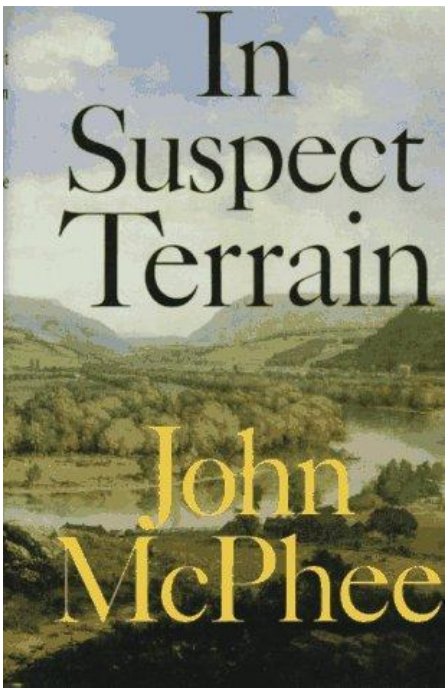

In Suspect Terrain

John McPhee

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From the outwash plains of Brooklyn to Indiana's drifted diamonds and gold *In Suspect Terrain* is a narrative of the earth, told in four sections of equal length, each in a different way reflecting the three others—a biography; a set piece about a fragment of Appalachian landscape in illuminating counterpoint to the human history there; a modern collision of ideas about the origins of the mountain range; and, in contrast, a century-old collision of ideas about the existence of the Ice Age. The central figure is Anita Harris, an internationally celebrated geologist who went into her profession to get out of a Brooklyn ghetto. The unifying theme is plate tectonics—here concentrating on the acceptance that all aspects of the theory do not universally enjoy. As such, *In Suspect Terrain* is a report from the rough spots at the front edge of a science.

In Suspect Terrain Details

Date	:	Published January 1st 1984 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (first published 1983)
ISBN	:	9780374517946
Author	:	John McPhee
Format	:	Paperback 224 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Science, Geology, Environment, Nature, History, Geography, Natural History

From Reader Review In Suspect Terrain for online ebook

Diana Biggs says

Didn't enjoy this one as much as Basin & Range - may have to do with the territory - ie: eastern US.

Catherine Mustread says

Enjoyable geological reading but more esoteric than the first in McPhee's Annals of the Former World series, Basin and Range, which I would recommend reading first. This second book, In Suspect Terrain, finds McPhee on a road trip with Anita Harris, a geologist specializing in Conodonts (fossil remains whose classification is uncertain, possibly an eel-like marine animal of the Paleozoic era), from NYC to Indiana along I-80, roughly the 40th Parallel, exploring the geology of road cuts and making frequent diversions into the history of geology and the plate techtonics theory vs glaciation.

Of additional interest to me was the information about Alexander Von Humboldt and even more on Louis Agassiz who both also appeared in David McCullough's Brave Companions.

Rosemary says

This one of 5 books that Mr. McPhee wrote, about the formation of the North American continent. I find it hard to believe it is geology, as the books are written more like a biography of North America. Most of the geologic history is really ancient but fascinating and informative at the same time. This book concerns Pennsylvania and the coal beneath the ground and learning what it took to get the coal there. This the third book in the collection.

Noah says

It pains me to give this book such a low rating, but I have to be honest about my experience. The final section--the book is divided into four essays--captures some of the glory of "Basin and Range," but the other three sections are mostly filler. It seemed like McPhee just didn't have enough material this time around. Maybe he expected more to come out of his interactions with Anita Harris, but her story is dull and ordinary, and her personality, her language and her preoccupations didn't strike me as interesting in any way. Only when he discards her to survey the history of the Ice Age as a scientific concept does he hearken back to the best of the earlier volume.

Paul says

I sometimes find it hard to follow the thread of these Annals of the Former World books. As opposed to Basin and Range, this seems to have a single "perspective geologist", Anita Harris, and focuses almost

entirely on her work. One thing I don't totally understand is whether Harris believes something fundamentally different from the plate tectonics people or whether she just thinks that plate tectonics people have a hammer and see everything as a nail. McPhee talks at great length about how Harris disagrees with the plate tectonics orthodoxy in some ways, and has many specific examples, but I didn't get a great sense of what the precise disagreement is and what the consequences of one or the other framework would be on one's geophysical worldview.

Mike Renz says

As a geologist and an Ohio Boy, this work of John McPhee is something special for me.
McPhee, a non-geologist, is a great teacher of geology. In Suspect Terrain, McPhee gives an account of a geologic road trip he took with the legendary geologist Anita Harris from Ohio to Brooklyn, NY. The road trip was part of a continuing effort of McPhee to learn the geologic history of the North American Continent. This book covers just one segment of that effort that covers the eastern midwest to the Appalachians. His presentation of the geology is artful and complete.

What I find so valuable in this book is his presentation of Anita Harris. Like too many great women of science, Dr. Harris has not received the public attention and recognition she deserves. There is so much to admire about this remarkable person. She was a poor kid in NYC and recognized geology as a way to intellectually and physically escape from the confines of poverty and the urban wasteland. She started this effort as a child, by taking long bus rides alone out to Coney Island with a window screen in her lap - which she used at the beach to sift sand for treasures - both material and geologic. Dr. Harris had a keen and honest intellect that allowed her to question everything, including herself, with a razor sharp honesty. She also thought about fundamental questions. She retained her child-like curiosity throughout her life and applied it to practical, scientific use. As a result, she made one of the most important and useful discoveries in the history of the science of geology.

Dr. Harris is also important to me as she roamed the same hallways and library stacks as I did in Orton Hall at The Ohio State University. Although I was a highly engaged student who revealed in the history of the Geology Department and who worked in micropaleontology, as did Anita Harris, I never once heard her name at the University. She had taken her PhD there in 1970 and I was an undergrad from 77 to 85.

McPhees work are referred to as “Geo-Poetry”. This soggy term is not accurate. I would call his work “comprehendible and artful. I frequently listen to his series of books on Audio to refresh my grasp of North American geology.

I passionately recommend this book to anyone who wonders "how did this all get here?".

Caterina says

If a piece of country is possibly exotic and possibly not—if it is so enigmatic that no one can say whether it has come from near or far—it is known as suspect terrane.

I especially loved this, Book 2 of John McPhee’s geological saga *Annals of the Former World*, because of Anita Harris, the feisty, smart, and independent-minded pioneering field-geologist who accompanied

McPhee from her childhood home in Brooklyn when Brooklyn was not cool, across New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana, smacking rocks with her sledge hammer, while opening up to our minds the lower realms of the world (its “terrane”) and the tales of its scientist-explorers and their evolving theories.

Pennsylvania is my home state and during the late 1980s for my job I drove all over the state on back roads, navigating with USGS (United States Geological Survey) “quad maps” — so it was utterly fascinating to learn about complex and convoluted deep terrane that lay beneath the surface terrain, and the various theories of how it had all come to be. The earth’s visual and conceptual poetry brought to light through John McPhee’s verbal artistry. There is a fair amount of technical detail in this volume, which I enjoyed.

Fascinating too were the scientist battles—very much tainted by nonscientific concerns. First, when a new explanatory theory dawned in the mind of a scientist, it would typically be ignored, or vehemently rejected and ridiculed by other scientists, no matter how much supporting evidence. But later, once a theory became accepted and established, Anita, always a skeptic, found that some scientists started taking it as doctrine and over-applying it, not bothering to check the evidence, or worse, making the evidence “fit” where the fit was questionable to say the least. How did the geologically jumbled, complex mountains of Pennsylvania arise? According to Anita, the evidence provides answers only up to a point, and after that, existing theories fail to explain what is actually there. We need to admit we don’t know. It is “suspect terrane.”

In Suspect Terrain was first published in 1983 and the revised five book compilation *Annals of the Former World* (the one I’m actually reading) came out in 1998. It seemed strange to read the book in 2018 that discussed at some length the glaciation and melting cycles of the earth without any mention of *current* climate change -- although he noted that for most of the earth’s history, there was not any ice at all — ice ages (such as the one we may be approaching the end of) are an anomaly. The scale of geologic time is so long that what’s going on now is only the tiniest blip. But the science, on the other hand, moves quickly—I’m already hoping that after I finish this series I’ll find a follow up by McPhee on new theories and insights since he wrote.

Kelly says

I do so love John McPhee and his writings. I think he is so lyrical. Maybe it's just that he takes science out of the realm of math!

I also wonder how the geology in the book has stood the test of time, but most of what's there is likely still accurate. We just learn what we didn't know and which suppositions were wrong as time passes.

I have to remember and use the phrase 'in suspect terrain.'

He has written on such a variety of topics, that I think everyone should read a book by him...

Darwin8u says

Not my favorite McPhee by far, but still a strong work. There are parts when he gets a little lost in the weeds or conodonts of time, but still, I'm glad enough to have read it. Unfortunately for me, I started with Book 2 of the four major books that make up McPhee's pulitzer prize winning opus Annals of the Former World. Still

to go: Book 1: Basin and Range; Book 3: Rising from the Plains; Book 4: Assembling California.

If you haven't read McPhee before, I'd suggest starting with Coming into the Country, The Curve of Binding Energy, Encounters with the Archdruid or A Sense of Where You Are before busting into his geology books.

Alan Mills says

This is basically an explication of the geography of the Appalachian Mountains, with extended side discussions of glacial theory and plate tectonics. Very illuminating for us non-geologists....although a few passages are too overloaded with technical jargon which threw me.

As usual, McPhee frames his narrative as a journey and conversation with an expert, this time a geologist, Anita Harris. They begin their journey in New York City, and travel across Route 80, ending approximately on the border between Indiana and Illinois....although the discussion encompasses the entire Great Lake system.

The Appalachians, which form the heart of the story, are perplexing from a geological point of view. They are actually the THIRD set of mountains to arise in roughly this same spot, each worn down by erosion. The original set were higher than the Alps.

This means that Appalachia is not a simple up thrust of rocks. Rather, the rocks have thrust up, fallen over and folded in on themselves (like waves in the ocean), and then been superheated by the pressure of the next set of mountains to rise on top of them. This complex series of events means that there is virtually no oil in the Appalachians (oil burns away if temperatures get too hot), but the purest coal in the world...which requires heat and pressure in huge amounts to form.

The geology is further complicated by the fact that about 20,000 years ago, they were covered in a sheet of ice thousands of feet thick....yes, actually COVERED! This glacial ice extended as far south as New York City (where the outflow at th southern edge formed Long Island) and northern New Jersey (the Delaware Water Gap was partially shaped by ice).

The Appalachians also pose a problem for plate tectonics. Generally, huge mountain ranges are thought to arise when two plates crash together. But the Appalachians formed three times in the same place over 100's of millions of years. How could plates have crashed that slowly?

One final note: the last book I read, Reading the Forested Landscape, focused on unraveling the history of the forests in northern New England...and focused exclusively on the post-glacial period. The lesson of that book is that what we think of as virgin forest never existed, and forests are in a constant state of flux. This lesson is driven home many fold by In Suspect Terrain, which makes clear that the post-glacial period is a paper thin slice of the history of the region..so small, it would not be visible on a timeline.

Martha says

Suspect Terrain is as interesting for me in parts as other McPhee books were in the whole. It was interesting to be reminded of the way this country looked a gazillion years ago - something enchanting about a warm sea

covering now dry land, a coral reef in Chicago. But I couldn't keep the geological terminology in my head - would have loved a glossary - and got overwhelmed due to my lack of basic knowledge. McPhee is such an excellent writer. I kept thinking how I would have loved to have had this as a reading assignment in my basic college geology class.

Joan says

This book was an interesting, albeit a bit dry with vocabulary beyond me, which is why the ability to quickly look up words is a good thing, read about the geology around I-80. I won't take the rock cuts along highways for granted :-).

Frank says

With apologies to the East, the best part of this book about geology in the eastern United States is a riveting description of an earthquake near Yellowstone. It's illustrative of why "Basin and Range" is a more enjoyable book, but McPhee's talents are are perhaps more acutely apparent here, as the less flamboyant geology of the East requires more descriptive acumen than the sexier West. As usual, McPhee is masterful in his distillation of the eons and his biographical treatment of renowned geologist Anita Harris. My three star rating reflects only my own intellectual limitations in absorbing the material to it's fullest. Smarter and more patient readers will easily afford it four of five stars.

Don Kent says

I picked this book off my self thinking I had read it shortly after its publication in 1983. Now I am not so sure that is correct as a good share of its content was new to me. Great writing, typical of McPhee, and a fine discussion of the validity of Plate Techtonics.

Jim says

Who would think that the subject of geology could be vitally interesting? At Dartmouth College during Ordovician times, it was a dreary parade of synclines, geosynclines, and anticlines. Now it seems that the plate tectonics people has swept all that away. What John McPhee does in his book In Suspect Terrain is accompany geologist Anita Harris across the eastern United States, mostly in the Appalachians, and follow her arguments about the incredibly complex processes that have formed and re-formed the area over time.

Harris accepts the general notions of plate tectonics, but generally believes that many of its adherents practice a kind of top-down science, letting theories do all the heavy lifting, rather than going out with rock hammers and magnifiers to verify their theories. "While geologists argue, the rocks just sit there," Harris's late husband (also a geologist) remarked. "And sometimes they seem to smile."

McPhee's enthusiasm on the subject is infectious. While not absorbing all the details (there are so many), I felt myself swept along by his enthusiasm and that of Harris.

I don't read many books on the sciences, because I am repelled by their dryness. This and the other books in the series by McPhee are an exception.
