

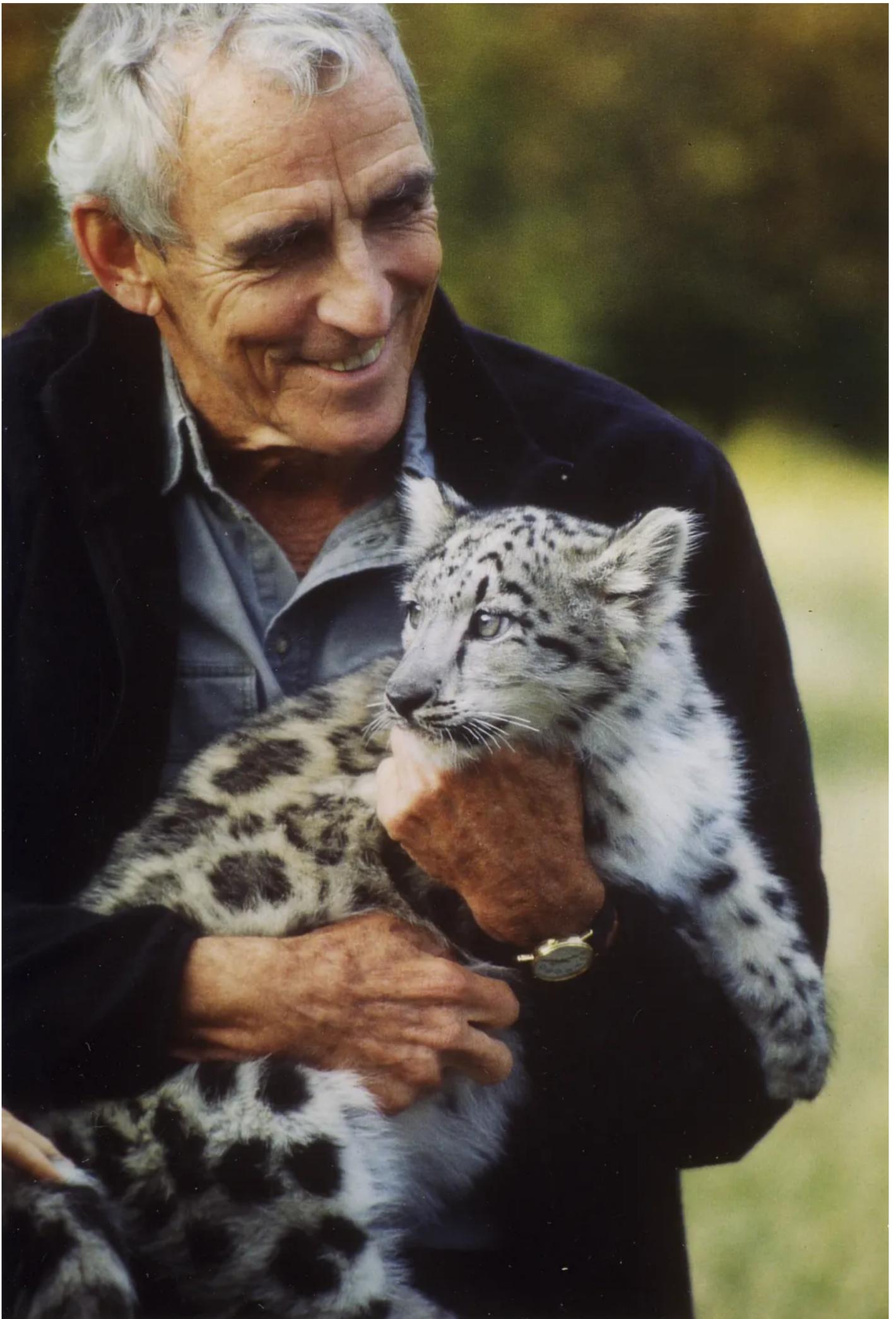
BOOKS

PETER MATTHIESSEN TRAVELLED THE WORLD, TRYING TO ESCAPE HIMSELF

He was a spy, a crusader, an obsessive advocate for neglected people and places—yet his work was shaped, too, by an inner crisis.

By Maggie Doherty

October 13, 2025



In "True Nature: The Pilgrimage of Peter Matthiessen," Lance Richardson depicts a writer constantly struggling to enact his ideals in daily life. Photograph courtesy Jessie Close

On November 20, 1959, at a pier in Brooklyn, the writer Peter Matthiessen boarded the M.V. Venimos, a freighter bound for Iquitos, a port town deep in the Peruvian Amazon. He was fresh off the publication of “Wildlife in America,” a travelogue-cum-polemic that lavished attention on the endangered species of North America, indicted the humans who had destroyed their habitats, and established Matthiessen as a nature writer in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. Now he was ready for wilder climes. As Matthiessen stepped across the ship’s gray deck, the writer William Styron, his close friend, looked on with admiration. More than twenty years later, Styron recalled the scene: “He might have been going no farther than Staten Island, so composed did he seem, rather than to uttermost jungle fastnesses where God knows what beast and dark happenings would imperil his hide.”

Matthiessen liked peril; one could even say he courted it. In the course of a long literary career, during which he wrote thirty-three books and was celebrated for both his fiction and his nonfiction, he travelled to places most writers would never dare to go. He flew through thick fog across the Bering Sea in pursuit of musk oxen. He accompanied a crew of Caymanian turtle hunters on a barely seaworthy schooner. He roamed solo across the Serengeti, dodging predators and scrutinizing dead prey. Most memorably, in 1973, he accompanied the famed field biologist George Schaller on a late-autumn hike in the Dolpo Mountains of Nepal. Schaller was looking for rare Himalayan blue sheep; Matthiessen was looking for enlightenment, which he compared to the elusive snow leopard, sensed but seldom seen. The book that resulted from this trip, “The Snow Leopard” (1978), won Matthiessen the first of two National Book Awards.

At the same time, he accumulated many of the trappings of an upper-middle-class life: four children; a house on Long Island; a devoted wife, followed by another, and then another. Yet he never let domesticity tie him down. A solitary type, at once charismatic and cold, Matthiessen conducted himself like a man beholden to nothing save his work. He said yes to nearly every months-long research trip suggested to him; when home, he sequestered himself in his writing shed. Blessed with rugged good looks that complemented his adventurous life style, he practically had a girl in every port. “I still

seem to be pathologically restless in some way and am no fit mate for anybody,” he wrote, after the breakup of his first marriage, to his friend George Plimpton, with whom he’d co-founded *The Paris Review*. His daughter, Rue Matthiessen, described him similarly: “My father always had a stunning ability to move on, sometimes shucking earlier associations like fresh snow from his shoulders.”

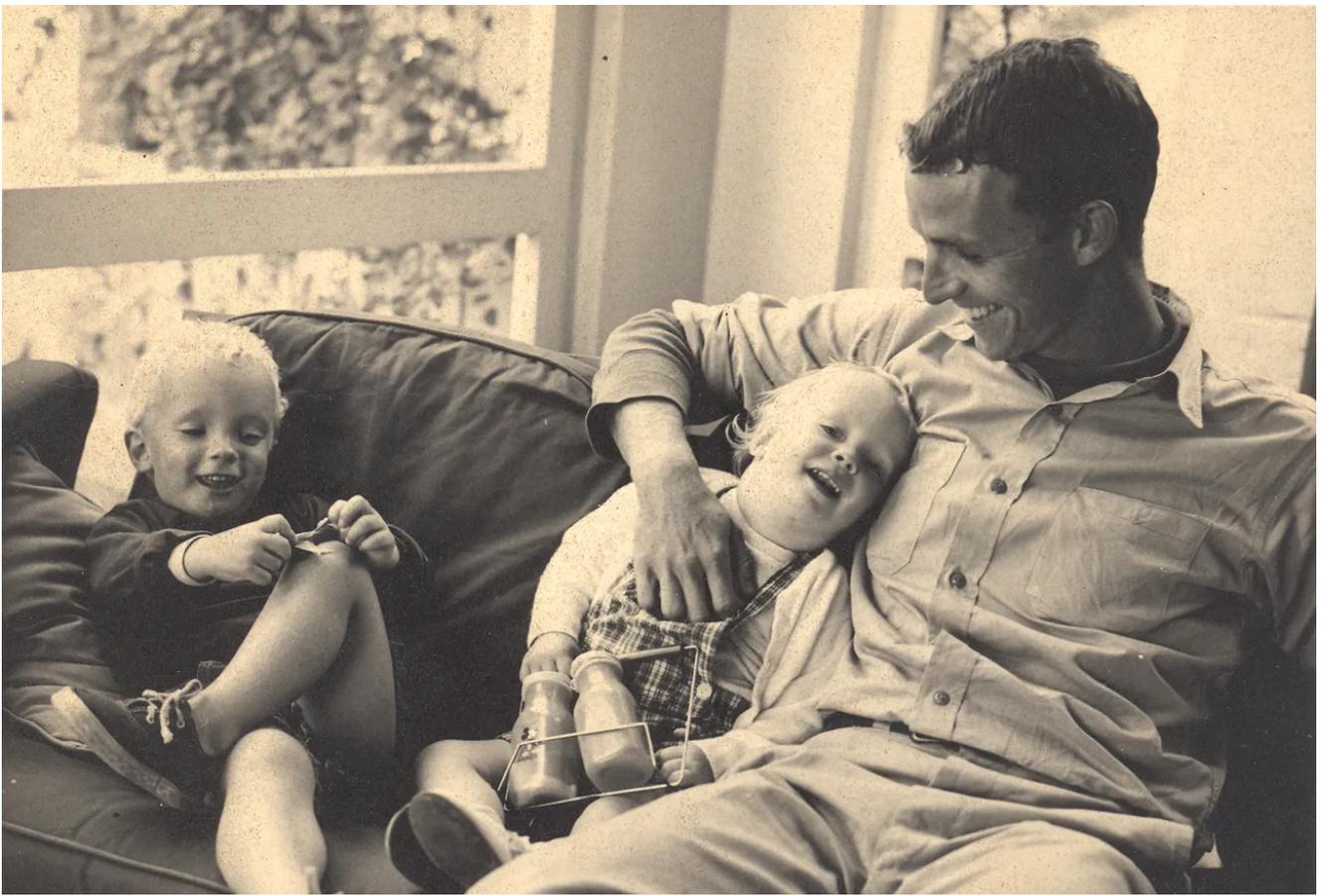
What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



For a certain type of literary man, Matthiessen was nothing less than awe-inspiring. Here was an artist who had stared death in the face and lived to write reasonably well about it. For his intimates, however, he was a more complicated figure, sometimes attentive and engaged, at other times incredibly callous. In truth, even as he neglected his family, Matthiessen was preoccupied with what it meant to be a responsible person—particularly in a world where nature, and those whose livelihoods depended on it, was threatened by the unchecked forces of modernity. His roving life inevitably prompts questions. What was Matthiessen looking for? And what was he running from?

Lance Richardson’s “True Nature: The Pilgrimage of Peter Matthiessen” (Pantheon) offers some answers. The first biography of the writer, and an engaging one at that, the book narrates how a child of privilege evolved into an esteemed naturalist-writer and a crusader for various left-wing causes. Matthiessen was born in 1927 to a pair of well-off, chronically depressed New Yorkers, people who were more likely to pour a stiff drink or take to their beds than to talk openly about their feelings. The family split their time between a house in Irvington, a suburb of New York City, and an apartment on Fifth Avenue near the prestigious St. Bernard’s School, which Matthiessen attended from the age of six. (Plimpton was a classmate.) In 1937, Matthiessen’s father, Matty, an architect, moved the family to rural Connecticut, where Peter and his siblings could roam freely.



Matthiessen with Lucas and Sara Carey, his children with Patsy Southgate. Photograph courtesy Peter Matthiessen estate

The second of three children, Matthiessen was the resident troublemaker. He mouthed off. He cursed. At the family's summer house, on Fishers Island, in Long Island Sound, he used a hunting rifle to take out an attic window. Ill at ease at home, and in New York's high society more generally, he found solace in the natural world. As an adolescent, he developed a birding habit that would endure for decades. Fishers Island, with its kelp-strewn beaches and diverse wildlife, loomed in Matthiessen's mind as a kind of "prelapsarian Eden," as Richardson puts it. During summers there, he could immerse himself in verdant beauty and live untouched by social expectations.

Richardson argues that, even as an adult, Matthiessen longed to find some similar paradise. Each time he set out for a far-off place, he was looking for another Eden.

Had he been born into a different family, or a different social class, Matthiessen might have trained for a job that let him spend most of his time outdoors. As it was, he was expected to attend an elite preparatory school and an Ivy League college, then pick a respectable profession and marry well. He rebelled whenever he could. At the Hotchkiss School, he was an indifferent student and was voted "Biggest Operator" by his peers. At Yale, where he matriculated in 1947, following a brief stint in the Navy that almost ended in a court-martial, he skipped class to go on nature walks.

But it wasn't until he arrived in Paris, during his junior year abroad, that he could truly nurture his bohemian streak. The city was still reeling from the Second World War. The

power went out intermittently, and families scrimped to get enough food. But to Matthiessen, a wealthy American who benefitted from a favorable exchange rate, it was a place of increased freedom, far from the reach of his parents and governed by entirely different rules. He lingered in cafés, had love affairs, and read Baudelaire and Proust. “I can’t describe the feeling of relaxation and complete ease which is partly based on France itself and partly on escaping from those endless messes and complications at home,” he wrote to one of several women he was seeing at the time.

By this point, Matthiessen was already toying with the idea of becoming a writer. Back in New Haven, he took creative-writing classes and read Steinbeck and Faulkner. He published a short story in *The Atlantic Monthly*, secured a literary agent, and attracted the interest of a publishing executive, the stepfather of a close friend—all before turning twenty-five. It was a confidence boost for a young man who didn’t really need one. He was thus surprised to have other stories rejected by magazines, and further surprised when his agent wrote to say that his novel in progress had already been written by James Fenimore Cooper. Decades later, he described such rejection as “a salutary experience for a young writer,” although one imagines it didn’t quite feel that way at the time.

But Matthiessen didn’t stew over his failures. He was on the move once again, headed back to Paris with his wife, Patsy Southgate, a Smith graduate who would eventually become a key figure in the New York School of poetry. Like many of his contemporaries—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Styron—Matthiessen was in Paris to channel the legacy of literary modernism and to write innovative fiction. But he was also there on a clandestine mission for the recently formed Central Intelligence Agency, which had recruited him out of Yale and charged him with surveilling Communists and fellow-travellers. (The experience would form the basis for his second novel, “Partisans,” published in 1955.) He founded *The Paris Review*, with Plimpton and the writer Harold L. (Doc) Humes, in part to give himself a more substantial cover story. As Richardson notes, it’s not clear how much, if any, C.I.A. money went to the magazine. What is clear is that Matthiessen’s socializing with left-leaning French and expatriate artists served the deep state’s agenda.

Matthiessen’s time with the C.I.A. sits uneasily within his biography. He rarely spoke of it, but at least once called it “the one adventure of my life that I regret.” In the years that followed, he tried to make up for his collaboration with the federal government by practicing “advocacy journalism,” much of it written for this magazine. He championed migrant farmworkers, defended traditional Inuit whaling practices, and, at a time when few white Americans took Indigenous rights seriously, supported the American Indian Movement (AIM), a loosely organized, occasionally militant grassroots group that promoted Native traditions and political interests.

This advocacy work culminated with “In the Spirit of Crazy Horse” (1983), a controversial account of the trial of the Native activist Leonard Peltier, who was convicted of murdering two F.B.I. agents, and the F.B.I.’s “war” against AIM. Matthiessen, not without reason, portrays the Bureau as paranoid, dishonest, and in league with corporate interests. Soon after the book was published, two libel suits—one from an F.B.I. agent, the other from William Janklow, the South Dakota governor, who was once accused of raping a Lakota girl—took it off the shelves. The book would remain out of print for the duration of an eight-year legal battle that ultimately saw Matthiessen and his publisher, Viking, absolved.

In “Crazy Horse,” Matthiessen collates dozens of Native voices, who speak of a desire for liberation: from landlessness and poverty, from the indignities of reservation life. Matthiessen contextualizes their demands within the history of colonial violence, and persuasively argues for the release of Peltier, who spent nearly fifty years behind bars before his sentence was commuted to house arrest by President Joe Biden, this past January. The heft of the book—at more than six hundred pages, it is exhaustively researched and exhausting to read—reflects the writer’s convictions. Unlike many of his peers, Matthiessen was anti-consumerist, anti-imperialist, and antiwar. But the book might also reflect his strenuous effort to escape his past mistakes, to atone for the years he spent spying on his fellow-artists. If Matthiessen couldn’t turn back time, he could write his way toward repentance.

In 1953, Matthiessen quit the C.I.A. and, accompanied by Patsy and their newborn son, Lucas, returned to New York, where they rented a cottage on the East End of Long Island. (Seven years later, following his divorce from Patsy, Matthiessen would buy a house in Sagaponack, which would function as a home base until his death, in 2014.) The area was popular with summer tourists, but in the off-season it was inhabited by poor fisherman-farmers known as Bonackers. Matthiessen idolized his neighbors, particularly the men: tough, laconic types who prized independence and who weren’t afraid of hard work. Courting their approval, he fished on their boats from late spring through fall, then spent the cold months working on his fiction. In “Men’s Lives” (1986), his poignant study of the trials facing commercial fishermen on Long Island, he recalls these years spent partly on the water as “among the most rewarding of my life.”



Matthiessen with Deborah Love, who introduced him to Zen Buddhism. Photograph courtesy Peter Matthiessen estate

Even as he tried to disavow his wealthy background, living hand to mouth and engaging in hard physical labor, Matthiessen knew that he would never truly belong among the sun-battered men he so admired. As Richardson notes, in “Race Rock” (1954), Matthiessen’s first novel, the protagonist and authorial alter ego, George McConville, compares himself unfavorably with the male laborers who live in his village: he is “a canary among crows,” a sensitive type with soft hands. He envies men from the working class and those with Native heritage; he believes they are “on closer terms with life than he had ever been.”

This conviction—that those in Indigenous or traditional communities live more simply and thus more authentically—would crop up again and again in Matthiessen’s writing. In “The Tree Where Man Was Born,” his 1972 book about the people and animals of East Africa, he waxes romantic about the Hadza tribe, a hunter-gatherer community. “For people who must live from day to day, past and future have small relevance,” he writes. “They live in the moment, a very precious gift that we have lost.” More than twenty years later, he described the Inuit in similar terms: “The traditional hunter is far more aware of all life, being a part of it . . . than the angry, strident people who abuse him.” Even his family picked up on his preference for the exotic other. As his daughter Rue writes in a memoir, “He saw us as sort of spoiled and had no respect for that, in the same way he hadn’t any respect for himself.” She recalls her half sister Sara Carey’s quip on the same theme: “In his eyes you were no good unless you were ‘washing the foot of a

leper.’ ”

Matthiessen explored this belief most rigorously in “At Play in the Fields of the Lord,” his breakthrough novel, from 1965. Based partly on his reporting trip to the Amazon, “At Play” follows two pairs of married missionaries charged with converting the fictional Niaruna tribe, who live in isolation on resource-rich land coveted by the region’s government. One of the men, Martin Quarrier, is fascinated by the Niaruna and makes little effort to convert them; if anything, it is they who influence him. His curiosity is mirrored by that of Lewis Moon, a free-spirited drifter with both Cheyenne and Choctaw ancestry, who has been contracted by the government to drop bombs on the Niaruna, in an effort to scatter the tribe. Instead, Moon, high on ayahuasca, crashes a plane into their territory, effectively disappearing himself from civilized society. Eager to live as the natives do, he walks barefoot through the jungle, puts down his gun, and helps the tribe defend itself against missionaries and mercenaries alike. “He had never envied anything so much as the identity of these people with their surroundings, nor realized quite so painfully how displaced he had always been,” Matthiessen writes—words that could apply to the author himself.

All this makes “At Play” seem like the story of the noble savage and the modern man who saves him. But the novel goes on to complicate such an interpretation. Moon impregnates a Niaruna woman; he also infects her with a virus that her body can’t resist. The illness spreads through the tribe, sickening one of its leaders and creating division and disorder. When Moon appeals to the missionaries for modern medicine, they criticize him for putting “personal ambition” above the well-being of the people he claims to love. The novel thus points up the threat posed to traditional communities by even the best-intentioned envoys of modernity. Moon, like Matthiessen, can’t help but be complicit in the very structures and forces he deplors.

In many ways, “At Play” is Matthiessen’s most successful novel: it contains well-rounded characters, a sense of narrative momentum that is absent from much of his work, and prose as lush as the jungle it describes. (Early in the novel, Moon looks out the window of a plane to see “a nether world of dark enormous greens, wild strangled greens veined by brown rivers of hot rain, the Andean rain, implacable and mighty as the rain that fell on those sunless days when the earth cooled.”) A “Heart of Darkness” for the nuclear age, the manuscript also stood out at a moment when American fiction was dominated by a kind of domestic realism—sad tales of alcoholic office workers and desultory extramarital affairs. Eight different publishers competed over the book. Random House eventually won by offering Matthiessen fifteen thousand dollars, ten times what he’d earned for his second novel. Nearly fifteen years after he’d sold his first short story, his career as a fiction writer was finally under way.

Until the very end of his life, Matthiessen insisted that he was a fiction writer first, a journalist second. He was convinced that, if he were known after his death, it would be for “At Play” and the novels that followed during his life: “Far Tortuga” (1975), a Melvillean sea saga written in Caymanian dialect, and the three novels that make up the Watson trilogy, about the nineteenth-century planter and outlaw Edgar (Bloody) Watson, which were published in a single volume, “Shadow Country,” in 2008. (“Shadow Country” won the National Book Award for Fiction, despite some controversy over whether the novel constituted new work.) Though his nonfiction books were often well received—“The Tree Where Man Was Born” was a finalist for the 1972 National Book Award—Matthiessen downplayed their significance. “Nonfiction at its best is like fashioning a cabinet,” he told *The Paris Review*, in 1999. “It can be elegant and very beautiful but it can never be sculpture.”

Matthiessen was ultimately wrong about his legacy. Today, he is best known for “The Snow Leopard,” a diaristic account of his gruelling trek through the Himalayas which doubles as a prose elegy for his second wife, Deborah Love, who died of ovarian cancer in 1972. The book is renowned for its blend of observation and meditation, both of which were influenced by Matthiessen’s newfound commitment to Zen Buddhism. He had been introduced to the practice by Love, a fellow writer and spiritual seeker, but didn’t pursue it in earnest until after Love’s death, when its concepts of nonattachment and impermanence provided solace. Although meditation might seem ill suited to a man who couldn’t sit still, the austerity of Zen appealed to him, as did its emphasis on knowing, and thus mastering, the mind. If he couldn’t become a pre-modern person, he could at least become responsible for himself.

The spirit of Zen infuses “The Snow Leopard.” In Richardson’s words, “it is steeped in science and spirituality,” moving “between these seemingly incompatible modes with startling ease.” At one moment, Matthiessen watches “a flock of vermilion minivets, blown through a wind-tossed tumult of bamboo.” At another, he contemplates the “profound consolation” of prana, the life force that preexists the individual and transcends mortality. Following Schaller and their hired Sherpas across the icy slopes, Matthiessen strains to stay in the present, to simply “be” in the way that Zen monks advise.



Matthiessen in October, 1973, the year he took the trip recounted in “The Snow Leopard.” Photograph by George B. Schaller / Courtesy Wildlife Conservation Society

“The Snow Leopard” is noticeably sparer than most of Matthiessen’s other nonfiction books, which tend to be padded with historical research. But what truly distinguishes the book is its personal nature. From early in his journalistic career, Matthiessen had abhorred the use of the first person, which he associated with a “*National Geographic* style of expedition writing,” sensational and unserious. In “The Snow Leopard,” however, he lets the “I” lead the way, offering access to his inner life, even as he questions the entire concept of the self. “Why is death so much on my mind when I do not feel I am afraid of it?” he asks at one point. “Between clinging and letting go, I feel a terrific sense of struggle.”

It’s tempting to read “The Snow Leopard” as a work of confessional writing, in which Matthiessen details his weak points as a husband and a father. Reflecting on his marriage to Love, Matthiessen remembers how he “found her goodness maddening, and behaved badly,” though he doesn’t expand on how. He also recalls their eight-year-old son Alex’s tears upon hearing that his father was about to leave him, alone and motherless, for a months-long trip halfway around the world: “‘That’s much too long,’ he wept, and this was true.”

But Richardson’s biography, which is grounded in remarkably candid interviews with Matthiessen’s family members and lovers, reveals that any confessions made in “The

Snow Leopard” are but partial. While in Nepal, Matthiessen was writing to two different women: one a longtime girlfriend, Jane Stanton, with whom he’d been involved during his marriage to Love, and the other Maria Koenig, a married woman twelve years his junior who would become his third wife. Prior to the expedition, he gave Koenig, who had two young daughters, an ultimatum that she leave her husband before he returned from the Himalayas; at the same time, he planned a European vacation with Stanton. While the grief Matthiessen relates in “The Snow Leopard” is surely sincere —“love was there, half-understood, never quite finished,” he writes of the enduring bond between him and Love—his mourning process was significantly more complex than the spiritual pilgrimage he describes. Illuminated by Richardson’s biography, “The Snow Leopard” becomes an even more intriguing object. It is both a record of a man’s failings and a book written to avoid confronting them.

Matthiessen and Love sometimes argued about who would die first. It was a strange competition, as if the one closer to death were more enlightened than the other. Matthiessen put forward the idea that he wouldn’t live past forty. “Death at forty: I do not take the idea too seriously, but even so, I am conscious now of a certain restlessness, and apprehension,” he wrote in his journal in 1967.

In the end, Matthiessen lived to eighty-six; like Love, he died of cancer. (His diagnosis was acute myeloid leukemia.) But the restlessness he felt in 1967, and arguably much earlier, never went away. It was with him throughout his thirty-four-year marriage to Maria, who organized his home, managed his social calendar, and edited his manuscripts, and whom he cheated on countless times, despite her evident suffering. It was with him in his writing shed, where he spent thirty years drafting, then painstakingly revising, the tripartite Watson epic, an ambitious project that he never felt was truly finished. And it was with him on his travels, which continued right up until his cancer diagnosis. He went to Kenya, to Siberia, to Australia. He attended a meditation retreat at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the inspiration for his final novel, “In Paradise.” (The novel was published three days after his death.) It was only when he was too ill to take full advantage of an expedition in the Gobi Desert that he came to something like a stop.

Near the end of “The Snow Leopard,” Matthiessen relates, with admirable frankness, the disappointment he felt during the last week of his hike. “I am spent,” he writes.

The path I followed breathlessly has faded among stones; in spiritual ambition, I have neglected my children and done myself harm, and there is no way back. Nor has anything changed; I am still beset by the same old lusts and ego and emotions, the endless nagging details and irritations—that aching gap between what I know and what I am.

The journey had not changed him, nor had it meaningfully closed the distance between the person he was and the person he wanted to be. Alone in a tent, during a rare moment of stasis, Matthiessen had to reckon with the harm he'd done to others. Then he packed up camp, boarded a plane, and put his time on the mountain behind him. ♦

Published in the print edition of the October 20, 2025, issue, with the headline "Rambling Man."