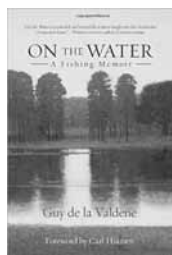


Angling for Trout

By Henry Hughes

Book Review:

On the Water: A Fishing Memoir,
by Guy de la Valdène, Lyons Press, 2015.



Fishing can be relaxing, but it doesn't spare the lessons of struggle and death we witness in a battle between an eagle and an osprey over a twisting catfish. The eagle in this story prevails, eating the fish and leaving the remains on the bank for turtles and ants to devour. Naturalism combined with humility and grace characterize Guy de la Valdène's *On the Water*, an intelligent angling memoir by a man—hold on to your Huck Finn hats—of tremendous wealth and privilege, who grew up in a moat-girdled 17th-century castle in France and now, in his 70s, drifts reflectively over the 27-acre “pond” he created on his 800-acre estate in northern Florida.

Valdène's father, a French aristocrat wounded in both world wars, “prized the ridiculousness of men who took themselves seriously, and defined ego as a reflex of ignorance and delusion.” In 1950, when the family settled in its castle on a river island in Normandy, his father stocked pools with pellet-fed American rainbow trout that would bite anything. “A typical guest,” Valdène writes, “much like a character in a Molière play, would, rod in hand, dance in wonder on the banks of the basin and, after each catch, invariably thrust his chest forward and with marvel spilling from his lips say things such as, ‘*C'est formidable!*’” The Valdènes understood people and society.

These idyllic days show us young Guy tickling trout, gigging eels, electrocuting coarse fish in the moat—an activity that nearly burned down the castle—and angling for all sorts of fish brought to the family cook for sumptuous preparation. Consider a wild brown trout rushed to the kitchen and cooked *au bleu*, where the gasping

creature is dropped, “fins aflutter, moments after removing its guts, into a court bouillon.” Squeamish Americans like to indict Asia for its culinary cruelty, but we are reminded of Europe’s long tradition of savage sophistication in killing and preparing flesh. Valdène recognizes this European attitude, an “ethos that translates loosely into: ‘Kill everything that moves.’”

As a teenager attending boarding school in southern Florida and spending summers in the Bahamas, he and his friend Gil Drake shoot, spear and hook all manner of fish and fowl—“all there for the taking—for the sport, for the eating, and to fulfill a basic wish . . . to exert dominion over the natural world.” These admissions and reflections will resonate with some readers and disgust others—that’s the way with fishing and hunting. We mostly believe the author when he says he “outgrew the need for killing,” and he charts his maturity through the catch-and-release practices learned by fly casting for tarpon in the Florida Keys in the 1960s and extended to the current balance of management and harvest maintained on his vast game preserve with the quail and bass he loves—and still loves to eat.

Why read a fishing memoir by a rich white guy from Florida? Part of the answer is in the way Valdène appreciates people, whether a “worm grunting” old man in Bullwinkle’s Saloon, a hunting maniac named Curtis, who lives in a converted tobacco barn showcasing hundreds of his mounted animals, or legendary fishing guides like Woody Sexton. In the chapter “Summer Pond,” Valdène sees “a low-slung 1989 Pontiac containing four ladies from the nearby village of Midway—granddaughters of the local black families who began their lives as slaves—drive up on the dam” of his pond. Valdène describes the elderly women in their broad hats and bright dresses, eating boiled peanuts and swinging cane poles to catch sunfish.

“We got no right to holler about such things as growing old and dying,” one of them says to me, her face grayed by work and poverty. The other two ladies nod. One of the bobbers sinks, and presently a bream dangles in the air among squeals of delight.

Fishing crosses socioeconomic and racial lines, and Valdène's descriptions of the women and the hard labors tending shade tobacco are empathic and respectful.

But in a book rich in portraits, Valdène never tells us anything personal about a woman, not even his mother or his wife. We learn much more about the dogs he takes fishing. Did he ever go fishing with women? He certainly chased them. After a remarkable day of salmon fishing in Iceland, he and painter Russell Chatham eat langoustines and lamb, take naps, then head to a club in Reykjavik, arriving at midnight: "an approach to nightclubbing we had perfected over the years in other big cities. The idea is to walk in clean and sober—beacons of light—in an otherwise drunken melee." The men do as well at the club as they did on the river, but further secrets of this sort of angling never surface.

Valdène could not, however, resist a chapter on the wild Key West of the late '60s and '70s, when he partied and fished with luminaries such as Thomas McGuane, Jim Harrison, Richard Brautigan, music legend Jimmy Buffet, and Chatham. Valdène even bankrolled and helped direct a film, *Tarpon*, replete with remarkable footage of those leaping leviathans, brief interviews with Harrison and Brautigan, and long takes of a handsome 20-something Guy poling a skiff over lush flats. *Tarpon* offers a glimpse into an important moment in angling, but its *cinéma vérité* pretenses, uneven sound and tenuous narrative are nothing like the clear, crisp prose of *On the Water*. "I'm a rich guy who writes a book every 10 years to justify his existence," Valdène told an interviewer in 2011. "McGuane and Jim Harrison are serious writers." Valdène has written other fine works of sporting literature, including *The Fragrance of Grass*, an exquisitely rendered memoir about bird hunting in Europe and America.

On the Water balances world angling adventures with the meditative, sometimes melancholy music of old age and those pleasures of settling down with familiar water and people.