

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *The Fat Paddler*

Author: Sean Smith

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Website: www.finch.com.au

Contents: 206 pp, two colour plate sections

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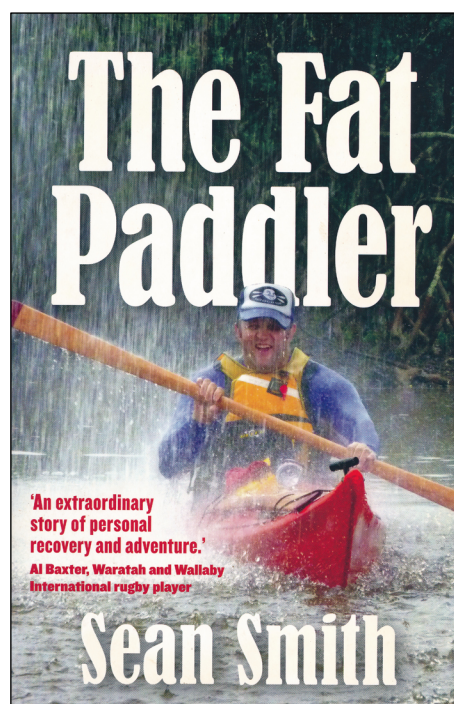
ISBN: 978 1921 462313

Review: Eric Soares

Availability: try your local bookshop or the NZ distributor:

www.bookreps.co.nz

The book's title says it all. This just-published book by Aussie kayaker Sean Smith tells the story of an ordinary bloke who took up sea kayaking in earnest because he had to. It's not about a long sea kayaking expedition. It's about a fun-loving rugby rower out riding his scooter who was run over by a hit-and-run driver. He got banged up pretty badly, and his femur was broken in two. After recovering from that ordeal, he was in Bali for a rugby tournament when the terrorist attack on the nightclub occurred. He witnessed the explosion, carnage, and confusion, and though he did not get blown up, he was emotionally traumatized.



Later, he was a passenger in a sports car and was nearly killed in a serious auto accident. This time his pelvic girdle was destroyed, and he suffered internal injuries as well. He details his recovery experience with straightforward language laced with dry down-under humor and understatement. As a person who has also spent some time in hospital, I could relate to his suffering and depression.

His doctor told him he was morbidly obese and a prime candidate for cardiovascular disaster. He quit smoking, toned down his partying, dieted, and began an exercise regimen. Since his lower body didn't work right, he took up sea kayaking to develop his upper body. He relates a funny story of his first trip on flat water and how he capsized several times and had to endure the applause of little old ladies when he was towed to shore. All kayakers should think back to their first excursions on the water and remember the awkward and embarrassing moments. *Fat Paddler* has a knack for self-deprecating humor that really tickled my funny bone.

He had a strong desire to paddle among icebergs and so traveled to America with a folding kayak and paddled here and there until he finally reached Alaska, his ultimate destination. Since Australian waters are comparatively warm, he had no idea about drysuits, which are essential in the frigid Alaskan seas. He wrote:

"It's hard to describe the discomfort of a drysuit in a manner that gives the full sensory experience. The rubber suit doesn't breathe and it is immediately lined in sweat. It becomes clammy and slippery on the inside, even as the cold outside air freezes your face and hands. The neck gasket feels like a rubber garrotte, maintaining a constant pressure as each breath fights against your crushed windpipe. I was having flashbacks to hospital and the respirator tube in my throat and struggled with the rising fear of being choked again."

He started his famous website, www.FatPaddler.com to share his adventures and learning experiences and to help beginners with their trials and fears. He also used his website to promote charitable causes. One of these causes benefits leukemia research and features a 111-kilometer night paddling race called the Hawkesbury Canoe Classic. Sean decided to enter the race and trained for it. After weeks of preparation, the Classic happened and Sean went for it with everything he had. Here is an excerpt from *THE FAT PADDLER*, which indicates how tough the race was:

"When I passed the final checkpoint, almost eighteen hours had passed since the start of the race. My

pelvis was screaming, my hands were blistered and my hips now streamed blood into the boat from the pressure sores. But I could see the finish line only a couple of kilometres away, and my pace picked up to full sprint, racing along the final stretch. My Greenland paddle sang as it whirred through the water. This was it, the final burst of energy before achieving the goal I'd set several months before."

Does the Fat Paddler finish the race? You'll have to read the book to find out. After finishing the book, I discovered that Sean Smith, aka *the Fat Paddler*, is a wonderful human being, the kind of bloke you'd want to paddle with, to share a brew and a sausage on the barbie with. He is unpretentious and a straight arrow. He still loves to have a good time, but is now on the high path of a life worth living. His inspirational writing style makes you feel good, like talking with a good friend.

I read THE FAT PADDLER over a couple of days while sitting in the shade next to a beautiful little creek. It was an easy read, full of adventure and fun. Filled with tribulations and triumphs, the book was a delight. Erik the Red (Soares) says, "Check it out!"