

Title: *Paddling North*

Author: Audrey Sutherland

Published: 2012

Publisher: Patagonia Books

Contents: 171 pp, map per chapter, illustrations, recipes, bibliography

Cover: Casebound, dustjacket

Size: 153 x 244 mm

Price: NZ\$23 (Fishpond) US\$15 (Amazon)

ISBN: 978-1-938340-02-4

Review: Paul Hayward



“Go Simple, Go Solo, Go Now...”

Good books come in many guises – some make you think, some make you feel, some educate and some just help you sleep. *Paddling North* made me stop and chuckle and then sit and think, with a smile on my face. Many times.

Audrey Sutherland has a great capacity to carry you with her, quietly and with humour. Carry you on a voyage of discovery as she paddles into a role as one of our kayaking greats. Great in heart and spirit and accomplishment, but so very uninterested in what the world thinks of her - arrestingly different to some modern kayak heroines.

In writing *Paddling North*, Audrey drew from her salt-stained journals, penned so many years ago in the tent before sleep; because as she says “long-ago recollections are always distorted”. This gives the tale a strong in-the-moment feel – the lessons Audrey learns are fresh and crisp. A few quotes:

- “It is strange to wake each night and wonder where I am and is this real.”
- “Warm and dry with sunshine, I would tackle anything.”
- “But I was afraid, a deep gut fear.”

At 59, Audrey had decided that she needed to get on with it. She re-prioritised her life and moved her dream of paddling in Alaska to the top. She took all she knew about kayaking and Hawaiian surf-coast swimming and worked out how to make paddling SE Alaska survivable and enjoyable.

Over the next 22 years, Audrey returned to Alaska every summer and paddled 13,000 km – not to set any speed or distance records, not to tick any boxes, but just because she loved doing it. A few weeks into that first 87-day trip, she decided to “Start worrying less and enjoying more”. She clearly succeeded.

This is a tale of pure adventure – of how to pare down the challenge to the bare essentials, so that it becomes possible to step into a remote and challenging world and live a dream so well that you want to return each year until simple frailty prevents you.

She takes great delight in her food – creative ingredients with tiny amounts of wine and rum – her ‘epicurean spoof’ as she terms it. She soaks up the strange plants and animals and learns the weather, tidal and sea conditions. Alone in the wild, she ‘was a wary animal, alert to every sound, a part of it.’

This, of course was in 1980 - so the gear was primitive and the safety nets cobwebby. Novice or experienced, today’s kayakers can learn much. The whole book is full of insight into how to be safe while confronting risk. Not with certificates and standards and gadgets, but with eyes open, mind working hard and enough preparation of body, mind & simple gear to be flexible and ready to assess and surmount challenges or to retreat without shame or bruised ego. Audrey was safe and survived because she didn’t expect safety to come from following rules. She knew she had to make herself safe – so she did. Looking over her shoulder is as educational as any ‘Bugger File’ drama.

Spare in frame and delightfully spare in style as an author, Audrey sets a stage, enacts a scene and reflects on an outcome in just a few rich sentences. This is a slender book (170 pages), very much in keeping with her philosophy. It's all the better for leaving out the fat.

Lest you think the book is tied to being a monologue, Audrey uses a couple of dialogs... Left Brain – Right Brain and Paddler – Critic – Writer, which illuminate her decisions and amuse the reader. The maps are good, the illustrations a delightful alternative to the photos she couldn't take and there are a few recipes thrown in for good measure. Audrey is also skilled at drawing in the thoughts and writings of other writers – ones who have helped or inspired her in her adventures. Not one, but two bibliographies open the door to further enjoyment. I've read a good few of those on her lists – all of which inspire me to hunt up the rest.

As you may have guessed by now, I'd suggest you hunt up Audrey's Paddling North. It'll do everything a good book can - except put you to sleep.