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The Expedition: Dark Waters

Jason Lewis
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Jason Lewis's account of the first leg of his human-powered trip around the world, from London to Pueblo, Colorado, is filled with mishaps and faulty planning. On one pre-excursion photo-op—to show off the pedal-powered boat that will hopefully bring credibility and raise money—Lewis and his partner, Steve Smith, forget the boat's centerboard, causing a collision with a concrete retaining wall and a humiliating newspaper headline. The mission's lack of funding leads to a shoplifting charge against Lewis and prompts the pair to change their route, thus taking on the greener funding pastures of America earlier in the trip. Then in July 1994, just minutes into the epic journey and having left Greenwich on bicycles, Lewis and Smith get lost in South London, unable to find the highway that leads to Rye and the English Channel.

The often tenuous friendship between Lewis and Smith is strained by the latter's awkward leadership style and by Lewis himself, always "the willful toddler being reined in." In Portugal, Smith explodes when Lewis confesses that he forgot his passport, a seemingly indispensable document for global circumnavigation. The months-long, sleep-deprived Atlantic crossing is another detriment to harmony, as they alternate pedaling in two and three-hour shifts, "like lobotomized hamsters chained to a wheel that constantly needs turning." Not long after arriving in Florida, they split up, with Smith opting to cycle while Lewis decides to roller-blade to San Francisco.

Often funny and irreverent, always frank and authentic, Lewis's first volume of his Expedition series is also marked by the thrills of a first-rate adventure. North of Lagos, in Portugal, the pair eludes the local cops and undertake a harrowing ride against a wall of traffic, across a bridge that forbids bicycles. Later, the Atlantic, with its rogue waves, lethal weather, and its own traffic hazards provides all the danger this duo will ever need. While building up his roller-blading legs for American highways, Lewis is puzzled when an old-timer in a rusty pick-up says, "They'll run ya down, see. They'll jus … run ya down." Skating along Florida's Highway 19, dodging road-kill and 18-wheelers, Lewis begins to understand the old guy's point. He is alternately in awe of and dismayed by his contact with Americana; a highlight comes in the Deep South, when Lewis bares his buttocks to two "self-righteous Bible-thumpers" who rail at him for resting under a tree—on church property.

Some of his loneliest and most monotonous moments give Lewis time for deep reflection and discovery. In Colorado, he will face perhaps his greatest challenge, but along the way Lewis grows wiser, forever changed by the awareness of a "common chemistry" that puts him at ease in his surroundings.
JOE TAYLOR (Fall 2012)

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