

Run River Run by Ann Zwinger

In the spring of 1869, the nation had held its breath as one-armed John Wesley Powell paddled off down the Colorado River toward the unknown labyrinths of the Grand Canyon. Naysayers shook their heads at the folly, predicting that he and his small crew would meet their end sailing over giant waterfalls believed to be roaring in the unseen bowels of the earth. When Powell emerged from the dark maws of the Great Chasm a hundred days later, he became a national hero, the first man in recorded history to survive the maddened waters of the Grand Canyon.

For roughly a century after, few men cared to risk duplicating Powell's exhilarating feat. The industrialized tourism of the late twentieth century, however, tends to depreciate his brave accomplishment. Technical knowledge of the river and vastly improved equipment have made the trip relatively safe. Each year people by the thousands, watched over by experienced and duly licensed boatmen, speed down the West's rivers in relative safety. In fact, "running" the West's whitewater rivers has become almost de rigeur for modern celebrants of the outdoors with enough money to take such tours. In literary terms, this creates a dilemma. Hundreds of travel books have been written on the subject. The writer of yet another faces a dual problem. Such a book almost by necessity must follow a standard organization, the physical progress of the trip. But what can a writer say that hasn't been said many times before about the thrills of plunging through watery haystacks and the adrenaline rush of being sucked by tons of rushing water between menacing boulders?

Zwinger solves the problem in several deft ways. She writes not about the popular Colorado but about a tributary, the Green River. Rising in southwestern Wyoming and twisting through varied landscapes to meet the Colorado in southeastern Utah, the Green at the time was not as widely known to the public as it is today. Furthermore, though there are heart-in-the-mouth episodes aplenty in the book's pages, this is not a usual rendition focusing mainly on the excitements of a watery roller-coaster ride through the wilderness. Respecting both her readers and the land, Zwinger sets out to do far more. She begins her book where the river itself begins, as a stream seeping from a glacier high in Wyoming's Wind River Range. From there, she takes us the full length of the watercourse. As the Green twists through three states, Zwinger not only explores the river but reveals its lore along the way, the peoples both ancient and modern forming its history, its plants, animals, and geology. What we get, then, is both emotionally and intellectually comprehensive, an instructive yet intimate portrait rather than a fast tour, and beyond that, as the book successfully risks the clichéd feelings about nature, a convincing sense of a woman blessedly, if momentarily, "at one" with the land. In overview, *Run, River, Run* is an act of engagement. "The river," says Zwinger, "becomes a way of thinking" (p. 100) • a statement, it turns out, that applies equally to the book deriving from it.

Even though up until publication of *Run, River, Run*, the Green had not received such full treatment, it would be glib to suppose that the novelty of the material was the book's main selling point. It is said that there is no such thing as a boring person, and likewise there is no such thing as a vapid landscape. But just as it takes a skilled writer to turn her raw material, people, into a forceful novel, it takes an alert mind and a special talent to transform the story of a place into a book compellingly followed by readers.

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After all, once the Green sluices out of the high mountains, it twists and carves its way through what appears to be unmitigated desert. The scenery, with its sheer canyons, can be dramatic enough in places, but to the unpracticed eye it is largely repetitive, one desert scene after another. Zwinger counters this problem by picking up on both the area's subtleties and its unsuspected background, and her prose swings back and forth from large panoramas to specific details.

As it happened, for example, the region was a favorite haunt of mountain men. Around the 1830s, the white adventurers forged into a new country, lured by the values of pelts, to be shipped back east, from the beaver along the streams. Zwinger fills in the historical background of the trade, noting that the new fashion in gentlemen's beaver hats back East and in Europe kept driving up the price of pelts, then livening up the history by telling a hair-raising story or two about escapes from Indians. In discussing an individual trapper's gear of Hawken rifle, lead, and knife, she pauses on the particular kind of knife the mountain man was likely to carry. An all-purpose tool in the wilderness, it was known as a Green River knife. And here we're in for the kind of small surprise that delights the scholarly minded. An expression of the day, "up to Green River," derived from the act of plunging the knife in deeply, up to its trademark on the blade. From that the meaning of the expression expanded: it referred to doing something thoroughly, as we might say, "up to the hilt." That trademark had "Green River" stamped into the steel, but the words referred not to the location of the knife's popular use but to its maker, a company in Green River, Massachusetts. The mini-lecture presents just one of the many ironies, one of the many memorable twists and turns, throughout a book that becomes a record of surprises, whether about the river's peculiar history or about its rare beauty.

In a similar vein, but on an entirely different topic, as the course of her trip proceeds Zwinger pauses after lush descriptive passages of the land formations to feed in the geological events • the rising of mountains over millions of years and the sediments depositing in vast lakes over eons • responsible for the specific scene presently before our eyes. Typically, her information is backed up by notes at the end of the book referring the interested to further reading. Typically, too, Zwinger doesn't ignore the immediate details. Taking a break to stretch her legs and explore Kendall Warm Springs, back from the river a quarter of a mile, she explains why the water bubbling out among rocks is warm. Delving into chemistry, she tells why its calcium content supports stonewort, a large alga, along with other plants and animals not abundant elsewhere in the area (p. 48). And careening around a bend, she explains the physics of stream dynamics, why the river's fast current cuts a bank on the outer curve of a bend, while leaving a deposit of silt on the inner curve, where the water runs more slowly (pp. 57-59, 90).

In control of her prose and aware of her readership's needs, Zwinger varies the pace. She realizes that Run, River, Run is not Land Above the Trees; it is not a textbook. Teacher though she is at heart, she knows what all good teachers know, that she must vary her tone and the approach to her subject or risk losing her audience. Thus she keeps bringing her account back to the river and waking her audience up as her craft speeds into the dangerous challenge of yet another cauldron of boulders and thrashing water. In such ways, her pages sway between contemplative instruction and physical excitements.

She alters the pace in a number of other ways so appropriate to her story that there's hardly a jolt in

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the change. Meanwhile, she mixes in, variously, elements of humor, pathos, and the transport of sheer beauty. Zwinger followed the length of the Green not on one extended excursion but through several trips over the years. Different people accompanied her, and this allows their injection into the story, the diversion of the human element. At one point, a rare opportunity appears; La Barge, a small town with a café, offers the chance to take a break from the river fare, and here Zwinger creates a warm vignette of the local, friendly people. The passage ends when the café owner says good-bye, offering the canoeists both free candy bars and wishes for their good luck in surviving the notorious whirlpool ahead (Run, River, Run, p. 108).

The subtlety of Zwinger's humor is well represented in Run, River, Run. Her husband, Herman, accompanied her on one leg of the trip, and he brought along the irritants that come even with good marriages. At the end of one long, hot day on the river, the two start fussing about the choice of a campsite. Finally, Herman finds one acceptable. It turns out to be infested with mosquitoes. Worse, the wind starts blowing, a condition, as we've earlier seen, sure to put Zwinger on edge. But Herman doesn't seem to be aware of any problem:

In the quieter layer of air near the ground the mosquitoes speckle my hands when I try to pound in a tent stake. Letting go to swat means starting all over again and recapturing the elusive tent loop; bedrock lies so close to the surface that the stakes will not hold by themselves. ... It is dark by the time I get the tent secured, and the wind still blows and the mosquitoes still whine and I seriously question what I am doing here, and there is murder in my heart when Herman, freshly fortified with repellent and a generous drink, asks if the tent is ready for his sleeping bag. (p.202)

Cranky people, however, don't make good teachers. Usually, Zwinger's humor either is gently or self-mocking. One hazard to canoeists on the Green is the barbed wire that ranchers have strung across the river. It's both hard to see and potentially decapitating:

When fence posts appear on either side of the river it pays to look carefully into the future. Accepted procedure is to hold the paddle up vertically in front of your face, letting the wire slide up the shaft as your head goes under. Being a craven coward, I simply get out of the canoe and crawl under on hands and knees, in a foot of water, following the same procedure that I would were I on land, enduring much ridicule. (p. 96)

Deceptively innocent on their surface, the words strike a nice balance between very real danger and comic relief.

Abandoned homesteads dot the length of the river. The stops to poke through the fallen walls and scattered equipment, the physical remains of ruined hopes, provide another parallel thread holding Zwinger's text together. They also offer Zwinger the opportunity to give another lesson, this time on the misunderstood West. Government-sponsored homesteading failed because it was based on a tragically flawed concept. The west was not at all the treasure house of agricultural abundance that hopeful congressmen back East liked to imagine. Instead, the region's aridity militated against settlement by crop-

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raising individuals on the small plots mandated by the Homestead Act. Farmers by the thousands wore their fingers to the nubs, failing despite their brave efforts as they avidly participated in the mass fantasy. Rummaging through the shambles left behind, Zwinger stops and captures the pathos in a detail: "At my feet shards of a blue bowl lie, convex sides up, pale sky blue." She remembers the human suffering as well as its historical perspective. Returning to the river and drifting off, she gives a backward glance. The cabin "does not seem abandoned, only waiting" (p. 224).

The essence of Zwinger's writing, however, lies beyond her able manipulation of readers through convincing literary theatrics as she takes them through a range of emotions. What is far more accomplished is that she achieves what novelist Joseph Conrad demanded of himself in his famous preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897). "My task," he says, ". . . is, before all, to make you see. That • and no more, and it is everything." The alchemy that leads to this is inenarrable, which makes the manifestation as striking as it is rare. It comes with a near passionless rightness, passionless because it has an aesthetic truth beyond the immediate individual self. Floating quietly through Horse Canyon, Zwinger gawks up at formidable cliffs soaring thirteen hundred feet as they loom above the river's course. Domed and notched and spired, they take on bizarre shapes. "Corteges of deformed animals cross the skyline, bawling who knows what brayings and barkings that are sheared away by the high wind" (p. 273). Later, as the landscape changes, she notes quite different cliffs, "pale peach, the color of the inside of a conch shell" (p. 278). Zwinger's best writing in all her books, whether she's climbing a peak in Mexico or watching the trembling green colors of aspen leaves in Colorado, is about the things of nature immediately before her, whatever the wider context provided. No doubt this is because such things of nature are themselves what most excite her; the act of seeing leads in turn to efforts toward understanding, both by Zwinger and her audience, of the entire matrix. This is the heart of Zwinger's contribution to nature writing.

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Peter Wild

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