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## Review of Fox at the Wood's Edge: A Biography of Loren Eiseley

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*Fox at the Wood's Edge: A Biography of Loren Eiseley.* By Gale E. Christianson. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990. Notes, bibliography, index. 517 pp. \$29.95.

Loren Eiseley, anthropologist and essayist, created his own persona in his essays and autobiography. Reluctant to have his self-portrait examined, he snubbed at least one biographer who became too curious about the facts. Several years after Eiseley's death, but still in time to conduct fruitful interviews with Eiseley's wife, Mabel, and many friends and associates, biographer Gale Christianson arrived at the right moment, with the technique and discernment to produce a fine biography that provides a new perspective on Eiseley's self-portrayal. Not that Christianson's version is better or even truer than Eiseley's—but it makes possible a deeper, more complex view of a remarkable writer.

Biographer and autobiographer coexist uncomfortably in the early chapters, where Christianson must rely heavily on Eiseley's own reports of his unhappy, lonely Nebraska childhood. Here the transitions and long paraphrases of Eiseley's narratives are somewhat distracting. Christianson's discussion of Eiseley's adult years, supported by many interviews and a variety of documents, is richer and more thought provoking. There are some elements of exposé: the distinguished professor never finished his dissertation, the lone wolf did not camp alone, the macho rail rider preferred a regular commute, the bronzed bone digger did comparatively little field work, the famous teacher often fled from students, the University of Pennsylvania provost was an inept administrator. More intriguing, though, are the gaps between Eiseley's own versions of events and those same events as remembered by other participants. It is not surprising that Eiseley's autobiographical essays are fictions, but the details discovered by Christianson suggest how Eiseley applied his artistry to his life.

Although Christianson, a historian, foregoes literary interpretations, he does acknowledge Eiseley's style and suggests that the elegant, sonorous phrases were largely responsible for Eise-

ley's success. As a systematic researcher, however, Christianson (like Eiseley's fellow scientists) suspects Eiseley of "cant," pointing out where he "recycles" his material and contradicts himself for the sake of a beautiful sentence.

In accounting for Eiseley's success, Christianson also acknowledges (as Eiseley often did not) the people who cared for him. Students, editors, and English teachers loved Eiseley's words; women and fatherly advisors responded to his air of vulnerability. From late adolescence until middle age, Eiseley always had at least one mentor; he himself was mentor to very few. His wife and secretary managed the everyday details of his life and ran interference in crises. Christianson wisely resists psychoanalyzing his subject but does mention that Eiseley's alienation, social awkwardness, and need for constant recognition are typical of people who have suffered childhood abuse. Still, there is no explaining exactly why his particular genius took the path it did.

Eiseley occasionally mused about being outside of time; Christianson places him squarely *in* time. He views Eiseley as a poet masquerading as a scientist, a "secular puritan" who sounds like a mystic, a well-cared-for "insider" with the instincts of a victimized outsider, a man who should have been having more fun than he will admit—in short, an "escape artist," a fox at the wood's edge.

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