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The muse in the mountains: Berkshire hills provide inspiration



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A view from Mount Greylock, the state's highest peak and fictional home of J.K. Rowling's Ivermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Berkshire County has a well-earned reputation as a world-class home for the arts, attracting visitors from far and wide to enjoy its music venues, museums, and theaters. Since the early 19th century, however, the area's lush green countryside and crystal clear lakes have in turn been a source of inspiration for the arts community. We recently decided to explore two particular places that have influenced some prominent writers: Mount Greylock, in 1898 the very first state park established by the Legislature, and Monument Mountain.

In 1838, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the first writer to visit Mount Greylock, and he made several ascents. One of his hikes occurred in the dead of night, during which he spied a burning lime kiln. The eerie light and smoke are said to have inspired his dark and brooding 1844 tale, "Ethan Brand — A Chapter From an Abortive Romance."

At the time of Hawthorne's visit, the mountain was known as Gray-lock. "I suppose," he wrote, "the name has been given it, because it so often has a gray cloud or lock of gray mist, upon his [sic] head." Given that the mountain was the scene of logging and mining activity in the 19th century, that gray mist may well have been smog.

Henry David Thoreau was the next to visit Greylock, when in 1844 he undertook the solitary mission of walking from his home in Concord to the northwestern corner of the state. Upon arrival, the poet hiked up the mountain and spent a night camped at the summit. When he awoke the next morning, he was surrounded by a fog so thick he couldn't see the valley below. He later wrote in his book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," of "an undulating country of clouds."

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The mountain experience inspired Thoreau to such an extent — “It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise” — that the next year he

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That same year Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. was so awed by the fog swirling at the summit that he memorialized it in his poem, “A Berkshire Summer Morning”: “Greylock, cloud-girdled, from his purple throne, A voice of welcome sends, And from green sunny fields, a warbling tone The Housatonic blends.”

On our visit, the mist became progressively thicker as we climbed through the dense boreal forest, until we found the summit enshrouded in white cotton candy. Of course, this being New England, the weather shifted and a stiff breeze dissipated the fog within minutes of our arrival, allowing us to see into New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts from the 3,491-foot summit, the sun warming our backs and the scent of pine tickling our noses.

Perhaps the most famous 19th century author to gain inspiration from Greylock is Herman Melville. The story is told that while gazing out the window of his study at Arrowhead in Pittsfield, he saw the mountain rising in the distant north. Perhaps the result of the rocky summit peaking through the seafoam clouds, it appeared to him as a breaching whale. Thus was planted the seed for his classic novel about an obsessed sea captain.

Thirty miles due south, another mountain captivated the literati. In August of 1850, legal scholar and reformer David Dudley Field Jr. organized a “picnic hike” (a.k.a. drinking party) on Monument Mountain, with the intention of introducing the literary elites of New York and New England. Among the merry band of hikers were Holmes, writer Cornelius

Matthews, and New York publishers Evert Duyckinck and James T. Fields.

Although Field had hosted dozens of these picnics over the years, this particular outing turned out to be one that would stand out in literary history, as it brought together for the first time the authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville.

That day, when the group was part way up the mountain, swiftly moving black clouds brought an unexpected thunderstorm that forced the hikers to run for shelter. Hawthorne and Melville settled into a cave to wait out the storm, armed with at least one of the champagne bottles that Holmes had brought along. The break in the climb allowed the two authors to engage in lengthy discussion about Melville's work in progress — the novel we know as "Moby-Dick; or, The Whale."

Their relationship grew after that auspicious day. They regularly corresponded, sharing ideas, editing, and commenting on each other's work. The much younger Melville would later write of his mentor, "Hawthorne has dropped germinous seeds into my soul," and when "Moby-Dick" was published in 1851, he dedicated it to his friend, writing "To Nathaniel Hawthorne: In token of my admiration for his genius."

Although that book is probably the best-known work of his prolific career, Melville never forgot his Muse. He dedicated his next novel, "Pierre; or, The Ambiguities" to "The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock."

When the party eventually reached the summit at Squaw Peak, they lifted their glasses in toast to Berkshire-bred poet William Cullen Bryant, and recited his 1815 poem, "Monument Mountain."

Remember the bubbly that Holmes brought along? Word is that he got so drunk that he came "near losing his foothold and tumbling straight down a thousand feet," having imbibed too much of the champagne.

Even without alcohol, hikers should be aware that others have indeed plunged to their

deaths from the heights. After our little picnic at Squaw Peak, my husband suggested that we take the shorter, if steeper, trail back down the mountain. This required that we traverse a very narrow path bounded by a dramatic drop to the left and a huge boulder, with absolutely no handhold, on the right. Just so you know, panic is not a helpful response in the situation.

In the most recent episode of Berkshire mountains, famous writers, and that frequently appearing fog, J.K. Rowling revealed Mount Greylock as the site of her North American Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In a story collection called “History of Magic in North America,” the author sets the school “at the highest peak of Mount Greylock, where “it is concealed from non-magic gaze by a variety of powerful enchantments, which sometimes manifest in a wreath of misty cloud.” While we no-majs (American for muggles) won’t be able to see the school, that hasn’t stopped local community organizers from getting into the excitement by lobbying to have all the mountain’s hiking trails named after Rowling’s characters.

When Melville spied his whale, there was no Veterans War Memorial Tower atop the mountain. The 93-foot granite tower, built in 1932 as a tribute to the state’s soldiers who died in the nation’s wars, has just completed a renovation that includes improved access as well as new interpretive exhibits. Its new LED beacon is so powerful with 1.9 million lumens that it can be seen from atop New Hampshire’s Mount Monadnock, almost 60 miles away.

In addition to the tower rehabilitation, another \$22.5 million in improvements have gone into the Greylock reservation since 2006. The visitors’ center and hiking trails have also been repaired and renovated, just waiting for your visit.

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