

Title: *Paddlenorth*

Subtitle: *Adventure, Resilience, and Renewal in the Arctic Wild*

Author: Jennifer Kingsley

Published: 2014

Publisher: Greystone Books

Website: www.greystone.books.com

Contents: 231pp; one map, a few b&w pics; bibliography

Cover: Hardback, dustjacket

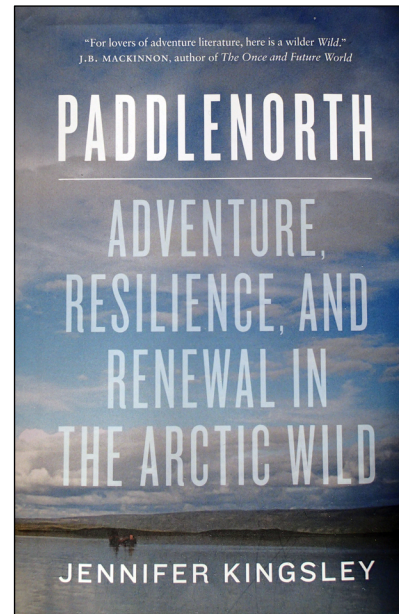
Size: 222 x 148 mm

Price: US\$ 26.95

ISBN: 978-1-77164-035-0 (also an epub)

Availability: Amazon.com

Review: Paul Caffyn



This is the story of a 2005 Canadian canoe trip down the Baillie and Back rivers from Moraine Lake in northern Canada to the Arctic Ocean. After six months of planning and preparation the six paddlers flew from Yellowknife with their canoes in a Twin Otter floatplane, aiming to finish at Gjoa Haven where they could fly home.

Jennifer Kingsley has written a corker book, an excellent blend of narrative, snippets of historical river exploration, descriptions of the tundra and its wildlife, the bonds between the paddlers, and her philosophy on wanting to paddle in the high Arctic.

It starts with the fly in, then an introduction to the other five paddlers, some planning and then onto the water. Jennifer writes:

The tundra, 'is unlike anywhere else, and that is a wonder in itself, but in the three years since my last visit, I had forgotten about the tundra's oppressive moods. The landscape is so open – yet when the wind rises, the temperature drops, and the sky fills with clouds, the atmosphere becomes heavy, and you feel trapped by all that freedom.'

Jennifer's first introduction to canoeing was being taken by her father paddling in his cedar-canvas canoe, but she found, 'Canoeing was for adults. Supremely slow and quiet, a perfect place for that most hated adult activity – conversation'. At the age of eight, she was allowed her first solo paddle and realized, 'that a canoe could help reveal the world's secrets and it could unlock the land.'

Her first long canoe trip at the age of 22 was in the lakes of northern Ontario, the second a 50 day paddle on the Hood River at the age of 25. In 2005, at the age of 28 she was ready for the Back River.

On the 5th day, Jennifer describes a capsized in rapid, two of them in the freezing cold river water, unable to swim to shore, however quick thinking by the other two canoes led to a quick rescue and recovery of the capsized canoe, with the loss on just one paddle. A pretty savage wakeup call of how things could turn to custard so quickly in such a remote area. The rescue was reviewed and the group's emergency communications were triple checked.

The narrative is not diary style, but it flows nicely along with a blend of detailed descriptions of life ashore and afloat, encounters with the outriders of the big Porcupine caribou herd, wolves and a grizzly bear. I could sympathize with Jennifer's feelings when strong daytime winds led to a schedule of paddling at night. She noted, 'I had always been terrible as sleeping in. Alie was the most prodigious sleeper of all of us, and the later we paddled, the more I resented her for it. On the rare occasion I did get some extra rest, I woke drenched in

sweat under the midmorning sun. The heat forced me out, only to be attacked by mosquitoes, which had finally hatched en masse. I slapped them out of my ears until the bug jacket was on and then scowled at the silent tents'. A very clear vignette!

The historical snippets link in nicely with the narrative. On shore of Garry Lake, the team walked to an abandoned cabin which was bare, except for a biography of George Back written by Peter Steele. Titled *The Man who Mapped the Arctic* the book describes George's 1833 expedition down the river now named after him to the sea. The front cover of the book was inscribed by seven girls of a YMCA group paddling a few days ahead of Jennifer's team, and noted to leave another book if this one was taken. Alie's copy of *War and Peace* was left as a substitute.

A short epilogue updates the lives of the historical figures described in the text and also that of the team members to 2014. The bibliography is very comprehensive.

Any gripes? The cover is just so bland. The frontispiece two page tight shot of two canoes would have lifted the visual appeal of this book no end. With Jennifer taking 40 rolls of print and slide film on the paddle, it is disappointing that more photos were not included in the text, and that no colour plates were included.

But those are minor grizzles. If you are keen to up the ante with your descriptive trip report writing, this book is an absolute treasure. A book that kept me page turning to the end-notes.