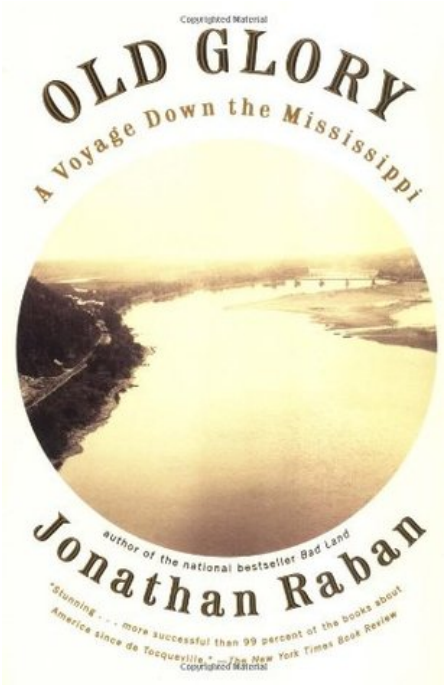

Old Glory: A Voyage Down the Mississippi

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The author of **Bad Land** realizes a lifelong dream as he navigates the waters of the Mississippi River in a spartan sixteen-foot motorboat, producing yet another masterpiece of contemporary American travel writing. In the course of his voyage, Raban records the mercurial caprices of the river and the astonishingly varied lives of the people who live along its banks. Whether he is fishing for walleye or hunting coon, discussing theology in Prairie Du Chien or race relations in Memphis, he is an expert observer of the heartyland's estrangement from America's capitals ot power and culture, and its helpless nostalgia for its lost past. Witty, elegaic, and magnificently erudite, **Old Glory** is as filled with strong currents as the Mississippi itself.

Old Glory: A Voyage Down the Mississippi Details

Date	:	Published May 26th 1998 by Vintage (first published 1981)
ISBN	:	9780375701009
Author	:	Jonathan Raban
Format	:	Paperback 416 pages
Genre	:	Travel, Nonfiction, Adventure, Autobiography, Memoir, History

From Reader Review Old Glory: A Voyage Down the Mississippi for online ebook

Teraberry says

great book. one of the best travel books I've read.

Sue Marshall says

I have read another book by this author-BadLands about the settling of the west via railroad development and federal land grants. Both are great reads-very informative and well written. He has many more I'd like to read but might continue with Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi to compare points of view 100 years between their separate journey's.

Tom says

I've read Raban's books in the wrong order. After discovering Passage to Juneau (great book) , this earlier work is similar but contrasting, but whatever he writes he's always an outstanding wordsmith bringing people and places to life.

Jacques Reynart says

This probably my favourite travel book of all time - an epic journey down almost the entire navigable length of one of the world's great rivers. Raban's private musings and the extraordinary cast of characters he meets along the riverbanks make this a compelling read.

Troy Parfitt says

Cerebral, yet accessible, Old Glory is difficult to peg in terms of genre. Travel narrative approaches, but any classification would fall well short of the mark. Raban incorporates history, mesmerizing descriptive prose, biographical morsels, and sparse but welcome bits of dry British wit in this journey through America atop its longest river. In fact, Raban's Englishness is part of what makes the book so appealing. You see America, warts and all, from the eyes of an intrepid and analytical outsider. Raban is a stylist who reveals himself to the reader slowly. I found him to be a very interesting, complex, and slightly tortured figure. He is nearly as intriguing as the voyage itself.

Never again will I look at the Mississippi River as just some long line on a map. The whirlpools, the logs, the dangers; always moving atop and into the unknown on a vessel ridiculously undersized and unsuited for such a trip; a metaphor, certainly. In terms of writing style, there cannot be many better than Jonathan Raban. Here's a writer, you think, you will come back to.

Ray Francis says

Raban started his trip in 1979 in Minnesota. As he went down Mississippi he saw first hand the foment that led the Reagan landslide in 1980. As he stops in Midwestern and Southern towns along the river, he meet Americans filled with grievance about what they think the rest of the country thought about them. Frequently, what they think the rest of the country thinks about them entails a detailed understanding of those towns' perceived foibles and dirty laundry that simply does not exist. Raban cottons on to this grievance providing the grist for what passes for politics in America. The book, though, really describes Raban's journey and his relationship to the river as influenced by Huckleberry Finn. The only thing to make this book more successful would be that it leads more Americans to read Mark Twain's classic.

Lisa says

Jonathan Raban is British, yet his childhood dream was to follow Huck Finn's path and float down the Mississippi River. When he finally decided to realize the dream, he arranged to use a 16 foot boat with an outboard motor to make his way from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. He knew nothing about running a boat or about the river, and was in for some pleasant and some frightening surprises.

There is the tranquility of quiet water just before dawn and the turbulence of the wide, straight stretches against a strong wind blowing against the current. He meets fishermen in their johnboats and barges three wide and eight deep that throw out wakes powerful enough to swamp his little craft. The changing faces and attitudes of the people along the way are interwoven with the descriptions of the places he visits and the joys and hazards of his travel.

Although the voyage took place at the end of the Carter presidency, it is still a wonderful travel book.

John says

Three Goals: (1) Take a boat solo down the Mississippi from Minneapolis to New Orleans and write about the adventure to make a book, (2) Master piloting a 16-foot boat through wing dams, floating logs, jetties, boils, eddies and waves, (3) Meet “characters” along the way so as to add color to book’s narrative. Outcome: A commendable job on all counts. In sleazy bars, derelict hotels, a pig roast and sundry churches he found his colorful characters. He hunted squirrels and ‘coons with them, fished crappie and walleye with them and recaptured their lively colloquial expressions and wry wit. Many whom the author encountered envied him his adventure, but were seemingly stuck by their situations, unable to escape.

Howard says

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Snarky – 1: crotchety, snappish. 2: sarcastic, impertinent, or irreverent in tone or manner; 3: sarcastically critical or mocking and malicious

When Jonathan Raban was a seven-year-old boy living in England, he first read "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and fell in love with the Mississippi River. Or maybe he fell in love with Mark Twain's graphic portrayal of the river. I read the same book at about the same age, but I have a more substantial basis for my fascination with the subject. Almost my entire life has been spent within at least thirty minutes of America's mightiest natural force. The only exception being the years I spent going to college and even then I was never more than ninety minutes from the Mississippi. I have moved from my birthplace in almost a straight line north but never east nor west (or south, for that matter).

The result of Raban's fascination was "Old Glory: A Voyage Down the Mississippi," published in 1981. It is the story of his attempt to travel almost the full course of the mighty river, 1400 miles, in a small sixteen-foot boat powered by a 15 h.p. motor.

I first read the book a number of years ago and recently gave it a second look after reading Raban's latest travel book. I have to admit that I liked the book better the first time than I did the second go around.

Here is the problem as I see it. Raban loved the river, but didn't have much use for what Americans have created along its banks, which in many cases is understandable. However, he seems to have a visceral disregard for the people that he meets along the way. He seems to be – well – snarky in his regard for the folks he meets.

Personally, I have had a much more pleasant experience in my contacts in the communities and rural areas that border the river. And I know why. Raban didn't exactly re-enact Huck and Jim's river voyage. Whereas they camped along its banks or on its islands, Raban headed for the nearest motel each evening. I don't blame him for that, but on his way he nearly always stopped at the nearest bar – the seedier and sleazier the better. No wonder he didn't like the people he encountered. When he stopped in the charming little historical town of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri, he headed for a bar and became involved in conversation with somebody totally unlike anybody I have ever met in that community. And yet, Raban leaves us with the impression that he has just met a person who is generally representative of the town.

Raban does a similar thing in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, another town with which I am intimately acquainted. The people that he writes about are not truly representative of the people who live there either. In his conversation with a waitress, whom he makes out to be scatterbrained, he misconstrues her comments. He thinks she is talking about Columbia University when in fact it is the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri to which she is referring. Well, he is not a native of either the United States or the state of Missouri and could be forgiven for his error, that is, if he hadn't been so snarky about it.

But then one reviewer writes that Raban is "a sort of English Capote; vivid, funny, accurate, full of hyperbolic wit and outrageous metaphor; no reticence at all. But at least as important is the author's ability to make an instant connection with virtually any human being whomsoever." (I admire a writer who can so unselfconsciously use a word like 'whomsoever,' a word that I believe I just typed for the first time.)

Even though Capote would have to be considered the epitome of snarkiness, I have always enjoyed reading him. And I admire Raban's innate ability to connect with the people he meets, but I do believe that he and the reader could have been better served had he broadened his circle of connections.

Of course, Raban wants to write about the offbeat and thus seems to shun any objectivity in his analysis of the American people. But had he tried just a little harder he would have found some interesting people who do not frequent the bars and taverns to which he tends to gravitate. (I apologize if that came off a bit snarky.)

But having said all this, I have to admit that I like the book. It took courage for Raban to travel down the river the way he did. And he is a good writer and his vivid descriptions of the river – its seductive beauty, its dangerous siren call, and its unwillingness to be tamed -- saved the book for me.

I like "Old Glory" better than I do Raban’s "Hunting Mister Heartbreak: A Discovery of America" (published in 1990), but not nearly as well as his "Bad Land: An American Romance" (published in 1996).

When I originally reviewed this book the title was "Old Glory: An American Voyage," which I indicated was rather meaningless. I went on to say that I thought a much better one would have been "Big River: An American Voyage." At some point somebody else must have decided that the title was lacking, and on later editions of the book the subtitle was changed to "A Voyage Down the Mississippi."

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Christopher Ryan says

I wanted to quit this book 50 to 100 pages in. I thought he was condescending and snobbish towards Midwesterners and maybe the Midwest in general. Even now that I have finished and loved the book, I can say that he was. At the same time, though, he was open and kind with hundreds more people than those he knocked around and that makes all the difference. His humanity and reporting skills are perfect and have created an entirely engrossing book.

I have gotten the impression that in the 70s and early 80s, people loved taking trips around America, often in an unconventional way. Then they wrote books about it (see A Walk Across America and see this book). This is an interesting time in our history. There is a presidential election in the background-- Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. There is the transition from the old ways, the early- to middle part of the century ways of doing things, especially considering how rural the areas he passes through are. On top of all that, there are people he comes across born in the 1880s and 1890s (including Rush Limbaugh's grandfather!) who lived and thrived in those times, who bemoan the changes they have seen-- sometimes in not the most sensitive ways.

Maybe the point is this country and this world have always been in flux. Maybe there have always been people who are cranky and unhappy about the way things are going. Even knowing that, though, it is still a fascinating ride-- literally and figuratively!

Cedric Rose says

Great "outsider" look at 1970s Middle America self-consciously placed in the existing canon of the Mississippi... Raban walks a wonderful balance between accessibility and erudition.

Sue says

Written in the late 1970's, Raban fulfills a childhood dream of boating down the Mississippi following the ideas of one of his favorite books, "Tom Sawyer". He doesn't start at the headwaters but in Minneapolis. I had to keep reminding myself that this was the 1970's and not the Mississippi and places like Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Louis etc. that we know today where the river walks have been cleaned up and made into parks. Raban delights in the seamier, cruder side of the river towns, finding unique characters to talk to. It was an industrial era that was ending, of button factories and boat building. An interesting look into the River as it was and still has some of the rough spots today. He wasn't an experienced boater and taking a smaller motor boat out into unknown waters that were filled with the big barges, not until near the end of the journey even having a radio for communications along was daring and stupid but he accomplished what he set for a goal.

Edward Nugent says

I thoroughly enjoyed the journey, a modern Huck Finn full of rogues, rascles, race, religion, even a siren or two. It is a portrait of middle America from North to South. Even after nearly forty years the portrait is still true, places and people struggling to preserve the connection to the past as time sweeps by, ever changing and threatening.

John Morgan says

Great writing. An interesting account of travelling down the mighty Mississippi in a fairly small motorboat. The author meets many interesting charactgers along the way.

Ryan Murdock says

After a childhood of river dreams inspired by readings of Huckleberry Finn, Jonathan Raban set out to travel the length of the Mississippi River from north to south in a 16-foot open aluminum boat.

His journey took place in 1979. The waters he drifted down were much more dangerous than the river of his childhood imagination, but Huck's urge to escape, to light out for the Territory before someone — some woman — civilizes him was very much the same.

Raban's Mississippi is a turbulent world of fast eddies, mysterious boils, and tow boats with acres-long fleets of barges that looked like floating apartment blocks, and that pushed up massive wakes which sucked water from the shoreline and sent back towering waves that could capsize unwary boats.

Life beyond the muddy shoreline was another world entirely, with coon hunts, Baptist churches, pig roasts, failing towns, racial segregation, and disenfranchised people who felt left behind by their leaders and their nation. These are the characters he meets along the way as he observes the journey's single rule: to follow the current of things.

Raban's meandering narrative is perfectly in synch with the life of the river, and with the sun-drunk lethargy of its slumbering riverside towns.

Reading Old Glory brought back so many memories of my own St. Lawrence River childhood. Mine was a very different river, running as it does from the Great Lakes east to the yawning Atlantic gulf, and I grew up in a very small town on the Canadian side of those swift waters. We didn't have a port, either. Only a small Coast Guard base. But I knew the heavy thrum of passing ocean ships and lakers, heard from miles away when swimming underwater at the town beach. I knew the clanging sound of channel buoys, the bite of winter winds across the ice, and the freshwater smell of the river in summer that forms the background of all my early memories. I also know what it feels like to be caught by sudden storms on open water in a small boat.

But Raban's river passed through a very different history. The Mississippi witnessed the rise and fall of slavery in the south, the cotton boom, and river towns whose geographical position generated economic prosperity before the river wiped them away in a flood, or changed its course to leave them inland and dry. As he explored these towns and spoke to their residents, I had the feeling that history had left them behind, too.

The general reader will find wonderful bits of prose in Old Glory, and the sort of observations I've come to regard as trademark Raban. Here he is writing about racoons and their inability to cross nighttime roads: "Bright lights mesmerized them, and they died careless hobo's deaths on the wooded edges of tiny unincorporated towns."

Besieged by mosquitos and stinging things on the muddy riverbank at dusk, he writes, "When I slapped at the air, it was crunchy with bugs." And in New Orleans, "I slept alone in a four poster bed meant for honeymooning in, and woke up feeling widowed."

My favourite passage deals with fishing: "I spent a happy half hour buying fishing tackle; flexing rods and sorting through boxes of painted plugs which were supposed to look like fish to fish. Their artists, who had decorated them in Day-glo stripes and flashes, were deeply under the influence of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. I bought a blinding handful of the things, hoping that Mississippi bass and walleyes understood the conventions of the modern movement."

I could hear my father chuckling behind him as I read this, flipping open his zippo to light another pipe or cigar.

This isn't a new book. After 37 years, it has become a travel classic. But it remains vital reading.