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Along the Mekong, from northern Tibet to Lijiang, from Luang Prabang to Phnom Penh to Can Lo, I moved from one world to another, among cultural islands often ignorant of each other's presence. Yet each island, as if built on shifting sands and eroded and reshaped by a universal sea, was re-forming itself, or was being remolded, was expanding its horizons or sinking under the rising waters of a cultural global warming. It was a journey between worlds, worlds fragiley conjoined by a river both ominous and luminescent, muscular and bosomy, harsh and sensuous.

From windswept plateaus to the South China Sea, the Mekong flows for three thousand miles, snaking its way through Southeast Asia. Long fascinated with this part of the world, former *New York Times* correspondent Edward Gargan embarked on an ambitious exploration of the Mekong and those living within its watershed. **The River's Tale** is a rare and profound book that delivers more than a correspondent's account of a place. It is a seminal examination of the Mekong and its people, a testament to the their struggles, their defeats and their victories.

The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong Details

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Keith says

Excellent book! Author is former New York Times journalist who became a journalist after quitting his doctoral studies in East Asian Studies. In mid-life, he took leave from NYT to travel the Mekong River from its origins in Tibet to the South China Sea.

The book is part adventure travel, explaining his adventures trying to arrange various modes of travel and lodging along the way. It also includes the author's observations about the cultural and political environment through which he traveled. For example, he notes that the Mekong did not always form the boundary between Laos and Thailand. this boundary was established after WWII. Those people who were formerly in Laos who were now in Thailand got a more prosperous lifestyle due to Thailand's reliance on capitalism vs. Laos' reliance on communism.

Song-my says

I enjoyed reading this travelogue. As a wanderlust myself, it was fascinating to hear about Gargan's experiences traveling through 6 countries along the Mekong River. I really appreciated the vivid descriptions of the scenery and people he met, his retelling of history, and his research on historical documents and folklore. I felt like I was along for the ride on a one-of-a-kind journey.

My biggest complaint of the book is that at some points, it seemed to drag on. I enjoyed the sections where Gargan interviewed people or went into historical details, but often he would go on and on, using flowery language to describe the scenery and landscape. I also felt that we didn't get to know the author much - I can understand that if he wanted to take himself out of the picture, but when he did give us snippets of information about himself (he mentions at the end of the book that he spent 2 years in jail for not signing up for the Vietnam War draft) you wanted to know more and felt gypped when he didn't provide it.

David says

Like the author, I'm very interested in Asia and have traveled by boat on the Mekong. as such, it was a nostalgic read and a delightful one. I was very impressed with the author's vocabulary, and learned many new words.

Patricia says

A friend recommended this book as he knew I had travelled to about three-quarters of the destinations travelled by the author. Perhaps that is why I was less excited than I thought I would be when I finished it. Some of the sites along the Mekong I had travelled twenty-odd years ago, others as recently as last month (Luang Prabang), so there was a mix of both romantic nostalgia and small irritations. This is perhaps unfair

to the author as *The River's Tale* is a personal travel diary and therefore does belong to a specific time--late 1990's/early 2000's (I confess I don't remember the actual year) and place. But readers should be aware that Asia has probably changed more in the past 10 years than any other time during its history, so many of the descriptions of both the terrain and the people and their dreams/concerns has changed, some radically. I am specifically thinking here of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam which have all exploded with tourism and its accoutrements.

Nicole says

I did not love his writing style, a little too superfluous for my tastes, but I enjoyed the story. Wonder how it would read if it was written today.

Lisa says

The existence of Google Earth made this a much more engrossing read!

Jeff Clay says

This is a big book, or, at least the topic -- traveling down a 2,700 mile river -- is big. In fact, for a year's journey, the book is surprising slim. I know the author took copious notes, and I don't need to have a description of every meal he ate or flophouse he crashed in, but at times I craved a bit more detail. This is a very minor criticism of what was clearly a labor of love for him. And labor it surely was. Not just based on his ordeals but at times his 'voice' sounded weary as well. Part of this though I interpret as concern for the peoples, lands, and cultures he touched.

I would love to sit over a BeerLao or two and chat with Mr. Gargan about the changes wrought in the last decade-and-a-half. His journey -- completed sometime around Y2K -- is necessarily a snapshot. Having traveled to three of the countries he visited -- Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and most recently Laos -- I have seen both the invasive and enabling effects of globalization. There has been some political progress: Lao PDR is no longer the paranoid state as described and the generals are finally not (completely) ruling Myanmar. But, incredibly, Hun Sen is still the Cambodian P.M. The more things change the more they stay the same. China too has bloomed into a global infrastructure-creating juggernaut. This is alluded to in Gargan's book, but what a difference 15 years makes! (We will see much more of this in the years to come as with the 2016 election we have abdicated our role and responsibility of being a global leader and China is eager to fill that gap.)

Back to the book...trained and working as a journalist, Gargan's language is generally descriptive but clear and concise. Only on occasion does he get 'poetic' and with the exception of one clunker (something about a boat's engine being as greased up as a California sunbather), his writing produces no winces.

This is neither a travel book nor a travelogue. Yes, he travels -- all 2700 miles and then some considering his various mainly unexpected deviations -- and he does 'document' and comment upon what he sees and finds. (He is aided by this in his fluency in the Chinese language.) He is quite vocal in his skepticism of the various powers that play chess on the Southeast Asia board and his concern for all whom he meets is

persistent and true. But this is also a journey where his personal history as a Vietnam War protester crosses paths with the lands those wars were fought over/on and the lingering effect it has had on the inhabitants. To his credit he acknowledges but does not harp on our (America's) deleterious impact (truly, no pun intended) on this patch of the world. Every player -- from the French to the Americans to Mao, Pol Pot and the current SE Asian governments have contributed to the general mess, poverty and ruination of the region. At least that is the take-away.

Things have changed since 2003 (the year of publication) and are continuing to do so, for better and worse. Having spent the intervening time resting up, I, for one, would encourage Mr. Gargan to consider a revisit and update with the writing of Volume II: Return to the River...One can hope!

Claire S. says

A tale of traveling 1,789 miles over the course of a year from a trickle in the Tibetan plateau to the broad channels of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, this is a worthy book. A tad overwritten at times, but just forgive him that.

"It had been a long day chugging down the Mekong River from Luang Prabang, the old royal capital of Laos, a day of endless arguments with the boatman, a wretched, hollow-cheeked scamster who had relieved me of some 800,000 kip, about \$160, with the promise to convey me in clattering splendor for three days downriver . . . barely two hours out . . . the boatman, named Pheng, steered his vessel alongside a floating gas station, one of the occasional pit stops along the river where diesel fuel is served up from steel oil drums. After filling his tank with the lollipop-red fluid, he informed me that the boat engine was broken and he could go no farther. I told him to fix it. He told me he couldn't. . . Under a devastating sun, deep in an empty landscape, I succumbed to months of frustrations and uncharitably raised my voice, angry that my careful arrangement to travel the Mekong were once again collapsing and that my shark-eyed boatman was intent on ripping me off."

Ann says

Heel herkenbaar, veel geschiedenis, kritische schrijver

Tom says

This is a travel tale of the writer's experiences traveling from the headwaters of the Mekong River in the Himalayas to the Nine Dragon Delta in Vietnam. Published in 2003 it naturally does not bring the reader up to date on all the rapid changes that have taken place in the region in the last 12-13 years, but that is not a criticism. The book describes the author's attempt to take stock of the varying cultures along the river, and to learn about how they have been affected by, and adapted to, the pressures of the events that have engulfed them. Thus the Chinese pressure to change, or wipe out, Tibetan culture; the effect of American and French wars and influences and damage, and the destructive and even catastrophic damage done by the Chinese government, the Pathet Lao, the Khmer Rouge and the Northern dominated Vietnam government.

The author has a strong journalistic and scholarly history to strengthen his writing, and a willingness to "rough it" so as to get close to people along his way. Perhaps not for every reader, but for me it was a

reminder of how little I have known about Tibet, Cambodia and Laos partly, I suppose, because Thailand and Vietnam are so much larger and have been so much more in our news. Some of his experiences and descriptions of the damage done and consequences for Laos and Cambodia were simply awful to read, and important to read. For me the book dragged in sections, in part I suppose because the author seemed to want to spend more time on history that wasn't necessary for the story he was developing. Nevertheless, a good read.

Colin says

An excellent read - and extremely well-written. It was very nice to read such an elegant travelogue, though as the cover says it is far more than just some thrown-together notes from a journalist's sabbatical. Gargan is thorough and engaging in his description of the Mekong's journey from its source to the Delta and weaves a vivid tapestry through incorporation of history and personal experiences both far in the past and closer to the present. The only thing that kept putting me off was his need to remind us that his time there was far too short - he kept on writing "I must away...the river, it calls..." or something of that ilk. It got a little frustrating after a bit not only because I wanted to hear more about the places he had visited, but also after the first few times it became quite...overdone. Also, he is quite fond of that rhetorical term where you pair two words of opposite meanings to describe the same phenomenon (paradox? opposite words together? I've forgotten what exactly it is called). But, he would describe things usually in trios "Harsh and sensuous, glamorous and seedy, rollicking and sedate, the Blah Blah was....". It was very nice the first few times, but like the "...oh the river...my soul aches for its touch...etc." it got old after a bit.

Other than those small rhetorical things, I thoroughly enjoyed this book and sincerely hope that Gargan continues to produce such works.

Carole says

A literate memoir of a year's solo journey down the length of the Mekong River, from Tibet, through southern China, Laos, Cambodia, and Viet Nam to the South China Sea. Gargan, a New York Times reporter and bureau chief, was always fascinated with Asia and studied Chinese in college. He also served a couple of years in a Kentucky prison for anti war actions during the Viet Nam era. Gargan back-packed his way thousands of miles, using local iffy transportation sources and making contact with natives along the way. Food and transportation were often a challenge. The contacts were often dispiriting, with poverty, government corruption, and a crushing lack of services suppressing hope. Gargan came away with apprehension about the future of the area, but with an appreciation for its beauty and complexity, which he often described in lyrical language. An excellent personalized introduction and overview of a not well understood part of the world.

Marguerite says

A decent read, but author Edward Gargan never seems passionate about his pilgrimage. It's an adventure, through some of the biggest hot spots in recent history, but that dynamic seldom comes across. For someone writing about a river, he seems to spend precious little time on the water. In the hands of another writer, this

could be much livelier. I do appreciate his thoughts on the disappearance of native cultures, arts and ways of life. But Gargan seems tired of the topic long before the end of his quest.

Annette says

A perfect book to read while traveling in Southeast Asia. thought provoking. Also a reminder of how quickly things are changing in Vietnam and Cambodia...mostly for the better.

Mitch says

Writing: Gargan's vocabulary struck me first. He deploys a myriad of strong, simple verbs and avoids cliches. He's a journalist, all right. His imagery worked well at times and poorly at times, strangely motivating my page turning. Will his wording trigger an imagined thing/motion realistically or as a (often amusing) caricature? Average is boring.

Content: Elucidating, sad, joyous. A complete know-nothing of upper Southeast Asia before, I now feel somewhat expert. A built-in pronunciation guide would have been convenient (Alan Watts included one in "Tao"), but the Internet substituted well. I feel I learned a lot more than the book promised. Also have a strong urge to replicate Gargan's journey, but the dams will inhibit an attempt.

World-widening book.
