



A Basket of Berries

Val Archer

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On the morning of June 18, 1990, high up in the Canadian Rockies. Robin Cody pushed his Sixteen-foot, forty-seven-pound Kevlar canoe through tall grass and mud to launch it on peaceful Columbia Lake, the nominal source of the river that heaves more water into the Pacific Ocean than any other in North or South America: the Columbia. For the next eighty-two days, Cody would steer his canoe around massive dams, through killer rapids, and across reservoirs the size of small states, plunging 2,750 feet in 1,200 miles and passing right through his hometown of Portland, Oregon, before reaching the open sea. Undertaken with no particular goal in mind, with no great point to prove, the solo voyage would churn up myth, memory, and unexpected truths about the magnificent natural phenomenon that dominates the landscape, economy, and spirit of the Pacific Northwest.

To the tent-dwelling canoeist, animals play an often funny, sometimes scary, role -- bear, moose, coyote, beaver, deer, osprey, heron, loon. But, as Cody soon realizes, "nature, in real time, is not a dependable entertainment." Untethered thought takes over, and human contact, human language, is craved. Cody's cravings are met by a host of colorful riverfolk: Virginia Wyena, the grandmother of seventeen who pronounces for him the unspellable Wanapum name for the Columbia; Wayne Houlbrook, a would-be adventure guide and actual companion through daunting Redgrave Canyon; Mary Yadernuk, a seventy-three-year-old trapper of the old school; Ben Seibold, a "wood butcher" on hand for the raising of Grand Coulee Dam during the Great Depression; Lucille Worsham, who counts the fish swimming by her station down in the bowels of Bonneville Dam; even a couple of anonymous gossiping teenagers in a hardware store. A consummate listener, Cody learns that few are satisfied with the contortions the modern Columbia has been made to undergo for the sake of hydraulic and nuclear power, and that the environment is indeed in grave crisis -- and yet, he can't help but marvel at the orchestration of the river's power system as if its fourteen dams were "the stops on a massive pipe organ." He hears about eco-terrorists who slaughter hatchery salmon that they suspect are diluting the gene pool; about "hummers." radioactive coyote feces in the vicinity of Hanford's notorious B Reactor; about trees shooting like javelins out of man-made reservoirs that weren't logged before they were filled.

As he takes all this in, merely by putting his ear to the river for a good long time, Cody gains as rich an understanding of it as anyone has since 1811, when David Thompson made the first white man's trip along the Columbia, mapping it as he went. With a generous and infectious spirit, Cody draws us into the mysteries of a much altered river -- tamed, regulated, but still at heart a wilderness.

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