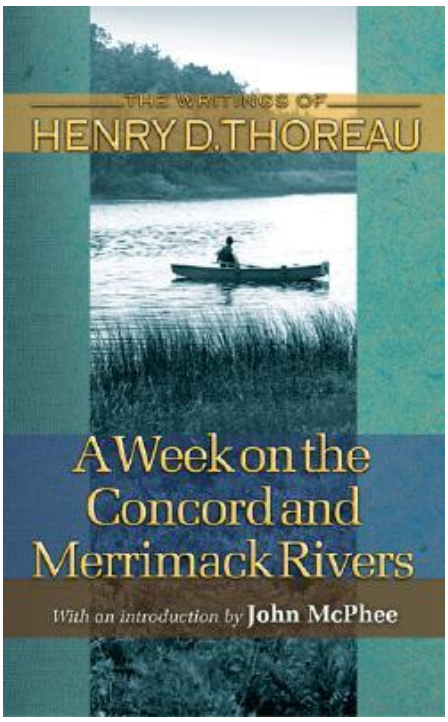

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Writings of Henry D. Thoreau)

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Henry D. Thoreau's classic "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" is published now as a new paperback edition and includes an introduction by noted writer John McPhee. This work--unusual for its symbolism and structure, its criticism of Christian institutions, and its many-layered storytelling--was Thoreau's first published book.

In the late summer of 1839, Thoreau and his older brother John made a two-week boat-and-hiking trip from Concord, Massachusetts, to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. After John's sudden death in 1842, Thoreau began to prepare a memorial account of their excursion. He wrote two drafts of this story at Walden Pond, which he continued to revise and expand until 1849, when he arranged for its publication at his own expense. The book's heterodoxy and apparent formlessness troubled its contemporary audience. Modern readers, however, have come to see it as an appropriate predecessor to "Walden," with Thoreau's story of a river journey depicting the early years of his spiritual and artistic growth.

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Writings of Henry D. Thoreau) Details

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From Reader Review A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Writings of Henry D. Thoreau) for online ebook

Robin Friedman says

A Week With Thoreau

In late August, 1839, Henry David Thoreau and his brother John took a two-week trip on the Concord and Merrimack rivers in a boat called the Musketaquid that they had built themselves. John Thoreau subsequently died of lockjaw in 1842, a death which greatly affected his brother. While living at Walden Pond from 1845-1847, Thoreau worked on the manuscript of what became "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers", and the book was first published, with little commercial success in 1849. A revised edition was published after Thoreau's death.

The book describes the Thoreau brothers' river journey on the Concord River from Concord west to Lowell, Massachusetts where it connects with the Merrimack River from Lowell north to Concord, New Hampshire. (The brothers spent one week on land exploring Concord, New Hampshire and its environs, and this is not described in the book.) At the time of the journey Lowell was already a manufacturing center where girls from New England farms lived in large barracks and worked long hours spinning cotton in factories powered by the Merrimack River.

I was familiar with "Walden", but I didn't know this earlier book of Thoreau's. It is a wonderful read. The book is arranged in seven chapters, one for each day of the river journey, and Thoreau describes extensively the rivers and inlets, the land, the plants and animals, the weather, the locks and the people that they encountered on their journey. Thoreau here and elsewhere has a clear and detailed eye for nature.

But the more fascinating part of this book consists of its extended digressions and discussions that are only suggested by the description of the brothers' journey. Thoreau uses the river trip as a jumping-off point for meditations on history, science, literature, education, philosophy, religion, and much else. There is information on the early settlements of Concord and Lowell and of New England, especially involving contact with the Indian tribes. Even with this, most of the book is internalized. On almost every page, Thoreau's text is interspersed with poetry, some of it his own, some by other writers. Thoreau discusses the ancient Greek writers, including Homer and the Greek lyricists, as well as writers including Shakespeare and Goethe. There are long meditations on subjects such as the nature of friendship. Thoreau discusses comparative religion and turns a critical eye on the Puritanical religion of New England. The book shows a great fascination with and knowledge of Eastern thought, which is striking for this time in America's history, particularly with the Bhagavad-Gita.

Near the end of the book, capturing the end of his trip, Thoreau assumes an oratorical tone and his work takes on a philosophical theme. Although the American philosophy of Transcendentalism is notoriously difficult to define, Thoreau here discusses a world beyond the world of our senses and of nature. He alludes to a world of the timeless and of mysticism, which encompasses all religion, and which the evidence of the senses only suggests to us. It is a difficult and inspiring vision, informed greatly by Eastern thought and by Thoreau's friendship with Emerson. The discussion forms a moving conclusion to the book.

With its learning, its love of poetry, its picture of early New England, and its spirituality, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" is one of the great American books. For readers who know Thoreau only, as I did, through "Walden" and "Civil Disobedience,", this book will be a revelation.

Robin Friedman

Dan Graser says

"At intervals we were serenaded by the song of a dreaming sparrow or the throttled cry of an owl, but after each sound which near at hand broke the stillness of the night, each crackling of the twigs, or rustling among the leaves, there was a sudden pause, and deeper and more conscious silence, as if the intruder were aware that no life was rightfully abroad at that hour."

This transcendentalist travelogue detailing almost two weeks of travel of the titled New England rivers, to and from Concord Massachusetts, not only contains prose on the natural splendor surrounding Thoreau and his brother during the trip, but also several philosophical meanderings on religion, poetry, New England history, all set against the backdrop of the lamented impact of the Industrial Revolution on the region. If you're considering reading Thoreau you know what you're about to experience and this is some of the most beautiful prose and poetic verse written by an American.

Hannah Smith says

"But behind the sheaves, and under the sod, there lurks a ripe fruit, which the reapers have not gathered, the true harvest of the year, which it bears forever, annually watering and maturing it, and man never severs the stalk which bears this palatable fruit."

At times a simple and poetic travel narrative, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers follows Thoreau as he weaves together careful descriptions of Nature with intimate musings on friendship, virtue, literature, and culture.

I am trying not to be quick in calling this a better book than Thoreau's magnum opus Walden. I am still caught in the throws of the majesty of this text, having just finished it. (I haven't read Walden in its totality in almost two years.) A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers was published before Walden, and is one of the only two books that Thoreau actually published himself. There is something much more youthful about this book; Walden is a mature text, Thoreau knew himself and his beliefs better and was able to organize his thoughts clearly. A Week is a travel narrative spanning the course of a week's journey down the rivers of New England, but often and pleasantly veers off and lands on shores rich with wisdom. The reader is essentially following Thoreau's train of thought. On that same note I feel as though Walden was written consciously, whilst A Week reads as the natural fruition of a solemn September river journey. Not to say Walden is so concrete, but it is certainly more concise in its layout.

I adored this book. It has left me hungry for more of Thoreau's beautiful musings and inspired dialogue. With each of his works that I read, I understand more and more the final line of Emerson's eulogy,

"His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home."

Bruce says

At times this work seems a leisurely pastoral, at times a zoological exploration. Of most interest to me, however, are the times when Thoreau uses his travels as a framework on which to construct philosophical musings only tangentially related to the trip itself; for example, he has a fascinating long discussion about religion, the church, and Christianity that sheds light on his own beliefs in the context of his times. I personally find Thoreau’s iconoclastic perspectives refreshing and his rejection of institutional religion, specifically Christianity, perceptive and congenial, although all readers clearly would not agree. It is satisfying to see that the current stream of freethinking anti-religionists is not a new phenomenon but rather has a long, solid, and intellectually honest heritage.

How much Thoreau has to teach, not least about how to educate ourselves and live fully. He has comments, memorable comments, on many subjects. Here are some of his thoughts about books and reading: “It would be worth the while to select our reading, for books are the society we keep; to read only the serenely true…Read the best books first, or you may not have the chance to read them at all…Books, not which afford us a cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring; such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions - such call I good books.”

At the very end, he has moving and wise thoughts about Solitude. Thoreau is a marvel, a gifted writer and a wise and prescient thinker, well worth reading and pondering.

Howard Olsen says

Throeau's admirers laud him as a nature writer, and often describe this work as a "journal" recording a week's worth of river travel in Van Buren-era Massachusetts. This will not prepare you for the profound pilosophical and literary qualities found in this book. This is no journal. The seven days on the river are a framing device for Thoreau's extended thoughts on nature, religon, America, friendship, fish, and anything else that might cross his mind. Living as we do in an age of specialization, it is humbling to read the work of a man who could comfortably discuss (at great length) Hinduism, colonial history, Classical poetry, the operation of canal locks, etc. Thoreau also includes plenty of exquisite decriptions of nature, which reveal him to have a true poetic soul on top of everything else. His thoughts on local history are especially interesting. The US is often derided as a "young" country, but Throeau reminds us that Englishmen had already been living along the Concord River for 200 years at the time he made his journey. Often the history is fantastically detailed, a reflection of the extent to which the settling of America was a matter of one family going 10 miles farther inland than the last. Interesting biographical note: Thoreau appears to have worked harder on this book than any of his others. He worked on it for 10 years (including the 2 he spent at Walden). He unsuccessfully self-published it, causing him to famously quip that he had a library containing 1000 volumes, of which he was the author of 800. In other words, this book is central to understanding Thoreau as an author.

Maarten Van doorn says

Didn't finish. Not what I expected. Too much babbling on, without really saying interesting stuff. Of course,

such a style was to be expected in a book like this, but this book has a too unfavourable information to noise ratio for my taste.

Already started on Walden, much better so far!

Jim says

This is a book that is meant to be read slowly. While ostensibly a travel book, it is actually a book of prose and poetic digressions attached onto a thin narrative. Some of those digressions are incredible. The poetry is not quite the same level, but it can be impressive nonetheless.

It was in 1839 that Henry David Thoreau, accompanied by his brother John, took a boat trip north along the Concord River and, when it met the Merrimack, continued north, though this time upstream. Shortly thereafter, John cut himself shaving and died of tetanus. Although in some remote sense the book is a tribute to him, he is never named, nor is anyone else they encounter.

Toward the end of their journey appears this beautiful passage:

> As we looked up in silence to those distant lights, we were reminded that it was a rare imagination which first taught that the stars are worlds, and had conferred a great benefit on mankind. It is recorded in the Chronicle of Bernaldez, that in Columbus's first voyage the natives "pointed towards the heavens, making signs that they believed that there was all power and holiness." We have reason to be grateful for celestial phenomena, for they chiefly answer to the ideal in man. The stars are distant and unobtrusive, but bright and enduring as our fairest and most memorable experiences. "Let the immortal depth of your soul lead you, but earnestly extend your eyes upwards."

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is one of a kind -- a book which I hope to read again some day. Books that make your heart sing are few and far between.

Michael Holm says

I read this work in another edition - Modern Library published in 1992 which includes Walden and other works.

Henry Thoreau and his brother, John Jr., built a rowboat and floated down the Concord River from Concord, Massachusetts to the Merrimac River and then on down that river and walked to Concord, New Hampshire. Then they returned to navigate (row and sail) back up the rivers to their starting point. This outing is reported over nine chapters such as Concord, Saturday, Sunday, The Inward
Morning and The Poet's Delay. Thoreau describes the voyage with a poet's brush and his commentary digresses onto the subjects of poetry, books, writing, friendship and Chaucer. These digressions sound the high note and laud the classical works of literature, the poetic life, sincere writing and being yourself. I did not find these sermons very persuasive but understand his feelings
considering the paucity of libraries and books in New England at that time. He is quick to adopt a haughty tone toward those not like himself. More enjoyable are the nuggets of prose that Thoreau does so well:

from the Saturday chapter:
"However, as art is all of a ship but the wood,....."

"Perchance he is not confounded by many knowledges,.....",

from the Sunday chapter:
"...the frogs sat meditating, all Sabbath thoughts, summing up their week..." ,

"He comes with a list of ancient Saxon, Norman, and Celtic names, and strews them up and down this river.....and this in New-Angleland, and these are the new West Saxons, whom the red men call, not Angle-ish or English, but Yengeese, and so at last they are known for Yankees." ,

"A perfectly healthy sentence, it is true, is extremely rare. For the most part we miss the hue and fragrance of the thought;....." ,

"The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done.",

"Yet, after all, the truly efficient laborer will not crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and then do but what he loves best. He is anxious only about the fruitful kernels of time."

from the Friday chapter:
"....and a solid bank of fog on every side forming a small yard around us."

from Rumors from an Aeolian Harp:
"The universe seems bankrupt as soon as we begin to discuss the characters of individuals. Out discourse all runs to slander, and our limits grow narrower as we advance."

From The Poet's Delay:
"We see the comfortable fireside, and hear the crackling fagots in all the verse." (a put-down of 'fine' poets).

Reading this short work is like taking a long walk along a river with an engaging naturalist and iconoclast. He is entertaining, enlightening and such a good writer.

Cameron says

a wonderfully sloppier, more circular version of Walden

Rick says

This book, far from a vacation travelogue, was Thoreau's first published work. Like any novice effort of someone as talented and unique as Thoreau, it is a mixed work and several kinds of mixed work. There is the journey he and his brother took together, collapsed from the actual two-week duration into a single week. There is poetry, philosophy, biology, botany, theology, history, literary criticism, and much more in the form of long essay length digressions from his journey up and down river. Some of the digressions are close to the spirit of the journey (the history of the species of fishes that inhabit the rivers and how they have changed over time, being closest, and his thoughts on Homer and other literary themes being furthest from the event.)

Strangest to me was the invisibility of his brother, there is a "we" always when the journey is under discussion but nothing is said to separate the two. Perhaps this was some mystical intent—Henry was one with his brother (who died in the years between journey and book writing). Even when the two young men separate for some purpose, Thoreau tells us only one of them went to nearby farm to look for supplies and the other stayed with the boat, not which did which and why or what if anything unique happened to them. It is an enjoyable read, particularly on the river, and the nearest digressions are usually the most engrossing (botany and biology, local history and lore) but pales compared to *Walden* or *The Journal*.

Lauren says

"A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" was Henry David Thoreau's first published book. In it, one can already see the roots of the ideas he would establish in his great writings like "Walden" and "Civil Disobedience". As a great fan of Thoreau, I enjoyed taking a step back and seeing the beginnings of a great writer forming themselves in this book. While "A Week" is not quite on the same level as "Walden," it has its own merits.

The book is an account of a canoeing trip that Thoreau took with his older brother, John, who died suddenly not long after. In many ways, "A Week" also serves as a way to remember what was likely the last major expedition Henry took with his beloved brother before John's tragic death. The brothers traveled on the river from Concord, MA into New Hampshire. "A Week" is a good example of Thoreau's knack for intermingling gorgeous physical descriptions of nature with philosophical implications. In my mind, Thoreau is in part a great writer because he does not merely notice the beauty of natural scenery, but finds deeper meaning in it. In "A Week," Thoreau often returns to the theme of rivers, as he and his brother traveled using the river as a guide. He considers the symbolic implications of rivers in the human history of exploring the unknown, writing "Rivers must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travelers. They are the constant lure, when they flow by our doors, to distant enterprise and adventure… They are the natural highways of all nations, not only leveling the ground, and removing obstacles from the path of the traveler… but conducting him through the most interesting scenery… where the animal and vegetable kingdoms attain their greatest perfection" (5). Thoreau returns to the symbolic implications of rivers various times throughout the book, noting their importance to exploration, their purity, and the idea that they allow for a "highway" that can be traveled without harming the natural environment.

As in much of his work, Thoreau also values wildness and the unknown in "A Week," writing that "the wilderness is near, as well as dear, to every man. Even the oldest villages are indebted to the border of wild wood which surrounds them, more than to the gardens of men… The very uprightness of the pines and maples asserts the ancient rectitude and vigor of nature. Our lives need the relief of such a background,

where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams" (108). For Thoreau, unexplored nature is not merely alluring, but essential to human existence. His definition of morality itself is connected to exploration, first of nature, then of the self. Attention to nature and the seasons, in Thoreau's view, allows us to glimpse the sublime and become greater for it. He writes that "In summer we live out of doors, and have only impulses and feelings, which are all for action, and must wait commonly for the stillness and longer nights of autumn and wholly new life, which no man has lived; that even this earth was made for more mysterious and nobler inhabitants than men and women. In the hues of October sunsets, we see the portals to other mansions than those which we occupy, not far off geographically" (245).

Later, in language that echoes a famous self-exploration passage in "Walden", he goes on to add that "It is easier to discover another such new world as Columbus did, than to go within one fold of this which we appear to know so well; the land is lost sight of, the compass varies… But there is only necessary a moment's sanity and sound senses, to teach us that there is a nature behind the ordinary, in which we have only some vague preemption… as yet. We live on the outskirts of that region. Carved wood, and floating boughs, and sunset skies, are all that we know of it" (249). Like the famous line in "Walden" to "explore your own higher latitudes… Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought" (215), this passage in "A Week" asks the reader to consider whether he or she has the inner strength to explore "this which we appear to know so well". Symbolically, the passage seems to point to the sort of interior discovery voyage Thoreau advocates for as a necessary precursor to formation of moral beliefs. To his mind, the October sunset skies, carved wood, and floating boughs of the natural world invite us to journey into the great unknown within ourselves and see what we might find there.

It is because he pays so much attention to the minute details of nature that Thoreau understands humans—and himself—so deeply. In the young man who undertook a canoe expedition on the Concord and Merrimack rivers would one day develop the courageous figure who protested the government's upholding of slavery and laid the foundations for the civil disobedience of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Phillip says

This is my second time to read this book. I enjoyed it much more than the first time. Think of it as a beta version of *Walden*. This book ostensibly presents his experience of a week long boat voyage with his brother John. It is primarily a weave of thoughts of the author inspired throughout the trip. The thoughts include, fish, fishing, local history, scripture, genius, literature, symbols and metaphors...and on and on. The book is well written and beautiful in its own rambling way. It is perfect for the reader who loves everything written by Thoreau.

Most will prefer *Walden* with its narrower focus and efficiently presented rhetorical argument.

Personally, I think I will be returning this way again. Many of his thoughts appear to be similar or the same as what I find in the work of Owen Barfield, who I have been studying for the past year.

R.K. Cowles says

3 1/2 stars

Ethan says

This was my first formal exposure to Thoreau, though I was familiar with him before reading this book. Though I had a basic understanding of his main philosophical beliefs, I was just astounded at how deeply and sincerely is was able to communicate them. This book was such that each sentence was its own little book, and I saw so many sentences that I could write a whole essay over alone. This book is in no way easy reading. You have to take it slow and often read passages multiple times, but it is well worth the payoff and intellectual achievement. Thoreau is a genius prose writer and a deeply touched spiritual philosopher. A great experience that went a long way toward advancing my reading abilities.

Gary says

Thoreau, sincere and erudite, digging through history, using his own brilliance with which to see, speaks to us of river and tree, of Homer and Egyptian, of poetry and prose. The calm mind of Thoreau flows quietly over centuries.
