

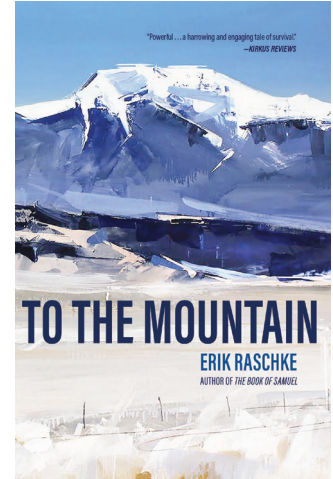


VOICES FOR THE LAND
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Reading Group Guide

TO THE MOUNTAIN

BY ERIK RASCHKE



INTRODUCTION

Eleven-year-old Marshall lives in a remote juvenile center in Colorado, where he is bullied by the other boys, misunderstood by all of the staff except Leslie, and so overwhelmed by the sounds and smells in the cafeteria that getting his lunch is a daily terror. During a blizzard, an unexpected mishap for Marshall and Leslie leads to Marshall's disappearance into the wilderness. His father, Jace, knows that Marshall has gone searching for a secret on the mountain. To save Marshall, Jace must overcome not only the winter elements, but his own self-doubt in this tale of sacrifice, hope, and the bond between father and son.

"A mercilessly taut, relentlessly thrilling tale of heartbreak and survival. Raschke writes with humanity and grace about the challenges of parenthood, and the rigors of the natural world."

—JONATHAN EVISON, author of *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*

"What lifts this novel above the ordinary also challenges readers—to enter the hyper-sensory perspective of the autistic boy as he puzzles his way through an insensate world. It is not a spoiler to say that love matters when the odds seem insurmountable and surrender feels like mercy."

—CHARLIE QUIMBY, author of *Monument Road* and *Inhabited*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Before writing *To the Mountain*, I kept coming across stories about autistic children lost in the wilderness, who would survive while other children could not. Then I started reading about feral children through the ages, autistic or mentally-disabled children who had been abandoned, and learned to grow up outside. Nature was more caring for them than the institutions or their professional caregivers and that is what interested me...

Why was nature almost better suited to these children than being inside? Of course, my own son struggled with destructive energy and because he couldn't play basketball or ski or whatever, I took him for long walks and hikes. He would throw sticks and break branches and, because he could release his energy without repercussions, nature became a special sort of sanctuary.



Erik Raschke was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. He received his BA in English from Earlham College and his MA in creative writing from the City College of New York. His first novel, *The Book of Samuel*, was translated into Italian and nominated for the Michael L. Printz Award. As a reporter in the early nineties for *The Newsletter* and *Belfast Telegraph*, Raschke covered the bombings, shootings, and assassinations that marked the end of The Troubles. Later, he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Armenia and a certified teacher with the New York Board of Education where he taught English to children from the Bronx and upper Manhattan. Raschke's work has appeared in the *Atlantic*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Guernica*, and elsewhere. He teaches writing at the University of Amsterdam.

Learn more at erikraschke.com.

Raschke is available to discuss *To the Mountain* with reading groups in person or virtually.

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CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Marshall is able to survive and exist in the wilderness in ways he's unable to do in structured society. Compare or contrast your relationship with wild places to Marshall's. How does the author portray wilderness throughout the novel?
2. When "The Fury" emerges during one of Marshall's episodes, he is likened to a wild animal. What do you make of this comparison?
3. Jace's flashbacks highlight the difficulty he and Lynne faced in trying to decide the "right" way to care for Marshall. These memories also show the complexity of loving a child who has autism. Do you think Jace comes to a conclusion about what it means to be a good parent to Marshall?
4. Jace's friend Ozzie tries to assure Jace that God will take care of Marshall. Are there signs of divinity in Jace and Marshall's experiences on the mountain? How do you think Jace's perception of faith may have changed by the end of the novel?
5. What role does Suzy play in Marshall's life and in the narrative of *To the Mountain*? How would the story differ without her character?
6. Throughout the novel, Lynne appears only in Jace and Marshall's memories. Why do you think that is?
7. The novel's epigraph is a quote from Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, an exploration of Abraham's experience when God commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. What parallels do you see between the characters in the Bible story and those in *To the Mountain*?
8. Several types of survival are explored in the novel, including physical, emotional, and social survival. What are the connections between these different forms for Marshall? For Jace?
9. On page 122, Suzy says she would tell Kid Colter that "he should try and adapt to the world, instead of running away from it." She then tells Marshall that, "Being alone is easy, but it's not healthy." Do you agree with Suzy's statements? When do you believe solitude is beneficial and at what point do you think it becomes harmful?
10. *To the Mountain* is told through Marshall and Jace's alternating perspectives. How did this add to or subtract from your reading experience? Did Marshall's point of view enhance your understanding of autism in any way?



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