

Epic Trails in the Glacier Peak Wilderness

# Washington TRAILS

A Publication of Washington Trails Association

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Details  
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By Cassandra Overby

# The Down and Dirty

It's an intoxicating thought: trade in an office for a forest, a suit for a hard hat, a computer for a shovel. If you've ever wondered what it would be like to quit your day job and do trail maintenance for a living, you're not alone. *Dirt Work: An Education in the Woods* tells the true story of Christine Byl. She forewent graduate school in favor of trail work and has since made a career out of 16 seasons spent building trails.

Byl's narrative begins before she ever holds her first Pulaski, back when she's just a new college graduate who's broke and looking for a life change. Moving from Michigan and an intellectual upbringing to Montana and manual labor seems like an improbable solution to her problems—and a temporary one at that. After all, it is Byl's intention to do seasonal trail work for just one summer and then head back to the "real world."

That first season at Glacier National Park isn't easy. Byl is a woman in a male-dominated profession and an outsider in a forest fraternity. But slowly and surely, she masters the art of taking a ribbing, starting a chainsaw and brushing a trail. At the end of the season, Byl is faced with a choice: go to graduate school or continue with seasonal trail work. She chooses trail work.

Over the next 16 years, trail maintenance becomes the tapestry around which Byl's life is built. It takes her from Montana to Alaska, from Glacier National Park to the U.S. Forest Service's Cordova Ranger District to Denali National Park. Under the tutelage of eclectic mentors and often-brash personalities, Byl experiences a slow transition from student to teacher, from green-hat to crew leader.

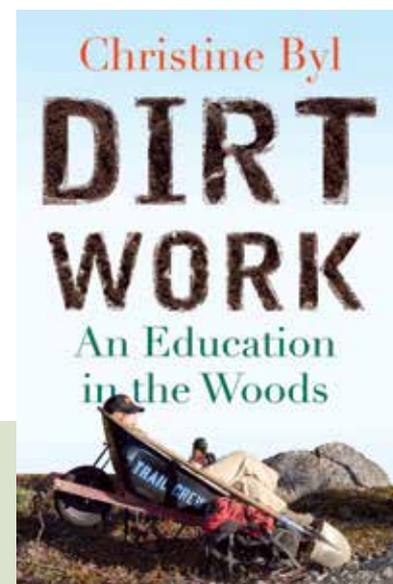
Byl's transition and her education in the woods are compelling stories on their own, but the book's real magic comes from her incredible talent for waxing poetic about the ordinary things she loves most: the pride of hard and dirty work, the feel of a wheelbarrow handle in a gloved hand, the sing of a saw.

Before you know it, Byl's descriptions will leave you aching to quit your day job and head to the woods, to busy your hands with something raw and real: dirt work.

**Recommendation:**  
3.5/5



*Trail work is not fetish, hiatus or a meander off a truer path. Through two decades of changes, years of both drudgery and stimulation, trail work has been an unexpected constant, the magnetic pull that swings my inner needle true, the thing that has taught me, in a way, how to live.*

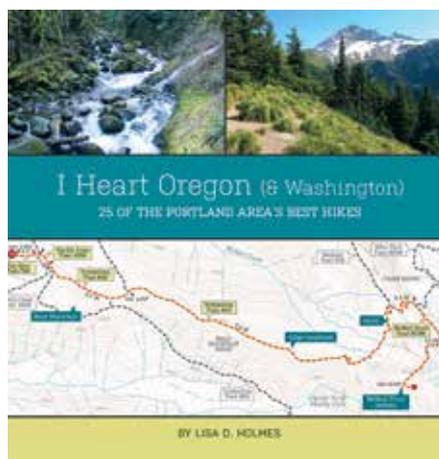


## You'll love

- ◆ Beautiful and poetic descriptions
- ◆ Nuanced portrayal of trail culture
- ◆ Real-world look at a trail maintenance career

## You may not like

- ◆ Challenging narrative structure
- ◆ Byl's negative depiction of hikers



## A Different Kind of Hiking Guide

Most hiking guides are information-rich and picture-poor—but not *I Heart Oregon (& Washington)*, a new book by graphic designer and WTA member Lisa Holmes. The book profiles 25 great hikes around the Portland area, ranging from the Oregon Coast to Mount Hood and from Southwest Washington to the Central Cascades—along with more than 400 photos and customized maps to boot.

The maps are the real selling point of the book. Each was hand-designed by Holmes to showcase topography, marked trails,

distance, elevation and trail highlights. Gone are all of the details you don't need for your hike; highlighted is everything you won't want to miss: waterfalls, lookouts and shelters.

The wide format of *I Heart Oregon (& Washington)* makes it cumbersome to actually carry on trail, and it is on the expensive side (\$24.95), but if you're looking for a more attractive hiking guide—this one is for you. Visit [iheartpacificnorthwest.com/my-hiking-book](http://iheartpacificnorthwest.com/my-hiking-book).