

## BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Amazon Woman*

Subtitle: *Facing Fears, Chasing Dreams, and a Quest to Kayak the World's Largest River from Source to Sea*

Author: Darcy Gaechter

Published: 2020

Publisher: Pegasus Books, USA

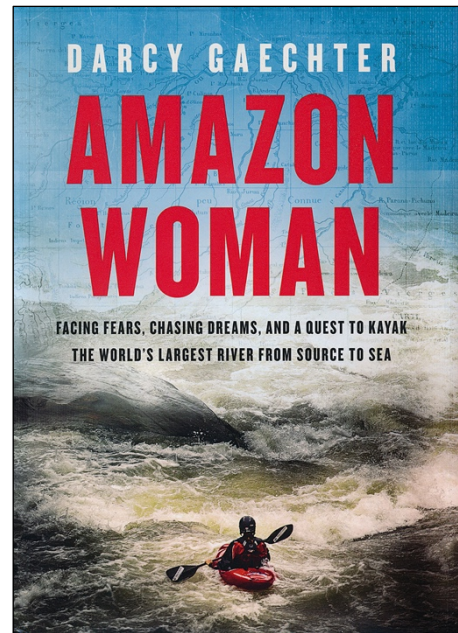
Contents: 224 pp, colour photo plate section, bibliography

Cover: Hardcover,

ISBN: 978-1-64313-313-0

Availability: Book Depository NZ \$39.15

Review: Paul Caffyn



Inside the dustjacket, this book is described as part memoir, part feminist manifesto. Although the author, as a freshman at a USA high school, was a bit on the small side, only five-foot-tall and weighing 82 pounds, Darcy Gaechter made up for her small stature by doing really well with sport, especially competitive volleyball. There was a chip on her shoulder certainly but I would not tag this book as a feminist manifesto. At university she was asked to take a semester off and go kayaking in Nepal, and to the 20-year-old's surprise, her parents agreed.

That initial trip led to a passion for white-water rafting and kayaking. Darcy has made a career out of guiding and instruction and ultimately owning a company with her partner, which guided paddlers on white-water adventures in Ecuador. The third character involved in the narrative of *Amazon Woman* is a wealthy English computer whiz who back in 2004 decided he needed a huge challenge, as he felt his life was slipping away. A climb of Everest was ruled out, as too many had done it, but fewer people had descended the full length of the Amazon River than had walked on the moon. His choice was made. Midge had absolutely no paddling experience which is how he ended up meeting both Darcy and her partner Don with finally an invitation for them to guide him in a source-to-sea mission on the Amazon River.

After a brief note on which river is the longest/largest in the world and a glossary of kayaking terms, Darcy introduces the many dangers the team will face. After an excerpt 'Losing Midge in the Dam Site' from day 20, the team members are introduced, and the next chapter is mostly about motivation for their paddle.

Once the expedition begins at Lago Acucocha, Darcy's account of the paddling, portaging and overnight camping is engrossing, especially as the initial strong relationships between the three of them start to fray. Three can be an awkward number for any expedition but when Midge who lacks the serious white-water experience of Darcy and Don, but who is funding the entire expedition, starts to apply what are viewed as onerous demands by Don, this almost leads to an early team breakup. What with really serious Grade V rapids, concerns with running the Red Zone, where Shining Path rebels have killed paddlers in the past, also biting bugs and rockfalls, there is just so much mental pressure on the team.

Beyond the white-water canyons, a motorized canoe, a Peruvian Navy vessel and a finally a chartered boat shadows the trio; the boat used for overnight camping when the river widens out to kilometres wide. They had swapped their white-water kayaks for racing sea kayaks with a cockpit. Frustrations loom large with the slow paddling speed of Midge, but Darcy's volleyball skills help her interact on shore where women villagers play very competitive volleyball.

On day 148, the team reach a tagged GPS point marking the river mouth and Darcy feels the start of post-expedition depression, acknowledging the magnitude of the paddle but that further challenges were necessary to satisfy her paddling passion.

An 'Afterword' rounds off the narrative nicely, while an 'Author's Note' states that both Don and Midge felt Darcy was 'unfairly harsh' in her treatment of them. She acknowledges all three of them acted 'crazy, mean and irrational at turns', but to me the book is simply a 'warts and all' story, well told.

The bibliography is mostly a list of websites, quoted and footnoted in the text. I am disappointed that Darcy did not include books of those who have gone before, those who have kayaked or rafted down the Amazon, such as:

Alan Holman's *White River, Brown Water* (1985)

Joe Kane's classic *Running the Amazon* (1989)

Francois Odendall's *Rafting the Amazon* (1992)

Colin Angus's *Amazon Extreme* (2001)

Ben Kozel's *Three Men in a Raft* (2002)

What also disappoints is the lack of a decent map (or stage maps) to show the route followed; the half page map at the end of the colour plate segment, shows only the top half of South America with bugged all detail. All of those books listed above have really good maps, double page and several with section maps.

Also disappointing is the number and choice of photos in the colour plate section, 22 in total, and not a single black and white photo included with the text. Why do publishers surround photos with as much blank white page as the photo? There is just one of a white-water rapid, and even the cover photo (nice jacket design) is a stock white-water photo, not of the author and I surmise not even on the Amazon. However my niggles re photos, lack of maps and book design lie solely with the publisher and not the author. When you sign over your manuscript to a publisher, you forfeit any involvement in the book; no input re layout, overall design or choice of photos. And if it is your first book, you are only too happy to see it in print!

Overall a superb read, a wonderful insight into the highlights and perils faced with a paddle down the Amazon, with snippets of bygone history, encounters with locals (good and bad), and ups and downs with personal dynamics within their team. Darcy was 35 when she began this 148 day expedition. Is it a feminist manifesto? Definitely not. A bit of a chip on her shoulder re being of small stature but she certainly is a talented white-water paddler and writer.

Paul Caffyn 28 July 2020