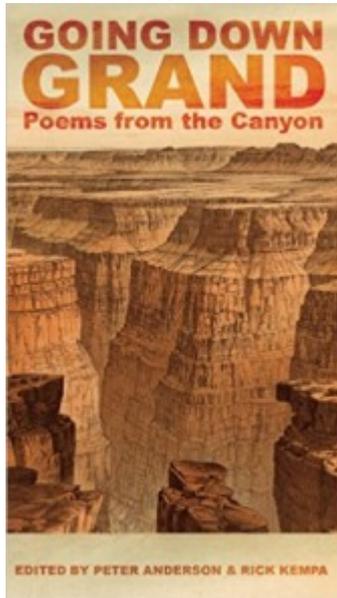


Going Down Grand: Poems From The Canyon

written by John Yohe | October 29, 2015



Going Down Grand: Poems From The Canyon

Edited by Peter Anderson & Rick Kempa

Lithic Press, 2015

148 pages – [Lithic](#) / [Amazon](#)

Going Down Grand is a beautiful-looking book, designed with a purpose: long and thin, not that thick, therefore not weighing much: perfect for slipping into a backpack pouch or a waterproof rafting canister. It contains poems about, and from, the Grand Canyon, to be enjoyed *in* the Canyon, though of course they can be enjoyed away from it too.

Most of the poems in *Going Down Grand* are contemporary, though some older ones are included, including a couple by 'name' writers like Carl Sandburg and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. One co-editor, Peter Anderson, is a southwest writer, and former river guide. He edited the great literary magazine *Pilgrimage*, perhaps not known on the coasts, but it should be. And full disclosure: I know the other co-editor, Rick Kempa. He was kind enough to include my essay "Holy Water" in his anthology of essays about the Grand Canyon, *ON FOOT* from Vishnu Temple Press, and I did a couple readings with him in support of it. We both (Anderson too, I suspect) belong to that subset of a subset of backpackers who think lugging the extra weight of a book or two on a hike is perfectly reasonable and sane, and we share this love of books and nature with the other poets included in *Going Down Grand*.

Perhaps a warning: The poetry in *Going Down Grand* is very...sincere. You will not find any irony here. Nor any east coast academic stuff: No LANGUAGE poems, nor John Ashbury-esque sentences that lead nowhere. The desire of

these poets is not *just* to play with language (though there is some of that) but to explore the lessons the Grand Canyon has to offer. In doing so, they trace their lineage from the Romantics, the individual in Nature (or, part of Nature?) on up through Emily Dickinson to Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver.

Speaking as someone who has experienced the Grand Canyon from the top and waaaay down in the bottom, what it inspires is, at the most, a feeling of oneness with Nature but, more generally, feelings of inadequacy. That is, awe. Which is what many of these poems try to capture. That can take many forms, from awe at the wildlife that surrounds one, to awe at the sense of Time (gotta be with a capital T here). The Canyon was around way before us hominids, and will be around long after we've killed ourselves off.

Still, me being me, I can't help but wish for just a wee bit o' irony, or at least some good old coyote-trickster irreverence, which is why my favorite of the four sections is "From The Water," where the river rats weigh in. Here there are touches of humor, perhaps because you can carry more alcohol on a raft. So, for example, even the title of Terry Martin's poem: "What You Think About Rafting Through The Grand Canyon On The Eighth Day Of Rain" kind of says it all. Though too, the humor can be in his details:

Carrying little, pockets empty, you think about
the world behind and its comforts—
hot water, clean clothes, dry beds—
of mornings slept through, food eaten without tasting,
the sleepwalking trance of inattention
that domesticity allows

Not all the poems are about the Romantic 'I' in Nature. Andrea Ross' poem "Bessie's Honeymoon" takes the point of view of Bessie Hyde, who spent her honeymoon with husband Glen rafting down the Colorado. They never came out, and their bodies were never found. Despite that somber note, there is a touch of humor here too:

Crystal Rapid exploded between boulders,
washing us through the river's middle,
pebbles popping against the floor.
Glen pulled hard on the sweeps while I pushed:
this was more than the marriage-night—
shooting a rapid is an act of love.

That last line is both funny, and true, and serves as a good contrast to the danger, and to my eyes/ears/mind, the poems with these contrasts, are the more interesting, because that's what an adventure in the Grand Canyon contains: contrasts, highs and lows, humor and grumpiness, joy and (like on the climb out) despair.

There are also native voices included, which could only be fitting—one a Hopi creation myth involving the Canyon 'told' by Albert Yava, to Harold Courlander. Though for yet another type of contrast, Navaho Laura Tohe tells the story of her mother coming to the Canyon not as a tourist, but as a worker. A good reminder that the Grand Canyon isn't just an adventure-

destination for white folks, but a home, which has been appropriated:

The bus stops in front of the big hotel
where she later stripped and tightened the bed covers
after the tourists left.

And outside the Canyon stretched wide her arms
the way her dreams must have felt
back then,
wide and open,
so much space to be filled.

The editors and publisher make clear on the back-cover blurb that they consider this a book to be taken with one on a trip into (or down) the Canyon. If you're one of those people who would choose to take a helicopter ride of the Canyon rather than get dirty or wet, this book isn't for you (but then, you probably don't read poetry anyways). Even folks that venture down below the Rims aren't always poetry fans. In fact, readership of this book involves about three or four subsets of already small groups: hikers/rafters, readers in general, and readers of poetry. Make a Venn diagram out of them and the people who share all three interests will have found a good companion for their next trip. And, who knows, *Going Down Grand* may make some converts, convincing people to leave the scenic overlooks and explore, the Canyon, and thereby themselves.