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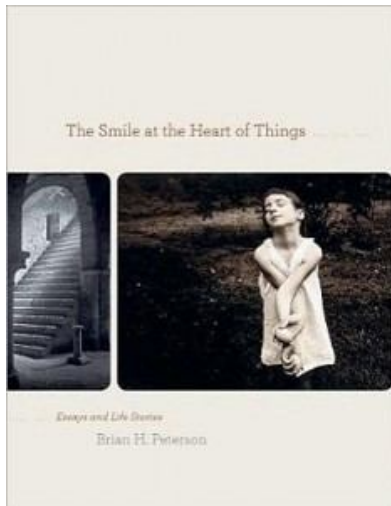


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## Memoirs of an arty nature

By [roberta](#) | February 25, 2010

*We live at a time of unprecedented memoir-izing where people tell all, or as much as they want to reveal (often lots more than a reader wants to know). Here are two memoirs that have either direct or indirect relationships with the art world.*



Chief curator at the [Michener Museum of Art](#), [Brian Peterson](#) is also an artist in his own right and a published critic. What this book — a compendium of essays, musings, anecdotes and diaristic narrative — reveals is that Peterson is a romantic soul, a poetic wordsmith and someone whose spirituality is a driving force in his worldview. Many pages about God and the Bible notwithstanding, the book is a pleasure to read.

Unlike in many memoirs, few psycho-bombshells are exposed in this relatively ordinary examined life. But Peterson's inner musings take you on a roller coaster ride. From his discovery of Walt Whitman's poetry on a cross-country bus ride when he was a teenager to musings on death, regeneration, family — all told through vivid and personal anecdotes with a breezy flow of words — the book is a page-turner. Peterson is a master of mood and description.

The tales and essays are supplemented with a goodly number of pictures, like the nice full page color image of Thomas Eakins' portrait of Walt Whitman that accompanies the tale of the teenage bus rider discovering Whitman's poems. Some of the illustrations accompany the essays Peterson wrote about artists he's worked with. There's a nice section about photographer Emmett Gowin, for example. And the choice to put Gowin's photo of the little girl with her twisted arms on the book's cover is a great stroke merging inside and out. Both the wonder of that strange image and the sense of wonder and inner contentment on the child's face capture something of the spirit of the book, If that child is full of easy self-exposure, aw shucks happiness and genuine awe at the world then so is Peterson.



Brian Peterson

Peterson grew up in Montana with a geologist father, and his grounding in a rural community close to the land and nature pervades the book, from his musings by the banks of the Wissahickon to his sensual pleasure in lying on the grass at night looking up at the stars over Montana. There are stories about a difficult mother, a troubled youth, and health issues with his wife and himself that make him feel his mortality. For its honest examination of self and the world and for its embrace of artistic wonder, the book is a gift. It is a smile to read it.

*The Smile at the Heart of Things: Essays and Life Stories*  
Co-published by [Tell Me Press](#) and the James A. Michener Art Museum  
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