

Title: *One Woman's River*

Subtitle: *A Source-to-Sea Paddle on the Mighty Mississippi*

Author: McDonah, Ellen Kolbo

Published: 2016

Publisher: Prairie River Publishing USA

Contents: 421 pp, 100+ paintings & drawings, small scale maps, glossary

Cover: softcover

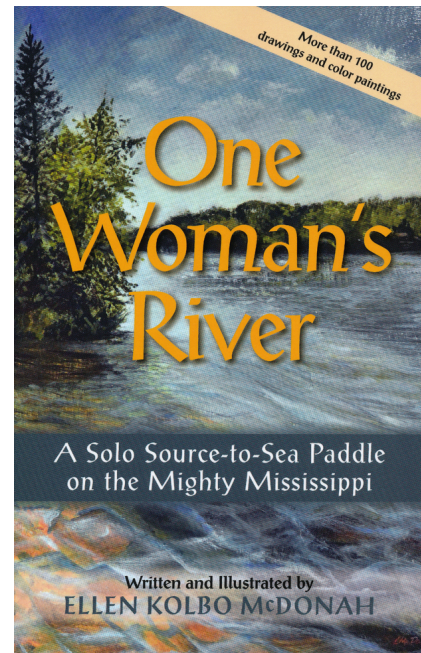
Size: 217 x 140 mm

Price: NZ\$ 42.36

ISBN: 978-0-9962451-0-4

Availability: Blackwells or Amazon

Review: Paul Caffyn



Numerous books have been written about paddling the Mississippi River, from its headwaters at Lake Itasca near the northern border of Minnesota with Canada to its snout in a sprawling delta in the Gulf of Mexico. Many are vanity publications, self-published by the authors, up to 514 pages long (The First Hundred Miles are the Longest) without a single photo or map, bar for a rear cover thumbnail author photo.

One of best is also the shortest at 136 pages - Down the Mississippi with Stinky. Reviewed in the KASK magazine, this is the story of two women setting out in 1960 to paddle the 2,348 river miles, and along the way they pick up a kitten which they named Stinky. Lovely cover photo of the two young women with Stinky, along with a central black and white photo plate section and a map.

Although One Woman's River has only one rear cover photo of the author, and is a vanity print, the book is a cut above the many other titles in that Ellen McDonah has recorded her 2014 paddle with well over 100 colour paintings and drawings; sights, scenes, people and wildlife met on shore. Nearing retirement at age 59.99 years, Ellen decided she is ready to undertake a big paddling adventure. Based on her research, no woman had ever achieved this river paddle solo. The concept of aiming to 'gift and share her artwork' with those who helped her on the river would add an extra dimension to the paddle; Ellen takes quite a mix of acrylic paints and pastels, along with drawing pencils and water-soluble graphite sticks.

Brought up in Wisconsin, Ellen and her sister were introduced to canoe paddling and camping at a tender age, with adventures (and skills) increasing with growing experience when moving on to kayaking. Thus, she was not a novice when she launched from Lake Itasca. Her research, planning and training all seemed top rate.

Each of the 53 chapters, is nice and short, relating to the chapter heading, and begins with a 'pastel' drawing and a line or two of her mantras: 'Slow or fast, if you're lucky you'll get there just the same'. Ellen's writing style is very readable, not too laboured. The repeated small-scale maps which show the full river length are notated with a star showing the location for each chapter.

For Kiwi paddlers, paddling down big rivers like the Whanganui or Waikato, we can picture picturesque gorges, the odd dam, not always too much sign of habitation and plenty of places to land and lunch or camp, and no real issue with bugs. Early days after first launching, Ellen describes dealing with windfalls in the river's headwaters, and having to cover up with protection from ticks and swarms of mosquitoes. Then come the dams, the locks which she radios ahead to pass through, or has to portage. Then come the big towns and holiday resorts on the banks. Her prior research pays off in finding campsites above flood level, and also that will ensure a quiet night's sleep with no noisy parties or wombles on ATVs.

Once the river becomes navigable to bigger boats, Ellen has to deal not only with some horrific storms with lightning and fierce winds, but increasing traffic with tugs and long line of barges. The vignettes of fellow paddlers met and land dwellers (human and wildlife) who she interacts with are nicely described. A seriously wet late spring causes severe flooding to the river with many tagged campsites underwater or clad in a thick layer of mud. As Ellen passes the last dam (30+), the barge and traffic then changed to really big cargo vessels, with pretty serious propeller wash turbulence, generating rebound (clapotis) from the riprap river bank protection. It must have been quite a nerve-wracking paddle down past New Orleans and finally out to the salt water of the delta river mouth.

I reckon it was a pretty outstanding achievement for a lady in her retirement years. In the brief acknowledgement page, Ellen writes:

‘For other women who have yet to descend the entire Mississippi River alone, I hope you will treasure this firsthand account of my unique experience of the entire story in words and my original artwork for your own journeys. And for women everywhere, I hope I’ve encouraged you to take some risks to follow your dreams, whatever they may be’.