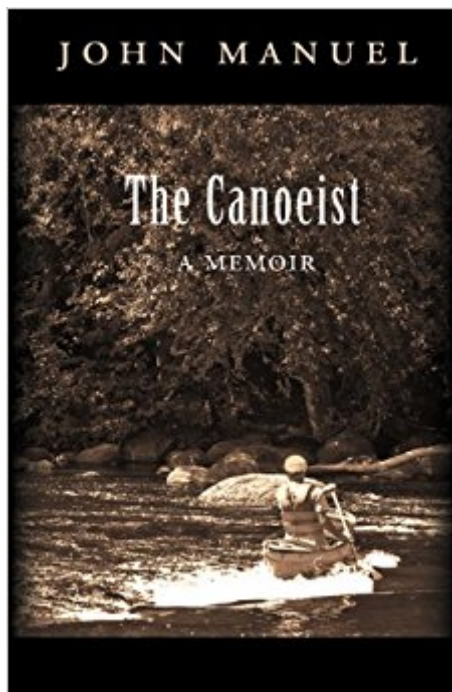


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The Canoeist: A Memoir



Synopsis

An ardent canoeist for more than forty-five years, John Manuel was first introduced to the solace, natural wonder and exhilaration of canoeing while growing up on the Chagrin River in Ohio, paddling an old Grumman canoe under the scrutiny of his father. Decades later, as he watches his elderly dad succumb to cancer, Manuel recalls this initiation into a lifetime of canoeing with both fondness and confusion. What was the allure of rivers? Was it the challenge of rapids, the natural beauty his father had known? Or was it the need to pursue his own life, to escape from home and family expectations? At times rollicking and playful as the rapids it portrays, *The Canoeist* also possesses a rare emotional depth. Manuel gives us a vivid picture of his own human experience—of falling in love, its elation and heart-rending turns; the intimate connection among paddling friends; the fight to save the natural places he reveres; the frustration and joy of bringing children into the canoeing life. Chapters named for a dozen eastern rivers carry the reader from such historic events as the fire on the Cuyahoga River and anti-Nixon demonstrations in Washington D.C. to the wild and some times dangerous watersheds of Manuel's life. In part an ode to rivers, *The Canoeist* also affirms the vital importance of family and friends, and reveals a portrait of America in changing times.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

From the Chagrin in Ohio to the Chattooga in North Carolina to the Pigeon in Tennessee, Manuel (*The Natural Traveler Along North Carolina's Coast*) recalls trips along waterways both big and

small. But one canoe ride soon blends into another (which then quickly gives way to another), and though each has a special place in Manuel's heart, the feeling for the reader is akin to bobbing aimlessly in a lukewarm stream of Manuel's nostalgia. He juxtaposes his canoe trips with ruminations on family in particular and nature in general, but the intent of these passages is not entirely clear; the book begins with Manuel visiting his dying father, for example, and though he references their troubled relationship, their mutual disappointment is never satisfactorily addressed. Manuel's explored raging rivers, but he's less adept at traversing the still water of his inner life, making for a tepid reading experience. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"A parable of conservation and community...a fast and absorbing ride." — Lee Smith, author, *The Last Girls* "An honest take on a man's path of self-discovery viewed through the lessons learned from a lifetime of running rivers." — Paddler Magazine "What makes *The Canoeist* worthy is Manuel's ability to put us in the boat with him, spectating from the stern." — The News & Observer (Raleigh North Carolina) "Gorgeously well-written." — Wilmington Morning Star "The message is about life, birth and death, love and trust, our burning need for wild places." — Canoe & Kayak

John Manuel's lyrical writing is evocative of Salinger and Knowles as he tells of personal rites of passage. Whether reading this book as personal memoir or whitewater adventuring, it's captivating and realistic. With each chapter focusing on a different river Manuel (sometimes with friends) has paddled, comes a clear window into life experiences. The beauty and honesty of Manuel's writing makes this a memorable reading treasure.

I first connected with author John Manuel through an article he wrote in *Montana Outdoors* magazine about watching wildlife on local rivers via canoe. The author's byline at the end of the article revealed that he resides in North Carolina. It seemed a bit odd that someone from the other side of the country would provide expert tips for wildlife viewing in Montana, but he was spot on in the article, citing the Jefferson River as a prime waterway encountering moose, otters, bald eagles, and just about anything else that lives in the northern Rockies.

I've also seen bears along the river, and other people have seen wolves and mountain lions. As president of the Jefferson River Canoe Trail, I reached out to John Manuel and sent him a copy of our *Canoe Trail Maps of the Jefferson*. We also traded books, a copy of

my *Foraging the Mountain West: Gourmet Edible Plants, Mushrooms, and Meat* for his memoir, *The Canoeist*. As an admitted workaholic, my reading is usually work-oriented, so it was a rare treat to read a book for pleasure, and what a wonderful book it is! Manuel tells his life story through canoeing adventures from childhood onward, embracing life in the shadow of death--the drowning death of neighbor girl when he was young, and the eventual loss of his own father. The story relives his troubled relationship with his father, his hope to win his father's praise, and his challenge to avoid becoming his father in his relationships with other people. It is a beautiful story of friendship, family, love, and adventure. I am an avid canoeist myself, but prefer long, lazy river trips, spending days or weeks on quiet wilderness waterways. I

don't have much of an appetite for whitewater, which made the harrowing adventures of *The Canoeist* that much more appealing, the opportunity to vicariously join Manuel in the canoe while safe and dry in my own comfort zone. If you love rivers, you will love this book.

I watched *THE CANOEIST* evolve from the first scribbled pages to the last polished paragraph, and I read the book several times in manuscript form before it was published. But reading the finished product was like shooting the rapids with John Manuel as my guide...a wonderful ride! John did what many writers fail to do, which is fine-tune his book during the last few months before publication. I was delighted to come upon whole chapters revised and even more so to find added words of wisdom, eg, "...obstacles that appear so daunting often turn out to be easy, while the unnamed threats do us in." Such thoughts and observations take the reader in tandem with John, give us an intimate relationship with him as we read this story of his life. Memoir is variously defined as "an essay on a learned subject" and "an account of personal experiences" and "a narrative of something noteworthy." John Manuel's book explores all facets of memoir; he lets us look over his shoulder as he runs wild rivers and as he struggles to be a good husband, father, and friend. The book opens on the deathbed of John's father, a man we come to know as both critical and kind, both harsh and gentle, both judgmental and wise. Throughout the book John struggles to be a better man than his father was; by the end of the book we come to see that the two men are more alike than they are different, because John allows us to see his own weaknesses, and to be with him when he acknowledges his father's strengths. It is appropriate that John dedicated this book to his father, the man who first put a paddle in John's hands. From "The Chagrin" to "The Ocoee," this is a book to be savored, one riveting chapter at a time.

John Manuel's *The Canoeist* is insightful and well-paced. He intertwines quiet reflections on life and

relationships with tales of trips down various rivers, providing insight into more than canoeing and rivers. Much of the book circles around Manuel's prickly relationship with his disapproving father, who died before its writing, and the author's very different relationship with his own son, Jackson. Recounting a trip down the storied Nantahala with his son, Manuel writes: We rounded the bend to find a canoe broached on the rock, its bow sticking right in our path. "Draw right!" Jackson pulled hard, the sinew flexing in his thin arms. We slipped through the narrow gap between the rock and the shore, punched through the tail wave, and eddied out against the bank. "Good job!" I said. Keith and Roger came around the corner, dodged the canoe, and swung in behind us. "We would've hit the boat if we hadn't seen you bogey for shore," Roger said. "Way to go, Jackson." Keith nodded his approval. I felt a sudden wave of emotion and glanced away to hide my tears. I couldn't understand what was happening. Was it just Jackson I was happy for, or was there another boy in the boat who'd waited a lifetime for a few words of praise? Like many memoirs, "The Canoeist" is an interesting recounting of people, events, time and place, but it also offers a rare and welcome perceptiveness.

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