

Of Earthly and River Things: An Angler's Memoir

by Wayne Curtis

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Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Of Earthly and River Things by New Brunswick writer Wayne Curtis is subtitled *An Angler's Memoir*, and it is that, but it's also much more. This is a collection of 19 essays, some of which have been previously published in various outdoor journals, notably the *Atlantic Salmon Journal*. Much of the collection does, indeed, focus on fishing, but also included are the author's musings and memories about rural life in general, particularly life along the Miramichi River and its tributary streams during the 1950s and '60s. The essays are set out in a more or less chronological order – though not completely, for in the early ones the author is a young boy and by the end he writes as if he were an old man (although at the time of writing it, he is not quite 70.)

The book begins with Curtis's memories of an early evening spent fishing with his father, using only a twig for a fishing pole, black thread for a line, worms dug out of the garden, and a twisted safety pin for a hook. Straight off, he got a nibble and pulled out a pan-sized speckled trout. This incident served to hook the author, too. Only much later did he realize how that evening had planted a seed in him that he would nurture for the rest of his life.

In "Open Water," Curtis recalls the spring of the year he was nine, when the students were kept home from school, quarantined because of a smallpox scare. In "From the Boat," he describes the spring he was twelve, when his father built a boat to use on the river.

Parents today will look askance at some of the activities he relates – boating alone, with never a life jacket to be had; children smoking home-made cigarettes with no parental concern mentioned; and riding bicycles across a swinging bridge where one slip might have sent them into swirling waters. These early stories, when children were often free to spend the whole day off by themselves on the river seem almost from a different life. We learn, too, of the ecstasy of the author's first love, and the later pain of rejection.

Many of the essays have similar themes: an event, a sight, smell, or sound along the river that propels him back to remembering some earlier event, particularly times when he fished with friends or family. The joys he felt, as well the hardships of a backwoods life in the '50s, come through often. We feel the pleasure of sitting on a rock as evening shadows lengthen, and the excitement of fly fishing when the fish rise to the bait.

This is a slow-moving book, like the river in summer, meandering, not following a straight course, since the format is a series of essays, not that of a novel. In some selections, such as "River Spirits," "River Legacy," and "River Voices", the author writes in a quite philosophical manner. He tries to explain the togetherness he feels with other people who have shared similar river experiences, and the way he thinks his whole life has been influenced by the river. "One could do worse than to grow up on a river" (49), he says. Having been raised next to a river myself, I tend to agree with him.

These essays are well crafted, full of unique, descriptive details, with neat comparisons. For example: "a hoarfrost whitens the fields so that the dying grass looks like an old man's hair, bent and twisted and quite uncombed" (214). Another description that caught my interest was that of autumn: "when high winds stripped the multi-coloured leaves from the branches, reducing those ancient trees to charcoal sketches" (51).

Wayne Curtis has written six books of fiction, five previous volumes of non-fiction, and one book of poetry. He lives in New Brunswick, dividing his time between Fredericton and his beloved Miramichi River.

If you're interested in life along a river, fishing or rural life, or if you feel nostalgia for earlier times, this book is one you'll enjoy. If you have a rural background, the author says you will never outgrow it, because it is so deeply rooted in you. But if these topics don't pique your interest, then this book may not be for you. ☺

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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