

A Note from Andrew J. Graff, author of *Raft of Stars* / On Sale March 23, 2021

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On writing *Raft of Stars*

I was raised on the end of a dead-end road in the township of a village of 1999 people. Or so said the sign by the road that led into the riverside town of Niagara—way up north in the fingertips of Wisconsin—with its towering bluffs and pulp mill and single-building K-12. I had a barn full of pigeons and a Siberian Husky, two brothers and alfalfa fields, a cedar forest, and the Menominee River. There are many good ways to grow up in this world, but this one is mine and I loved it. Of the landscape, I loved the river most, where it ran steep and tea-colored through a set of rapids named Piers Gorge, just west of the Highway 8 Bridge, from which I have thrown many rocks. I live in Ohio now, a busy father and writing professor, but I still sometimes close my eyes and take long hikes alongside Piers Gorge. I can smell the cedars, cross the two slippery wooden bridges over the tributary creeks, climb uphill and hear the deep hum of waterfalls. These days, I drive four hours to West Virginia to get my river fix. Back then, the river was simply part of things, a given in the cosmos. Rivers with rapids have been central to my life, and will probably be central to any story I ever try to tell.

The first words of *Raft of Stars* came to me by a river, the Peshtigo, which is a sort of little sibling to the Menominee, sharing the same watershed and emptying into Lake Michigan not too many miles south of Marinette, Wisconsin, where the navy still builds battleships and taverns have perch fries. It was winter when I wrote the words. My wife and I and our first child lived in a house by the river, and I was busy building fires and painting rooms and grading papers from my first teaching job after I graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. I read an essay by Flannery O'Connor about physicality in writing and wrote a few lines about two boys pushing bikes down a country road, which later became the novel's opening scene. The view from our river house looked out at a wide channel filled with a maze of islands where my son and I and his sock monkey liked to canoe and look for turtles. I knew the two boys pushing their bikes down the country road would somehow end up on a set of wooded islands like these, but I didn't yet

know what in their lives would take them there. I didn't even know their names, who they were, what they were like.

As country kids growing up in the 90s, we set off firecrackers in silos and rode our hot-colored skateboards in barn basements. We read a lot of books and told stories about ourselves, and jumped Huffys off ramps made from plywood and stacked hay bales. When we were lucky we'd get dropped off at the river in somebody's mom's station wagon with our fish poles and tackle boxes. We'd hike the Piers Gorge trail, through the cedars, then the hardwoods, then the pine, and catch bass from the eddies behind boulders amid all that thundering, shining water. If you hike to the very end of the Piers Gorge trail, you'll come to a rapid called Sand Portage. There's a rock outcropping with a cedar growing on it, overlooking an island splitting the river in two. This is where we sat when the bass quit biting, and many years later it became Lantern Rock—the place where Fish and Bread decide they are all in, where Teddy says all roads end, where Cal takes a swim and loses his gun.

Northern Wisconsin is similar in the best and worst ways to Appalachia. It's naturally and thoroughly beautiful. The forests and skies and pickup trucks are big. People are reserved and to the point and mostly very good. They hunt bears. There is also poverty and too much alcohol, and often there is too little work. The town of Marinette, for instance, rides the ebb and flow of naval shipbuilding contracts. For a long time families in my hometown of Niagara worked at the local pulp mill, but that has since closed. Now many who grow up there have to leave. Teenagers like me looked up at stars and thought about faraway places. I was hauling furniture during my first year out of high school, and in the same strip mall was a recruiting office. I left after enlisting as an aircraft mechanic in the United States Air Force.

Desert Storm happened when I was in elementary school, which was my first experience of war. My second experience was Afghanistan, when I deployed there. I was nineteen. It was the driest, most blinding desert I could imagine. The sand drifted in places, soft as talcum. We worked at night and slept during the day, and the tents sometimes reached one hundred twenty-eight degrees. I remember staring at the thermometer in dumbfounded silence. My first real task in Afghanistan was to stand at the end of the combat airfield in the pitch black to "catch" an inbound C-130 cargo jet. I was part of a small group of mechanics lost in a sea of marines and

infantry. Our job was to make sure the inbound pilots didn't want any maintenance. They never did. The flight crews wanted to get in and get out, back to Germany or Italy or wherever else there was real food and air conditioning. That first night on the airfield, as I waited alone in the dark of a desert I hadn't even known existed two months before, waiting for the inbound to land in a swirl of heat and sand, clutching the rifle I shot only once in basic training, my helmet all wobbly, I remember thinking very clearly, *Wait . . . doesn't anyone know I'm from Wisconsin? There has been some mistake.*

The deployment lasted a few months, and I spent many hours walking the paths alongside the runway at night. There was no river in Afghanistan I could see. But there were stars, and the stars were something to behold, night after night, circling the airfield like inbound jets in all that desert air. The stars were important to me during that time. They reassured me of the persistence of home.

What I love about rivers and stories is the way they always feel like gifts. After the war, I took a job as a white-water guide on the Menominee during my summers off. I was an English major at Lawrence University in Outagamie County, and it was during this time that I learned to love the river, and books too, in a new way. I was no longer just fishing the river or hiking beside it. I was now in it, and on it, riding its swells and seams and drops. And I was no longer just reading stories. I was trying to write them, under the tutelage of a young professor who is now a department chair, the writer David McGlynn.

My first attempts to write were forced. Like a new river guide, I used too much muscle and not enough calm. My stories flipped like rafts flipped, all wrapped around rocks. Sometimes I dumped out all the paddlers. In time I learned I couldn't fight rivers, but I could wait for them. I could learn to co-labor, become a part, accept the gift of a surprise spin, a new current or pressure. After a solid decade of learning to write, the gift of a story came one night after building a fire and looking out at snowy islands in a frozen river. A constellation had formed. It was a beginning that would carry me—and Bread and Fish, and Teddy and Cal, and Miranda and Tiffany—carry all of us down a river poured out from so many conscious and unconscious currents of life.

The day I received news that my agent was sending the finished manuscript to editors, I remember feeling as if I were seeing off actual family members. I was sitting on the porch of a

rented lake house in central Wisconsin, looking across the water, and there they were—the whole cast of characters paddling off in canoes, a bit of worry in their eyes, but hope also. It was then I realized how much I truly loved them, how they were a gift to me I couldn't keep. I wished them well. I hope others love them too.

—Andrew J. Graff