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Author David Joy to discuss 'Growing Gills'

By Stina Sieg | Sep 15, 2011

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(Photo by: Donated photo)

Author, fisherman and journalist David Joy — shown above catching a fish at Lake Junaluska — recently released "Growing Gills: A Flyfisherman's Journey." He will discuss his memoir Sunday at Blue Ridge Books.

People go fishing to kick back. They fish out of tradition. They fish to put fresh food on the table. Author and journalist David Joy fishes for all these reasons, too, but not only. In his words, he thinks of fly fishing "as an art form and as a means of reaching a different realm of consciousness."

No wonder he loves it so. In his new book, "Growing Gills: A Fly Fisherman's Journey," he examines his love of fish and fishing, which has been with him nearly as long as he can remember. The book is in no way a how-to guide, but instead a memoir in which he takes the risk to explore why he is who he is.

Joy, who writes for "The Crossroads Chronicle" in Cashiers, is not afraid to say that he feels less of a connection with people than he does the natural world. He's happiest far away from the crush of traffic and frenetic pace of life that cities offer. He'd rather be somewhere like his small cabin, tucked into the wilds outside of Lake Glenville. The older he gets, the more he craves this remote solitude.

"I think that the easy answer is to seek more seclusion, but I think the more difficult answer is to see why that seclusion is needed to begin with," he said.

The desire to find this answer led Joy, now 27, to begin the book more than a year ago. For six months, he delved into his life's history, as well as the past of Western North Carolina. He wrote about his childhood in what he calls the "concrete jungle of Charlotte," and his happiness at discovering the far western reaches of the state. He described his obsession with fishing, brought on partly by being born into a family of fisherman.

Somewhere in the mix he also threw in such philosophical ideas as "the noble savage" and "nature as teacher," he said. He ended up creating something that is bigger than both he or his admiration of fishing. The book speaks of larger truths, especially when it comes to one of his biggest concerns in this part of the world: development. In his opinion, that more than anything is encroaching upon his beloved wild world.

"I think that development is our coal mining, is our mountaintop removal," he said. He stressed that he doesn't want to blame, but he also knows the kind of effects that can follow when people move their homes and cars and lives en masse into the wilderness.

"They don't seem to realize that that development ultimately leads to the destruction of what they came here for to begin with," he said.

The desire to speak out against such things strikes at the very heart of why he's a writer. As he mentioned other regional authors who tell their truths about social and environmental issues (Ron Rash, Silas House and more), it was clear that he feels part of this legion of writers who hope to

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change the world for the better with their words.

“I think that a writer has an obligation to have some sort of purpose like that,” Joy said. While his book is swimming with ideas and philosophies, it seems there is one that ties them all together.

As Joy put it, “I think what I am trying to do is become more animalistic.”

This means that as much as he’s happy to discuss issues of the day, he also wants to talk about the basic pleasures that come with being secluded from the media-soaked world.

For him, this means hanging out at his cabin, where he can see the bobcats and baby bears tromping through the woods. It means enjoying the stillness and quiet that comes along with being miles away from everyone else. It means fishing, of course. Ultimately, he explained, fishing is a means of wisdom for him. It’s a window into the natural world, a way for him to experience what he calls flashes of “thoughtlessness.” That’s when, for a few moments, all his thought escapes him and he feels in harmony with the wilderness around him.

“In the minute when you’re fighting a fish, you don’t have time to think about anything. It just vanishes,” he said. “You’re just reeling.”

That might sound incredibly simple — and that’s the beauty of it.

Joy will be at Blue Ridge Books at 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 18. For more information, call 456-6000 or visit www.david-joy.com. The event is being sponsored by the Waynesville Fly Shop.

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