

Ever So Humble

What happened when an urbanite finally acquired the
mountain cabin of his dreams.

Alexander Nazaryan

Jan 5, 2025

CABIN

Off the Grid Adventures With a Clueless Craftsman

By Patrick Hutchison

St. Martin's. 286 pp. \$29.

“MAN WAS MADE to do his daily work with his muscles; but see him now, like a fly on flypaper, seated for eight hours, motionless at a desk,” wrote Jacques Ellul, the 20th-century French philosopher whose idiosyncratic Christianity made him skeptical of the modern world.

I'm not sure that anything would have enticed Ellul to Snohomish County, Wash., but I suspect he would have approved of what Patrick Hutchison set out to do there, in the thick conifer forest, as he chronicles it in his funny and thoughtful new book, “Cabin.”

In 2012, as he initially related in a viral article in *Outside* magazine, Hutchison was working a dull copy writing job in Seattle, languishing instead of living. “All too often, an average evening at home would consist of little more than sitting on the couch, phone in hand, letting my attention lazily ping-pong between Twitter and Instagram and YouTube and whatever happened to be on TV,” he writes.

These were the glory days of the “cabin porn” trend, when social media users gazed yearningly at bespoke buildings in fashionably rural places, preferably northern Finland or the Hollywood Hills. Actual ownership was not generally the point; as the name implies, this was food for the imagination. There you were, warming yourself by the wood stove. Listening to birdsong, swimming in creeks untainted by microplastics.

But Hutchison went further. In 2013, he bought a cabin on Craigslist for \$7,500 from a guy named Tony who “seemed about as concerned about the place as a dog is about climate change.” The cabin — appropriately, an “oversize doghouse” — was set in a rugged stretch of forest above the Skykomish River, close enough for weekend escape.

We travel with him as the cabin becomes his “safe space,” where he and his friends regularly retreat. In their sylvan solitude, they engage in behaviors increasingly missing from coastal urban landscapes. They build a deck, then an outhouse. They install a stove. They drink bourbon and fry steaks and go at it again. They tear things up, they get things wrong. They learn.

“We just wanted to play with power tools and cut wood. We wanted to squeeze the triggers on drills and rip boards with saws,” Hutchison writes. His prose has an easy warmth, never self-indulgent or forced. Wielding the glorious Sawzall — a reciprocating saw — he observes that its “only purpose in life is to utterly destroy things while giving the operator the illusion of control.”

He makes no bones about being a neophyte, but his craving for mastery is always a match for his inexperience (itself relative; Hutchison was raised in an outdoorsy family). “At times, it felt like the cabin and I were partners in a sort of joint self-improvement project,” he writes. “When the cabin was all fixed up, maybe I would be too.”



Patrick Hutchison bought a cabin on Craigslist that he describes as an “oversize doghouse.”

Hutchison's dread at returning to Seattle after weekends at the cabin is the same Sunday blues many feel, amplified by the proximity of what he increasingly becomes convinced is a better way to live. You feel his desire to be back in the woods, working with his hands. Don't we all? So why do we so rarely have the courage to act on that impulse, to push back against a culture we know is not conducive to human thriving?

"Fifteen minutes of exercise cannot make up for eight hours of absence," wrote Ellul, in what could well serve as "Cabin"'s epigraph. "The human being was made to breathe the good air of nature, but what he breathes is an obscure compound of acids and coal tars."

It may come as no surprise that several books by Ellul (currently enjoying a vogue among certain online thinkers) were found in the Montana cabin of Ted Kaczynski. Better known as the *Unabomber*, Kaczynski has likewise recently attracted a coterie of young adherents who see "Uncle Ted" as a prophet lacking perhaps in the right public relations approach but fundamentally correct in his withering observations about modernity. They are, perhaps, responding to the same pressures as Hutchison, only without the cathartic pleasures of a Sawzall.

It's probably best that Hutchison avoids Luddite-style creeds: He is too good-natured for diatribes about iPhone alerts. Yet his exasperation keeps creeping back into the book, his desire to somehow banish the "listlessness" that marks his Seattle life.

Spoiler alert: He succeeds. By the end of the book, the cabin is no longer a doghouse, and Hutchison is no longer a copywriter — he has taken up carpentry full time. The "irresponsible" decision to buy the place from Tony turns out to be transformative. "Maybe I would have found something else — hot-air balloon operator or glassblowing or falconry," he muses, but he could have just as easily remained stuck in an unfulfilling job had he failed to heed the "quiet, persistent voice that nags us into wondering what else might be possible."

ALEXANDER NAZARYAN *Writes about politics, culture and science.*

The Ted K Archive

Alexander Nazaryan

Ever So Humble

What happened when an urbanite finally acquired the mountain cabin of his dreams.

Jan 5, 2025

The New York Times Book Review, New York (Jan 5, 2025): Page 7.

<nytimes.com/2024/12/02/books/review/cabin-patrick-hutchison.html>

Here's a link to where to buy the book being reviewed:

<us.macmillan.com/books/9781250285713/cabin>

www.thetedkarchive.com