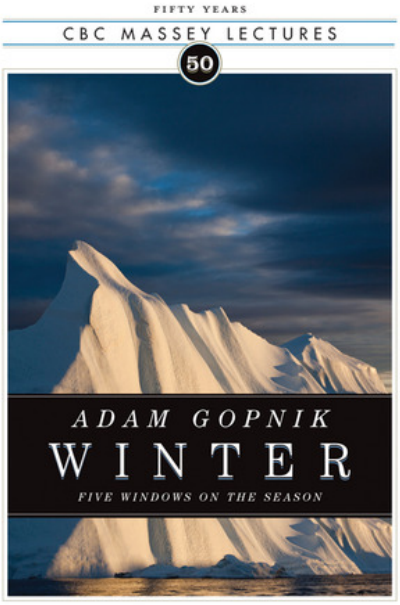

Winter: Five Windows on the Season

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A taste for winter, a love of winter — “a mind for winter” — is for many a part of the modern human condition. International bestselling author Adam Gopnik does for this storied season what he did for the City of Light in the New York Times bestseller *Paris to the Moon*. Here he tells the story of winter in five parts: Romantic Winter, Radical Winter, Recuperative Winter, Recreational Winter, and Remembering Winter. In this stunningly beautiful meditation, Gopnik touches on a kaleidoscope of subjects, from the German romantic landscape to the politics of polar exploration to the science of ice. And in the end, he pays homage to what could be a lost season — and thus, a lost collective cultural history — due to the threat of global warming. Through delicate, enchanting, and intricate narrative detail, buoyed by his trademark gentle wit, Gopnik draws us into another magical world and makes us look at it anew.

Winter: Five Windows on the Season Details

Date	:	Published September 27th 2011 by House of Anansi Press (first published August 1st 2011)
ISBN	:	9780887849756
Author	:	Adam Gopnik
Format	:	Paperback 256 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Environment, Nature, History, Cultural, Canada

From Reader Review Winter: Five Windows on the Season for online ebook

dv says

Libro splendido, al tempo stesso dotto, curioso ed emozionante. Cinque storie che dicono dell'inverno costruendo trame e vicende che uniscono mondi, intrecciano le vite di personaggi, illustrano e musicano grazie a opere d'arte. Gopnik conosce i segreti del rendere un saggio un racconto dal quale è impossibile staccarsi.

Shawn says

Loved it, although the lecture focusing on hockey is a bit much for a non-fan. Hoping to be able to hear Gopnik (who grew up in Montreal) read these Massey lectures when he does so on the CBC in November (via the internet?) I like the last lecture, about winter and memory, best, and it ends so:

"'I wish I had a river I could skate away on,'" Joni Mitchell tells us, lost in Los Angeles as she longs for snows once known. Ou sont les neiges d'antan? Where are the old snows? Inside us, where they remain compressed, perhaps frozen, but still capable of being forced out from memory and finely articulated, or at least sweetly sung. Where did they go? Inside us, where they remain, as winter remains my favorite season. I still see the boy at the window, my own otherwise lost self, and feel him thinking, 'Oh, a new place, the ice palace, the river, my home -- my new home -- look at the snow falling, hear how quiet it gets!' For the time being, at least, the snow still falls, and the world, like this speaker, is given the winter gift of silence."

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itpdx says

Gopnik presented a series of lectures. This book is a written version of those lectures. He calls it cultural observations themed around winter. His winters are about snow and ice. He grew up in Montreal after all. He starts with the mini ice age and the arrival of central heat, which he thinks changed our perception of winter. We could stand in a mini Serengeti and look through the glass at winter. We could venture out knowing that we could return to safety. He explores the artistic representations of winter from that time, pictorial and written. Then he moves on to the polar expeditions in radical and permanent winter. He discusses the development of our current Christmas celebrations. He takes up recreational winter, mainly looking at urban winter recreation--skating and hockey. And then he explores what it might mean to us if we loose winter via climate change.

His oservations are interesting and thought provoking. Sometimes it is obvious that this was originally conceived as something to be spoken. There are sentences with asides that are hard to follow on the page. He is so enthusiastic about hockey and its history that I expect in person he could have carried me through that portion of the book where I lost interest.

I live in an area, western Oregon, where winter (and fall and spring) mean rain with only very occasional appearances of snow and ice, and where winter recreation usually involves driving an hour or so to the mountains. So Gopnik is writing about a form of winter that is different than my experience.

Steven Buechler says

As the crush of September/October came - with back-to-school, travels, disruptions because of labour disputes, Thanksgiving, etc - it was a pleasure to sit back once in a while and reflect on the oncoming season of snow and ice.

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"Ice wine, as every drinker knows, is sweetness made from stress. That's not news, or not exactly. All good wine takes its essential sugar from the stress of its circumstances: pinot noir, the grape of the cold country of Champagne, gets flabby and soupy as the climate warms. But ice wine is extreme sweetness made from extraordinary stress. Every winter the grapes on the Niagara Peninsula are left not merely to chill but to actually freeze - the worst thing that normally can happen to fruit - and the the brutal cold forces all the natural sugar into the core of the grape, where it waits to be pressed out.
And in that simple paradox - the hardes weather makes the nicest wine - lies a secret that gives shpae to the winter season, and to our feelings about it. Without the stress of cold in a temperate climate, without the cylce of the seasons experienced not as a gentle swell up and down but as as an extreme lurch, bang! from one quadrant of the year to the next, a compensatory pleasure would vanish from the world. There is a lovely term in botany - vernalization - referring to seeds that can only thrive in spring if they have been through the severity of winter. Well, many aspects of our life have become, in the past several hundred years, "vernalized." (Even those who live in warmth recognize the need for at least the symbols of the cold, as in all that sprayed-on-snow in Los Angeles in December.) If we didn't remember winter in spring, it wouldn't be as lovely; if we didn't think of spring in winter, or search winter to find some new emotion of its own to make up for the absent ones, half of the keyboard of life would be missing. We would be playing life with no flats or sharps, on a piano with no black keys."

Bill Hammack says

I had read Adam's Gopnik's Paris to the Moon and thoroughly enjoyed it. I picked up this book - Winter - to celebrate the arrival of the season. I started it on December 21st. It is based - or perhaps actually is - the CBC Massey Lectures he gave in 2011. I enjoyed every page of the book: It is so well written, but effortless; filled with facts, but always pellucid. I was worried that the hockey section would bore me, yet I found his take on the sport fascinating.

Marla says

I liked this book a lot. It is idiosyncratic, erudite, and well-written, despite having been also given as a series of lectures. I learned a lot about winter from many perspectives, and was fascinated by the research tidbits that Gopnik shared. I found myself searching for photos of art and listening to music that Gopnik wrote about. In fact, I listened to the entire Four Season's by Vivaldi (not just Winter) as an accompaniment! Worth reading!

Terzah says

Winter is not the season of my discontent. It's my favorite. I've always loved the austere beauty, the exhilaration of being outdoors and the coziness of being indoors, the sleepiness, the rich food, and of course Christmas, that fulcrum of the calendar when the light begins to return (never mind that I don't actually like the long hot summer days that the light returning portends!). Maybe it's because my birthday is in January.

Adam Gopnik, who wrote this tour of the artists, writers, singers, explorers and others who have asked and answered questions about winter or who have celebrated and lamented it, didn't disappoint: "My heart jumps when I hear a storm predicted...my smile rises when cold weather is promised....Gray skies and December lights are my idea of secret joy, and if there were a heaven, I would expect it to have a lowering violet-gray sky...and white lights on all the trees and the first flakes just falling, and it would always be December 19--the best day of the year, school out, stores open late, Christmas a week away."

He then goes on to chart the various roles winter plays in our consciousness, beginning with the romance of it, moving onto the explorers of the Far North, and from there into Christmas, ice hockey (Gopnik grew up in Canada) and ending with the idea of winter as the season of memory. I enjoyed almost everything about this book, not least that it made me listen to some music I'd never heard before.

The last chapter was almost sad. This is partly because Gopnik as a "humanist" (read "atheist") believes us all to be as transitory as snowflakes. Therefore, he opines, the meaning we ascribe to anything, including winter, will die when we as both individuals and as a species are finished. He calls this his sense that "the entirety of the universe could have been made--was made--without purpose, that is cold, spinning, unconscious, neither kind nor cruel, just following laws that are in the end not even laws, just regularities produced by the cycling of chances. A vast, empty room, with no one home....We are inside, naming and making, while outside the world doesn't give a damn; yet we persuade ourselves that it's a season bound by many symbols, a Christmas card picture, a thing, a state, a friend. It's winter."

I don't share that sense and I don't agree with that bleak view. But I do agree with the other reason the last chapter is sad: I, like Gopnik, worry that global warming will end winter. I hope my anecdotal sense that it doesn't snow as frequently, or as early, or get or stay as cold as it once did, is wrong. If it's right, we really will be left only with winter as a memory. It wasn't something we began...but it is something I fear we are ending.

Leslie says

I came to “Winter” from hockey, which is fitting. Hockey is a winter sport, a winter creation: one of the many ways that humans have sought to engage the blankness of the dead season, an expanse of slippery ice, and use it as our canvas, our mirror, reflecting our own image back into an uncaring void. This book is about how we humans (of the European variety, in any case) make everything about ourselves, even in a universe that, manifestly, is not about us at all.

I enjoyed “Winter: Five Windows on the Season” more than I thought I would; initially I borrowed it from the library, but when I was less than a chapter into it I purchased my own copy, which I have since adorned with innumerable scribbles and post-its. Gopnik’s text is dense with allusions; those as little-read as I will find it helpful to have browser near at hand. You will learn some things, only a few of which I have space to

touch on below. “Winter” is a very rewarding read.

The subtitle’s “five windows” represent five paths of inquiry, five scavenger hunts, five different directions that Gopnik takes in his examination of our relationship with winter. The window itself represents, for Gopnik, that moment when we first stood inside our newly heated homes and looked out through the glass at the winter scenery--that moment when winter changed from being a thing endured to being a thing considered, engaged, imagined.

This moment dawned during the Romantic era, and “Romantic Winter” is Gopnik’s first window. With its roots in the mini-Ice Age that Europe experienced from 1550-1850, Romantic Winter, as portrayed by painter Caspar David Friedrich, composer Fanny Mendelssohn and others, became enmeshed with Northern Europe’s assertion of its identity. In revolt against France and the Enlightenment, the northern artist employed winter as “the poster scene of a national revival,” embracing its darkness, its storms and its cold; fascinated by the absence of vegetation that allowed him and her to see nature as she really is: minus the frills, the decorations, the adornments--ultimately, perhaps, minus God.

“Radical Winter” is Gopnik’s second window. Through it he sees the shadow of Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein, “the modern Prometheus,” in the polar expeditions, particularly that of the Englishman Robert F. Scott. Here the European takes on the blankness of the polar region, the enormity of its frozen indifference, and attempts not only to define and label its geography, but to imprint upon it his own character. As predictably as Frankenstein’s creation of the monster, this leads to tragedy, but it is tragedy on the explorer’s own terms. The polar expeditions represented, says Gopnik via Norman Mailer, “the WASP dream of doing things for their own sake, as a purely existential test of the national and personal will.” “The bad times,” continues Gopnik, “were real, but so was the ‘cleanness,’ the absence of sordid motives.” We may well laugh at Scott & co. in delicate communion with their silver tea service in a flimsy tent on the edge of death in the raging Antarctic, but along with the tea they brought a sort of clean, gentlemanly aesthetic. Neither piece of baggage served their stated goal particularly well, but their combined futility and comedic aspects, stiffened by unquestionable courage, form a picture of the human condition in Radical Winter: our meeting with the elements stretching us as far to the extreme as we can possibly go. There’s more: I could go on, but I’ll let you read it yourself, and if you read only one chapter of “Winter,” I recommend this one.

“Recuperative Winter” is largely about changing views of our winter festival, that is to say, Christmas, examined broadly and (for the most part) secularly. Gopnik begins with the dualism expressed by the twin Roman winter solstice festivals Saturnalia and Kalends--the reversal feast vs. the renewal feast--that still, to his mind, confuses us today. He places the birth of the modern holiday in the hands of Charles Dickens, in Scrooge’s dilemma between capitalism and charity. Scrooge wakes up from his famous dream renewed by a sense of caring and connection. After World War I and its “Christmas truce,” this domestic Victorian Christmas ideal becomes, grown fuzzy through nostalgia, entrenched (no pun intended) as the measure of the holiday. Faced in more recent times with an alarming abundance, we search frantically for renewal in the reversal, and we don’t find it. As Gopnik says, “the material festival turns out to be a fake...the earth does renew itself; we don’t.” Which is why the symbol of the newborn baby is so potent at mid-winter, and perhaps the reason that, as the song goes, “Christmas is for children.”

In “Recreational Winter,” Gopnik makes the case that our engagement with winter in the form of sport connects us to our most basic instincts, those that point us towards sex and violence. While the velocity of ice travel allows us to remove ourselves from our fellows in pursuit of the solitary and the soulful, the heat and speed generated by cold-weather sport, Gopnik argues, has a sexual edge that invites involvement. The sexuality--whether expressed by young women in the 19th century or homosexual men in the 20th, is rendered acceptable because of the healthful effects of the activity that masks it. But the impulse toward

solitude--Gopnik calls it “freelancing”--is somehow more threatening within an industrialist, factory-oriented society, and team sport arises to suppress it. This inevitably brings Gopnik around to his dear hockey, in which he finds echoes of both themes: solitude vs. social involvement, and sexuality: expressed, perceived, repressed. He writes, “we race into the corners of the pond and find there the corners of our own minds.” Dr. Freud, call your office.

In “Remembering Winter,” Gopnik finally gets around to addressing the elephant in the room, the gigantic, ever-expanding behemoth known as global climate change. Will winter cease entirely to be? Are we exterminating it? And, what are the ways in which we have already forsaken it? What are the implications of abandoning winter, of ignoring it, of neglecting to engage it? For Gopnik, winter is many things, but, perhaps most poignantly to this grown-up school-girl, he calls the experience of winter “a snow day...a day a child spends outside of normal time.” What is the unquantifiable value of that experience? What is its measure once it is gone? What emptiness does it leave behind?

Winter symbolizes the moment that we, as humans, stare into the void of the universe--into the void of our own minds, individual and collective--and describe, discriminate, seek, move, create. Thus, it is potentially a moment of joy, of abandon, of ecstasy. You may call this humanist hubris; Gopnik calls it our attempt to “manufacture our love...our need for [winter].” Whatever you call it, I find this book to be a fascinating meditation not only on winter, but on “the northern consciousness” and on our connection with the physical and metaphysical form of the universe.

Larry says

I strongly recommend Adam Gopnik’s “Winter” I had the pleasure of listening to him read the book, actually its a series of lectures, on Canadian Broadcast Corporation Radio designated as the annual George Massey Lectures some years ago. Looking out at the snow on the local mountains here in Canada I recognize, as does Mr Gopnik, that Winter (often experienced here for a good deal of the year) is something that we must deal with both on a mental and physical level and be reconciled with it as this book so wonderfully states. Mr Gopnik as an American grew up in Canada and has thoughtful insights into our (and his) unique winter psyche. He quotes composers, poets,authors, philosophers, thinkers,and he injects wonderful art work depicting winter, (especially Caspar David Friedrich to heighten the special Northern European Winter ethos). Winter is the time of contemplation and memory; there is memory IN Winter and memory OF Winter; recollections, loss and longing are closer to the surface for some reason and staring into the fire-place evoke memory unlike any other season. Winter asks us to look through that window pane that separates us from the snow and cold but like any window it is two-sided, winter beckons us to renew our spirit of childishness and go play with the assurance that we may return to the warmth of the fire-place. Adam asks the uniquely Canadian question with a hilarious answer: " What happens to all woolie hats/toques of all Canadian children? ...they are lost to some vast repository of wool that will one day be recovered and used to re-cloth the sheep of the world!"

WarpDrive says

To be perfectly honest, this is not really what I was hoping for. On the positive side it is a decently written book, with a good writing style and an impressive bibliography, and it is clear that the author made a real effort to examine the idea of winter from different perspectives. On the less positive side, it does not manage to really capture the magic and essence of winter, and it is sometimes too annoyingly and provincially US/Canadian-centric: just as an example, who cares about ice hockey or about the underground city of Montreal???
If you are after intellectual depth, then you will probably be better off spending your time reading something else.
Yes there are some undoubtedly original and quite interesting ideas and insights, and some nice poetry, but there are also a few common-place observations and statements that do not add much value.
Overall, maybe a pleasant enough experience, but nothing to be too excited about. The best chapter of the book is probably the first one (Romantic Winter) which I would rate with a 3.5 stars; on the other hand the section on recreational winter, so focused on ice hockey, does not deserve more than half a star at best - the author could have so much better used this space in his book to explore in more depth the philosophical, historical and psychological facets of our idea of winter.

Mark says

I'm a huge fan of Adam Gopnik, especially Paris to the Moon, and have just picked up his Angels and Ages, which I am reading enthusiastically. This book, however, showed none of Gopnik's characteristic insight and wit. The subject, I think, is a bit too formless for Gopnik's approach. Typically, he moves inductively from well-researched and well-observed facts or well-considered specific literary works to surprising general theroies about them or about the world in general. Here, he has asked himself to take a relatively abstract idea and make concrete observations about it, and I don't believe the reversal in his conceptual approach from induction to deduction benefits him. His observations about winter seem self-indulgent and prosaic, words that I never thought I would use about his writing. Still contains some interesting tidbits about winter, but I'd start with one of his other works.

Debbie says

I chose to read this collection of Massey Lectures broadcast on CBC Radio to satisfy the Keyword Challenge hosted by Bev at My Reader’s Block. I also thought that with some insight on this frigid season, I could learn to dislike it a little less.

The five windows or views of winter that Gopnik considers are: Romantic Winter, Radical Winter, Recuperative Winter, Recreational Winter, and Remembering Winter.

This book is a fascinating mix of history, art, science, religion, popular culture, and philosophy and flows like a great lecture should. I highly recommend it.

Read this if: you’re a fellow winter-survivor and want to have ‘warmer’ feelings about this difficult season; you’re one of that unusual specie – a winterphile and want factoids to dazzle and convince your friends that you’re not insane; or you’re a lucky warm-weather inhabitant and want a taste of what the big chill is all

about. 4½ stars

Thanks to Buried in Print who first tipped me to this book.

Heather says

Gopnik uses the five lectures in the book to look at winter from five different angles, or through five different "windows," as the book's subtitle puts it. He starts with "Romantic Winter/The Season in Sight," which is about the winter as both "sweet" and "scary," "picturesque" and "sublime." Then he talks about polar exploration in "Radical Winter/The Season in Space." In "Recuperative Winter/The Season in Spirit" he talks about Christmas as a secular holiday and the things that have shaped it, from Dickens on, and then "Recreational Winter/The Season at Speed" is about winter sports, mostly ice skating and ice hockey. The last section of the book, "Remembering Winter/The Season in Silence," was for me the weakest: I wasn't totally convinced by the argument "that winter seems to act as a kind of magical place of memory, a storehouse of things recalled" (180).

But just summarizing the topics of the book doesn't begin to get at how pleasing it is to read. Gopnik's writing is smart and allusive and concerned with culture and cities and humanism, and Gopnik nicely ties together his own memories and experiences with larger themes and questions. The big question of the book is, as Gopnik puts it, "why winter, a season long seen as a sign of nature's withdrawal from grace, has become for us a time of human warmth" (xii). The answer is complicated, but it's not all philosophical: cheap coal and central heating are a big part of it, as Gopnik recognizes and emphasizes. As a culture, we can only start appreciating winter when we don't have to suffer through it, when winter isn't necessarily about cold and hardship and hunger. "Winter's persona changes with our perception of safety from it — the glass of the window […] is the lens through which modern winter is always seen. The romance of of winter is possible only when we have a warm, secure indoors to retreat to, and winter becomes a season to look at as much as one to live through" (4). So Gopnik gives the example of William Cowper, writing in 1783 about sitting cozily inside by the fire with tea and a newspaper, with the winter world as something pleasing to behold from the warmth of the indoors. But then we also have Coleridge and the other Romantics and the idea of sublime nature, and there's also lots of interesting stuff about Caspar David Friedrich and other Germans, and Russians too, taking up winter and the love of winter as something that separates their cultures from the French. I love Gopnik's style and exuberance: at one point when he's writing about "the eroticism of winter" in Russian literature and culture he says that "it's all tied up in furs and snows and secrets"; Tchaikovsky's music is "winter made exquisite" (26, 38).

I liked the Romantic Winter section of the book best, but the rest of the sections all had their excellent bits, too. And throughout, Gopnik's own love of winter comes through and enriches the writing. Mmm. This was just the kind of smart and engaged nonfiction I was in the mood for.

Connie says

This book was written in conjunction with five 2011 Massey Lectures broadcast in Canada by the CBC. I was happy to receive it as a "First Read." The author, Adam Gopnik, is a staff writer at "The New Yorker" and an essayist.

In this book, the author looks at winter from five themes--romantic, radical, recuperative, recreational, and remembering winter. The beginning of the book was densely filled with ideas of artists, writers, and intellectuals. Other winter observations were lighter such as the discussions about snowflakes, icebergs, artic explorers, and winter sports, especially his beloved ice hockey. He also looks at the origins of Christmas including the winter solstice celebrations. There were interesting sections about architecture and city planning where he wrote about the advent of central heating, the invention of the car, and the subterranean city of Montreal. With global warming advancing, winter may be changing in the future as more ice melts in the polar regions.

The book was well researched with an impressive bibliography. It also contained fourteen pages of artwork depicting various aspects of winter. I would recommend this book to any reader who enjoys the type of essays that you would find in "The New Yorker."

Michael Clemens says

Gopnik's five chapters on the mentality and metaphor of Winter is an excellent, albeit meandering examination of the evolution of the season's meaning in Western thought. The book was written in conjunction with the CBC's Massey Lectures, and so the prose is more colloquial than we are accustomed to with Gopnik. Nevertheless, the staff writer for the New Yorker does a wonderful job of synthesizing centuries of Winter-thought into an accessible, sometimes funny, and always smart reflection of the months December to March.
