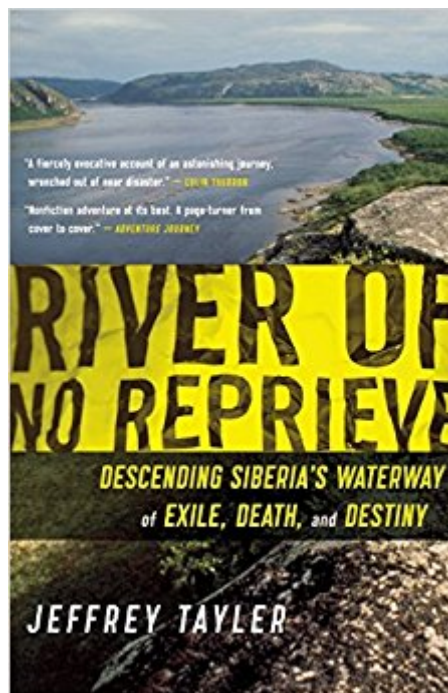




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# River Of No Reprieve: Descending Siberia's Waterway Of Exile, Death, And Destiny



## Synopsis

In a custom-built boat, Jeffrey Tayler traveled some 2,400 miles down the Lena River, from near Lake Baikal to high above the Arctic Circle, re-creating a journey first made by Cossack forces more than three hundred years ago. He was searching for primeval beauty and a respite from the corruption, violence, and self-destructive urges that typify modern Russian culture. His only companion on this hellish journey detests all humanity, including Tayler. Vadim, Tayler's guide, is a burly Soviet army veteran whose superb skills Tayler needs to survive. As the two navigate roiling white water in howling storms, they eschew lifejackets because the frigid water would kill them before they could swim to shore. Though Tayler has trekked by camel through the Sahara and canoed down the Congo during the revolt against Mobutu, he has never felt as threatened as he does on this trip.

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## Customer Reviews

[Signature]Reviewed by Tom BissellIn his fifth book, Tayler returns to the Siberian hinterlands of Russia, the country where he has lived for the past 11 years and of which he wrote in *Siberian Dawn*. This time, however, he struggles 2,400 miles up the Lena River in an inflatable raft with his guide (and bane) Vadim, an ill-tempered veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war. Tayler follows the likely route that the Cossacks "who embody "the best and worst" of the Russian spirit" took in the 16th century, when they annexed much of Siberia for Ivan the Terrible. It was a hard trip then; it is a hard trip now. Tayler, a freakish polyglot who speaks eight languages, is unique among contemporary travel writers. Despite his fondness for death-prowled lands, he rarely complains and never falls

prey to self-aggrandizement. The Lena River, however, very nearly undoes him. After a pleasant spell, the temperature drops, bad weather rolls in and soon Tayler is gagging on clouds of mosquitoes and shooping wasplike horseflies"all of which is grippingly described. "In more than two decades of travel," he writes, "I had never... hit this nadir of gloom." Along the way, he and Vadim come ashore to find devastated villages, teenagers dancing away in surreal Arctic discotheques, Soviet irredentists flying the hammer and sickle, drunken Russians and aboriginal people, Baptist missionaries, Yakut shamans (one of whom has his own Web site) and, in what is perhaps the book's most moving interlude, some of the last of Siberia's Volga Germans. The many incidental pleasures of this harrowing if sometimes repetitive book are chiefly literary and sociological. Tayler is good at describing the summer Siberian sky ("a glowing canopy of lavender"), and his thoughts on Russian president Vladimir Putin, who is adored by the very people for whom he provides the least, offers the American reader some borscht for thought about the appeal of their own benighted leader. About halfway through, the book catches fire when Tayler's patience ruptures beneath Vadim's shower of abuse. Movingly, Tayler and Vadim neither become friends nor grow to "understand" each other. This is a book about survival, and Tayler's observations are as bracing, and sometimes shocking, as a lungful of Arctic air: "Had any other people on earth," he writes of the Russians, "done so much to destroy itself?" Tayler's Siberia is unremittingly depressing, and the book concludes with little hope for its people or its culture. As a sympathetic but clear-eyed portrait of an unhappy but beautiful land, *River of No Reprieve* will be a difficult book to surpass. (July 11)

Tom Bissell is the author of *Chasing the Sea* and *God Lives in St. Petersburg*. His new book, *The Father of All Things*, will be published early next year. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

During the summer of 2004, Tayler traveled in a custom-built raft 2,400 miles down the Lena River in eastern Siberia from near Lake Baikal to Tiksi on the Arctic Ocean. The voyage took almost two months and was what Tayler called a partial re-creation of the Cossack journeys that delineated Russia's eastern borders and annexed Siberia to European Russia in the seventeenth century. The boat was constructed to carry enough fuel to get them to the city of Yakutsk, about halfway along the route. They were armed to protect themselves from "potentially desperate villagers and Siberian bears." At one point the temperature soared to 114 and gales battered their tents, marooning them on an island. Tayler, the author of five other books, has spent the last 13 years in Russia and is married to a Russian, and he is the Moscow correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Thanks to

Tayler's keen powers of observation, readers will relish this trip of high adventure. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Thanks to a fellow reviewer, I was introduced to the works of Jeffrey Tayler, first reading his excellent account of a journey across the Sahel portion of Africa, through some of the world's poorest countries. Today a prudent person - yes, even Jeffrey Tayler - would not undertake that journey, due to the dangers involved from religious fundamentalists who are willing to see a "soft target" in the personage of a lone, foreign, inquisitive traveler. That account is suitably titled *An Angry Wind: Through Muslim Black Africa by Truck, Bus, Boat, and Camel*. I checked Tayler's other works, and knew this would be the next. I was immediately reminded of Eric Sevareid, the TV news commentator's account of his canoe trip from Minneapolis to York Factory, Hudson Bay, in part, down "God's River," during the Great Depression, which is entitled *Canoeing with the Cree*. Sevareid had just graduated from high school, 18 at the time; Tayler was (hopefully) at mid-life, 43. The Lena River is in Siberia, with its headwaters near Lake Baikal, and it flows north, to the Arctic Ocean. Tayler travelled almost all of it, some 2,400 miles, from Ust Kut to Tiksi on the Laptev Sea, a portion of the Arctic Ocean. Naturally his journey was in the summer, or what passes for it in the Arctic region, and on occasions it was hot, with temperatures above 90 F. Though contacts, Tayler made arrangements for Vadim to be his guide. Vadim is the Russian equivalent of a "troubled-Vietnam-War-veteran," with his "Vietnam" being, of course, Afghanistan. He has turned his back on the so-called civilized world, and seeks solace in the natural world, the more rugged and isolated, the better. He, too, was very cynical when it came to the military's efforts to give him "medals." There are frictions between the two, as would be expected on such a journey, but somehow I thought Tayler underestimated how very lucky he was to have Vadim as his guide. Certainly for me, and I suspect most of us, the Lena River, and its course through the newly-named "Republic of Sakha" is an enormous "blank spot" on my mental geographic map. Tayler did a superlative job of filling in the blanks, starting with an appropriate epigram from Leo Tolstoy: "The Cossacks created Russia." They were the ones who helped fulfill the role of providing a Russian version of "Manifest Destiny" by initially settling these remote and harsh regions, subduing the indigenous people. Subsequently, Siberia was a place of exile, as well as forced labor, and all sorts of people washed up on the banks of the Lena, from Polish nobility, to German residents of the Soviet Union, who accepted the invitation of Catherine the Great to those Russians who "crossed" Stalin, not a small number. Along Tayler's trip, whenever they stopped near a village,

Vadim seemed to be content to stay with the boat, and enjoy the solitude. Tayler would explore the village, sometimes utilizing advanced contacts. His experiences overall were flat dreary or worse. Alcoholism dominated the entire river, with few exceptions, leading to a declining population. "Nothing to do" for the youths, except to find "refuge" in the bottle. Despite America's own bad experience, it was enough to make you re-think Prohibition. Some villages had been completely abandoned. Tayler has an "eye" for the ethnographic, noting how the Russians, and other European exiles, like the Germans interacted with the Yakuts, who themselves had pushed out of the way earlier inhabitants, like the Evenk. Tayler finds a maddening fatalism among the people along the river. Clearly, the "magic of the market place" did not bring a better world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he encounters a fair amount of nostalgia for that earlier era. In one summation, Tayler says: "The very faith the Soviets had tried to extirpate had induced in him a docility that had him praying for his tormentors souls. I sat back, frustrated, beyond pity." In contrast, very occasionally, he experiences "pride," and he italicizes it, for example in the Evenk village of Sikhyakh, high above the Arctic Circle. Tayler claims that shaman religious practices originated in the "pillars" north of Yakutsk. And there are many other interesting nuggets of information that he provides from this blank spot on the map. One that would keep me away: of the natural annoyances, he places the infamous arctic mosquitoes in third place (!) behind the midges and the horseflies. Tayler is married to a Russian, and is fluent in the language, which provides much additional insight. His account is richly informative, and very well-written. Most likely, I'll see what he has to say about the Congo. For this account, 5-stars, plus.

Taylor offers a rare introspective of an American living in Russia who has enough passion of it's past and present to emerge himself on a 2000+ mile journey through the heart of Siberia via the Lena River. He does a good job of not only conjuring up a vivid visual of his experiences on the way, but also offers the reader a ton of history and social science to better understand the challenges (and atrocities) the people of Russia have endured. There are redundancies in his descriptions of rough weather on the river that feel a bit contrived at times, but the meat and potatoes of the story keeps the pages turning.

Not a bad read , shed a lot of light on the alcohol abuse in the former USSR and how communists for government leadership killed millions of its people . Sad

Although Jeffrey Tayler paints a vivid portrait of the challenging terrain and geography that he

passes through, his true skill is in getting people to talk about themselves and their society. He manages to talk his way into the deep recesses of any town he visits, and gives the reader a fantastic glimpse of the ways life that are so vastly different from our own.

An incredible adventure exposing a world of people that have been forgotten by their government and left alone in a wilderness of despair. A must read. A light into an unpublished current Russian reality.

When I ordered this book I was hoping for more nature and less politics. What I got seemed to be little more than a political diatribe written by a guy who was disappointed that he couldn't find as many people who hated Putin as he had hoped to find living in the dilapidated villages along the Lena.

It was an interesting read about a region of the world that I knew very little of.

I spent some time in the swampland on one of the tributaries of the Ob and thought I'd learned a lot about the people and situation they faced there, but reading this book I found a much deeper understanding of the tragedy of northern Siberia. It is a book difficult to put down. The writer has a wonderful command of English. Travel writing can easily get bogged down in cliches or cheap cynicism. This book shows how sparkling, inventive and lexically dense it can be. His descriptions of the land- and cloudscapes is brilliant. He shows exquisite sensitivity and humility in his description of the relationship with his guide and the various people he meets along the way. It would be easy to sink to stereotypical descriptions of the Russians, Evenks, Yakuts and Tatars, but he understands them all in their own terms. Though I am a voracious travelogue reader I can think of few books that match this: R.F. Burton's "Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Medina and Mecca" equals it in literary qualities, but lacks the deep introspection of Tayler. I read "River Dog" prior to this...it's no contest.

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