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Book Review: Cumberland Island: Strong Women, Wild Horses

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Book Review

Seabrook, Charles. Cumberland Island: Strong Women, Wild Horses. Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 2002. 373pp.

Charles Seabrook, the award winning environmental reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, has written an absorbing book about one of the most beautiful spots in eastern North America. Cumberland Island, located off the coast of Georgia near the Florida border, is a third larger than Manhattan and home to towering trees, sandy beaches, exotic plant life, salt marshes, wild horses and wild hogs. The establishment of Cumberland Island National Seashore was intended to preserve this unique ecosystem, but ever since its inception the park has been burdened with major disputes over tourism and environmental management. For example, should the herds of non-indigenous horses and hogs be protected because they are a beloved part of Cumberland's mystique, or should they be thinned or removed completely, in light of the destruction they inflict on the island's natural environment? Ironically, some of use rights that the National Park Service had to grant in order to obtain the property for the park are now contributing to environmental concerns, e.g., riding motorized vehicles on the beach.

As the book's title implies, several remarkable women have dominated the history of Cumberland Island. Seabrook's vivid portrayals begin with Catharine "Caty" Greene Miller, the widow of Revolutionary War hero General Nathanael Greene and close friend of Eli Whitney. Caty established the first great residence on Cumberland, a profitable cotton plantation. A strong woman in a different manner was Zabelle, a mulatto slave who bore several children by the island's largest pre-Civil War landowner and slave owner. In the reconstruction era, the sister-in-law of Andrew Carnegie, Lucy Coleman Carnegie, began developing a series of magnificent residences for her closest family members. Meanwhile, a small but thriving black community grew on the northern part of the island, led in the mid-twentieth century by its unofficial mayor Beulah Alberty, a strong-willed eccentric whose moonshine liquor and raccoon trapping were only two of many moneymaking schemes to pay for her niece's education. Later, Lucy Ferguson, granddaughter of Lucy Coleman Carnegie, ensured that a national park would be established on Cumberland only on her terms.

Today, the island's most influential women are on opposite sides in the disputes over Cumberland's future. Gogo Ferguson is the great-great-granddaughter of Lucy Carnegie who helped organize the 1996 Cumberland Island wedding of John F. Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette. Carol Ruckdeschel, a naturalist and outspoken environmentalist, has lived and researched on Cumberland since the 1970s. In one of Cumberland's most dramatic incidents, she killed a former lover who was breaking into her cabin.

Seabrook writes in a clear and straightforward style that belies his journalistic background. Rather than sensationalizing a story that already boasts sex, violence, power, and a cast of colorful characters, the author recounts dispassionately the litany of lawsuits, backroom deals, internecine family conflicts, government lobbying, and naked power grabs. He also evokes Cumberland's many attractions effectively, and does a good job of tracing the current feuds back to their historic sources. This work is authoritative and well documented, thanks to his many hours of archival research and personal interviews. If you have never visited Cumberland Island, I suspect you will be very eager to do so by the time you finish this book.

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