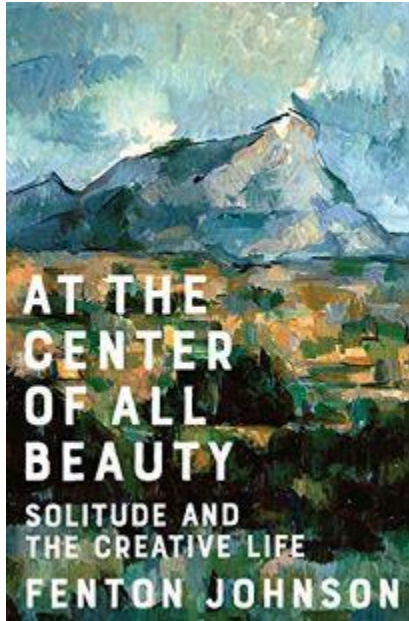




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At the Center of All Beauty: Solitude and the Creative Life

Fenton Johnson. Norton, \$26.95 (256p) ISBN 978-0-393-60829-8

In this stirring memoir and social critique, Johnson (*Everywhere Home: A Life in Essays*) explores a life of solitude of those who “sit alone writing, painting, or reading, or watching the changing light.” A self-described “solitary,” Johnson posits that he and other artists who have focused wholly on answering a

calling—rather than pursuing romantic love—constitute a larger “human family.” This premise frames Johnson’s meditations on how race, celibacy, sexual orientation, or gender identity have informed many a solitary life. He investigates his “affection for being alone” through colorful anecdotes of his “bent” childhood in rural Kentucky and calls his choices to be childless and celibate “a joyous turning inward.” Johnson then examines 11 solitaries, including writers Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, as well as jazz singer Nina Simone, who, because of her commitment to her art, refused to marry the one man she loved. Queerness and solitude, writes Johnson, make many of them “role models for the cultivation of an interior life.” Some, he observes, went from longing for a partner to calmly accepting solitude as a gift of destiny, while others, such as Simone, never “seemed to have reached that inner peace.” His musings on solitude deliver heady and abstract concepts with engaging clarity. (Mar.)