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EDUCATION OF A WANDERING MAN

By Louis L'Amour

Introduction by Daniel J. Boorstin. 240 pp. plus 16-page photo insert. Bantam Books.

A few days before his class in Jamestown, North Dakota graduated high school, Louis L'Amour (then Louis LaMoore) sat in a Singapore bar with his shipmates. He had decided that "school was interfering with [his] education." This intellectual autobiography details the three-fold path the late Mr. L'Amour travelled to become admirably, refreshingly self-educated. Purported to be an account of Mr. L'Amour's extensive reading, these musings convey far more about the author's exotic travels and the colorful people he learned from, mostly under the austere conditions of his young adult years when he was hungry, alone, believing in himself when no one else did. Mr. L'Amour crisscrossed the Third World as a sailor, growing sensitive to Asian and African culture. He trekked on foot through Death Valley. Sometimes he traveled alone, but inevitably he met interesting storytellers to learn from: hoboes, retired gunfighters, old cowboys, ancient miners, rugged individualists with names like Old Doc Yak, Singapore Charlie, Russian Joe Smith and Oriental Slim. Yet always he found time to read, and Mr. L'Amour lists what he read during each of seven years in the 1930s, averaging more than 104 books per year, eclectic samplings from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Christopher Marlowe, Marcel Proust to Claude McKay. At times officious and pontifical, certainly repetitive in a way that suggests more revision was planned before the author's death last year, this memoir rises above its tedious moments to provide the same intriguing historical insight that has won praise for the author's fiction. Mr. L'Amour's appealing erudition stems from a conviction that history is "the story of people and how they lived," and long before the final page the reader feels more educated for having listened to this piquant chronicler of frontiers one last time.