

Title: *A Complex Coast*

Subtitle: *A Kayak Journey from Vancouver Island to Alaska*

Author: David Norwell

Published: 2023

Publisher: Heritage House Canada

Contents: pp 212, colour images throughout

Cover: softcover

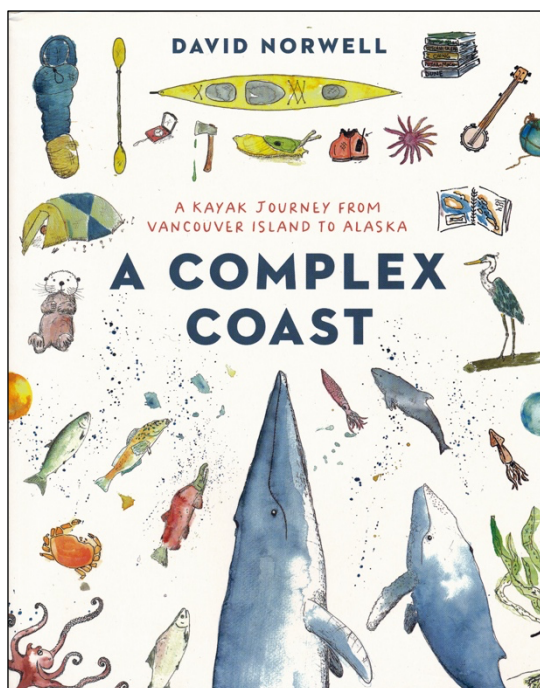
Size: 204 x 254 mm

ISBN: 978-1-77203-449-3

Availability: Fishpond

Review: Paul Caffyn

Buying paddling books these days on-line is a hit or miss process, with only a cover or dust-jacket thumbnail image and a brief text description. My latest *Fishpond* delivery was both hit and miss. The miss was misadventures down the Mississippi River while the hit is an absolute cracker.



Although the cover of David Norwell's *A Complex Coast* implies it is a kid's book, the images surrounding the title are just a hint as to what is inside this visually stunning illustrated diary of a two summers kayak journey from Victoria, Vancouver Island, north through the Inside Passage to Gustavus in Alaska.

In a single sea kayak, the 24-year-old geography student set off in April 2014 for a remarkable journey of self-discovery, not only jotting down personal thoughts in his journal but recording coastal landscapes, flora and fauna encountered in daily watercolour sketches.

The book is so much more than just a paddling narrative, with David's views on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; 'How to Love Better', 'Unsolicited Relationship Advice', and a new love interest in his life. Plenty of definitions in text with washes of kayak kit, important tucker, clouds and wee beasties in the ocean. David's father joins him paddling from Prince Rupert to Ketchikan, along with a banjo carried in a deck-attached rubbish bag.

The Canadian publisher Heritage House has worked magic with page layout, some watercolour washes span two pages, some just a single page, some down to single column details. The double column text format works really well, with the daily text diary mixed with painted 'snapshots' of plant and animal species, camping kit and coastal folk he met on the paddle.

Maps - so important with sea kayaking narratives and often omitted to cut down on page numbers. David's passage maps, hand-drawn to scale, I can't find fault with. They show his paddling route, places overnighted, with the place names big enough to read for older eyes.

The appendix includes galleries of photos, a Pacific Northwest Crossword, 'The Davidism Dictionary' with a few new words like 'Chowser', Acknowledgements and Endnotes.

What I found mildly disturbing was that David Norwell wasn't even born yet when I started out from Prince Rupert on my paddle around Alaska in 1989. The year he was born, I headed out from Elfin Cove - where our paddling paths crossed - on my way to Nome. To see and hear of the sights and sounds he recorded is a marvellous time warp for me.

To see such a fresh approach made to portraying a sea kayak voyage, with a wondrous mix of water colour washes and superb descriptive text, *A Complex Coast* is a sheer delight to dip into.