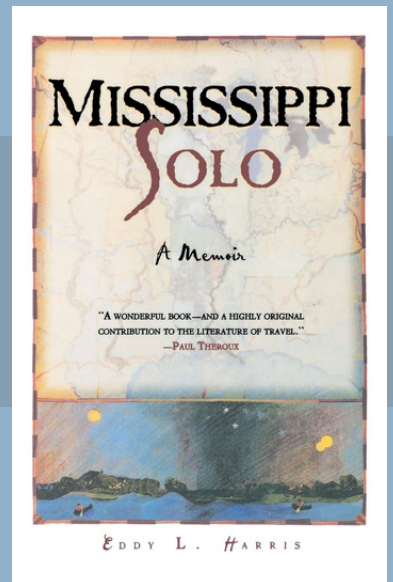


# An Interview with Author Eddy L. Harris

**The true story of a young black man's quest: to canoe the length of the Mississippi River from Minnesota to New Orleans.**



*Mississippi Solo: A River Quest*, Eddy L. Harris, Holt  
Paperbacks (Reprint Edition), 1998, 256 pages

***You grew up in St. Louis and saw the Mississippi River every day, yet you didn't have canoeing experience before you started your journey. On the first page of Mississippi Solo, you write that you both feared and respected the river. How did your family influence your feelings about the river and your experience in the outdoors? Who were your role models in the outdoor space and how did they shape your admiration for time spent in the outdoors?"***

When I was a kid, all the parents of all the kids I knew warned us all about the dangers of the river, advising us all not to get too close, certainly not to venture into the water. I only knew two people who braved the river: the Greer brothers. They had a boat and talked about swimming in the river. Everybody thought they were crazy.

There was a pleasure boat, the Admiral, that was an obligatory outing for young teenagers. Friday and Saturday evenings the boat would go up river to the Chain of Rocks and turn around, an excursion of a couple of hours, music and dancing and loud laughter. Parents went so far as to warn us not even to look over the side of the boat and gaze into the river. The Mississippi's swirls would hypnotize us and cause us to plunge into the water and be lost forever. The river was scary.

At the same time, my mother was crazy in love with St. Louis and all things St. Louis, the Mississippi included. She talked about it like it was her personal river and every day, once we had dropped my father off at work (we only had one car and when I was little I went with them), we would stop somewhere along the river and she would talk about how beautiful it was.



Interview conducted by  
Book Recommendation Panelist, Monique  
"Mo" Fair and Founder/Editor, Beth Nobles

Both effects, fear and attraction, danger and beauty, remained. When I got ready to do something crazy, the Mississippi was there.

I didn't need role models. Not for canoeing, not for traveling as a young person, not for going off at spring break to ski. It wasn't until later and upon deeper reflection that I saw how limited and restricted certain activities were -- along racial lines -- and that I began to question.

***You've talked about "golden moments" on the river, and we wonder more than forty years later, what are some of your enduring memories of the wildness of the river journey?***

The nature was important, the encounters were important, but most important of all was the solitude and the ability to determine for myself (as if I hadn't already) what was important for me and how best to interact with the world around me. My relationship with wild nature was only once aspect of that interaction.

What I discovered, alone within my solitude and in the wildness of nature was, beyond the self-confidence that comes with being confronted alone with the bigness of the outdoors, was a great appreciation for the outdoors. A city boy at heart, I felt a oneness with it, a sense of smallness, a sense of ownership.

I described Lake Itasca as the most beautiful spot on earth. And it was. But along the river there were many beautiful -- most beautiful -- spots on earth. Paddling in tranquility, out on the middle of the river, it flooded me with a sense of wonder and fun. Hard work, but man! it was fun.

***Race is mentioned just a few places in Mississippi Solo, and you write "Racism—sure it exists, I know that. But its effect and effectiveness depend as much on the reaction as on the action."***

What I am convinced of is that, racially speaking, I am absolutely in control of how I react to a given situation. Short of physical violence, I can choose to react, reject, internalize, forgive, or ignore what anyone else brings to the table of my little feast. I am not responsible for the actions and thinkings of other people, and it is not up to me to climb inside someone's head to know when an act or action is racist. It doesn't matter to me if it's racist. What matters is the action itself and my reaction to it. That sounds horribly selfish and privileged. Everyone is not in a position to ignore outside influences so readily. One of the things I took away from the river was a grander sense of self, a capacity to paddle away from unwelcome situations.

I knocked on a door one night in Clayton, Iowa, a closed hotel where I had seen a woman cooking in the kitchen. When she opened the door, the first words out of my head: "What's for dinner?" A big black man knocks on your door in the middle of the night, what do you do? That woman Eileen, short, white and old, decided that night to show who she was. She opened a room for me, gave me dinner, and acted like she expected big black men to come off the river every night looking for a place to stay and something to eat. Except for a couple of small incidents, there was no reason to think in terms of race but for the absence of other blacks doing what I was doing and what I do.

***Mo asks: When I read Mississippi Solo five years ago, I read it as a person of color's opportunity to stake claim to a space in which I still struggled to find a way to belong. Today, I work to ensure all folks feel a sense of connection and ownership with the outdoors. If we can create a sense of belonging, the space will receive care. How did the conversations you had on your trip further connect you with nature as a whole? I think the beautiful thing about nature is its power to connect and unite many folks.***

I've just been encountering young people in Grenoble [France] where they are surrounded by mountains but never go hiking in those hills. They are like those kids on the Mississippi who never even thought of paddling the river -- not for an excursion and certainly not from source to sea.



I can't say that it was my encounter with the river (beginning with my mother on the banks of the Mississippi while she fed my dreams about the beauty of the river and the faraway places it passes) that encouraged my desires for independence and sense of belonging, but being on the river gave me a new point of view. I could be city boy in love with nature. I could own it all. But with ownership comes responsibility. To own it (river, nature, or country) is to care for it and take care of it.

***Mo asks: Lastly, it feels like all of the "editing" we do in our day-to-day lives just to survive was stripped away during your journey. Maybe partially because you started this journey with little knowledge or experience canoeing and partially because nature can be very unforgiving? I would love to hear how this journey (and the lessons learned) lean into the larger narrative of finding comfort in the outdoors and in new experiences.***

Mo, you're right about being stripped down to essentials. The river took away my need for stuff and the essentials -- not just physical -- and all the other noise was pushed into the background. Maybe that's the power of nature. It made me see how small I am and how little I need. And just now, writing that, I wonder if a more powerful lesson at the end of that trip was my need for help, underscoring how much help I got all along the way. A kind of union with nature and people at the same time. Sappy message: we're all in this together. We have to take care of our natural spaces and of each other.