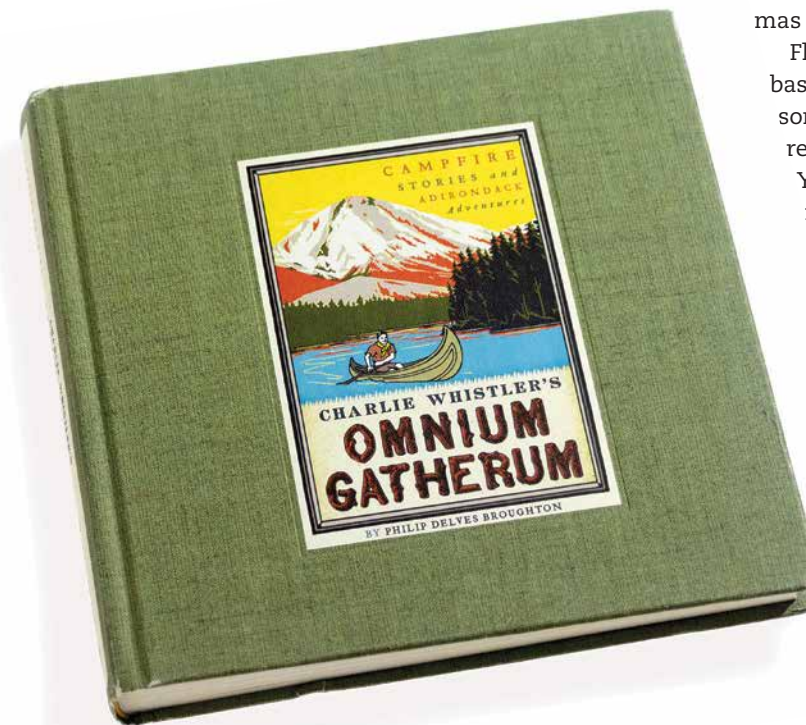


TARJETA POSTAL

# LAND of MAKE-BELIEVE

AN ENGLISHMAN'S  
FICTIONAL LOVE LETTER TO  
RAQUETTE LAKE

BY BRIAN MANN



**E**VERY MORNING WHILE SIPPING MY FIRST CUP OF COFFEE, I open a Google News search and ask the computer gods to tell me everything they know about the Adirondacks. Usually they churn out things that are already on my radar, kerfuffles over tourist trains or battles over wilderness areas. But one day a few months ago, the search kicked out something completely unexpected: a review in the *Wall Street Journal* of a book set in Raquette Lake called *Charlie Whistler's Omnium Gatherum*.

I had never heard of it or its writer, Philip Delves Broughton. The *Journal* reviewer described his book as a fictional “gallimaufry of letters, maps, newspaper clippings, postcards and vintage photographs,” all supposedly collected by a make-believe family during generations of vacations and adventures in the Adirondacks.

There’s nothing more fun than a good mystery, so I started digging and quickly learned that Broughton is a British-born business writer and consultant living in Connecticut—which only tweaked my curiosity further. How had an English expat, a *Financial Times* columnist and the author of books with titles like *Life’s a Pitch* and *The Art of the Sale* come to write a fictional love letter to a tiny hamlet in the Adirondacks? And what on earth was a gallimaufry?

I sent off for the book and it turned out to be a kind of small wonder, a captivating mishmash of tall tales and historical anecdotes, boys’ adventures and advice and recipes. The whole enterprise is lavishly adorned with sketches and watercolors and little diagrams, all of it wrapped in a scratchy green cloth cover. It looked and felt like the kind of treasure you might find on a dusty shelf in an old bed-and-breakfast.

*Omnium Gatherum* opens with a description of an idyllic, if weather-beaten, cabin perched on the shore of Raquette Lake. “The floors are splintery. The bedsheets are worn and thin. The plumbing often breaks down. But for generations of Whistlers, it’s been our favorite place in the world,” Broughton writes. “A few hardy Whistlers have seen out entire winters up here, sitting through the long deep winters in flannel pajamas beside a well-fed stove.”

Flummoxed, I sent an email to Broughton, basically begging him to meet me and offer some explanation. “It was 1998 and I was a reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* living in New York City and I saw a story about mule diving in the Adirondacks,” he said, when we finally sat down together on a bench outside the Tap Room, a tavern in Raquette Lake. He sounded a little sheepish at the sheer randomness of his book’s inspiration.

“I thought mule diving would be interesting to English readers, so I drove up that weekend and this was the only place I could find to stay. I remember coming out in the morning and thinking, This is just the most beautiful place.”

Broughton was hooked and he kept coming back year after

**THE BOOK IS A KIND OF SEMI-FICTIONAL SCRAPBOOK MEANT MOSTLY FOR YOUNG READERS. THINK ONE PART *THE DANGEROUS BOOK FOR BOYS*, ONE PART BOY SCOUT MANUAL AND ONE PART ANYTHING ELSE THAT CAUGHT BROUGHTON'S CURIOSITY.**

year. When I asked why, he shrugged and said, "They make the most amazing donuts in the general store. It feels like a real place."

What are the chances? Raquette Lake isn't the most remote settlement in the Adirondacks, but it's pretty darn close. It lies in the very nearly unpopulated mountainous sprawl of Hamilton County. To get there, you take a highway until you're miles from anyplace you've ever heard of. Then you follow a dog-leg road past the permanently shuttered school and a handsome old church.

In the 19th century, the hamlet and lake were a prestigious summer retreat, favored by Durants and Carnegies and other builders of Great Camps and industrial empires. These days it's a busy place in summer, with dinner cruises and cocktails and canoe races and bustling kids' camps. With a permanent population of roughly 120 souls, it's very nearly a ghost town in winter.

This was the tiny world that captured and held Broughton's imagination for nearly a decade. He took me for a walk along the shore, pointing to the handsome clapboard cabins he called "wooden encampments." Though he was an Englishman with little experience of East Coast traditions, a story began to germinate. It involved a New York City clan called the Whistlers. Inspired by the writings of Henry David Thoreau, they make Raquette

Lake their retreat in the 1870s and stick around for the next five generations.

*Omnium Gatherum* isn't a novel. The phrase that Broughton took for his title is a bit of Latin that sort of means anything goes, which gives you the idea. The book is a kind of semi-fictional scrapbook meant mostly for young readers. Think one part *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, one part Boy Scout manual and one part anything else that caught Broughton's curiosity. The chronicle begins in the present day when Charlie Whistler (the sixth generation of Whistlers) finds a trunk full of keepsakes and old letters and diaries in the cabin's attic.

"Many were illustrated with drawings and maps or had photographs stapled to them," Broughton writes. "They told the most amazing stories. Danger and distant lands. Of risk-taking closer to home. There were stories about cowboys and adventurers and advice on everything from cooking to scaring off grizzly bears."

**Omnium's sketches, watercolors, diagrams, letters, recipes and journal entries help bring the author's imagination to life.**

The book spins on from there. Real people make appearances, including Teddy Roosevelt and the famed Adirondack guide Old Mountain Phelps. There are poems by Yeats and Gary Snyder and a side-trip to the 1932 Winter Olympics in Lake



Placid. If a theme emerges, it's the way that family and memory work when given time and leisure and enough vigor, building up over decades. Another thread is Broughton's notion that children should be free as much as humanly possible to explore and think and make up their own entertainments.

"One of the guiding ideas around this book is a quote at the beginning from William Blake," he told me during our stroll. "'Energy is eternal delight.' We shouldn't be trying to tell children, You should be interested in this, or, You should be doing that. If you somehow unleash their curiosity and let their energy run wild, they will find things to be interested in."

Broughton said the project was shaped in part by his own young boys and the books he saw them reading. "There was a lot of dystopia and a lot of video gamey stuff. I grew up with these old-fashioned English books about kids growing up in the Lake District of England. But those books were dated. I thought, What could I do that's like that?"

So he kept returning to Raquette Lake and he also started researching. "I went to the New York Public Library and read about the Adirondacks. I came up to the library at the Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake, and I found these big boxes from the summer camps, the old newsletters and theater programs. They were full of jokes by kids, nicknames and funny stories about their camp counselors. I thought, Here's an amazing kind of spirit that could be revived and put in a book."

Broughton said he didn't want to write a polemic about modern childhood and smartphones and play-dates, but he does think kids these days are too scheduled. Their lives are too structured and cautious. "I wanted to recreate this idea of a boy on an Adirondack lake. I wanted to create that kind of space that exists in childhood, that sense of nothing to do for weeks on end."

I loved this openness in Broughton's book, the sense that there are things to explore and discover. It's nostalgic but not cloying. And it's beautifully made. He collaborated with artists at the Center for Book Arts, in New York City, to recreate the feel of old postcards, old watercolor paintings. It feels happily cluttered, with bits of sharp storytelling and clear voices sounding through the muddle. (A gallimaufry,



by the way, is defined by Merriam-Webster as a hodgepodge, which seems a pretty apt description.)

Even more than I loved *Omnium Gatherum*, I loved the fact that Raquette Lake seduced Broughton into writing it. The Adirondacks has always had this power, I think. People come to spend a single night or a week's vacation and with surprising regularity they find themselves lingering, or coming back, at least in their imaginations. They see that this really is a real place. It seems a fixed and a quiet compass point in a world of churn and noise.

In the end, it's no mystery that Broughton would want to write his fictional family into the history of this lake and these mountains and the little town that lies between. 🌿

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