. Of course, life and death are part of the cycle, eloquently illustrated through tales of shipwrecks (past and present), but perhaps most poignantly shown after a great summer storm, when all that Beston finds of a least tern colony is an eggshell fragment, then, upon further exploration, discovers the song sparrow determinedly sitting on her nest, which is now only inches above the wind-piled sand. Like the Lord, the sea giveth and the sea

take away, a way of life that is most clear when predators drive in schools of fish to feast on, only to find themselves stranded by the relentless surf. Immersed in all these cycles and rituals-the seasons, day and night, life and death, migration and hibernation- Beston, perhaps unconsciously, creates his own, including not only the practical such as weekly visits to town for supplies, but also the equally necessary-the regular seeking out of the Nauset light and the companionship of the Coast Guardsmen who man it and who patrol the coastline. These human contacts become the ritual of Beston's own human life, when it is not involved in observing the world and the life around him. Beston did not write *The Outermost House* with a purpose, other than to please his fiancée; that is, his intent was not to preach or persuade but to observe and chronicle. At times, the passages ramble accordingly, but at other moments they sing, as when he says of animals, "They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth." Given the constant flux of the world, where a thriving colony of terns may be replaced by a storm-tossed sand dune in the course of one night, it seems appropriate that the Fo'castle, the outermost house, along with its beach, was reclaimed by the ocean during a winter storm in 1978. Knowing the ocean and the land as he did, Beston may have been surprised that the house survived as long as it did. Beston does not have to resort to preachiness for the outermost house-and its fate-to make a point about our tenuous connection to our frail world and its rhythms. The outermost house is gone. Discover, explore, and preserve what remains. Diane L. Schirf, 18 September 2005.

Beston does a terrific job of describing the plants, animals, vistas and sounds of Cape Cod. At the time, he was able to live remotely away from others. This couldn't be written today with all the swarms of people everywhere. This book made me want to go back to that era where a person could enjoy solitude and nature.

This is a wonderfully written book. It will cause you to slow down to the speed of life... Nature in its raw observation spread over the seasons is a miracle unfolding... Read this book. Slow down, none of us are getting out of this alive.

a lyric paean to the outermost beach, dunes, and wild inhabitants - experienced firsthand during a year alone on the shore. Beston is a fine writer who can sustain descriptions of coastal nature's dimensions - sight, sound, smell, night, wave, to name a few - with fullness and precision and grace. A gem of a book and clearly a classic in literature about the natural world.

a fascinatingly different book and life of the author

A beautiful, eloquent, literary masterpiece; it's no wonder it has been in print for 75 years. Thoreau would even be impressed. You don't have to live in a coastal area to find it fascinating and lyrical. Beston's description of living through a true nor'easter and emerging to find his cabin surrounded by water is, alone, worth the price. Highly recommended.

Truly a lovely read. Espif you've been to Cape Cod.

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