

A Book Of Reasons - John Vernon

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"History in its minute particulars touches us all, and in the least expected ways." Every family has its odd character, the one member who never seems right with the world. In his brilliant pairing of family history with the history of civilization, John Vernon discovers the extraordinary sources of ordinary things in the life of his reclusive brother, Paul. When Paul died and John was charged with settling his affairs, he came face to face with a life he had never suspected. His brother's house in southern New Hampshire was in a state of squalid, shocking disrepair: piled high with a lifetime of trash, unheated and decrepit, pitifully unlivable. An assembly worker and an amateur inventor, Paul had managed to keep his sad and strange world hidden. The story of this troubled soul is at once fascinating and tragic. And more: it cries out for reasons. Why does a childhood full of promise turn wrong? Why do we clutter our lives with things? How do we make and understand our world? Vernon seeks answers in the most unexpected places. Buying a hammer and thermometer at Wal-Mart, that icon of consumerism, inspires a short history of tools and the discovery of mercury. Paul's wake occasions an investigation of blood circulation and embalming. Vernon voyages through science and physiology, culture and mythology, on a search "for a way to comprehend a life that left behind not splendid monuments but ordinary wreckage." The result is a book of reasons: reasons for his brother's way of life, reasons for his own response to Paul's death. Bringing to bear the narrative powers that distinguished his acclaimed historical novels *Peter Doyle* and *All for Love*, Vernon links the story of one odd individual to the surprising and irregular upheavals of history. In the process, he discovers how reasons, for all of us, are one means of learning to accept things that can never be explained.

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