

Reading the River

A Voyage Down the Yukon

1988 – Originally published by Houghton Mifflin Company
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"[Hildebrand] is interested in the river, the wildlife and the people...and he has every skill of mind and craft to enfold us in his experience."

—The New Yorker

"Like so many of the best nature books, Hildebrand's account of his canoe trip through Alaska is as much an exploration of his own emotional landscape as it is of the people and places..."

—Philadelphia Inquirer

"Quiet, lyrical and sensual, it is the most introspective of travel writing..."

—Los Angeles Times Book Review



Swimming out of sight, great schools of whitefish and salmon kept their own company in the river. Beluga whales, I knew sometimes lost their way in the labyrinthine channels of the Yukon Delta and strayed far upstream searching for an outlet to the sea. The nineteenth century William Healy Dall mentioned a white whale that was killed a few miles below Nulato, at least four hundred miles from saltwater, its appearance an ominous sign to the villagers of something clearly out of place. But I think such a visitation would be marvelous: Out on the river in the twilight, the canoeist feels something rubbing against the hull as if he had run aground. Looking over the side, he sees a ghostly shape breach the surface, exhaling mist from its blow-hole. The head is pale and fetal, eyes set back beneath the high, intelligent forehead, the mouth a droll curve. Beluga and river traveler stare each other across the vast evolutionary gulf. In a high-pitched tremolo, the whale speaks. What it asks is how to get home.