



Setting sail for the interior

Nancy Robb

The summer of 1994 couldn't have been more bleak for Dr. Kevin Patterson. Filling in as a physician at an army cadet camp in the BC interior, his heart broken over a love affair that ended before it really began, he passed his days chain smoking and wandering listlessly around the camp's grounds, wallowing in self-pity.

By August Patterson found himself on the shores of Vancouver Island, gazing at sailboats. Then, in one of the most impulsive acts of his life, he purchased a 20-year-old, 11-m ferro cement ketch called the *Sea Mouse*. Three weeks later the 29-year-old Manitoban, whose ocean experience was limited to ferry rides between Vancouver Island and the mainland, set sail for Tahiti with a man he barely knew.

On the way home Patterson's companion got off in Hawaii, and he sailed the last leg to Vancouver Island alone. This was the hardest part of the trip, recalls Patterson, now a third-year resident in internal medicine at Dalhousie University. "I went 31 days without talking to anyone. But when you spend that much time by yourself, you're bound to learn something about your interior landscape."

Patterson reveals some of those vistas in his new book, *The Water in Between: A Journey at Sea* (Random House). Picturesque recollections of his voyage and autobiographical sketches of his state of mind provide a vehicle for discussing the travel writings of great adventurers like Eric Newby, Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin.

"The book is about the phenomenon in North American society of nomadic self-isolation and how that's discussed in travel writing and presented to people as a worthwhile ideal," says Patterson. "Self-isolation, self-sufficiency, withdrawal — these are all presented as valid solutions. The people I met out there on the ocean, other sailors mostly, had pretty much bought into that whole idea, so the book is an exploration of that idea and ends up rejecting it."

Patterson's desire to escape had been simmering for years. He'd enlisted in the army so he could afford to finish medical school, but he loathed his 3 years of obligatory service, most of which were spent at a bleak artillery base in Manitoba. For solace, he turned to travel literature. "I fled my olive-drab tedium through the pages and pages of walk-

ing across deserts and through jungles and smoky bazaars," he writes.

But on his trip Patterson discovered that the life of an itinerant wasn't all it was touted to be. "The single-handers I met out in little atolls were mostly profoundly unhappy," he says. "It shouldn't be at all surprising that people who go out for 6 months or a year on a tiny little boat with nobody to talk to would be not too pleased with that. The surprising thing is that this would appeal to us. It is widely appealing."

He suggests that this appeal stems largely from the widespread loss of a sense of community. "We are excessively mobile, we are disengaged from our extended families. We have poor senses of community, of involvement and investment in the people who should be our community.

"If one is feeling harried by the world, the thing to do is to bond with the people that you love, that define you, because ultimately we are defined by the people that we love, not by the postures we might strike beside our horse as the sun sets over the Montana plains."

During the last stretch of his trip, Patterson became acutely aware of this truism. Sailing solo and feeling lonely, he passed the time talking to himself, reading books and practising

celestial navigation. About 1770 km off the coast of Vancouver Island, he got caught in a storm that lasted several days.

"The memories that do not fit at all well into the patterns of our day are the richest sources of insight," he writes. "This time alone on a little boat at sea in the middle of a wild storm and longing for company is like nothing else in my experience. . . ."

"These ventures are difficult. And the reason they are difficult is that men and women need each other. We make one another better."

Patterson says it's still too soon to say whether his trip has had any other profound effects, although it has influenced his fiction. Now part way through a novel, he has written a collection of short stories that will also be published by Random House.

Is he happier with his lot in life? "Yeah, I'm happy," he says. "I wanted to go explore the world and I did, so that itch has been scratched for a little while." ?



Don Lang

Dr. Kevin Patterson aboard *Sea Mouse*