



My Kind of River Journey: Seeking Passage on the Mississippi

By Susan Carol Hauser, The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, 2011, 144 pages, hardcover, \$35.00.

Poet and writer Susan Hauser and her husband hired a captain and his repurposed 50-foot ocean trawler for a trip from the Twin Cities to Louisiana. She recalls the journey in a book that is part memoir, part natural history and part metaphor.

They started in early May and became so used to the gentle motion of the boat that they became unbalanced walking on land. Hauser learned to jump onto docks with the bow line to tie up the boat, but encountered her fears at Cape Girardeau:

I expect this docking to be routine. There is little wind, and there is no tow going by throwing us a wake. I unhook the chain that completes the walkway railing, hold the looped rope in one hand, and set my feet to prepare for the stepping over. I check the dock to look for clear footing. It is strewn with rubble, bits of rusted bolts and iron scraps. Then, I notice the water between the boat and the dock. It is moving. It is flowing. It is running as though sent for. The barge strains against its moorings, wanting to go with the river. Our engines strain against the current, holding

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the boat where it does not want to be. The water breathes up and down, the barge and the boat out of synch, now up together, down together, then not, a half beat off, a whole beat off, together again.

She kept lists of flora and fauna she saw. Some species, such as grackles and herons, she saw almost everywhere. Some, such as eagles and kudzu, were only on parts of the river.

Her language is usually a pleasure to read. Sometimes the detailed account of the daily routines, especially on the Lower River beyond the lock-and-dam system, produced a feeling of lassitude in me. They took a lot of naps, which seemed a good thing to do.

Hauser, from Bemidji, Minn., is an experienced paddler. She wrote this book years after the trip, after the death of her husband. The year is not stated, but it must be in the mid-2000s, because they stopped at the Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium in Dubuque, Iowa, which opened in 2003.

This is a good read for anyone contemplating or imagining a trip down the river. Hauser is a keen, curious observer who explains facts in a natural, flowing voice that pulls you along.

At the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri, the captain helps Hauser understand the mingling of the two rivers:

That is the Missouri, right? It seems so—nothing. We are now straight out from it. He tells us to note the surface of the water. The Mississippi has a light chop; the surface of the Missouri is silken and paler in color. We follow the pattern forward, tracing its path along the west bank as it shoulders into the main current where, in the invisible depths, the silt from the western flank of the continent marries the silt from the center. After a thousand feet or so, the distinction is lost, and there is only the Mississippi. ☸

— Molly McGuire