



# Uncommon Carriers

*John McPhee*

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**Uncommon Carriers** John McPhee

**What John McPhee's books all have in common is that they are about real people in real places. Here, at his adventurous best, he is out and about with people who work in freight transportation.**

Over the past eight years, John McPhee has spent considerable time in the company of people who work in freight transportation. *Uncommon Carriers* is his sketchbook of them and of his journeys with them. He rides from Atlanta to Tacoma alongside Don Ainsworth, owner and operator of a sixty-five-foot, eighteen-wheel chemical tanker carrying hazmats. McPhee attends ship-handling school on a pond in the foothills of the French Alps, where, for a tuition of \$15,000 a week, skippers of the largest ocean ships refine their capabilities in twenty-foot scale models. He goes up the "tight-assed" Illinois River on a "towboat" pushing a triple string of barges, the overall vessel being "a good deal longer than the *Titanic*." And he travels by canoe up the canal-and-lock commercial waterways traveled by Henry David Thoreau and his brother, John, in a homemade skiff in 1839.

*Uncommon Carriers* is classic work by McPhee, in prose distinguished, as always, by its author's warm humor, keen insight, and rich sense of human character.

## Uncommon Carriers Details

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Author : John McPhee

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## From Reader Review Uncommon Carriers for online ebook

### Jacob says

Amazon has been urging me to read John McPhee ever since I told them (it?) I own *Annals of the Former World*. Amazon tends to do that; add a book to your personal library/collection, and it immediately recommends every other book the author has ever written, ever. In this case it was justified, since *Annals* looks a bit imposing and I was considering checking out McPhee's other books anyway, but don't tell them that.

As it turns out, there are some books I shouldn't bring along when visiting family, and *Uncommon Carriers* was one of them. My sister saw it lying on the table and laughed at me. It looked like "those books for first graders about trucks and trains and ships!" she said. Look at the boat! Look at the train! What sound does a train make? Gooooood!

I wanted to turn up my nose, adjust my monocle, and say "I'll have you know John McPhee writes for *The New Yorker*." So these are sophisticated first-graders we're talking about.

But the principle is the same: this collection (one of many, but the first I've read) is concerned with freight transportation, the trains and boats and trucks my sister mocked. With an eye for size, for the large and ungainly, McPhee crossed the country in an eighteen-wheel chemical tanker, rode a mile-and-a-half long coal train from Kansas to Black Thunder Mine in Wyoming, travelled on a tug boat pushing a thousand feet of barges up the "tight-assed" Illinois River, and visited the UPS Air distribution hub in Louisville, Kentucky. In the French Alps, he attended a ship-handling school for ocean-going vessels, learning to handle scale-model ships on scale-model oceans and seaports in scale-model time. Back in the States, he recreated Henry David Thoreau's 1839 boating trip up the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, a journey made more complex 160+ years later by ever-larger canal locks. Through each journey, with insightful humor and a keen eye for what the rest of us ignore, McPhee fills the narrative with mini-biographies, ruminations on the history of freight and the logistics of modern transportation, geographical history, and fascinating studies of the miniature yet complex worlds of the transportation industry.

This was the only McPhee book my library had on audio, which wasn't bad--the author has a great voice for narrating--although I later checked out the hardcover edition to read "Five Days on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" because one of the discs was scratched. Turns out I wasn't missing much: "Five Days" didn't hold my interest (perhaps because McPhee wasn't reading it aloud?), but that essay doesn't hurt the rest of the collection, and it won't stop me from checking out the rest of John McPhee's work.

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### John says

On CD, this book consists of eight discs, and at the start of the eighth disc the foul language suddenly took a quantum leap, so I stopped listening. Was the author accurately quoting his sources? No doubt. Are there other ways to tell the story without actually quoting the profanity? Of course. Most authors did so routinely until, oh, the past 20 or 30 years or so. I realize there are those who think writing is somehow better or more honest because the actual, repulsive language is used. I quite disagree. If you use foul language on a Duluth Transit Authority bus, the driver will immediately inform you that you must stop using this language or you will have to leave the bus. I think this is a good rule. It applies to my car. It applies to CDs I listen to on my car. The common use of coarse language in our society has not improved society in any way, it has just made

it ... coarse.

The first seven discs had some interesting material. They contained the amount of coarse language that I have somehow come to find acceptable, or at least tolerable.

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## **Jimmy says**

McPhee rides on different "carriers." Did not enjoy the stories as much as I hoped I would have by such a fine author.

One of my favorite episodes: The truckers all stare at him, so he buys a cap with a gold visor, an American flag, and so on. Now he fits right in.

Nice science fact worth remembering: Bernoulli's Principle--where the flow is fastest, pressure is lowest--holds airplanes in the sky.

He shows how lobsters are shipped around the world. Lobsters are to Christmas dinners in France what turkeys are in America. Shipping live lobsters around the world is just animal cruelty in my view.

At a public hearing, Wyoming officials outline how they plan to sterilize coyotes. One rancher says, "We don't want to fuck the coyotes, we want to get rid of them." There is an underlying failure of getting along with nature throughout the book.

T-shirt on a fisherman: "UNION FISH STRIKE MORE."

Dick Eissfeller of Greenland NH films trains for a living. He will film for 24 hours straight without sleeping at times.

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## **Espen says**

John McPhee specializes, like Tracy Kidder, in detailed and ruminative reportages about things and people we see everyday, but seldom think about. In this collection of articles, he primarily studies transportation, describing the workings of long-distance trucking, coal trains, cargo ships, barges and a memorable case study of the workings of "The Sort", UPS' humongous sorting facility in Louisville, Kentucky.

Moving writing, quite literally. An example for any academic writer trying to explain what makes modern society tick.

More at my blog.

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## **Eric\_W says**

I loved this book. I actually read the sections when they appeared in The New Yorker. I assume few changes were made. McPhee must have the best job in the world getting to ride with an over-the-road trucker across the United States; traveling down the Illinois River on a towboat and linked barges (something I've always really wanted to do down the Mississippi with a friend of mine); and following freight trains from the cab.

Talk about your Walter Mitty! His articles and books are filled with juicy little tidbits of detail that I just love reading about.

I love going to locks on the Mississippi and watching the towboats shepherd their charges down the river and through the locks. Another good site to watch is Starved Rock State Park along the Illinois river. Here's my review on the towboat going down the Illinois section of McPhee's book:

The Illinois River is third in freight carried, following the Mississippi and the Ohio. It's a relatively straight river except for some "corkscrew" bends near Pekin. The barges that navigate the Illinois can be huge. The Billy Joe Boling that McPhee is riding (some people get all the fun) is pushing a toe longer than the new Queen Mary 2, the longest ocean liner ever built. Maneuvering such a "vessel" takes skill and sang-froid. At its widest point, this collection of barges and towboat is four times longer than the river's 300 foot width. The Illinois is an autochthonous river (a word I learned from Founding Fish but will probably forget) beginning not far from Chicago.

This particular barge string has fifteen barges wired together carrying pig iron, steel and fertilizer. The ones with pig iron appear empty, but the iron is so heavy and the river channel only nine feet deep at its minimum, that the barges can only be loaded to about 10 per cent of capacity. The steel cable holding the barges together is about an inch thick and the deck hands need to constantly monitor the tension of the wire.. The barges and tug at the stern become almost a rigid unit. The pilot has to steer this mass carefully between railroad bridge pilings and other obstructions. The pilot "is steering the Queen Mary up an undersized river and he is luxuriating in six feet of clearnace." Meanwhile at the stern, behind the stern rail of the towboat, only ten feet away, is the riverbank. This assumes no unusual current changes.

On the Mississippi, a tow can consists of as many as forty-nine barges and be two hundred and fifty feet wide. When they arrive at the Illinois, the consist needs to be broken up into smaller groups. Just by way of comparison, a fifteen barge tow can carry as much as 870 eighteen wheelers on the highway.

All captains have to start as deckhands, and it's not unstressful. One physician who had been asked to study how pilots and captains handled stress, had to leave the boat because he couldn't handle the stress. The river is rarely empty and you can count on being approached by another thousand-foot tow coming at you down the river. Downstream tows always have the right of way. Hold spots, where a tow can be headed into the bank to wait for a downstream tow to pass, are plotted ahead of time and serve like railroad sidings. There is no dispatcher and the captains call traffic themselves announcing their location.

A large tow will burn about one gallon each two hundred feet or twenty-four hundred gallons of diesel fuel per day. Measured by fuel consumed per ton-mile, barges are "two and a half times more efficient than a freight train, nearly nine times more efficient than a truck."

There aren't too many locks on the Illinois as the river drops only about ninety feet, but watching a tow go through one can provide hours of entertainment. I remember sitting at the lock across from Starved Rock State Park as a long tow broke into two sections to get through the lock.

Unfortunately, pleasure boat operators being "ignorant, ignorant, ignorant," accidents happen. Much like train engineers, towboat captains fear boaters who won't get out of the way. It's impossible to steer around a small boat and the prop wash and propeller suction can be lethal to the unwary.

and the section on trains: Driving a train would seem simple enough: you push the lever forward and off you go. Not so. Coal trains, of which just one power plant in Georgia requires 3 fully loaded trains per day to keep running, are usually more than one and one-half miles long and weigh 34,000 tons. They are by far the heaviest trains on the rails. The train is so long that the engine in front (these trains must have engines in front and back and often in the middle as well to adjust the strain on the couplers) will often be applying the

brakes going down hill while the engines in back are pushing the cars still going up the other side of the rise. They can't go up hills, per se. A slope of even 1.5% makes the engines work hard.

Twenty-three thousand coal trains leave the Powder River basin every year; that's thirty-four thousand miles of rolling coal in a never ending stream of coal for power plants. The Powder River basin coal generates less heat, i.e. fewer BTU's than eastern coal, but it has a much lower sulfur content so following stricter environmental regulations eastern mines have been dying while western ones are thriving. That's where the railroads come in.

Plant Scherer in Georgia, a large power plant, usually has a one-million-ton pile of coal in reserve. To understand the revived interest in nuclear power, that pile generates the equivalent of one truckload of mined uranium. "To get a million BTUs, fuel oil costs nine dollars (before recent price increases,) natural gas six dollars, coal one-dollar-eighty-five, and nuclear fifty cents."

"Plant Scherer burns the contents of thirteen hundred coal trains per year -- two thousand miles of coal cars, twelve million tons of the bedrock of Wyoming." The plant requires twelve thousand acres to store, process and burn the coal. Think about that the next time you turn the lights on.

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## Joe says

This book is a collection of mini-biographies of people in the transportation industry. The first, last, and by far most compelling tells the story of a long-haul trucker -- a driver that owns his own rig and tank, transporting various goods. There's something deeply satisfying about seeing a real expert at work: someone that not only knows how to do their job well, but truly and deeply knows how to handle any eventuality effortlessly. The truck driver in this book is unquestionably an expert of that variety.

Unfortunately, the other stories aren't quite as interesting. A few of them are interesting enough -- although not up to the standard of the first one -- but the rest are sub-par. One is about Thoreau's travels with his brother, that the author replicates -- somewhat. It seems out of place, compared to the rest of the pieces, and it's not even that enjoyable to read. There's another piece on UPS, which should have been a highlight (goodness knows that there is a huge untapped mine of stories there) but was only so-so: some parts of that one are enjoyable to read, but those parts are more about UPS's anonymous subcontracting of, well, almost anything (laptop repair, order fulfillment, etc), and not about transportation.

In the end, I really enjoyed this book. I just wish the author would have dropped about half of it, and either expanded the rest or found other high-quality segments to replace it.

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## John says

Another book that was a simple and low cost download from Barnes & Noble to my Nook.

As usual with John McPhee, an interesting set of essays regarding travel and shipping. He has a unique way of making what might be mundane and every day activities into something fresh and vivid.

I don't recall ever reading a McPhee piece that did not hold an interest for me. In this book, I would

recommend the canoe trip and the piece on the coal train as the best, with the ride with trucker Don Ainsworth a close second.

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## Claxton says

A major letdown after *Coming into the Country*, the only other McPhee book I've read, and one of my all-time favorites...

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## Darwin8u says

*"On the horizon there were no trees. Deer and antelope were everywhere at play, much too young to care what had happened to the range..."*

-- John McPhee, *Uncommon Carriers*

McPhee is one of my favorites. I think his strongest form is the long-essay and I love his collections that are thematic. *Uncommon carriers* delivered exactly what I wanted with a bunch of surprises. Like always, McPhee is able to mix together great characters, fantastic observations, and a real sense of space and place and tell a story that illuminates some place or time that you have probably driven past without noticing a hundred times before.

McPhee has a geologist's curiosity and patience (and a poet's pen) that allows him to spend an inordinate amount of time with a story to get that one detail that turns a good essay about boats into a fantastic essay about the craft of work, the beauty of place, the magnificence of the ordinary. The magic of McPhee isn't just that he writes new journalism almost better than anyone else on the planet, it is that he does more of it than almost anyone else. Up McPhee's other sleeve is his ability to make you want to follow him on his explorations. He isn't going to chase down your interests (rock stars, movies, money). Instead, McPhee is going to carefully let you follow him down his rabbit holes and help you onto his hobby-horses.

I would also be remiss if I didn't include a part of one of my favorite paragraphs. A barge McPhee is on, is flashed by a woman on a pleasure boat on the Missouri river. Here is McPhee's response:

*She has golden hair. She has the sort of body you go to see in marble. She holds her poise without retreat. In her ample presentation there is a defiance of gravity. There is no angle of repose. She is a siren and these are her songs. She is Henry Moore's "Oval with Points".*

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## Tony says

For 35 years I did what I did (fairly enjoying the first 34). John McPhee, in this book, lets me imagine a few other trades: Tony in the cab of an 18-wheeler, carrying hazmat; Tony pushing a thousand feet of (15) barges up the "tight-assed" Illinois River; Tony sorting packages in a UPS center, letting UPS pay for my college; Tony in a coal train, wearing a T-shirt that says, "UNION FISH STRIKE MORE". On my days off, I'd paddle a canoe one week with my brother on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, just like those Thoreau boys once did, but with likely more beer. Forget that I'd wreck, crash, get my head severed in a quick stop.

I'm reading; and I can do anything.

No, this did not make me want to take a course on operating an ocean liner, which McPhee did; but I indulged myself in meeting wonderful characters -- better than fictional ones.

Like the hazmat driver who turns to McPhee and says, "Do you know of a writer named Joan Didion?" (McPhee: *I was too shy to say, "Take the 'of' out."*) He's read McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy* three times because, like Moby-Dick, "you learn something new every time." He shares an argot (murdercycles, speedo (speeding ticket), lollipop (mile marker)) but also sprinkles in "paucity" and speaks of "circadian rhythms". McPhee tells us: *He said "shit" and "fuck" probably no more than you do.*

And I learned *stuff*.

I learned that the French coined the name "Illinois" but "are not responsible for Ill Annoy."

I learned about the classic sound of locomotives:

*As the clarinetist Skip Livingston e-mailed the tubist Tom Spain, "I've been listening carefully. The trains differ--different locomotives have different pitches to their horns. But I did hear one while I was moving snow on Sunday morning, and I was able to get to the piano before I lost the notes. They were A-sharp, E, and F-sharp below middle C, which made it sound like an F-sharp-7 chord (minus the C-sharp). The instruments that would come closest to the sound would probably be trombones."*

I learned this about railroad grades:

*The steepest mainline railroad grade in the United States is Saluda Hill, coming off the Blue Ridge of North Carolina at five per cent--a thousand vertical feet in four miles. It is not presently used. To get up it, trains were cut into thirds. To get down it, Dick Eisfeller says, "they were extremely careful, put it that way."*

I learned that San Diego, thinking itself pretty, has few truck stops. *"They have no support structure for trucks. The closest real truck stop east is at a casino sixty miles away. The closest to the north is Los Angeles County; to the south, in Mexico. To the west, nothing, for obvious reasons."*

And I learned the difference between a Jehovah's Witness and the door of a Freightliner: *You can close the door on a Jehovah's Witness.*

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## Amanda says

When I was a child I used to stare at my father's collection of John McPhee books. Over time the titles acquired great mystery and weight "The Deltoid Pumpkin Seed" "Heirs of General Practice" "A Roomful of Hovings"

As an adult I've only read *Founding Fish*, which was great, and now *Uncommon Carriers*.

I find McPhee's style a bit abrasive at times, but he engages with his subjects in such interesting and thoughtful ways, it is hard to resist the next chapter. In this book I particularly liked *The Ships of Port Revel* and *Out on the Sort*.

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## Howard Olsen says

John McPhee is one of my favorite New Yorker writers. This book is a collection of articles whose common theme is the magnitude of the transportation systems that criss-cross America. He hangs out with a long-haul trucker, visits UPS's main hub (through which everything produced by Americans seems to flow), retraces a river journey made by Thoreau, rides a coal train from Wyoming to Georgia, and floats down the Mississippi on a barge. The book is quite intimate, as McPhee focuses on the ordinary folks who guide these systems; but their sheer scale and scope is ever present, and eventually one is left awe-struck that it works at all.

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## Jim says

There is a growing branch of literature which consists of nonfiction. How is that possible? The Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996 was awarded to Svetlana Alexievich of Belarus for her work, which consists primarily of interviews of people affected by the nuclear accident at Chernobyl or the Soviet War in Afghanistan. As for Americans, we have John McPhee, who has written a series of nonfiction works of high literary quality.

I have just finished reading his *Uncommon Carriers*, which deals, in turn, with long-haul truckers; a place in France where ships' pilots are trained; boats that tow barges on American rivers; the parcel sorting services of UPS; and mile-and-a-half-long coal trains. In between, there is a delightful essay by the author about retracing the route of Henry David Thoreau and his brother John described in **A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers**—which I had read when it was first published in the **New Yorker**.

McPhee likes to take what looks like a boring subject that nobody would write about and turn it into a gem. For instance, there is that tetralogy he wrote about American geology beginning with **Basin and Range** and ending with **Assembling California**. One would think that McPhee's books might be a tad boring, but they never are.

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## Jan says

I enjoyed three of the chapters especially: one about a miniature replica in Switzerland of ocean shipping to allow captains to practice maneuvers; another about cross-country trucking; and a third about barge shipping on major American rivers. This is all new information to me, and I like the way John McPhee takes his inexpert eyes and mind into the experience and tells the story to an audience of inexperts. He's pretty funny, too.

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## Andrea says

Divided into six sections based on the mode of "carrier" McPhee is traveling with: HAZMAT truck drivers, Ocean-going cargo ships, Mississippi river barges, Canals of the northeast, UPS/FedEx and deliveries, Freight trains.

Most scientifically fascinating was the cargo ship piece where McPhee attends training school for the captains and skippers of these massive vessels. On a lake in Switzerland, they train using life-size-yet-scaled models. One trainee is practicing a docking maneuver and parks an impressive 6 inches from the pier. The

teacher reminds him that at full scale, he's something like 15 yards away. If the birds on the shore of the lake were at full scale, they would be 6 feet tall.

The canal chapter is a total waste- McPhee and a friend follow Thoreau's canoe trip up the Hudson to some spot in Mass. Yawn.

My favorite of course was the truck driving chapter. Not only is it charming and interesting, it spoke to a deep longing to be a truck driver myself. In his epilogue, McPhee revisits truckers saying that "the late-night hum at hundreds of truck stops across America is a quintessential piece of our sonic landscape." Indeed.

Unfortunately this was a book-on-mp3, and McPhee is no voice actor. I was actually stunned to hear a director listed in the "credits," since I had sort of assumed McPhee just decided to settle in with a cup of tea one afternoon and read his whole book quietly to himself. Recommend to anyone interested in quirky engineering and/or is consumed by a burning desire to drive a big piece of machinery.

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