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The Memory of Water by Allen Smutylo and Traveling the 38th Parallel: A Water Line Around the World by David Carle and Janet Carle

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Peopled Waters

***The Memory of Water* by ALLEN SMUTYLO**

Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013 \$39.99

***Traveling the 38th Parallel: A Water Line Around the World* by DAVID CARLE and JANET CARLE**

U of California P, 2013 \$29.95

Reviewed by **SANDY M. BONNY**

Water “. . . the heart’s blood of the earth.”

Carl Sandberg’s poetry kicks off the introduction of Allen Smutylo’s essay collection, *A Memory of Water*, setting the tone for musings and memories that circle the role of water in shaping and sustaining extremes of human culture. *Traveling the 38th Parallel: A Water Line Around the World*, by Janet and David Carle, provides a flipped viewpoint that explores how human activities affect, and have affected, natural watersheds around the world.

These offerings are well paired, a twinned reflection on the multi-vectored relationship of our human species with the waters that flow in and through our planet—the rivers, lakes, springs, and tides, “the systole and diastole of its veins.” Janet and David Carle’s ecologically oriented travelogue is constructed of serial cameos that describe the use, misuse, and remediation of watersheds around the world, following the 38th parallel. Written from a scientific perspective but for a general audience, *Traveling the 38th Parallel* treats readers to a unique complement of chemical and hydrological data—but why the 38th parallel? The choice is both incidental and intensely personal for the authors. This is the latitude that passes

through the body of water dearest to their hearts, the Mono Lake Conservation area in California. The Carles lived as resident-stewards and protectors of the park for many years and its management is the standard against which they reference the examples encountered in their travels.

The mid-Northern latitudes are heavily populated worldwide, so these linked examples at 38 degrees come from a context of dense humanity where natural waters have been altered by hydro-engineering, dams, and flood and tide management, as well as by commercial fishing and harvesting, all of which carry high stakes for the natural environment and the sustainability of potable water supplies. A lay audience will benefit from insight into the perspective of scientists committed to habitat restoration, and the eco-literate are likely to be both inspired and heartened by environmental efforts underway in locations as diverse as China’s Yellow River Delta and Spain’s Coastal Lagoons.

The Carles were guided and hosted by local conservation groups on their global journey, and *Traveling the 38th Parallel* includes stories of fellowship with a worldwide community of water conservationists. Korean youth eco-leaders, American marsh-restoration pioneers, altruistic Japanese businessmen, and many global animal wildlife advocates are featured. To the Carles, these passionate people are “rays of hope shining around the world.”

Allen Smutylo can surely be counted amongst these rays of hope, and reading these two books back-to-back makes it easy to imagine the three authors in a spirited meeting of hearts and minds. Smutylo is an aesthete and environmentalist, a wilderness painter whose representations of extreme landscapes through an artistic, rather than

photographic, lens embrace cultural perspectives—from the stark Arctic ocean that shaped successive Indigenous Polar cultures, to the crowded banks of the Ganges river where Hindu culture thrives at the intersection of tradition and adaptive innovation. Plates of Smutylo's original artwork are found throughout *A Memory of Water*, providing an extra 1000 words of textual descriptions each time.

The longest of the ten narrative essays in *A Memory of Water* is "Bylot Island: The Northwest Passage, 2000," which details Smutylo's accompaniment of a sea kayaking expedition that set out to circumnavigate Bylot Island through a changeable Arctic waterscape characterized by open water, drifting ice, and kilometer-wide tides. Animal threats on this journey included a territorial bull walrus that stalked exposed, kayak-bound human prey; food cache-eating polar bears; and ravenous sled dogs boarded without rations on remote rocky islands. This essay captures the flair of courageous Northern adventure, lightened (and rescued) by the incredulous humour of Inuit residents who navigate the same waters rather more easily by motorboat and floatplane.

Vivid contemporary adventure is interleaved with stories of successive circumpolar cultural groups—the Independence, Thule, Dorset, and Inuit peoples—and those physical elements of their cultures that remain on the land. In a poignant example, the brutal strength of real polar bears (who munch through metal ration barrels and circle tents at night) is contrasted with the stark spiritual power of tiny ivory polar bear carvings left as talismans on the land for over 3000 years. To stumble on either—megafauna or microcarving—is a treasure of experience, and Smutylo's meditations on the cultural

imperatives of water traverse cultural contexts.

The Arctic inlets, relatively little traveled by Western eyes, carry the reader into the realm of imagined space. This is also true of Smutylo's depiction of an Eastern Canadian fishing derby, where passage by kayak to the sea is criss-crossed by fishing line as sportsmen crowd the banks for the salmon run; and of the depiction of Varanassi, India, which is not only a watershed under intense human pressure, but a river that flows at the service of humanity's fragile tenure, collecting and carrying the dead. In each essay in *A Memory of Water* we are reminded of the uncertainties that individual human lives, and collectively determined human cultures, face in terms of survival on our water-filled planet.

Beyond their informative value, both *A Memory of Water* and *Traveling the 38th Parallel* are very much tributes to the joys of travel and the richness of learning first-hand from place. If, like me, you have enjoyed learning by shorter journeys and have wished to travel more, then reading these books will be something like pressing your nose against the glass of an all-you-can-eat buffet—you'll finish with a longing to get your feet wet, and push away from shore.

SANDY M. BONNY is a writer and Earth scientist (PhD 2007). She has recently published a collection of short stories, *The Sometimes Lake*, focusing on intersections between scientific and other ways of knowing, and is engaged in cross-cultural science education as a program coordinator, instructor, and curriculum developer at the University of Saskatchewan.