

Tailings: A Memoir, by Kaethe Schwehn

reviewed by [Shirley Hershey Showalter](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Tailings

By Kaethe Schwehn

Cascade

Holden Village, though firmly rooted in the Gospels and dedicated to values like community, justice, hilarity, and hospitality, is also a place of constant flux.” Thus begins this memoir of loss, quest, and initiation, which introduces a place and a

spiritual geography.

The fact that Holden Village was once a mining camp in the state of Washington and is now a Lutheran retreat center puts Kaethe Schwehn into rich metaphorical territory. *Tailings* is an apt title: bright orange copper mine tailings are toxic and veritably eternal, perfect symbols for the “terrible beauty” of the post-September 11 world she describes.

The structure of this book follows a deceptively simple linear pattern: ten chapters, one for each month of the 2001–2002 academic year, when the author, in the midst of many transitions, chose to teach at Holden Village. During that year she hoped to recover from the wounds of a failed romantic relationship, occasionally painful memories of her parents’ divorce years before, and her uncertainty about the next step in her vocation to become a writer.

Like memoirists Rachel Held Evans, Barbara Kingsolver, and Cheryl Strayed, Schwehn narrows her focus to a short period spent in an exotic, “hearty” space to tell her year-of-living story with ripples of meaning extending beyond her own life. Within each of the chronological present-tense chapters, time past and time future shimmer and beckon. Contemporary memoirs include at least two layers of time, sometimes referred to as “me then” and “me now.” Schwehn, however, is not content with those. She paints with time, applying it with careful detail, much the way the 15th-century painter Jan van Eyck layered on his translucent glazes. She imagines her own family history before she was born:

The bed is king-sized, which means my parents can sleep all night without touching, their worlds distinct and contained: my mother full of sickness and mystery, my father full of the \$1000 he was given and the \$20 he had taken away.

And I am somewhere in the middle, coming into being.

She uses both historical research and imagination to weave her telling of the history of the place, especially drawing on the story of J. H. Holden, the late-19th-century explorer and entrepreneur who founded the original Holden Village around a mining company. She sees him in her mind’s eye in 1896: “Thighs wet with dew, hunting grouse beneath a sky marbled with clouds. He is hunting grouse but also ore. He is looking for the glint of sun on feathers but also the harder glint of sun on rock.”

Applying another translucent glaze of time, Schwehn allows her mind to drift backward past the industrial age, past the great Greek and Hebrew texts, to what novelist Willa Cather called the “geologic ages.” As she nears the end of her stay in the village, Schwehn compares the sequential rock strata of the Midwest, where she grew up, with the geology of her current place: “In the Cascades it’s different, two hundred million year old rocks beside two million year old rocks, the land a reminder of what happens when things collide.”

Her deep diving into time and surfacing into the present reality helps readers appreciate what is essentially a coming-of-age story but with its own twists. The author is too sophisticated to reprise the simple redemption story of “I once was blind but now I can see,” or “He done me wrong and now I’m free.” But she desperately wants redemption.

While resisting an easy reliance on a master narrative, Schwehn undergoes initiation both into her own complex Christian faith and into adulthood. She experiences an Easter epiphany she does not fully trust but that lingers. She manages to think less about “the Intended,” her name for the man she was in love with but who rejected her. And she makes progress toward her vocation by imagining herself at the one MFA program that accepted her—the University of Montana’s (eventually, according to the book jacket, she earned an MFA at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop). Unlike some members of her generation, she even finds community.

Holden Village is not Eden. Its pile of toxic tailings makes it a Superfund site. Yet the landscape pours out its healing song to a receptive heart: “The snow covers everything that is rough or sharp or scratchy in soft waves. If the sound of the word *ululation* were made into a landscape it would be this.” Resisting clichés and expected endings all the way, the author concludes: “Holden didn’t let me escape the world; instead, the village helped me make more room for the world inside myself.”

Kaethe Schwehn has mined every vein of her younger self, and she has emerged as a writer of great promise.