

# VOYAGE ON THE JACKSON

JEAN-LOUIS COURTEAU

Translation by Nathalie Courteau



Wooden toy boat, hand sculpted. Circa: 1900

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“Voyage on the Jackson” by Jean-Louis Courteau is the story of a stream in the territory of the Jackson River Protected Natural Area (RJANP) (*JRPNA*) and an ode to the rich biodiversity of the region; a natural environment marked by human presence dating back to the Algonquin. This poetic tale is primarily an invitation to a journey.

Those who would like to plunge even deeper into the author’s universe will enjoy [« Seize Îles »](#) and [« Remonter le Nord », Éditions XYZ](#)

Here is what a book lover had to say about *Seize-îles*:

« A diving logbook imbued with the breath of classical tales of adventure to which is grafted the poetry of the stars, hydras and the strata lying in the depths of the lakes »

– François-Alexandre Bourbeau, Librairie Liber, in *Les libraires*.

There is a difference between happiness and joy. They say it's a question of duration. That joy doesn't have the rooting system happiness has; that joy is fleeting, ephemeral, short-lived. Therefore, it's a question of time. Better a long tranquil river than a sudden cascade. However, rivers also pass; downstream unceasingly swallowing upstream, until the source dries up, yonder, beyond, into hinterlands unknown.

So then, since what passes eventually dies out, I've decided to deceive it and become a passenger of time instead of watching it go by.

In the silent glory of the morning, dawning sky before me, filled with the hopes and the music of beings awakening and the dreams of those who slumber still, kneeling before the liquid emerald of the Jackson stream, I lay on the water a little wooden boat. In my mind I take a seat at the helm, captain of possibilities, sailor of destiny. If joy is a drifting craft, I will no longer be content to watch it pass by and disappear. We will sail together and never part again.

We travel slowly, without haste. The *Vallisneria* undulates under the hull, blond and auburn tresses of the naiads. And then, beds of pebbles, fields of agates and pearls. I may have seen in passing, lying amongst the stones, an arrowhead lost for centuries or millennia. But those stones resting with it and all the Laurentians around were once mountains as high as the Himalayas; and for them millennia are but winks, a mere few words in a long discourse. It takes a lot to move them.

Around me, on the stream's fresh water navigate phantom vessels, spectres of a time still almost recent: the canoes of the Weskarini, local Algonquin, and those of the *coureurs des bois*. In the lakes fed by the river sleep the centuries-old objects, they traded and lost. Water is the memory of the land.

My boat doesn't have a sail. If I had one, would it be possible for me to go fast enough to sail back upstream? Back in time? I smile, quite certain not! We can keep winding the clocks, in the end we never wind up at the same beginning.

The Jackson doesn't always know what it is. In places, it's a small discreet brook hidden by the tall grass in which also hide rabbits, mice, broody ducks and sometimes even lovers. Then, joined by its fellow streams, it widens into a marsh bordered by mauve arrowhead plants, starlit by the yellows of the water lilies, on part of which floats a mire, coloured by carnivorous purple sarracenia.

On it land, at dawn, black ducks and their cousin mallards, along with a few blue-winged teals. Then at nightfall the wood ducks come to sleep. In between, swallows and multicoloured warblers come to feed, as light and airy as the moose is lumpish and clumsy.

Marshes supply water, feed, cleanse the brooks, breathe in what must be transformed and breathe out what revives and inspires artists. They are life condensed, solar systems in green space.

The current takes me lazily through the hot air under the amused watch of otters and the serious and haughty eyes of the great blue herons. And if by chance, it came to one of the locals to wonder what I would taste like, I start singing and he takes off or dives back in, irritated.

Then we speed up and slide down some rapids, my little ship and I, passing haphazardly between the wet and rounded rocks like a pinball across a board; my shrill laugh mixed with the water's mirth, happy to simply exist. As the river calms down again and as we fly over a dark abyss where I know rest the speckled trout, I look back and shout: "More!" and I would go again!

If I could, if I were not irretrievably carried away by the water and life and time, would I pass by the same places again? Between the same reefs and pitfalls? Would I find the same joy? Or would it be another path, of shipwreck and of grief?

Time is dancing a passionate tango with chance to the rhythm of chaos. And it's all good that way. What seems to me to be a vast disorder is perhaps just a poorly revealed beauty. Maybe do I only see a few brushstrokes on a painting too large for my eyes. Or nothing of the sort. If pride and vanity believe in destiny because the end frightens them, humility is at peace everywhere.

And so, this small cascade is not merely a little water descending a slope between the rocks. I just got through those rapids like one goes through existence. In all regards, the river is life itself! It welcomes it, is filled with it, gives it and symbolizes it... Biology too, dances a tango, with philosophy.

We go through other marshes, we scoot off in a straight line; we oscillate in meanders like a water snake, at times in full sun and at times in the shade of the spruce trees, heads filled with their sweet, intoxicating perfume. When we brush against the forest, I hear the call of the fawns to their mother, and at night the owls are asking who I am. Beauty is a revelation as much as it is a mystery.

The Jackson stream becomes a river. And the more it grows, adding on the memoirs of each stream, the more lives it carries within; in the same way, we accumulate the memories that make us.

Up where I started only swam young trout, tadpoles and the small, microfauna. Here appear schools of cyprinids racing in murmuration, shimmering in the sun; largemouth bass stir the water with their desynchronized pectoral fins, pouting. Turtles reflect lengthily on rocks

and lying trunks. Bullfrogs croaking, salamanders hiding, kings fishing. To my little boat's eyes, sometimes the other shore recedes so far it gets lost in the luminous fog of summer days filled with the stridulations of crickets and the vibrating shrill of cicadas.

The voyage of my little wooden boat will have taken a few days, like it could have lasted for seasons if I had lingered, if the spirits of the water had left me stranded. But nothing is a waste of time, is it, since it is the essence of everything. We can get beached for a moment, but we never fail.

Maybe next time I could ride volleys of autumn leaves or sit on the back of a last-generation monarch butterfly, the one that migrates to the south, and I could see from the air the stream rippling through the palette of a mad painter. Or I might turn into a winter fox and search through snow dunes and random encounters a little prince, rapt with wonder.

Suddenly: a large shadow. Rumours of metal, rumbles of monsters. But it doesn't last, and we find the light again, past the bridge. Other inhabitants: muskrats search for cattail hearts, a young beaver considers the neighbourhood.

A few more turns and then the ocean.

It is no longer the current that moves me. The waters have practically come to a stop. It is the wind now that makes me sail above forests of plants until now unknown. Broad-leaved pondweed rise from the depth almost to the surface. The Eriocaulon pierce the waves like rocket trajectories, elodea let out micro-bubbles of oxygen, the stems of water lilies twist into corkscrews. Water takes on hues that the stream is not aware of, deepening the ultramarine of the sky, reflecting the pink course of the clouds.

Here I am at the lake. If I could scream my wonder loud enough so that it bounced off the surrounding mountains, I would hear its echo. And as, of course, for every kingdom there must be a prince; I look around and soon catch sight of him. The great loon: master of the air when he crosses the sky en route to other lands to defeat the seasons, but also master of the waters when he plunges into the cold darkness to hunt. High priest of the night when he yodels to the stars' chants between happiness and pain, sadness and madness. Phantom of the night, wolf of the northern waters.

The day falls asleep. The hour is blue, mauve, and then black like the evening which never really is. I rock gently on the lake as the wind grows weaker and dies. Crossing the sky, the Milky Way reveals itself, timid at first then flamboyant like a bride. And the amorous night is lost for words, silent and amazed.

Tomorrow, shortly after dawn, the wind will rise again and push the little wooden boat towards the shore. A child will find me there, or a grown-up who has not lost his sense of wonder. The idea will also come to him to go back up to the source and set afloat the small boat on the stream. Because that really is what toys are for when you still know how to play. They are meant for travelling.

And sometimes it is very close by that great voyages are made. The boat will retrace the course of the stream, learning and rediscovering the beauty of the world.

I stay here. This time I choose a nighthawk. On his back I will explore the night, fly to the galaxies, race with meteors. It is said that it was on comets that water arrived on earth. The stream and the lake's water.

It seems like another beautiful journey to go on...