



Desperate Voyage

John Caldwell

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In May 1946 John Caldwell set out to sail from Panama to Sydney to reunite with his wife who he hadn't seen for more than a year. Eager to reach his destination and unable to secure any other form of transport, he had to resort to singlehanded seamanship. After an ignominious scene in the harbor, where a tangled anchor led him to take an early dip, he spent ten days learning the rudiments of navigation and sailing from a book, before embarking on the 9,000 mile journey aboard the 20-foot Pagan. Ahead lay a mission that was to reveal in him elements not only of astounding courage and determination, but also of incredible foolhardiness. Within 500 miles of Panama John Caldwell had already been shipwrecked once and had his boat's engine and cockpit destroyed by an angry shark. Indefatigable, he decided to press on towards his goal. He endured the terrors and discomforts of life on the high seas and enjoyed the triumphs of fighting and winning against the elements. This is more than an exciting tale of sea-adventure. It is as compelling and unpredictable as a thriller. It is the story, witty and moving, of a man, motivated initially by love, and ultimately by his own fierce determination to survive.

Desperate Voyage Details

Date : Published January 25th 1991 by Sheridan House (first published 1950)

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Author : John Caldwell

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From Reader Review Desperate Voyage for online ebook

JackCanoes says

Interesting stories. Impressed by the author's resourcefulness but he was definitely careless. Maybe brave because he fought in the war?

Jim says

Let's face it, "sea adventure" books usually hinge on things going wrong, the more extravagantly the better, and they succeed because of the ghastliness of the accidents, or the memorability of their writing. In the case of Caldwell's book, the situations are plenty desperate, but it's the sure hand at writing that really carries the day. Caldwell's voice is literate and descriptive, but never academic or remote: he is an enlightened observer of wonders large and small, and communicates them with immediacy. The voyage begins in innocence (naivete, really) and ends in wisdom. That's the enduring value of this book that sets it apart from other tales of voyage, for Caldwell does not merely arrive in the end, but learns from the people he meets along the way. He is deeply changed by the experience, and the reader is touched by that same experience, and cannot help but be changed somewhat as well.

Melissa says

I went into this book not realizing that it was actually a true story. And it was an interesting story, although I couldn't help but shake my head at a few of Caldwell's decisions.

Caldwell, after having to leave his new wife behind in Australia, decides that he can't stay away any longer, and buys a small sailboat in which to sail from Panama back to Australia. And he goes alone, with only two kittens as company. He suffers through more hardships than can be imagined. Some of its due to the weather, but sometimes its due to his own foolishness as well. But he meets some interesting people along the way, and also nearly starves. A very exciting adventure in all. And his descriptions of sailing on a boat for so long are very detailed and probably paint a very accurate picture of what he experienced.

Since its mainly Caldwell and the kittens on the boat, he spends a lot of time with his thoughts. And he doesn't tend to describe himself very often, unless its to comment on the state of his non-shaving. But he does think often of his wife and that's very admirable. She must have been some woman, and you could definitely tell he loved her enough to put himself through such an ordeal. I also liked his take on the islanders, he always described them favorably. And his description of the cats, wonderful. They were very entertaining.

I had a hard time with the parts of this book that described some technical aspects of sailing the boat. It just took away from the actual story for me and there's only so many times you can hear about pumping out the bilges really. And some of the things he does to himself just has me cringing. I guess I just wouldn't take such risks with my life on an already risky adventure. But then again I was only getting part of it as I'm sure he didn't give the whole story in the book. But I did admire his courage, and the fact that he survived such a journey.

An interesting book. Maybe not to my tastes but anyone who's into nautical journeys should find it interesting. And since it's a true story, it makes the tale quite amazing.

Desperate Voyage

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243 pages

Review by M. Reynard 2012

More of my reviews can be found at www.ifithaswords.blogspot.com

Anastasia says

Oh. My. God. What a crazy story and what a crazy man. I couldn't help but admire his dedication, perseverance and resourcefulness. He has nine lives or possibly more, I would have perished ten times over. Or gone mad and jumped overboard. But then again I would never have undertaken such such a crazy voyage in the first place. sometimes I had to be angry with his hot-headed risk taking and bluntness. I still can't understand how he could watch dolphins accompany his boat for thousands of miles, even give them names and yet harpoon them even when food was not scarce. Nevertheless it is an amazing story and his account of starvation made my insides churn. I'm glad he lived through his desperate voyage to write about it, it's amazing reading for anyone interested in sailing. But be warned: it might be off-putting if you think sailing is what they make it out to be around harbor-cruising yacht clubs ;)

Lucy says

I absolutely loved this book! The author, John Caldwell, found himself stuck in Panama at the end of WWII with no way to get home to his wife in Australia. So he bought a little 29-foot sailboat and set out alone, determined to get home, unconcerned about the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about sailing or navigation. What could possibly go wrong? I refuse to say anything more for fear of spoiling the story for others, except for the fact that I loved his little shipmates, the kittens Flotsam and Jetsam. This is a man that I would truly love to have met.

Mum says

Fantastic tale of sailing from Panama towards Australia in 1946, solo. Very well written prose and very exciting! Loved it.

Graham says

A compelling story of a human experience that is so fantastic that it almost seems unbelievable. The author writes in an easy comfortable style in the first person. Parts of the story drag and if it were fiction would be wildly unbelievable. The fact that it is a real life experience makes it more compelling.

Jack Gardner says**Courageous Voyage**

More challenging and danger packed than a novel. Heroic. Fascinating read for young and old.

Elizabeth says

I loved the book: at first it was pure curiosity about the deal: traveling halfway across the world in a small boat to go find your wife...sounded very romantic and crazy at the same time. Then he obviously survived the trip so in spite of the potential dangers he made it. But then his discoveries which i didnt expect at all coming from a sailing book really tickled me pink so to speak. I couldnt put the book down. Excellent book. It has all the ingredients for me to give it a 5/5 and i dont give a 5 unless all the conditions are met for me.

Shamae says

Ummmm this wasn't the best of books. You know that struggle you have when you are talking to someone with a very heavy accent, you have to concentrate really hard to understand what they are saying? Well this is what it was like reading the book. I didn't care for the writing at all.

Art says

Excellent read on an excellent single-handed voyage across the southern Pacific ocean by a man trying to return to his sweetie. Very dramatic and action-packed although in his somewhat dry fashion he recounted how he got himself into an amazing amount of trouble. A happy ending nonetheless.

- found this while researching sailing novels. Checked it out as an ILL. It came from Kansas and was threadbare. Published in 1949 and this hardbound copy printed then the physical record of it's every 5 year or so checkout was still under the front cover.....

Sandi says

My parents (Bill and Peggy Walsh) both passed away in 2010 at the ages of 92 and 93, in San Pedro, California. When I was going through their books, I found this book autographed with these words:

To our good friends Bill and Peggy. Though you have traded your keel and hull for a hearth and lawn there's always hope! Remember the good times around Hanchette's when we gummmed of blue seas and white sails. Fair winds from the crew of "Tropic Seas". John Caldwell - April 1951, San Pedro

John's wife Mary also wrote: Mary Caldwell also Johnnie and Stevie

Larry Tysome says

I read this whilst sailing the Atlantic! (so I could kind of relate to it although there were no comparisons to what Cauldwell did in terms of sheer guts, determination and courage).

It's an incredible story of a man who, following being de-mobbed after WW II on the wrong side of the Pacific, ends up buying a small boat (he had never sailed before) and sailing back to Australia to be with the girl he had married during the war. As you read it you wonder at the kind of emotion that leads a man to put himself in a near certain death situation and, although he does not die he gets astonishingly close to it (and I never knew you could eat and get sustenance from engine grease and after-shave lotion). Could I ever imagine having such strong feelings for someone that I would do this - I fear I would not (or at least I'd take another route!!). What a man!

Nicole Nasvytis says

My mum gave me this book to read almost a decade ago, as my great uncle happened to be this man's accountant (in his later years, of course). The story was so tragic, after his ship was wrecked I remember being in absolute tears, unwilling to finish the tale. Of course, I knew he survived, and eventually I mustered up the courage to keep reading.

It always fascinated me how fantastical and perfectly the story played out, as if it was meant to be a fiction novel, or perhaps a gritty movie. I mean, how lucky was it that he was alone when the storm hit? Otherwise there would have been some gruesome tale of him killing and cooking up his crewmates.

If anyone's curious, I can definitely assure that he lived out his last years wonderfully, on a little dreamy island called Bequia.

Peter says

During WWII John Caldwell married an Australian woman. Once mustered out in the States he wants to get back to her, but all transportation to Australia is booked. So he does what any reasonable man would do—he gets himself to Panama, buys a small sailboat (he has never sailed) and teaches himself to sail—including the well-known mistake of throwing the anchor over without tying down the bitter end of the rode. Then he sets off alone for Down Under. This true story is filled with misadventures, including boarding a shark and a hurricane that spoiled his supplies (including water—he actually drank motor oil). Fascinating!
