

James Raffan, Jim or Raff is a friend of my older brother. They went through school and through scouts together. They did exciting stuff like paddle the local rivers of southern Ontario during spring runoff. My brother and his pals, like Jim, were giants, or that was the way it appeared to me.

My father, like Jim's parents, was born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada. My father, like Jim's parents, was fascinated by the unimaginably vast and pristine Canadian wilderness. Their awe was inculcated in us. We spent hours, although not together, after school and on weekends playing outdoors along the somnambulant Speed River. In the summer, from the age of seven, we went to summer camps, although not the same camps. We learned to swim in the cold, clear, deep, choppy lakes of the Canadian shield. We swam to uninhabited islands to pick blueberries, we jumped from ledges into deep water and we dried ourselves on sunny rocks.

At camp, we learned to canoe. To become a good canoeist takes time. It doesn't come naturally, it doesn't come quickly and it doesn't come without mastering related skills such as swimming, life saving, and camping. Good canoeist can read the water and read the weather. There are contrasting canoeing philosophies. Is paddling an end in itself or a means to an end? Is the purpose to whip boys into men through the rigor of conquering nature or to widen our consciousness to both the beauty of nature and our place therein?

For my brother and I camping and canoeing is a part of our lives. For James Raffan it is his life. He became a Queen Scout. He became a canoe trip leader. He paddled the classic river trips from Northern Ontario into James Bay and he led expeditions in the Arctic that required a bush pilot to drop him off and pick him up three weeks later at some point several hundred kilometers distant.

He graduated from Queen's University with a BSc and a BEd. He taught high school for a while, returned to Queen's did a PhD and launched the Queen's Faculty of Education Outdoor Education Program. He stuck with that for eighteen years, but now he's back to canoeing. He also writes and tours the country giving presentations on his canoeing voyages.

Tumblehome: Meditations and Lore from a Canoeist's Life is one of Jim's books. I received it as a gift and managed, for a time, to avoid it. It looks like something a greeting card company might publish, but it's more than chicken soup for the desk and mortgage hobbled. It's a collection of essays arranged as a triptych that follow Jim's maturing relationship with the outdoors. Many of the essays are photographic, capturing a time, a place and a feeling without an obvious moral or homily. Others recount harrowing adventure nearly gone bad.

After a near miss, alone, in a cold Arctic lake trying to recover his drifting canoe, Jim reflects matter-of-factly while sipping hot coffee and eating some lunch.

"Three realizations strike me right away about what happened. The first is how it is never the obvious risks that will get you. The second is how breathtakingly quickly things can go horribly wrong. And the third realization is how alive I feel, in the wake of the episode. I am alive and more conscious of life's beauty than I have been in a long, long time."