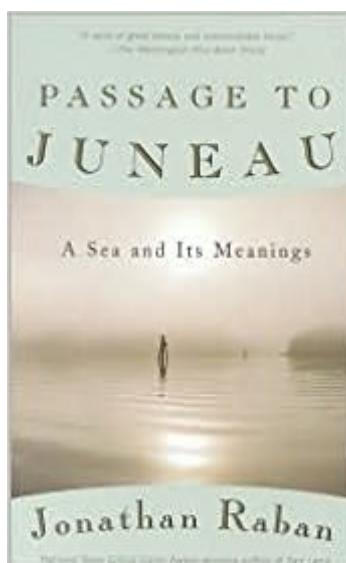


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Passage To Juneau Publisher: Vintage



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Customer Reviews

Jonathan Raban is, for my money, among the best of our contemporary travel writers, standing shoulder to shoulder with Paul Theroux and Bill Bryson, and *Passage to Juneau* only reinforces that opinion. I first read this book in 1999, when it was published, because I was looking forward to a sailing trip through the Inside Passage from Seattle to Southeastern Alaska. Then I read it again just recently because I am again looking forward to this trip. Like most of Raban's books, *Passage to Juneau*, is written in two layers. The first is an account of his preparations and execution of a solo sailing trip from Seattle to Juneau, Alaska. The second level is an entertaining and well-researched historical account of the travels and travails of Capt. George Vancouver aboard HMS Discovery during his four-year exploration of the northwest coast of North America. But it isn't really a story about a routine sailing adventure similar to that undertaken by dozens of boats every sailing season, is it. It is a poignant story of a successful writer who in late middle age loses first his father (to cancer) and then his wife (to neglect and absence of common focus) and is left alone facing old age in disconsolate apprehension and confusion. The reader is given an early clue to the direction the book is about to take when Raban, early on in his voyage, meets a married couple who seem to cling to each other like the two sides of a Velcro patch and makes the mildly derisive comment, "some people are more married than others," leaving us with the feeling that he isn't very married at all. This is reinforced throughout the book by his obsessive preparations for a planned visit by his young daughter, where he is looking forward to showing her the bears, with only passing mention that his wife will be coming along also. Raban is an excellent writer who doesn't hesitate to bare his soul to the reader and does it with a refreshing lack of maudlin and only a trace of sentimentality. He records his varying responses to his surroundings with an honest and only slightly judgmental way that lets the reader understand what is going on without feeling the need to interfere or change things. This interested-but-detached view is particularly apparent in his interactions with the

members of the First Nations tribes he encounters, and in his slightly cynical take on the ceremonies he is invited to attend. It is like he is letting the reader share his view of the world through one of the portholes in his boat. *Passage to Juneau* is a recommended read for anyone interested in maritime history, for present-day sailors traveling on sailboats, and to anyone wanting a poignant yet free-from-moralizing story about the personal passage of a late-middle-aged man facing an uncertain future.

I purchased this book used in paperback form; reading at a leisurely pace soon turned laborious and took 2 weeks to complete the book, some days remaining on the night stand because I hadn't the will to resume reading it. Raban has a million dollar vocabulary and turns many an impressive phrase, however, he left me with no sense of emotional connection, either with Raban or the material. The sub-plot of Captain Vancouver and crew, their original log entries, together with Raban's impressions of them, were overly descriptive, at least for someone hoping to read about a modern sailboat trip to SE Alaska. Raban lost me early on and I began skimming those passages about the time he launched into a lengthy description of sextants, magnetic compasses and modern GPS systems and the impact each instrument has had upon navigation. About my reaction to Raban, the fact is I'm selective about what I read; not that I have any difficulties reading, but because of my temperament type: an iNtuitive Feeling Perceiving (MBTI) type. Quite simply, if the author doesn't make an emotional connection with me, with few exceptions I'll abandon the book. Since this book came highly recommended by an English friend in response to a conversation we had about my dream to sail up the inside passage, I read it to the end. Jonathan Raban impressed me as an aloof, condescending facade of a man towards the people he met along the way, unless of course the people he met were his intellectual equal (few were) who could also give him something of value. Raban was not giving of himself to others in the least. His disregard for others, especially Americans, was most apparent in his dismissal of people with a more simple vocabulary than his; in particular his disdain for Captain Vancouver who used few words to describe the weather and geography and the Cap's annoyance with the crew for their overuse of the word "sublime". Note that I did relish the irony of Raban's over use of the word "labyrinth" to describe the inside passage. In the final 20 pages of the book, when his wife and daughter flew to Juneau to meet up with Raban, he had originally planned for them to sail back to Seattle together. Instead, she dropped the separation and divorce bomb on him. Had Raban made any kind of emotional connection with me through the book, I'd have wept for him, for the same happened to me 25 years ago. Instead, I applauded his wife and mumbled to myself "couldn't happen to a nicer guy". Unless

of course he intended the book to reveal his character (or lack thereof) and obvious reason his wife wanted to divorce him. While reading the book, I had no doubt that Raban had actually sailed the inside passage, until the end of the book, when in Juneau Raban twice referred to a "Mildenhall" glacier. Having been there in my youth (1973), I distinctly remembered "Mendenhall" glacier. A google search brings up a few references to Mildenhall, but that appears to be a misspelling that originated on Tripadvisor. With so many passages lifted from the logs of Captain Vancouver and his crew, together with his verbose descriptions of minutia (compasses, sextants, et al), his erroneous reference to "Mildenhall" glacier made me wonder whether Raban made the trip at all. What his book did do for me, is help clarify my own dreams of sailing. Thanks in part to Raban, I've concluded "no, I do not want to sail to Alaska". There are far too many tide and weather considerations, hidden perils and unknowns for an older man like me to make such a trip and not be a ball of nerves the entire way. What scant description I found helpful for perspective about sailing the inside passage, reminded me of the few times I was a passenger on a sailboat in Puget Sound out of Shilshole marina around Whidbey to Port Townsend. I had forgotten the many subtle annoyances of sailing, not the least of which is slow going and the need for constant attention to water, sail and steerage. While I would still enjoy boating in retirement, the expense of boat, maintenance and moorage, together with limited time and waning strength and agility, suggests I'd be better off to throw in with a friend who already owns a power boat or hire a local guide to take us on day trips up and down the Strait of Juan de Fuca, in and around Sequim Bay, Discovery Bay, Protection island, and one day perhaps, a cruise to the San Juan Islands. By the time I was half way through the book, I'd reached my decision. One factor in my decision, which to avid boaters will betray my ignorance, is growing up in Auburn, 30 miles SE of Seattle, lakes were abundant and I fished several of them from a 12' foot row boat, on the Green (Duwamish) and White (Stuck) Rivers. Thus 90% of my boating experience is upon small lakes, where the largest wave I've ever contended with might be a foot tall. Consequently I hadn't really considered the dynamic nature of boating on the sound, much less the open ocean, the tides nor their effect in the many fjords and passages between here and Alaska, effectively turning them into temperamental bi-directional rivers twice daily. More mindful of the tide, deadheads, floating garbage, kelp, wind, waves and fickle coastal weather, commercial boat traffic, fishing boats running a blockade of gill nets, I quickly formed the mental image of trying to sail in a giant toilet while it's flushing. While the book was not an enjoyable read for me, it did give me perspective. Sailing the inside passage will for me, remain a dream.

Excellent writing! Jonathan Raban is a real upper-echelon writer and weaves an engrossing tale. I look forward to re-reading this on my upcoming sail up the inside passage. I always enjoy having works covering natural and human history for anywhere I go traveling as this increases the depth of understanding and appreciation for a new place. This work is not a guide or history per se, but many things are woven together to craft a wonderful account of the author's own passage to Juneau.

This is still one of the best books I have read about the Pacific Northwest coast. Raban paints an amazing picture that crosses time and gives the reader plenty to ruminate on. If you are traveling or live in this part of the world, read it. There are things in here that I won't spoil that literally changed the way I see the land, the water, the artwork, the people of the Pacific Northwest.

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