

General

Waterwalk: A Passage of Ghosts

Steven Faulkner

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Pausing in his frenetic hurtle through a manic lifestyle, a father comes to realize he has lost touch with his teenage son. He works two jobs and attends college classes while his son is “an occasional apparition flitting in and out” of his life. What better way to slow things down and bring them closer together than to take a two-month canoe trip through Lake Superior, then across Wisconsin, finishing halfway down the Mississippi River. They would retrace the route of Louis Joliet and Father Marquette, the first Europeans to explore America’s upper Midwest some three hundred years ago. Sounds both wonderful and educational, yet, he could not help but have some serious misgivings about undertaking such a long and potentially treacherous journey.

The reader will be grateful that Faulkner did not heed his self-doubt, for the recounting of his voyage makes for a thrilling and insightful tale. More than once, the lives of father and son are in jeopardy; often, their inexperience leads them into harrowing battles with high winds and relentless waves. The best moments of the journey and the book, however, are found in their sharing of mundane moments, such as drinking coffee boiled in a battered pot over a campfire: “Justin sucked in air to cool his lips and said it tasted better than coffee at home, and I said it was better than coffee in any coffee shop, and we were both right.”

The two novice canoeists set out on the frigid waters of Lake Michigan in early summer. Their trip begins on a gravel beach near St. Ignace, Michigan, the place Joliet and Marquette began their epic journey. It’s a tourist town now, but three centuries ago, there was little there but a log chapel and a few friendly Huron Indians who watched as their priest, Jacques Marquette, disappear into the feared and dangerous west. A gifted linguist, Marquette had heard from rumors of a great river far to the west that ran from north to south, and he was determined to find it. So, too, are the author and his son.

Trying not to stray too far from shore, they make their way along the gigantic lake to

Green Bay, then continue along various riverways through Wisconsin. Finally, they travel south along the mighty Mississippi River to St. Louis—more than 1,000 miles and countless paddle strokes. Like the title character of *Huck Finn*, one of the books they take with them to read at their nightly campsites, they encounter colorful river denizens along their trek. Many seem to appear when a good neighbor is most needed, offering simple amenities like a hot shower, a warm meal, or simply jovial conversation.

The miles of quiet canoeing give the author time to reflect on his hectic life and his relationship with Justin; his musings touch deeply on the special bond a man should build with his son. “A word, a look, a touch; it’s not too much to ask. But it’s the repetition that counts, so that the word that touches and the touch that speaks are not rare, but again and again are woven into the fabric of our ordinary days. A lot of those threads have been missing over the years. I was trying to stitch things up now, but hand stitching takes time.”

And always on their journey, they sense the ghosts of Joliet and Marquette, who seem to be “just ahead, just beyond that tree-covered island, moving through the shadows around that bend.” Faulkner’s juxtaposition of his journey with the historic trek of these two famous explorers imbues this delightful book with more interest and heft than the typical adventure yarn.

Faulkner is a marvelous writer who shares his well-honed craft as a creative writing instructor at Longwood University in southern Virginia. His use of colorful, descriptive language gives the reader a third seat in the canoe as it plies the bitterly cold currents of Lake Superior to the languid waters of the Big Muddy.

Anyone with a teenage son or with a craving for adventure will enjoy this engrossing and wonderful Waterwalk.

Alan J. Couture