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## 'On Looking' Opens Eyes to Local Writer's (and Walker's) World

By Lou Fancher



The shadows and contours created by the sun shining on Saint Mary's College can change over the course of just minutes, altering the experience of a walk. Best-selling author Alexandra Horowitz's book, "On Looking" discusses the beauty of spatial awareness and subtle differences in our surroundings. Photo Andy Scheck

dents on a garage door, where a neighbor boy practices his pitches, slowly inch higher as the years pass.

Traveling the same route, I've found the comfort of constancy and have been chastised by change, which combined, remind me to accept both departures and arrivals.

But what if I weren't so eager to move? What if I worked in a job as interesting and stationary as a doorknob? (Doorknobs are actually fascinating, but I've a writer's curiosity about everything.) Or what if my only walk was a dash from BART to a San Francisco skyscraper? How would I find spontaneity, gaiety - and that cherished clarity - a glorious setting provides? And how will I survive, when I am much older and a journey might consist of a 30-foot walk down the same hallway, day after day?

One of 2013's best books, "On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes," by best-selling author Alexandra Horowitz, helps all of us look upon familiar terrain with fresh eyes.

Horowitz's first book, "Inside of a Dog," spent 63 weeks on the New York Times Bestselling list and showed readers the world from a dog's perspective. Trained as a cognitive scientist, she teaches psychology at Barnard College, Columbia University.

"On Looking" has Horowitz taking 11 ordinary walks with "experts" - a toddler (her son), a dog, a blind person, a geologist, an artist, a doctor able to make a diagnosis by simply observing a person's gait and more. Seeking to re-awaken her "perpetual wonder," in familiar settings, she sees a crowded city's geology as would a chess master: moving parts destined to fulfill predictable future patterns. Every building becomes a "family" of stones; her increasing spatial awareness adds a fourth dimension: the distance separating two people becomes an entire psychology, a hole the size

Oh, to walk! As a freelance writer who abhors sitting, there's nothing better than a quick stride out the door and 20 minutes in the Lamorinda outdoors. When deadlines loom, even a run on a treadmill miraculously supplies an article's lead, usually within the first mile. Like many fidgety folks, I give myself a hike up the hill as a reward for each nearly completed article. Upon my return, silly sentences are suddenly easy to edit, as if walking in the clear air has swept aside muddled thoughts and left only much-needed clarity.

With a packed schedule, the walk usually follows the same, well-known path: across the parking lot, along the sidewalk, around a big curve, into the street (I detest those slanting driveways interrupting the sidewalk and resort to the road), climb the steep hill, loop the cul-de-sac, wave "hello" to far-off Mount Diablo, and reverse all.

Over time, I've discovered some things change, some things stay the same. Neighbors who pass in their cars no longer scowl, but instead, they smile and wave, having grown accustomed to the lady in the street. Wild turkeys still poop more on the sidewalks than they do in the road. Trees grow and some die, homes peel and get painted, and the

of a quarter through which a squirrel can pass amazes her perception.

It's almost a guilty pleasure that Horowitz writes so well. Words like "belching" and "crepuscular" (active at dawn or dusk) happily reside on the same page; a brief history lesson on the origins of sidewalks fascinates; a woman's wildly swinging arm is described as "conducting an orchestra at her toes." It's simply fun to read Horowitz's breezy depictions of people and places-and easy to form an instant picture of the intricate spaces and faces she encounters. When the book's "fresh eyes" message begins to creep into greater consciousness, we too can see a patient behind an IV, recognize weariness in a walk, or even begin to "see" with our ears or sense of smell.

The best books, films, athletic events, conversations and vacations - all a natural part of slowed-down summer months - change us. Thrilling or enthralling, significant "outings," whether literal or cerebral, endure beyond the pages of a book, a play's final scenes or remembered home runs.

"On Looking" reminds us to pay attention; to venture out the door looking for excellent adventure. Better yet, with the author's "no mandate, only opportunity" encouragement, we might look upon a loved one's all-too-familiar face and with enhanced focus, see something new. We might slip out the door, alone or with a companion, free from sitting and independent of the setting, and think, "Oh, to walk!"

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[back](#)

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