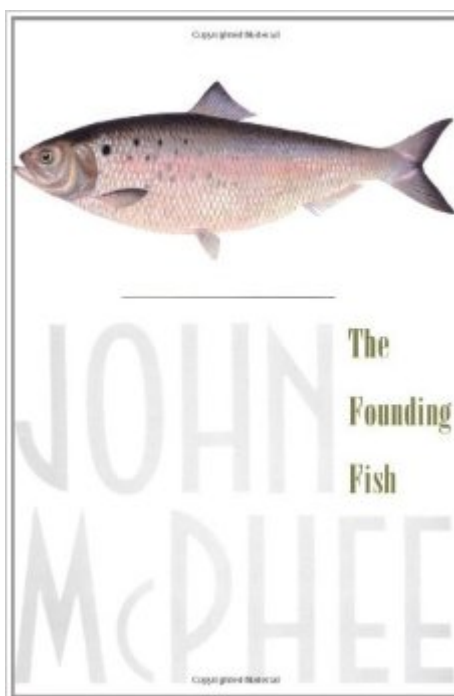


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The Founding Fish



Synopsis

John McPhee's twenty-sixth book is a braid of personal history, natural history, and American history, in descending order of volume. Each spring, American shad-*Alosa sapidissima*-leave the ocean in hundreds of thousands and run heroic distances upriver to spawn. McPhee--a shad fisherman himself--recounts the shad's cameo role in the lives of George Washington and Henry David Thoreau. He fishes with and visits the laboratories of famous ichthyologists; he takes instruction in the making of shad darts from a master of the art; and he cooks shad in a variety of ways, delectably explained at the end of the book. Mostly, though, he goes fishing for shad in various North American rivers, and he "fishes the same way he writes books, avidly and intensely. He wants to know everything about the fish he's after--its history, its habits, its place in the cosmos" (Bill Pride, *The Denver Post*). His adventures in pursuit of shad occasion the kind of writing--expert and ardent--at which he has no equal.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

John McPhee has written numerous pieces for *The New Yorker* and over a score of books on such subjects as oranges, canoes, and geology. His wide range of interests now centers on an object of personal obsession; in *The Founding Fish* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux) he tells us about his own passion for fishing for shad. As you might expect, he can't help but tell us a lot more, about history, ecology, and human oddities. If you don't know about shad, and even if you don't know about fishing, and don't care to know about it, you won't feel alienated away from these pages, which contain McPhee's fine prose and wry humor. (For instance, he is surprised to find a snake in

his net: "I lack the sense of companionship that some people seem to have with snakes.") Shad is worth knowing about, it turns out, and so is McPhee, who has seldom put himself as a character in his own books. Of course, there is much advice about fishing for shad, which seem to be a particularly elusive fish. McPhee quotes extensively from his fishing diaries, and starts his book with a funny description of an epic battle with a shad on the Delaware River starts. McPhee has seventy feet of six-pound test line "suddenly pulled by a great deal more than the current." The battle goes on for pages and pages, eventually ending in the netting of a 4 3/4 pound shad. A fighting fish, to be sure. Or a clumsy angler. Shad is not an endangered species, but of course they have been affected by the humans changing their waters. Beside the problem of pollution, there are thousands of dams on rivers that used to present only milder natural obstacles for the returning fish. Some of the dams are, surprisingly, coming down, and McPhee takes us to a dam-removing ceremony. As the title implies, shad have played a role in American history. George Washington seined for shad on the Potomac. He didn't eat them; only one shad bone has turned up in the excavation of his garbage pit at Mount Vernon (and McPhee can't help an interesting digression upon "archaeozoology"). His slaves got them, and he used shad as a fertilizer. Despite the legend, his men at Valley Forge were not saved from starvation by a providential, unseasonal run of shad up the Schuylkill River. Thoreau worried about shad in their thousands meeting a new commercial dam, and wrote the lament, "Poor shad! where is thy redress?" Thoreau advised the fish, "Keep a stiff fin and stem all the tides thou mayst meet." Words to live by. Once again, McPhee has picked an unlikely subject and made everything about it vivid, interesting, and important. If you fish, you will love this book. If you don't fish, here is a book to give you an idea about why intelligent fishermen go about their often frustrating hobby with such evident pleasure. *The Founding Fish* is a delightful small encyclopedia on everything connected with shad.

John McPhee, "a registered curmudgeon", was fishing for shad on the Delaware River one afternoon when he felt a tug. Nearly three hours later, amidst a serious debate over what was on the end of the line, a concerned wife's inquiry forwarded by a policeman, and cheers from interested spectators, McPhee pulled from the river a 4 - 3/4 pound roe shad. Clearly not a record-setter, nor an exotic species - the debate suggested bass, sturgeon and even tarpon. What prompted McPhee to relate this event in opening a lengthy account of what, to some, remains a mediocre animal? Surely, John McPhee, who has written of continental movement and extended vistas, must have a compelling reason to deal with such a mundane topic. McPhee's reputation as a writer should need no introduction. However, if you are unacquainted with his work, you can start here with confidence.

He deftly presents a melange of scientific information, "folk wisdom", history and personal experience. As with his work on geology, he entices researchers, fishermen, guides and legislators to provide him their views, which he relates with sympathy and clarity. Throughout this narrative, his own experiences are told with wit and compassion. Fishermen are great whingers, but McPhee brings a new level of sensitivity to his personal accounts. He knows there's a god when a nearby fisherman nets six fish while his hook remains empty - only a god could permit such arbitrary antics in nature. The research and folk tales centre on a particular form of fish. Anadromous ["running up"] fish, among which salmon are the most famous, can move from an ocean environment up fresh water streams to spawn. This talent requires bizarre body chemistry, bearing immense costs. Salmon die after spawning, partly because they don't feed on the upstream run. Shad, too, remain hungry heading "home" to breed, but some shad return to the sea after mating. In some regions they may make three or four trips in a lifetime. McPhee, accompanied by fishermen and researchers, traces the history and physiology of the American shad. Other piscine species are touched on, including, of all things, a hammerhead shark. The shad, however, keeps centre stage. Once scorned as "just shad", chiefly due to its bony nature, many now acclaim its flavour when it reaches the table - hence the species name "Alosa sapidissima" - "most savoury". Books about sports are a major industry. They suffer a common fault - they're universally inwardly focussed. Baseball fans don't read about cross-country skiing. Golfers don't read about ice hockey. And fishing? There's divided opinion about fishing among sportsmen. Golfers, baseball fans, or hockey buffs often view fishermen with kindly disdain. Up at ungodly hours, thrashing through damp woods to take up stations at a bug-infested stream or foggy lake. Not something reasonable or civilised people should do. McPhee's experiences, brought to light by his superb prose, bring fresh breadth of vision to the world of fishermen and fish. Always an unmatched read, this latest publication of McPhee must join his other works on your shelves. You may not be a John McPhee fan when you encounter this book, but you will be when you finish it. Then pass it along to your children who will find riches and insights he provides. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

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