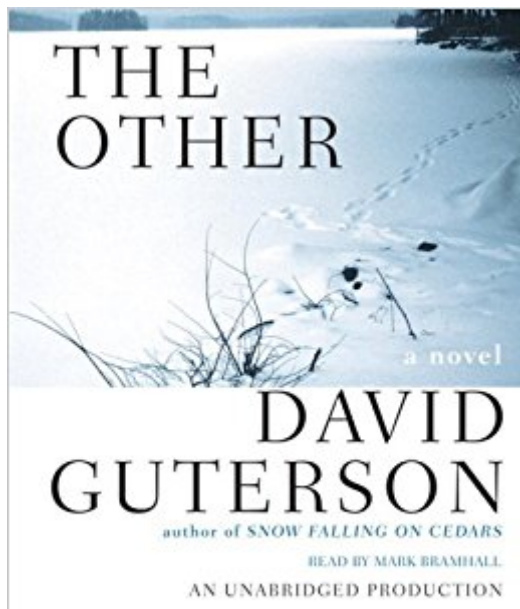


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# The Other



## Synopsis

From the author of the best-selling *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a dazzling new novel about youth and idealism, adulthood and its compromises, and two powerfully different visions of what it means to live a good life. John William Barry has inherited the pedigree "and wealth" of two of Seattle's elite families; Neil Countryman is blue-collar Irish. Nevertheless, when the two boys meet in 1972 at age sixteen, they're brought together by what they have in common: a fierce intensity and a love of the outdoors that takes them together into Washington's remote backcountry, where they must rely on their wits "and each other" to survive. Soon after graduating from college, Neil sets out on a path that will lead him toward a life as a devoted schoolteacher and family man. But John William makes a radically different choice, dropping out of college and moving deep into the woods, convinced that it is the only way to live without hypocrisy. When John William enlists Neil to help him disappear completely, Neil finds himself drawn into a web of secrets and often agonizing responsibility, deceit, and tragedy "one that will finally break open with a wholly unexpected, life-altering revelation. Riveting, deeply humane, *The Other* is David Guterson's most brilliant and provocative novel to date.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, June 2008: When John William Barry and Neil Countryman meet at a high school track meet in the early 1970s, they are two sides of the same coin: John is a trust fund baby and student of a prestigious private school while Neil is solidly working class, but they share an affinity for the outdoors and apprehension over impending changes in their lives. After an unintentionally

challenging week lost in the wilds of the North Cascades, John is compelled to an ascetic path: life in a remote river valley in the Olympic Peninsula rainforest, where he chips a shelter from a granite wall and immerses himself in the esoterica of Gnostic dualism --a philosophy that holds that the material world is illusional and destructive. Neil meanwhile chooses a traditional path as a father and school teacher, despite his troubled friend's exhortations to eschew "hamburger world" and find truth in a simpler, stripped-down existence. Nothing is that simple, of course, and *The Other* compellingly explores the compromises we make to balance meaning and security in our lives through the choices (and their subsequent consequences) of these two men. --Jon Foro --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Guterson (*Snow Falling on Cedars*) runs out of gas mulling the story of two friends who take divergent paths toward lives of meaning. A working-class teenager in 1972 Seattle, Neil Countryman, a middle of the pack kind of guy and the book's contemplative narrator, befriends trust fund kid John William Barryâpassionate, obsessed with the world's hypocrisies and alarmingly prone to bouts of tearsâover a shared love of the outdoors. Guterson nicely draws contrasts between the two as they grow into adulthood: Neil drifts into marriage, house, kids and a job teaching high school English, while John William pulls an *Into the Wild*, moving to the remote wilderness of the Olympic Mountains and burrowing into obscure Gnostic philosophy. When John William asks for a favor that will sever his ties to the hamburger world forever, loyal Neil has a decision to make. Guterson's prose is calm and pleasing as ever, but applied to Neil's staid personality it produces little dramatic tension. Once the contrasts between the two are set up, the novel has nowhere to go, ultimately floundering in summary and explanation. (June) Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

This was an excellent book! The characters were interesting, even compelling. The plot may have been a bit dark, but not overly so. It helped that I grew up in the Seattle area at about the same time as these guys. I have been to many of the same places and done many of the same things, though not to the same extent. These guys were hardcore outdoorsmen. They were also extremely well-read, and I enjoyed the many literary references. I have recommended this to several of my friends who are serious bibliophiles.

I write this review with the bias of being a fan of this author's. Once again, Guterson's

inclination/knowledge of nature shines through in another one of his books. I was a little bit taken aback, however, when reading the part about Neil's experience in teaching ESL to immigrant children. I especially do not think I talked like that when I was placed in ESL classes as a kid. But, of course, if I was not then moved to more advanced English courses, I might not have ever read any of the author's books. I also did not expect that ending, which gave me much to think about, but then again I did not expect the two friends' time in the woods to end like that, either.

Guterson continues with another riveting novel. I love the abundance of detail he gives the reader, painting a picture but not holding the reader's hand in explanation. Questions of how someone ought to live are easily woven through the dialogue, but judgements are left to the reader. The narrator admits defeat in the face of the hard questions and thus is easily relatable. Something I love, that is criticized about Guterson's novels, is his unwillingness to draw the conclusion into a tidy package. Life is messy, the characters and situations reflect that there is often never a clear answer, simply a series of conflicting values that often have more to do with one another than is admitted.

While this book lacks the plot and historical analysis of the outstanding *Snow Falling on Cedars*, it has something much more powerful: a clear case for the value of ordinary, loving parents--fathers in particular--and a sense of purpose in living one's life. I may be responding to this work through the prism of my own struggles: like Neil Countryman I am the child of a blue-collar father and a resident of the Pacific Northwest. I identify with his work ethic because in the same era I waited tables and sold clothes for tuition money while kids with financial aid packages bought stereos and lots of the aforementioned clothes. And much like Neil Countryman, I learned that those advantages meant little when compared to the advantages of strong parents and determination. Neil's obsession with great literature and poetry fills for him the role of a spiritual center while John William's fascination with the Gnostics does little to address the gaping holes in his soul. Their mutual love for the wilderness gives them a way to connect, but their obvious love for one another provides them both with anchors that don't quite keep them moored to satisfaction. It's easy to wonder what could have soothed the frantic colic of the adult John William, what could have answered the perpetual questions of Neil Countryman after John William's death. My one quibble with the book was the gross "Whole-Foods-ization" of Neil in the form of precious foodstuffs. I'd have appreciated seeing Neil saunter down to Ivar's, order a 4-piece, and toss the fries to the seagulls. Had Neil remained a bit truer to his roots when living in the city, I'd have probably liked this even more than *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

This book was, as all that I've read by David Guterson, written beautifully. Again, it did not reach the summit of popularity that his SNOW FALLING ON CEDARS did--that one having been made into a movie--yet, THE OTHER is indeed a worthy read. Mr. Guterson manages to elicit compassion and angst for one character while adroitly showing that early childhood has far reaching influences. Anything this writer puts on paper, as far as I'm concerned, is worthy of "a read."

Once again David Guterson has captured my mind and attention with a beautiful and well written book. His storytelling is believable and quite visually descriptive. I enjoy his wonderfully flawed and common characters being put into uncommon situations. You can never predict where you are going with his adventures until you get there! I fell in love with his writing when I read "Snow falling on Cedars," and his subsequent books are equally enjoyable.

David Guterson's "The Other" got a fantastic review in the Baltimore Sun about two years ago. On the strength of that, I bought the book. Big mistake. The story line of two young men, who as friends and contemporaries choose different paths in life is compelling. But that's where it ends. The narrative is ponderous and heavy. Long, long sentences rife with dependent clauses leave the reader hanging, hanging, hanging. Just how many dependent clauses can Guterson put into a single sentence? Read the book and find out! Throw me a lifeline, David Guterson! How 'bout some dialogue instead? Another reviewer said this is the opposite of a page-turner. I agree. Almost as annoying as the long-winded narrative structure is Guterson's reliance on stereotypes, trite Americana and period trivia, which he thinks captivates readers. Not me. I don't give one-star ratings often but that's what "The Other" gets.

I know Seattle well but learned a ton.

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