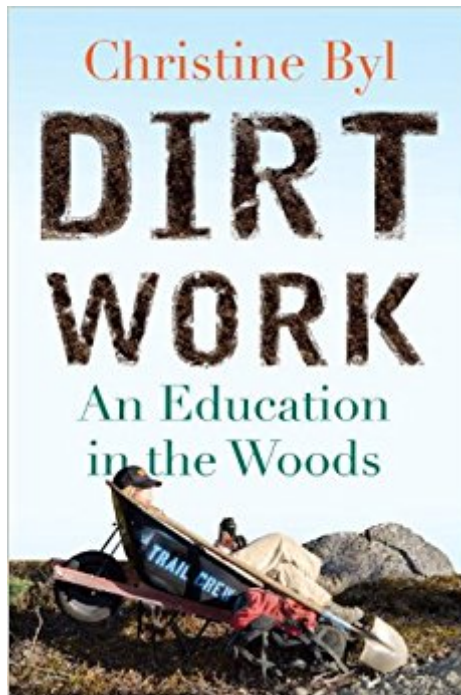




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# Dirt Work: An Education In The Woods



## Synopsis

A lively and lyrical account of one woman's unlikely apprenticeship on a national-park trail crew and what she discovers about nature, gender, and the value of hard work. Christine Byl first encountered the national parks the way most of us do: on vacation. But after she graduated from college, broke and ready for a new challenge, she joined a Glacier National Park trail crew as a seasonal "traildog" maintaining mountain trails for the millions of visitors Glacier draws every year. Byl first thought of the job as a paycheck, a summer diversion, a welcome break from "the real world" before going on to graduate school. She came to find out that work in the woods on a trail crew was more demanding, more rewarding, more real than she ever imagined. During her first season, Byl embraces the backbreaking difficulty of the work, learning how to clear trees, move boulders, and build stairs in the backcountry. Her first mentors are the colorful characters with whom she works—the packers, sawyers, and traildogs from all walks of life—along with the tools in her hands: axe, shovel, chainsaw, rock bar. As she invests herself deeply in new work, the mountains, rivers, animals, and weather become teachers as well. While Byl expected that her tenure at the parks would be temporary, she ends up turning this summer gig into a decades-long job, moving from Montana to Alaska, breaking expectations—including her own—that she would follow a "professional" career path. Returning season after season, she eventually leads her own crews, mentoring other trail dogs along the way. In *Dirt Work*, Byl probes common assumptions about the division between mental and physical labor, "women's work" and "men's work," white collars and blue collars. The supposedly simple work of digging holes, dropping trees, and blasting snowdrifts in fact offers her an education of the hands and the head, as well as membership in an utterly unique subculture. *Dirt Work* is a contemplative but unsentimental look at the pleasures of labor, the challenges of apprenticeship, and the way a place becomes a home.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Recent college graduate Byl (in philosophy, no less) made an unusual choice for summer employment as a “traildog” at Glacier National Park. What began as a lark becomes a transformative experience stretching into years spent wielding chainsaws and shovels doing “dirt work” in the back country for the National Park Service in Montana and Alaska. Framed with descriptions of the tools she learned to handle with aplomb, Byl shifts rapidly from thoughts on Thoreau to the sexual politics of women in a male-dominated field, to questions about the “wild” and pragmatic concerns over health insurance. Along the way she casts baleful glances in many directions, from tourists to Outside magazine to her employers and fellow federal employees. This is certainly an author with a literary chip on her shoulder, but the work is unique and Byl does such a good job of celebrating a colorful cast of characters that the occasional surges of attitude will be overlooked in light of her tale of an education earned in the woods that so deeply complements that of the classroom. --Colleen Mondor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

“[It] blends beauty and crudeness, grit and grace” | With language that is lyrical despite the earthiness of its subject, Byl turns the words of work into found poetry (“brake on, choke on, pull, pull, fire”), offering a bridge for readers to those “who would not speak like this themselves.” “a beautiful memoir of muscle and metal.” •Publishers Weekly, “A Starred Review” “A beguiling journey of self-discovery.” “Kirkus Reviews” “Here is a love story that encompasses wild country, skillful labor, hand tools, crusty workmates, and lingo formal and foul.” “As a woman, and a small one at that, the author must persuade the males on her crews that she can more than hold her own at hiking, trail-building, and swearing.” “She begins by convincing the man who becomes her husband, and ends by convincing the reader.” “You’ll find plenty to relish here, in a narrative that’s gritty, witty, and wise.” “Scott Russell Sanders, author of *A*

Conservationist Manifesto"Christine Byl has been summering on trail crews for more than a decade and a half. A first-rate storyteller, she details the techniques and tools, and the spirit of fellowship and feel of the woods. If you love getting into the back country, or even if you're an armchair backpacker as I am now at age eighty, you'll love *Dirt Work*. —**William Kittredge**, author of *A Hole in the Sky* and *The Nature of Generosity*"Every denizen of wild places from Laotse to St. Francis to Rachel Carson to black bears to field mice has depended upon trails. But rarely have we considered the people, tools, or toil that lay our favorite trails down. *Dirt Work* is a spectacular correction of this omission. Imbued with a tough-minded, ribald reverence for honest labor that brings to mind a female Gary Snyder or Wendell Berry (if you can imagine that!), Christine Byl does epic justice to the whole-bodied satisfactions that come of staying out in the weather, staying alert, and working one's ass off for others with love, tenacity and skill." —**David James Duncan**, author of *The River Why* and *Sun House*"Byl's is not a world of groomed nature, inert tools, or nostalgic rituals, but a vibrant landscape inhabited by people and animals and layered by idea and history. She means this book as a love song, she writes, and it is, not only from her to her fellow laborers, but from the mind to the body, the hand to the tool, the human to the wild. —**Sherry Simpson**, author of *The Accidental Explorer: Wayfinding in Alaska*"While Byl does not romanticize nature or her work, she skillfully uses poetic language, daring the reader to feel the grit, grim, and sore muscles of working ten hour shifts digging, chopping, clearing, and creating trails —**Al Dirt Work** is highly recommended for readers who love the outdoors, and especially those who have hiked in a national park or forest, and benefited from the hard work of trail crews. —**Women's Adventure Magazine**"Our work speaks for us,' Byl writes, speaking on behalf of all traildogs, who seldom brag about what they do. And it speaks volumes for this woodswoman and wordsmith." —**High Country News**From the Hardcover edition.

Christine Byl's memoir is reminiscent of *Walden* and *Desert Solitaire*. It is packed with themes: working in the woods; a woman succeeding in a male-dominated field and what she owes to sisterhood; team work in the woods and the special kind of bonding that takes place in trail crews; the craft of building and maintaining trails in national parks and forests; living off the grid on the Alaskan tundra; and some description of the very different environments of Glacier National Park, the rain forests of Prince William Sound, and the Denali wilderness. The author has mastered all these things. With all this going on, the book is set at a perfect pitch, honest, frank, not preachy, not pedantic, and loving of nature and her "tribe" on the trail crew. Some reviewers are put off by the

author's criticism of tourists who happen by while the trail crew is at work. As someone who volunteers doing trail work in a popular national park, I sympathize with the author. The criticisms are few and born out of the momentary frustration of someone trying to do a difficult job but required to waste precious time and smile at ignorant and insulting banter from a very small minority of hikers. The value, for anyone, though in this book is not the parts and the themes mentioned above, but the well-written insights to the mind of a remarkable person. Buy it! You will like it even if you have nothing to do with Alaska or Montana or hiking. Maybe reading this will encourage you to take a hike.

Christine Byl writes like she is sixty when she is probably not forty -- (high praise intended). This book shows a depth of experience and PARTICULARLY a breadth of knowledge (history, philosophy, art, sociology, literature) that takes my breath away. That, coupled with her seeking to meld with the rough and crude talking, joking, oathing folks that she has chosen for work-mates, makes for a slow read. I stopped sometimes and rolled my eyes at the boy-talk it seems she felt necessary to get in there, (a lot of THAT read like something from one much younger). But mostly, I read it slow like I do a good poem. There were frequent rereads to make sure I knew what it was about; vocabulary checks once in a while; and, like a good poem, I frequently reread for only the pleasure of it. I bought the book on my Kindle after reading the introduction and was thinking I'd get a story of an admirable person stretching her own, her family's, and society's limits re. feminism. I think I got all of that but mainly think I got an unsentimental outdoor education and someone who's next book I must buy.

Christine's writing is beautiful, and I found myself appreciating (and underlining) passages as little gems about her life, trail work, and the natural world. However I thought the structure made the story hard to get into, especially in the beginning. I was never really able to immerse myself in the Christine-as-a-new-inexperienced traildog sections, because she kept jumping back and forth between that and her more experienced perspective. I wanted a chance to inhabit the perspective of that young woman who chose (and stuck with!) trail work. There were often transitions to entirely different topics every paragraph or two, and I wanted to wonder what would happen next (but couldn't, because of the lack of continuity). The second half of the book, after she reaches Alaska is more linear, and flows better, so I found that the story pulled me along more successfully.

I really enjoyed this book. It was interesting reading about the work of all the people you hardly ever

see that keep things in good shape. We have visited Glacier several times and Denali (the two main places written about in the book) twice and appreciate all they do to make them nice places to visit. I did get tired of the tourist bashing. After all, if it weren't for tourists they wouldn't have a job. We aren't all idiots. If you are worried a laborer couldn't be a good writer, the author has a college master's degree and has studied writing.

Ms. Byl recounts her experiences working as a "traildog" -- maintaining wilderness trails many of us enjoy. It's backbreaking work with long hours, low pay and at times, miserable conditions. But Byl's love of the outdoors and a strong work ethic clearly shine through in her prose, giving the reader insight to a world full of drudgery and endless hard labor but also a life lived in close proximity to the land, much the way our ancestors existed. This book is a love affair with tools -- axes, chainsaws and the like -- with a view into a world not many women inhabit. The first half of the book details her experiences in Glacier National Park in Montana, while the latter half encompasses Alaska and the Denali region. An entertaining and interesting read!

Christine Byl is a trail dog and a writer, and more importantly, is a writer about being a trail dog. She brings to life the fun, pain, and hard work of the men and women who labor to ensure the rest of us have trails to hike on in state and national parks. Each long chapter in *Dirt Work* focuses on a different park or region in which Byl worked as a trail dog, and is made up of a collection of anecdotes and musings from her time in that park. She introduces us to the characters, stories, legends, and tools of her trade, and successfully convinced me that I'm grateful I've never had to work so hard. Entertaining, informative, and inspiring, *Dirt Work* was a welcome addition to my bookshelves.

As a former trail worker in Wyoming and California, I really enjoyed this book. It brought back memories of hard days of work and mellow evenings with co-workers. For me, trail work was a rite of passage that had long-term positive effects on my life. Moreover, this book is a great description of the way a woman manages to integrate herself into what is generally seen as a man's world. I bought a copy for my daughter as a sort of object lesson of the kinds of issues women can face in a working environment and how they can manage to overcome them. I highly recommend this book.

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