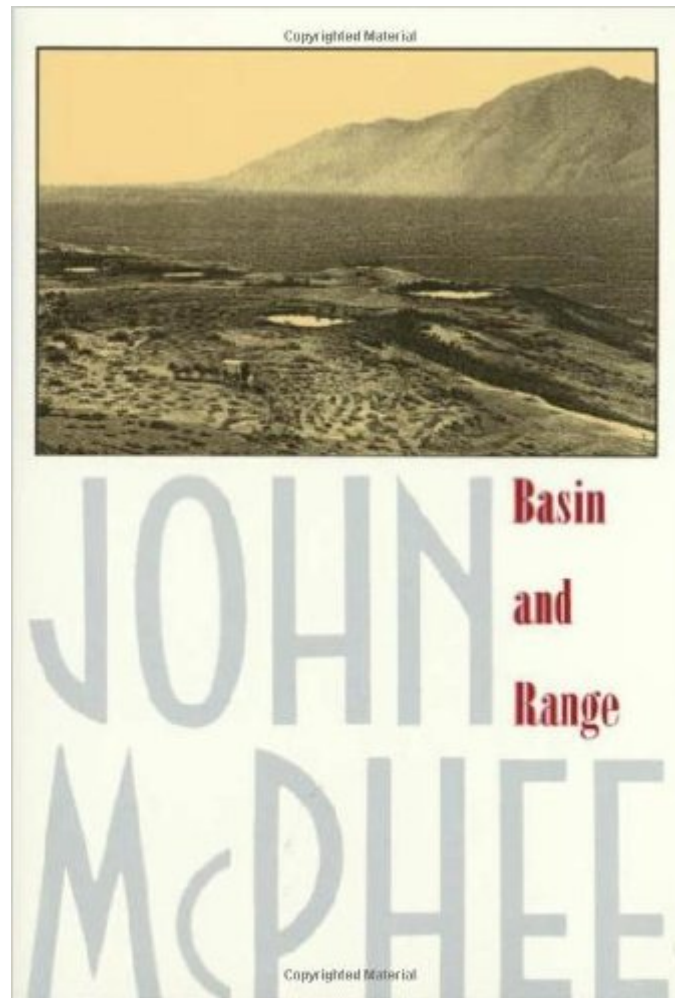


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Basin And Range



Synopsis

The first of John McPhee's works in his series on geology and geologists, *Basin and Range* is a book of journeys through ancient terrains, always in juxtaposition with travels in the modern world—a history of vanished landscapes, enhanced by the histories of people who bring them to light. The title refers to the physiographic province of the United States that reaches from eastern Utah to eastern California, a silent world of austere beauty, of hundreds of discrete high mountain ranges that are green with junipers and often white with snow. The terrain becomes the setting for a lyrical evocation of the science of geology, with important digressions into the plate-tectonics revolution and the history of the geologic time scale.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Reading John McPhee is such a delight that one wonders what he would be like as a teacher. Not a journalism instructor, for which he is amply qualified, but declaiming on science, particularly geology. McPhee is a master in understandably describing geologic processes and the people studying them. Under his touch, the stable earth is brought to life, compressing time and traversing space. Watching an aircraft descend for a landing, he muses that in another time its approach path would be deep under water. He explains how different the perception of time is in the mind of a geologist from that of our own. All civilization is but an eyeblink in contrast with the rise and fall of mountains and seas. According to McPhee, what geologists face is summarized in one sentence: "The summit of Mount Everest is marine limestone." Not long ago, he reminds us, the world was once considered to be like a drying apple. Some areas shrink driving other places to rise leaving a skin of

folds. McPhee describes the history of the idea of plate tectonics and how it confounded this earlier concept. The starting point was an understanding of the earth's age. A Scottish "gentleman," James Hutton was an astute observer and an eloquent speaker. Putting his findings in writing, however, "trampled people with words." Hutton revealed the vast duration of time required to form earth's vistas. He was followed by a herald of Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell. Between them, the age of the earth and of life replaced the established biblical origins. In effect, Hutton had taken the next major step in science after Copernicus. Plate tectonics, a group, rather than an individual's insight, opened new fields of research and provided more detailed views of Earth's processes.

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