

Down the Nile: Alone in a Fisherman's Skiff by Rosemary Mahoney
By Suzanne Wright

Many people dream of visiting Egypt but few dream of paddling its great river. Fiercely independent author Rosemary Mahoney first dreamt then did just that—but not without experiencing and then writing about the considerable obstacles which lend her account such a rich and resonant texture.

Mahoney paints an accurate picture of Egypt, a male-dominated society teeming with touts who verbally assault a lone female traveler with a never-varying series of questions: “Where are you from? What do you do? Where is your husband?” If, like me, you have ventured there as an unattached female, you will recognize her descriptions, such as the lewd, opt-repeated, “You want make sex with me?” she endures. If you haven’t, you will chuckle at her observations and insights.

What Mahoney, an accomplished rower, wanted to do was set off—alone—in a boat of her own. To fulfill her life-long quest, she was dismissed, chided and laughed at, repeatedly thwarted in her seemingly simple efforts to obtain a sea-worthy craft of her own. She perseveres and catches a lucky break, meeting a kindly Nubian *felucca* captain named Amr who champions her cause. Though protective, he affords her the opportunity to realize her dream of navigating the world’s longest river—even if it is with a watery “chaperone.” Although physically demanding—think scorching heat and the threat of crocodiles—she completes the first leg of the journey. Flaunting restrictive, parental-like male conventions, she manages to ditch her parental-like guide, completing the rest of her voyage solo.

Fool hardy? Courageous? A little of both? Part memoir, part travelogue, the book brings this mysterious—and slightly sinister land—into focus and to full-colored life, page after page. Mahoney, the author of several previous volumes, works historical and literary references into her river travels, highlighting Florence Nightingale and Gustave Flaubert. Her crisp, clear-headed text is honest and compassionate and reflects the complexities of life in Egypt. Her encounters with everyday people beautifully capture the joys and exasperations, the follies and rewards of cross-cultural travel. The writing is by turns poignant and humorous, simple, conversational and evocative—though the occasional “\$10 word” trips up an otherwise breezy paragraph and sent this reviewer scuttling to the dictionary.

In the end, the author travels but 120 miles. But the reader, ah, the reader has circumnavigated the globe in this riveting chronicle.