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## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JO DEURBROUCK, AUTHOR OF:**

### ***Anything Worth Doing, A true story of adventure, friendship and tragedy on the last of the West's great rivers***

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#### ***What is Anything Worth Doing about?***

It's a true story about two larger-than-life whitewater raft guides in the wilderness state of Idaho who love rivers more than anything, even security. It's about their journeys, their lives and the price they pay to live their dreams. It's about what it looks like—if I did my job right it's about what it feels like—to attempt to define your life by what you love.

#### ***In your preface you say that part of the reason you wrote Anything Worth Doing was because you wanted to know whether your main subject, Clancy Reece, would have made different life decisions if he could have foreseen their outcomes. Your book doesn't really answer the question. Can you?***

Yes. I think most of us seek balance between our wildest dreams and our other desires, say, our desire for physical comfort or material wealth. Some do not know how. Clancy and Jon are of that second kind. In a way, it's a weakness. If they had wanted more comfortable lives, I don't believe they would have allowed themselves to have them. They'd have sabotaged themselves. I actually think Clancy did sabotage himself. Among his papers I found several business proposals, including a couple which seemed to have real potential. None had been carried past the dreaming stage.

#### ***You were a raft guide for more than a decade and yet it's clear from the book that you don't consider yourself to be anything like the two men you write about. Why not?***

Working on this book I rafted with Jon Barker twice. I watched him move. The guy never stumbles or misses or even hesitates when he needs to execute a physical act. That seems to me an uncanny ability, and from what I was told, Clancy had it too. When I was guiding I was fit, and over the years I became very competent at fast decision-making, which is arguably the most important skill of the whitewater raft guide. But that picture-perfect execution, I never had that. I can't even imagine how it's attained. Maybe you have to be born with it.

***Around 3000 guides work on Idaho rivers every year. What about that job might surprise those of us who haven't done it?***

That it is even more fun than it looks.

Yes, you wash a lot of dishes and at the end of the trip it's you that cleans the stinking toilet box. You haul heavy gear and every summer you get this awful condition we used to call foot rot. It comes from wet feet too long in river sandals. You eat ibuprofen like it was candy and you know that when you're older your skin will turn to leather.

And you don't care.

I don't know what guiding is like where the work is 8-5 on day trip rivers. But when you sleep beside the river at night, wake in the pre-dawn cool to its voice, and move at its pace all day, it's easy to forget how cars, with their speed, compress space. What money is for. Why clocks matter. Why anything that isn't useful on a river matters. Life becomes simple and very beautiful.

The biggest downside to the job, in my opinion, is that you can't do it forever but if you're not careful it sort of ruins you for 'real' work.

***How did your guiding background influence your telling of this story?***

It made writing the book very difficult. I had to work hard to keep in mind the perspectives of both the nonrafter and the infrequent rafter without losing the perspective of the guide.

If you know nothing about whitewater rafting, it looks difficult and extremely dangerous. For the most part, it's neither.

And rafters who float a few times a year, some of them anyway, have the opposite perspective. What they know is that whitewater rafting is cake. And while they're not wrong—basic competency is easy to acquire—there is, to my mind, a more beautiful way.

Running whitewater in any sort of craft can become a dance of exquisite precision. You stop trying to merely hit the wave straight. Instead you ride a thin pathway of green water that threads through the explosion at the top of that wave, keeping just a bit of angle so that, when your raft's nose hits the pillow, you'll surf a few feet left. Or whatever.

I wanted to share this perspective without sounding patronizing. I found the job ridiculously hard. But I kept trying because I figured if folks could see through my eyes, they'd be entranced by how rich the experience of running whitewater could be if a person seeks excellence and intimate knowledge, as many, particularly guides, do.

***Why did it take you ten years to write and publish this book?***

I'm a terrible writer. What I'm good at is editing. So my writing process is this tortured thing where I produce horrible work, edit it into bad work, edit that into mediocre work, edit that into good work, figure out what I really intended to say, start over from scratch, and so on until I can't stand to keep going and therefor call it done.

But this book took so long to get from inception to print for an additional reason: the novelist Jim Harrison is supposed to have said that the New York publishing world considers anything west of New York's East River "regional literature." For a long time I was determined to sell this book to New York. I could not. My agent could not. Even here in the West, regional

publishers told me the book was a great read but that raft guides aren't romantic enough to be marketable. Mountains are romantic. Oceans are romantic. Cowboys are romantic. Rivers and rafts, not so much. I don't get it.

***You describe yourself as an obsessive researcher. What does that mean?***

I can't write if I haven't first learned everything I possibly can about my topic. I have to go to the place, and I have to do the thing and I can't still be carrying any unanswered questions. So, for instance, I needed to write about this one stunt of Jon and Clancy's. They called it their speed run. Part of what they did on that trip was boat at night. It was also a one-boat trip at high water, which is inherently risky. Luckily for me, Jon Barker agreed to partially recreate that run with me. So in the book when I say that as the men rowed into pure darkness the wavetops seemed to gather the starlight and glow with it, I can say that because I know.

I read somewhere once that John McPhee, if he wanted to write about a river being cold, would bring a thermometer so he would know for sure the temperature of that river he needed to describe. That made me so happy because McPhee is one of my heroes and, working on this book, I did that exact thing. And how's this for obsessive: I calibrated that thermometer at home, so I knew in advance how accurate its measure was.

***What surprised you the most when doing your research?***

Usually with nonfiction you end up with conflicts between the story you want to tell and the facts you must work with. To properly tell the story you need these three facts and...you can't have them. Or most of the facts fit the story but some pesky details don't.

What was weird about this project was that, the more I dug, the more the thing just fell into place. Like a jigsaw puzzle assembling itself. After a while I began to imagine that Clancy had hired a scriptwriter when he was a boy and then just lived according to the script.

***Anything else interesting happen while you were researching Anything Worth Doing?***

Yes. This book wouldn't exist without a couple important coincidences. I've thought a lot about that. First, the Barker family liked to record videos. This was way before Youtube. Now everyone does it. But when I came asking, the Barkers had video of adventures dating back to the 1980s. More important, they had video from Clancy's funerals and at both there was an open mike. Those videos gave me literally hours of stories told by people who loved the man.

The other coincidence had to do with Clancy's brother, Charles. Clancy apparently told his family that, if anything happened to him, he wanted his little brother to have his house. So when he died, it was given to Charles. Who went there and found, just everywhere, all over the place, journals and letters and poems and scraps of ideas. Charles was sort of paralyzed by the responsibility. He looked up to his brother and these were the man's very words. So he carefully gathered every scrap and put these into a box. Which he still had, six years later, when I came asking.

***You're getting warm feedback from people who have never donned a lifejacket and wouldn't want to. Why do you think this story has such broad appeal?***

Most of us feel a little aimless sometimes, right? And dream of a passion so big, so powerful, that every moment of our lives would shine with meaning. I'm not positive that's how Clancy felt, I mean I think he had his doubts, but I believe that's how readers feel, following his story. Clancy is the appeal. In life he was a beloved by most, a walking archetype: Paul Bunyan in a life jacket, the cowboy on the range except his pony was a dory and his revolver a fishing rod. In death he's a touchstone, a reminder to, as philosopher Joseph Campbell put it, follow your bliss.

***What's your favorite thing about this book?***

I love the idea of extreme adventuring at home. Every mountain has been climbed, right? So if you're the type who needs to push past what's been done, where can you push? It's a cool question. One of the things these guys did is run the Salmon when it was not the Salmon the rest of us run.

That river is normally run between early July and Labor Day, when the river flows between 15,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) and 2,500. To get a feel for how much water that is, picture 15,000 gallon milk jugs floating past a stationary point every second. So that's a decent amount of water. But a flooding river not only has a lot more water in it, it's moving faster. And if you double a river's speed you quadruple its kinetic energy, which is the work it can do because it's in motion. Kinetic energy acts on anything not moving at the same rate and anything that wishes it wasn't. So at 60,000 cfs, the river is many times more powerful than at a typical summer flow of 7,000.

Deliberately multiplying risk is unnecessary and it troubles me. And yet almost despite myself I want to celebrate it. It's uniquely human, I think, to do what is unnecessary. Even more so to do it with discipline. That's what artists do, right? Ballet dancers. Mountain climbers.

***Have you written other books?***

Yes. One or two, depending on how I count. I cowrote a book about cougar/human encounters and cougar attacks with a friend and colleague named Dean Miller in the late 1990s. I wasn't happy with it, so years later I revised the book so that it focused less on attacks and more on the larger issues of coexistence with large predators. That book, *Stalked by a Mountain Lion: Fear, Fact, and the Uncertain Future of Cougars in America*, (Falcon, 2007) is still in print. I'm not happy with it either.

***Are you happy with this book?***

For now I'm ecstatic. Sometimes lately I have daydreamed that I finally did the book I'll be proud of. But ask me again in two years.