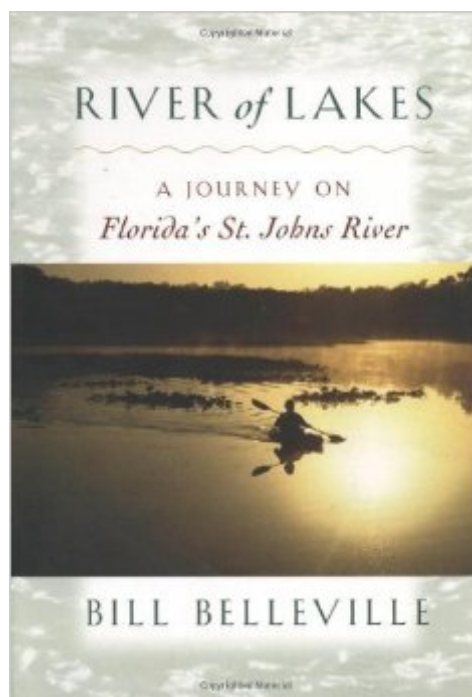


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# River Of Lakes: A Journey On Florida's St. Johns River



## Synopsis

First explored by naturalist William Bartram in the 1760s, the St. Johns River stretches 310 miles along Florida's east coast, making it the longest river in the state. The first "highway" through the once wild interior of Florida, the St. Johns may appear ordinary, but within its banks are some of the most fascinating natural phenomena and historic mysteries in the state. The river, no longer the commercial resource it once was, is now largely ignored by Florida's residents and visitors alike. In the first contemporary book about this American Heritage River, Bill Belleville describes his journey down the length of the St. Johns, kayaking, boating, hiking its riverbanks, diving its springs, and exploring its underwater caves. He rediscovers the natural Florida and establishes his connection with a place once loved for its untamed beauty. Belleville involves scientists, environmentalists, fishermen, cave divers, and folk historians in his journey, soliciting their companionship and their expertise. *River of Lakes* weaves together the biological, cultural, anthropological, archaeological, and ecological aspects of the St. Johns, capturing the essence of its remarkable history and intrinsic value as a natural wonder.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Bill Belleville travels the length of the St. Johns River from south to north, a rarity for rivers in North America, by houseboat, kayak or whatever means necessary to travel the river and many lakes through which it traverses. The book is an excellent balance between the natural and human history of the river and the river valley. The human history focuses on the early settlers, the growth of agriculture and lumbering as well as the later growth of tourism. It disusses some current problems

with pollution and sprawl. The unique nature of the St. Johns truly comes across in the descriptions of the natural history. It has narrow passages through subtropical vegetation and then goes through a number of lakes, large and small, all of which have their own personality and unique characteristics. To me, the most interesting part of the book were the dives into the cave from which the many springs come to the earth and are the point where manatees often gather. Well-written, lyrical with just enough ironic humor to make you enjoy the trip.

It is rare to find a 21st century man as aware of his natural environment as Bill Belleville. In a world of turnpikes, shopping malls, gasoline emissions, the shriek of airplanes, the thunder of traffic and the relentless river of asphalt that paves over memories and dreams, it is refreshing to find an author who longs to simplify, who notices apples snails and gopher tortoises, who endorses a way of life that has virtually vanished and writes lovingly of a place on earth and a watery path that modern society has all but forgotten.

Bill Belleville invites you aboard an allegorical raft as he explores Florida's St. Johns River. I was glad I accepted his invitation. With him as your guide "discover" this river with its many surprises and wonderments. With Belleville you learn how much of the "old" has survived modern day Florida and how important it is to preserve what remains. It is a wonderfully written book and before you know it you are caught up in Belleville's storytelling and when his story is finished you wish there were more bends in the river to travel and more tales to read about.

Quite by chance I was gifted with this book. I picked it up and became so absorbed in it I read it in one sitting. Not since Thoreau's "A Week On The Concord and Merrimack River" has a book on a river and its fauna and people impacted me so. Belleville truly takes you on a trip into the past and on into the present. His humor and his way with words will not disappoint you. This is one of those books you will share with friends and take off of the shelf frequently. How did Belleville know to write a book just for me?

As the author states, we are all students in this great shared learning experience of life, and we can see the river not only as a conveyer of water but also as a great lesson in ecology. Very true. This is a fascinating exploration of the St. Johns river and surrounding areas in Florida, much of it still largely unspoiled wilderness. I have been to one of it's (small) tributaries , Juniper Springs, twice while canoeing, and it is a beautiful wilderness I can attest. The author, Bill Belleville, takes readers

on a leisurely tour of the St. Johns river system starting in his own backyard and neighborhood, and from the marshy headwaters in an airboat, and later a kayak down river to a houseboat, and finally to the ocean, sometimes written in a dreamy poetic style, but still with lots of river lore and information. The St. Johns river is steeped in tons of history and Bill navigates it to great effect. By reading this book you can learn a lot about geology, history, plants and animals, ecology and conservation, evolution and natural selection, the beauty and value of nature, why it is important to preserve our wetlands, and along the way meet several interesting folks. At the back of the volume is a list of access points on the St. John river and near it, a list of public and private agencies, and also an extensive bibliography. Finally, I want to add that the part in the book where Belleville was floating past that tavern next to the river that was blaring out the Patsy Cline song "Crazy" (p. 140), in light of the history associated with that area, well, I laughed so hard I almost broke a rib!

Bill Belleville takes to Florida's St. Johns River in "River of Lakes" to tell the story of its history, culture and nature with eloquence and ease. He is truly smitten with the waterway, and it shows. His descriptions of the river's flora and fauna are sure to captivate readers, taking them along for a vividly colorful ride as he explores the river and its tributaries and springs via airboat, houseboat and kayak. Belleville's provocative thoughts also prompt deep ponderings of the river and its fate as Florida steps into the next millennium and struggles with the issue of balancing growth with its fragile environment. This is a Florida rarely seen by tourists, and, thankfully, Belleville delivers a stunning and remarkable guided tour.

The mix of nature, history and good writing is perfect. Find a comfortable chair, put your feet up, and settle in for a good read. When you get to the last page, try Cracker Childhood or Bullough's Pond.

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