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Dream State

Many of us feel a nostalgia for Maine—the one of undiscovered coves and old-fashioned state fairs—whether or not we've ever been there. Our trip to the central coast reveals a Maine that is frozen in time.

By Heidi Julavits

For many lifelong readers, the most memorable journeys are those that transpire between the covers of a book. This is how I first traveled to Oz, Narnia, Whoville, and Maine. At the time of these peregrinations, I was, in fact, a citizen of Maine. But like the voyages to these other occasionally cold and sinister places, a visit to the real Maine seemed to require a fictional entrée (and maybe a magic wardrobe). Years later, while I still can't attest to the accuracy (should you make it to Oz or Narnia) of the descriptions by Baum or Lewis, I can vouch for the usefulness of two childhood classics set in my home state, *One Morning in Maine*

([http://www.amazon.com/One-Morning-Maine-Robert-McCloskey/dp/B000H2N116/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?](http://www.amazon.com/One-Morning-Maine-Robert-McCloskey/dp/B000H2N116/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1204739009&sr=8-1)

[ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1204739009&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/One-Morning-Maine-Robert-McCloskey/dp/B000H2N116/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1204739009&sr=8-1)), by Robert McCloskey, and *Charlotte's Web*

(http://www.amazon.com/Charlottes-Web-E-B-White/dp/0064410935/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1204739140&sr=1-1), by E. B. White, both of which were written in 1952.

Maine is a place that doesn't easily reveal itself to outsiders—or even insiders. The locals often ignore you, the roads wind around confusingly, and the weather can flat-out suck. But those who appreciate Maine's craggy beauty and its emotionally steel-banded yet romantic character are forever smitten—which explains why its slogan was, until recently, "Vacationland," and why, when you mention that you live in Maine, so many people reply, "Oh, I've always wanted to go to Maine."

It's further testament to the state's thorny charms that McCloskey's and White's books have endured as long as they have. Both *One Morning in Maine* and *Charlotte's Web* take as their setting the Blue Hill peninsula along Maine's central coast, where I now live during the summer with my family. The area—which includes the towns of Brooksville, Brooklin, and Blue Hill, among others—remains one of Maine's most interesting and varied seaside stretches, with dramatic views over the water toward Mount Desert Island in some places, tiny rock coves and stony beaches in others. Though more than a half century old, the two books are still the best guides around to the peninsula, providing helpful sightseeing suggestions and packing tips, and allowing reader-tourists a privileged view into the area. Even if these books are as close to Maine as you ever get, you've gotten closer than most.

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Mccloskey's Buck's Harbor

One Morning in Maine functions as a kind of "Two Hours in Buck's Harbor." Sal (whom McCloskey

introduced in his 1948 book *Blueberries for Sal* (http://www.amazon.com/Blueberries-Sal-Robert-McCloskey/dp/0670175919/ref=pd_bbs_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1204739441&sr=8-2) and her family live on an island or peninsula so remote that they need a boat to reach civilization—i.e., Buck's Harbor, located in the town of Brooksville. Sal wakes up and remembers, "Today is the day I'm going to Buck's Harbor with my father!" Notably, Sal and her sister, Jane, wear fleece-lined slippers in the middle of summer. (*Tip #1: Pack sweaters for your beach vacation.*)

Over breakfast Sal discovers her first loose tooth, and she runs down to the clam flats to tell her father. McCloskey's drawings of Maine's iconic rocky coast are more evocative in their honest grunginess than the average brochure photograph. His charcoal renderings of the pine trees, the smudgy high-tide mark that traces the rocks, the water, the seaweed, the jagged mussel bed, the head of a seal, all look appropriately viscous and oily, just as these objects do on windless mornings in 2008. Gazing into McCloskey's murky woods, the seasoned native can practically hear the mosquitoes. (*Tip #2: Pack bug spray.*) Sal tries to show a seal her loose tooth, slips on a seaweedy rock, and just misses sliding into the ocean—this being before the Croc world takeover, Sal wears sneakers on the beach. (*Tip #3: Shells and barnacles will shred your feet. Pack appropriate waterproof footwear with thick soles.*)

Finally, Sal and Jane and Dad load themselves into the dinghy, and Murphy's Law being the prevailing cosmic force in these parts, the motor doesn't start, so Sal's father has to row across the bay. McCloskey's Buck's Harbor—a T intersection with a church and a few buildings—remains basically up-to-date and can function as your road map. Condon's Garage, where Sal's dad hauls his dead outboard, is still called Condon's Garage. The girls get ice cream at the general store and sit on the porch, still one of the best ways to while away the late morning in Buck's Harbor. McCloskey's store is located a few doors down from the present store; his illustration of the interior shows the usual fare—matches, bananas, mops, shovels, axes, and potato chips. The current Buck's Harbor Market is a bit more swank—you can buy organic produce and a hunk of Humboldt Fog—but the remote port-in-a-storm vibe remains the same. The story concludes with the family headed home for a standard Maine lunch of clam chowder. (*Tip #4: Despite the slight culinary uptick in this area, people with allergies to shellfish and dairy should probably pack their own food.*)

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White's Brooklin and Blue Hill

E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* needs no plot summation beyond this: Some pig. Threat of bacon. Literary spider. White, who moved from Manhattan to Maine in 1937, inhabited an old farmhouse with a barn and many outbuildings in Brooklin. From Buck's Harbor, Brooklin is about a 30-minute drive northeast, and it's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it locale. There's a general store, a "mall" (a clapboard house and barn with an antiques store, a jewelry-and-knives boutique, and a massage studio), a variably open café, and a library. Brooklin is also about 12 miles south of Blue Hill, which hosts the fair featured at the end of *Charlotte's Web* where "Zuckerman's Famous Pig" makes his debut.

The [Blue Hill Fair](http://www.bluehillfair.com) (<http://www.bluehillfair.com>) is still the major local happening each Labor Day weekend; rereading White's description of it, I don't think it's changed at all in the intervening decades, a charming fact that turns unnerving when you're seated atop the creaky Ferris wheel. White's book is so closely associated with the actual fair that the livestock area is called Zuckerman's Farm. There, you can see tragically fat pigs,

tawny patchwork cows, and fluffy, topiary-like alpacas. Between ogling the animals in their stalls and the cabbages in the vegetable hall, you can watch the horse pull or the piglet race or the lumberjack show. Adults can play bingo in the smoke-filled "over 18 only" parlors while kids loop jerkily through the twilight on the spinning-teacup ride.

The fair, in other words, is a quick way to dip a toe into a culture where the past and the present, the fictional and the real, the delightful and the tragic, are intertwined. The midway lights and "the crackle of the gambling machines and the music of the merry-go-rounds and the voice of the man in the beano booth" announce the shuttering of summer. As White so aptly puts it, "The crickets sang the song of summer's end... 'Summer is over and gone,' they sang... Summer is dying, dying." Glee and fried dough commingling with sadness, a day derailed by a temperamental outboard—this is the Maine that White and McCloskey deliver. Whether you're a native contemplating the frigid months ahead or a summer visitor facing your return to the real world via a magic wardrobe or a Volvo, this is a moment as nostalgic and fun as it is quietly heartbreaking.

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Getting There

Several airlines fly directly to Bangor or Portland (though some only seasonally). When you get there, rent a car; Blue Hill is a 30-minute drive from Bangor and a two-hour drive from Portland.

WHEN TO GO

Visit anytime between mid-June and mid-September, when temperatures range from the 50s to the 70s (it's chilly the rest of the year). Or peg your trip to the Blue Hill Fair, which takes place over Labor Day weekend.

WHERE TO STAY

Barncastle Hotel (<http://www.barn-castle.com/>)

This newly renovated old summer "cottage" turned five-room hotel has all the modern amenities, including flat-screen TVs and wireless Internet. Its spot on a main drag is uninspiring, but the luxurious interior, the restaurant's wood-fired pizza oven, and the convenient Blue Hill location more than compensate for this downside.

From \$125 a night for a double; 125 South St., Blue Hill, (207) 374-2300.

Coastal Cottages (<http://www.vacationcottages.com/>)

Families sometimes find it easier and more comfortable to just rent a house; this site specializes in the Blue Hill peninsula. *From \$1,000 a week for a one-bedroom house; (207) 374-3500.*

Dragonflye Inn (<http://www.dragonflyeinn.com/>)

This revamped Victorian is within walking distance of the cute-as-a-button library (much beloved by White), the general store, and Center Harbor (where you can admire museum-quality wooden boats). It's ideally located near Blue Hill, Brooksville, and Deer Isle for maximal day-tripping fun. *From \$100 a night for a double; 19 Naskeag Point Rd., Brooklin, (207) 359-8080.*

Oakland House Seaside Resort (<http://www.oaklandhouse.com/>)

This funky hotel, which has been operated by the same family since 1889, is on a quiet back road between Brooksville and Deer Isle. The 50-acre property has both a waterfront inn and individual cottages (definitely recommended for those who prefer vintage-style accommodations). On-site activities include badminton, volleyball, croquet, tetherball, and kayaking.

From \$475 a night for a cottage; 435 Herrick Rd., Herricks Landing, Brooksville, (207) 359-8521.

Where to Eat

The Bagaduce Lunch (<http://www.chowmaineguide.com/index.php?page=bagaduce-lunch>)

This roadside takeaway joint is situated on a hill that slopes down to the famed "reversing falls" (a river that flows in both directions, depending on the tide). Kids can climb on the rocks and look for horseshoe crabs while the adults eat too many fried scallops, fried clams, lobster rolls, and commendably thin onion rings. (Be ready for the food coma that follows.) Not recommended for rainy days, as save for the Porta-John, there's no indoor seating.

19 Bridge Rd., Brooksville, (297) 326-4729.

The Blue Hill Co-op (<http://www.ncga.coop/node/1015>)

It turns out a delicious, healthy-ish organic-egg sandwich with cheddar on buttery multigrain bread. Top it with hot sauce and you're good until lunch.

4 Ellsworth Rd., Blue Hill, (207) 374-2165.

Cleonice (<http://www.cleonice.com>)

Located near the Blue Hill peninsula in Ellsworth, this is the area's only "fancy" restaurant that's worth sampling (kids are allowed). Most of the ingredients are local, and it really knows what to do with them; a hangar steak will arrive bloodily rare if you want it that way.

112 Main St., Ellsworth, (207) 664-7554.

Eaton's Lobster Pool (<http://www.yelp.com/biz/eatons-lobster-pool-little-deer-isle>)

The ideal Maine-coastal-quaint location makes this worth a visit, even if the food is average (of the boiled-lobster-dinner variety). A stone fireplace heats the all—windows dining room on cold summer nights.

Little Deer Isle, (207) 348-2383.

El Frijoles (<http://www.elfrijoles.com>)

Get it? This cute, family-run restaurant offers the first example I know of Maine-Mex cooking—lobster tacos, for example. Seating is outdoors and bugs are fierce, but spray is supplied; the lucky family gets to eat inside the mesh tent.

41 Caterpillar Hill Rd., Sargentville, (207) 359-2486.

WHAT TO DO

Blue Hill Fair (<http://www.bluehillfair.com>)

In 2008 the fair runs from August 28 to September 1. Check the online schedule for activities. Admission \$5 to \$7 for adults, free for children 12 and under (rides cost extra).

Rte. 172, Blue Hill, (207) 374-3701.

Blue Hill Hikes (<http://www.bluehillme.com>)

At the center of Blue Hill village rises its eponymous hill; the easy trail hike to the top, about a mile one way, has fantastic views of the peninsula and Mount Desert Island.

Mail Boat to Isle au Haut (<http://www.isleauhaut.com>)

You can take the boat on a jaunt (about 45 minutes) from Stonington to the beautifully wild, 12-square-mile Isle au Haut. On the island, stretch your legs around the town landing before hopping back on the boat, or commit to a full day of hiking at Duck Harbor (part of Acadia National Park). Back in Stonington, make sure to check out the Granite Museum and grab some homemade ice cream at the Island Cow.

Mail boat, \$34 round-trip for adults, \$18 for children 12 and under; Sea Breeze Ave., Stonington, (207) 367-5193.

Four Season Farm (<http://www.fourseasonfarm.com>)

Run by organic gurus Elliot Coleman and Barbara Damrosch, this farm is about 45 minutes from Blue Hill on the stunning Cape Rosier. Most Maine farmers' markets don't get rolling until mid-July, but because it has greenhouses, Four Season has strawberries and tomatoes months before the rest of the state. You've never tasted or seen produce this gorgeous. Combine the trip to Four Season with a visit to the Good Life Center, where you can tour organic gardens, and to the Holbrook Island Sanctuary nature reserve for a beach picnic and a hike.

Four Season Farm, 609 Weir Cove Rd., Harborside.