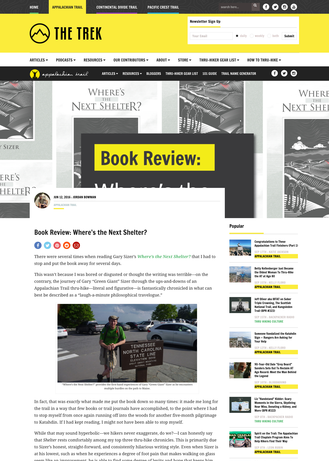


JUN 12, 2018 - JORDAN BOWMAN
Appalachian Trail, Books

Book Review: Where's the Next Shelter?

There were several times when reading Gary Sizer's *Where's the Next Shelter?* that I had to stop and put the book away for several days.

This wasn't because I was bored or disgusted or thought the writing was terrible—on the contrary, the journey of Gary "Green Giant" Sizer through the ups-and-downs of an Appalachian Trail thru-hike—literal and figurative—is fantastically chronicled in what can best be described as a "laugh-a-minute philosophical travelogue."

Where's the Next Shelter? - Gary Sizer's trail nickname is "Green Giant" (Note: All the documents available headline to Thoreau)

In fact, that was exactly what made me put the book down so many times: it made me long for the trail in a way that few books or trail journals have accomplished, to the point where I had to stop myself from once again running off into the woods for another thru-hike, preferably one to Katahdin. If I had been single, I might not have been able to stop myself.

While that may sound hyperbolic—we hikers never exaggerate, do we?—I can honestly say that *Shelter* rests comfortably among my top three thru-hike chronicles. This is primarily due to Sizer's unique, straight-forward, and consistently hilarious writing style. Even when Sizer is at his lowest, such as when he experiences a degree of foot pain that makes walking on glass seem like an improvement, he still manages to find a way to make you laugh and hope him trudging toward the Maine backwoods. It's one of the purest glimpses into a thru-hiker's mindset that I've seen on the page, giving *Where's the Next Shelter?* a very authentic personality.

Gary Sizer and his dog Ranger (Left) and Gary Sizer and his wife Thoreau (Right)

The book also benefits from a tight focus rather than trying to mix in the tell-all A.T. history books like *A Walk in the Woods*, or attempting to capture a sense of the grandeur that simply can't be replicated on the big screen. Sizer focuses exclusively on his own immediate experiences throughout the journey. Instead of descriptions of the vastness of the valleys or the majesty of the mountaintops, we are treated to claustrophobic interactions with the fellow Dell commune members, and to the slow, painful degradation of Sizer's feet, and to the bitter feud between Sizer and a New York ski resort over—quite literally—a single crest of electricity.

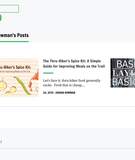
By focusing on the small details of a thru-hike, Sizer has done readers a great service: he allows us to focus on the truly memorable aspects of a thru-hike instead of just the scenery, which, in hindsight, mostly looks like a giant wash of green.

This attention to the small details of a thru-hike finds its true worth through the descriptions of Sizer's hiking companions. Great care is taken to depict the variety of friendships developed throughout a thru-hike, particularly the reality of how the trail can simultaneously bring together and tear apart dedicated companions within hours.

Gary Sizer and Thoreau (Left) and Gary Sizer and Ranger (Right) on the A.T.

Throughout the tale, Sizer relays the days he spent hiking with a wide cast of characters, including "Voldemort," a spunky female thru-hiker renowned equally for her speedy gait and her capacity for morning conversation; "Ninja Mike," a yoga fanatic with a hardcore lust for the outdoors and an equally hardcore mustache; and "Lemmy," an eccentric Israeli artist who draws a comic strip on every mountain top shelter and has a penchant for animal-themed headgear.

Sizer creates a unique voice for every one of his companions and describes their slow, sometimes-horrifying transformations as the days and miles crawl by, showing just how close a trail community can be for Katahdin—and sometimes, how infuriating it can be to be surrounded by these same people for weeks or months on end.


The final glimpse of the journey Sizer, Thoreau, Ranger, Lemmy, and all of the other characters have shared with the English language for the past five months. Sizer's journey is almost over, but his memories will last a lifetime.

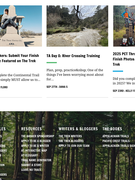
Which brings us back to Sizer himself. Many may recognize him mostly as the guy who went through an extreme body transformation while hiking the A.T. in 2014. What those pictures cannot tell, however, is the subtle insightfulness of his writing style.

Sizer takes a certain glee in mocking the self-serious nature of the various people and situations he meets along the trail; in particular, he seems most critical when his own preconceptions and ideals get in the way of his true enjoyment of the adventure around him. This point of view—a retrospective introspection—allows us to again see the changes in perspective and personality that Sizer experiences during the 2,189.3 miles of Katahdin, but more importantly, he's been allowed to see the living embodiment of that mantra.

Gary Sizer, Thoreau, Ranger, Lemmy, and Ninja Mike at Katahdin Stream Campground (Left) and Gary Sizer, Thoreau, and Ranger at the Katahdin Sign (Right) (Photos courtesy of Gary Sizer, Katahdin Stream Campground photo from Katahdin Stream Campground Facebook page)

I started reading *Where's the Next Shelter?* expecting another trail journal that has been slightly adapted into book form. Yet I was constantly surprised and rejuvenated to find that Sizer placed so much extra care into developing and focusing on the spirit of a thru-hike, a written nostalgia for the days when descriptions left in the backwoods of the Appalachians was his sole purpose for six months of his life.

If you are looking for a detailed description of the splits or historical landmarks present throughout the A.T., you may be better served elsewhere; if you want a depiction of the reason why so many individuals look back at their thru-hikes with a romantic longing, *Where's the Next Shelter?* will find you counting the days until you can start your own journey on the path following the white blazes.


Gary Sizer at Katahdin (Photo courtesy of Gary Sizer)

Get your own copy of *Where's the Next Shelter?* on Amazon.com or view supplemental material at WhereTheNextShelter.com.

Full disclosure: Gary Sizer and I are both writers here at Appalachian Trials. Gary provided me with a copy of the book for review but had no input regarding content. All images were provided courtesy of WhereTheNextShelter.com.

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Jordan Bowman's Bio
If you yelled "To Duck!" on the A.T. in 2014, it wasn't long before I showed up to give a lesson. As a writer, teacher, hiker, and general know-it-all, I'm happy to talk your ear off about stories, books, running, Star Wars and, of course, hiking thru-it-all on a trail-wide monomaniac afternoon and have professional experience writing for websites, magazines, and old-fashioned newspapers.
JUN 12TH - JORDAN BOWMAN
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