



On the Water: Discovering America in a Row Boat

Nathaniel Stone

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“I take a stroke and lean back, gazing up into the jet skies, bejeweled by the moon and the galaxies of stars. The hull glides in silence and with such perfect balance as to report no motion. I sit up for another stroke, now looking down as the blades ignite swirling pairs of white constellations of phosphorescent plankton. Two opposing heavens. ‘Remember this,’ I think to myself.”

Few people have ever considered the eastern United States to be an island, but when Nat Stone began tracing waterways in his new atlas at the age of ten he discovered that if one had a boat it was possible to use a combination of waterways to travel up the Hudson River, west across the barge canals and the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, and back up the eastern seaboard. Years later, still fascinated by the idea of the island, Stone read a biography of Howard Blackburn, a nineteenth-century Gloucester fisherman who had attempted to sail the same route a century before. Stone decided he would row rather than sail, and in April 1999 he launched a scull beneath the Brooklyn Bridge to see how far he could get. After ten months and some six thousand miles he arrived back at the Brooklyn Bridge, and continued rowing on to Eastport, Maine.

Retracing Stone’s extraordinary voyage, *On the Water* is a marvelous portrait of the vibrant cultures inhabiting American shores and the magic of a traveler’s chance encounters. From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where a rower at the local boathouse bequeaths him a pair of fabled oars, to Vanceburg, Kentucky, where he spends a day fishing with Ed Taylor -- a man whose efficient simplicity recalls *The Old Man and the Sea* -- Stone makes his way, stroke by stroke, chatting with tugboat operators and sleeping in his boat under the stars. He listens to the live strains of Dwight Yoakum on the banks of the Ohio while the world’s largest Superman statue guards the nearby town square, and winds his way through the Louisiana bayous, where he befriends Scoober, an old man who reminds him that the happiest people are those who’ve “got nothin’.” He briefly adopts a rowing companion -- a kitten -- along the west coast of Florida, and finds himself stuck in the tidal mudflats of Georgia. Along the way, he flavors his narrative with local history and lore and records the evolution of what started out as an adventure but became a lifestyle.

An extraordinary literary debut in the lyrical, timeless style of William Least Heat-Moon and Henry David Thoreau, *On the Water* is a mariner’s tribute to childhood dreams, solitary journeys, and the transformative powers of America’s rivers, lakes, and coastlines.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Catherine Stevenson:

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Kathryn Hebert:

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