

Diana Coogle HER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

■ When one realizes the pull of nature and the power of words to shape the soul, very little else in the way of material needs may be required. Diana Coogle, BA'66, who lives on the side of Grayback Mountain in the Siskiyou of southern Oregon, can attest to this.

Living in a home she built by herself in 1974 then expanded some years later, this writer, playwright, and teacher coexists in harmony with nature around her.

In listening to the earth she finds a thread that weaves its way seamlessly between her life on the mountain and the creative nonfiction she writes.

"Those who knew me at Vanderbilt know that I'm not a very practical person," laughs Coogle. "I wouldn't have thought during my years at Vanderbilt that I'd be the most likely person to live alone up in the mountains." But she has lived in her house now for more than 25 years, "and I love it," she says. "This house suits me very well. Because I built it myself, I completely created my own space. People's reactions to it when they visit are something like their reactions to me, because they're really responding to an expression of my personality."

The house began as a 10-foot by 12-foot room with a loft and skylights that she built by herself for \$300 in 1974. At the time, her son was two years old. As he grew, she added to the structure (this time with the help of a carpenter friend), and the 120-square-foot house became 500 square feet. She has no electricity, no refrigeration. She cooks on a propane stove, heats with wood, and showers outside. She does have a phone now, because, as she explains in the introduction to her book *Fire From the Dragon's Tongue*, which was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award in

1999, "I thought that listening to the human world might be important, too."

Cars, however, cannot make it to her home. "One of the special, poetic things about the house is that there have never been any vehicles around it at all. You have to walk to get here."

If all this sounds as though Coogle is an austere woman, think again. She studies guitar with a former

student of Segovia, practices yoga, and teaches writing at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass, Oregon. She has written plays for children and adults, all of which have been produced, and continues to write essays, which she reads weekly on Jefferson Public Radio. It is most often through the essays that she communicates how she listens to nature through all her senses.

Her winter passion is cross-country skiing, and her summer passion—and the source for an upcoming book—is backpacking to and swimming in high altitude lakes. "I swam in Crater Lake last summer for more than 30 minutes and really felt the kind of at-oneness that

people talk about. These lakes are very blue and very deep. Most are glacier-fed, and to be in the middle of this very cold, blue lake with snow-covered peaks surrounding me was just ecstasy."

Spring and summer near her home bring not only backpacking and swimming, but also tending to her steep, mountainside garden. "I have a lot of peonies and foxglove, Shasta daisies and daffodils," says Coogle, "but I need to build a cage around my roses. The deer and I are coming to terms with what I can and cannot grow around here."

—Bonnie Arant Ertelt

