

Listening to the River is a celebration of anonymous places where we can still find nature's beauty. Robert Adams first visited these particular locations as a boy, when the West seemed unchanging. Now in his fifties, he returns to them with the affection of a longtime acquaintance. The book records hushed walks when irrelevancies are forgotten, when sunlight makes the fields, hills, and roads new. Adams has chosen twelve poems by William Stafford to accompany the pictures. Both photographer and poet observe a practice of quiet in the out-of-doors, and both discover there a promise. This is an optimistic book, though not a sentimental one: a number of the photographs record views of the suburban West. Any tree in the path of development appears to have an uncertain future, Adams observes. Listening to the River affirms, however, that trees and other elements of nature are ultimately protected. Part of what their beauty means, says the photographer, is that they are safe. In 1989 Adams spoke at the Philadelphia Museum of Art about his enjoyment of the landscape, citing as an example his experiences at rural crossroads on the plains: Sometimes there doesn't seem to be anything there at all-- just two roads, four fields, and sky. Small things, however, can become important-- a lark or a mailbox or sunflowers. And if I wait I may see the architecture-- the roads and the fields and the sky. Were you and I to drive the prairie together, and the day turned out to be a good one, we might not say much. We might get out of the truck at a crossroads, stretch, walk a little ways, and then walk back. Maybe the lark would sing. Maybe we would stand for a while, all views to the horizon, all roads interesting. We might find there a balance of form and openness, even of community and freedom. It would be the world as we had hoped, and we would recognize it together.

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