

Reader Views

Book reviews, for readers, by readers.

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Interview with Peter Lewis

Author of *Treehouse Chronicles: One Man's Dream of Life Aloft*

Reader Views is happy to have with us, Peter Lewis, author of “Treehouse Chronicles.” Welcome Peter!

Irene: Peter, you have a book here that is very unlike other books. Tell us a little more about it.

Peter: “Treehouse Chronicles” is a story about people, the joys of working together, and the wonder of the natural world, all wrapped around a dream shared by kids of all ages—the creation of an enormous treehouse filled with odd contraptions, secret locks, furniture made from trees, and a drawbridge activated by gravity and falling boulders. It's a hardcover, large format book full of photographs, sketches, and watercolors. But it's more than just big and pretty: it has a wonderful message - it's a coffee-table book with heart. It's the story of what happens when big people decide to be kids again and they have tools and lumber. I call the book my "master's thesis on irony" because it explores the ups and downs (pun intended) of living a dream which on some days seemed like the greatest adventure in the world, and on other days seemed like the biggest mistake I ever made. I kept a journal during the construction and the 1400 pages that I amassed form the heart of the book: from day 1, when inspiration struck, to day 1028, when I splashed the last bit of shellac on the last stair tread. It's the story of an ordinary man who goes on a great journey without ever leaving his back yard.

Irene: What inspired you to publish this book?

Peter: I've written a bunch of books and this was my first book of whimsy (and it won't be the last). I published this book because people need to know that childhood never really has to end, and that being a grownup isn't just about going to meetings and paying bills and shuttling kids to soccer practice and answering e-mails. Although chronologically I was in my 40s when I built the treehouse, the whole time I felt like I was about twelve—and I had the time of my life.

Irene: Tell us about yourself and how “Treehouse Chronicles” reflects on your own life.

Peter: I grew up in a family where imagination, creativity, and industry were highly prized. My parents didn't encourage me to think outside the box—they told me they

weren't sure there was a box. (My father, who is 80, builds boats.) This idea of pushing, learning, and experimenting, has stuck with me my entire life. But, we weren't just idle dreamers—there was a practical side. When I was little, my mom said to me, “Dreams need feet, Peter. They're no good stuck between your ears.” She meant that the “doing” part of dreaming was even more important than the “thinking” part—she (and my dad, too) wanted *results*. (It was okay if the dream was silly—as long as you *got it done*.)

Irene: You were very fortunate to have parents who were so upbeat. They seemed to be ahead of their time when you were growing up. Did you appreciate their encouragement when you were growing up?

Peter: In most ways my parents, and my early years, were fairly conventional: two parents, two kids, dog, house in the suburbs (fortunately surrounded by forests and swamps). My dad was a mechanical engineer; my mom was mostly home, but worked a little. Typical for the 1960's. My parents were different—although I'm not sure "ahead of their time" describes them. I certainly appreciated the freedom they gave me to get a feel for the creative life. We had rules, to be sure, but my parents weren't afraid of saying "yes," whenever I wanted to try something. They let me keep snakes in my room (and in my pockets); I was allowed to climb on the roof (as well as trees) starting when I was about six; tools and lumber were everywhere for me to experiment with; playing in the swamp behind the house was considered normal. My parents told me I could do anything. I believed them.

Irene: Do you have children? If so, do you give the same encouragement your parents gave you?

Peter: I have two children. And no, I don't give them the same encouragement my parents gave me—I give them more. My typical response to "Daddy, can I?" is, "YES!" I only say no if something is truly dangerous or unethical or would hurt someone else. The pat answer that most parents give their kids is "no." They often do this because "yes" would inconvenience them or make them look odd to their friends and neighbors (or both). I think that's sad. Lest you think our home is chaotic, let me reassure you that it is not. Both my kids are respectful, studious, well behaved, and motivated to succeed in life. They have been encouraged to learn the value of initiative and hard work and they know where life's real boundaries lie. My son is a junior at a prestigious engineering school and will likely go on to get his master's degree in nuclear engineering (he wants to work in the field of marine architecture). He is my best friend and when I get older I want to be just like him. My daughter is tall and lovely, reads several books a week, and is about to help me renovate our barn just in time for her new horse. She's only 13 so she's not sure what she wants to be when she gets older (notice I didn't say "when she grows up"), but she's already talking about college. (By the way, both kids are home schooled—all the credit goes to my wife, Karen.) Karen is the rock in the family. She's German, and very pragmatic. Without her we'd be completely out of control. She doesn't climb trees or keep snakes in her pockets, but she does cheer us on. Occasionally she says "no" and it's always a good thing when she does (it saves us trips to the emergency room). She's wonderful and the love of my life.

Irene: T.B.R. Walsh is the illustrator. Tell us a little about Mr. Walsh and how he became part of your book.

Peter: Ted is my friend, business partner, and a craftsman and artist. He helped conceive of and build the treehouse, and his artistic talent helped make the book truly special. He

grew up in northern Massachusetts and on the Maine coast and his artistic bent showed up early. Before he turned four, he drew a three-dimensional cow.

“There’s something wrong with this kid,” his dad said. “We’ve got to get him tested.”

He has studied the history of art in New England and Italy, dabbled in experimental archeology and comparative ancient languages, once built a Celtic wheelhouse, and restored a 37-foot wooden sloop (which he sails on the coast of Maine). After college he taught art history, history, and architecture design at a private secondary school for nine years where he slowly lost his mind. He taught wilderness and leadership skills at a prestigious wilderness medicine school in New Hampshire for many years, and lives in a cottage in the woods with a wolf.

Irene: When you were trekking with your camera and journal, were you aware at that time your findings will end up in a book?

Peter: Very early on, as I was tinkering with design ideas for the treehouse, it occurred to me that this was going to be a series of mishaps that many people would find interesting—I can’t imagine not deciding to do the book. I’m always looking for the extraordinary in ordinary things, so writing a book about my little adventure hanging a cottage in the sky was inevitable.

Irene: Much of your book is about nature. From this, I gather that you bond with nature and the creatures in it. Tell us about your experiences.

Peter: Again, this stems from the early years of my childhood. I grew up in the woods, spent much of my free time exploring the local hills and swamps, and frequently snuck wild things into my room (logs full of ants, snakes, big rocks, bird’s nests, bee’s nests, turtles, leaves, live squirrels, etc.) My parents encouraged all this (except for the ants, which my mom had to vacuum up). We spent summers deep in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York on a lake where we had to take a boat to get to our camp. I thought it was paradise and I spent much of my time fishing or knee-deep in muck bonding with frogs. I went on to get a degree in forestry, and though I never worked in that industry, my love for wild places has never waned, (e.g. I spent twenty years on-and-off as a professional mountain guide). I feel most at home in the forests and mountains and streams.

Irene: The book is about fulfilling a dream. In reality, whose dream is this?

Peter: It’s certainly my dream—at least in the sense that I was the guy who first had the nutty idea. But, there were many conspirators, and, if this project was anything, it was a magnet for people who don’t take life too seriously (my father and my son in particular). I would have friends call me up and say things like, “Hey, I’m not busy on Saturday, can I come over and help you lug heavy timbers up a ladder? Please?” So, at least in a sense, this dream of mine was contagious and when it was over there were dozens of people whose lives had somehow been enriched by it. And perhaps it wasn’t even the concrete dream itself—the indisputable fact that we were hanging a three-ton house in the sky—but rather the idea that this sort of thing was not only possible, but should be encouraged. I’ve had many readers tell me that this book has inspired them to throw convention to the wind and follow their own dream. I love the way that makes me feel.

Irene: As humans, one of our greatest needs is to belong – be needed. You filled that need for your friends. Do you believe that your dream became your friends’ reality?

Peter: I hope not. I hope this dream we all shared will motivate my friends to go out and do their own great (if offbeat) things. And I hope they invite me over when they need help.

Irene: There is a deep message in “Treehouse Chronicles.” Please tell us what it is that you hope your readers will “get”?

Peter: I’ve probably already answered this:

- Dreams need feet. They’re no good stuck between your ears.
- Childhood never really has to end.
- Don’t take life too seriously (and don’t worry if people think you’re a nut).
- The natural world is a wonderful place; spend more time there.
- Creativity and hard work have their own rewards.
- You don’t have to travel to some far-flung corner of the world to have an adventure—I had my greatest adventure in my own back yard.

Irene: Why this message, and not some other message, like hiking is fun.

Peter: Because this message (described in the bullet points above) can be applied to anybody, anytime, anywhere, doing anything. It is not bound by social status, or financial security, or cultural convention, and is not limited to any one activity.

P.S. I’m not sure hiking is fun; my knees hurt (unless I’m running).

Irene: Explain to us about the squirrel – the squirrel with an attitude.

Peter: Vinny (Vincent R. Thugrat) is a red squirrel whose great grandfather came over on the boat from the Old Country. He is the principle antagonist in the book and my archenemy. He owns the tree (and, he thinks, the entire forest), and sees me as both a trespasser and a vandal. He is loud, obnoxious, and leaves cigarette butts and turds everywhere. He chews on woodwork, steals insulation, parties until the wee hours of the morning, and is just an all-around grouch. We constantly bicker and he always wins because he’s louder. I’ve often thought of killing him, but he has bigger, more thuggish cousins (all named Vinny) who swing baseball bats.

Irene: Does Vinny’s character resemble anyone you know?

Peter: Danny DeVitto in the sitcom Taxi.

Irene: What was your purpose of including the squirrel?

Peter: I had no choice. He threatened my family. Besides, he offers a kind of Mob-style comic relief.

Irene: It sounds like Vinny has a deeper message than just being a nuisance. What message does he give?

Peter: Don’t give Vinny too much credit. He’s just a squirrel (and not an overly bright one at that). He’s made up of equal parts angst, opportunism, and territorial imperative. He gets far more press than he deserves. Vinny does not represent some deep and repressed feelings of anger or inadequacy that I have. He’s just a common thug and we play him up in the book and in interviews because he makes people laugh.

Irene: Thank you Peter. I can't help but smile thinking of how much fun you had writing this book. And, needless to say, your readers will get a charge out of it too. Is there anything else that you would like your readers to know about you or your book?

Peter: Making the book was as fun and creative as making the building—and it was inside work with no heavy lifting.

You can visit me at <http://www.tmcbooks.com> “Treehouse Chronicles” is available from all the usual online and storefront booksellers. If people would like signed copies, they can order from our website (we even pay the shipping).