



One Man's Journey

A film trilogy by Robert Perkins



125 Western Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts
02134
617.300.3500
Fax: 617.300.1001
www.gotrob.com



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"I was three years old when I fell in love with fire. The yellow and blue flames captured me. I dove in. Unfortunately, I wasn't badly burned. So I did it again. Later, I became an explorer. I've taken my canoe down many rivers. Each trip adds to that first fire. This is the story of one man's journey."—Robert Perkins

Filmmaker Robert Perkins brings his trilogy of films to PBS in January. Part autobiography, part adventure, the three distinct hours take viewers from the frigid rapids of the Canadian Arctic to the shallow waters of the Limpopo River in southern Africa. Perkins—a writer, artist, and filmmaker—is above all an old fashioned explorer who frequently travels alone with nothing more than his canoe and the minimum supplies. "One Man's Journey" is an inspiring look at Perkins's physical and psychological struggle to overcome his own fears about life and relationships that in many ways are as difficult as the rivers he is trying to navigate.

In hour one, "Into the Great Solitude," we meet Perkins as he prepares for an eight-week trip along the 700-mile Back River in the uninhabited tundra of Canada's Northwest Territory. At the same time, Perkins is coping with his father's ailing health and questioning the timing of the trip. "There's a very subtle difference in the attitude between myself and my father and our interpretation of the risk I'm undertaking," Perkins reflects. "He sees the very palpable risks....But what he doesn't perceive, perhaps, are the tragedies that surround us here, of people who are caught in situations that they don't really like, and being sawed away at or chipped away at through the daily activity of pursuits that aren't making them greater or better or happier," Perkins says.

With nature as his guide and a hand-held video camera securely fastened to his canoe, Perkins paddles through some of the most challenging conditions—documenting

the profound beauty he discovers along the way. Viewers share Perkins’s experience as he battles rocks and rapids, wind and rain, and swarms of black flies, trying to stay on course. Timing is everything. One small delay and he will jeopardize meeting the plane scheduled to pick him up at the end of the river.

In hour two, “Talking to Angels,” Perkins takes another trip to the Canadian Arctic. It’s June 1993, and six years have passed since his last Back River journey. While he has the benefit of experience this time around, Perkins is struggling emotionally. His thirty-four-year-old girlfriend, Dr. Irene Goodale, has been diagnosed with breast cancer. She will spend the summer undergoing treatment in Boston, surrounded by friends and family, yet she urges Perkins to continue with his plans.

“Dear Rene,” Perkins writes in a letter to his love. “I’ve been traveling two months, and it’s been a hard trip, but not the way you would expect. The hard part has not been the physical dangers around me, although I had some close calls, but thinking about you and what you are going through.”

Viewers follow Goodale and Perkins as they embark on parallel but separate personal journeys. Weaving together footage from Goodale’s video diaries and Perkins’s outdoor adventures, “Talking to Angels” examines what sustains the human spirit in the face of adversity and sadness.

In the final hour of the trilogy, “The Crocodile River,” Perkins is inspired by a children’s story to take his canoe to southern Africa where he will follow the mysterious Limpopo River into the Indian Ocean. It has been nearly ten years since his wife Irene lost her battle with breast cancer and Perkins is looking for a way to regain his curiosity about life. With Bonas Lunga, a twenty-seven-year-old man from Zimbabwe as his guide, Perkins launches a ten-week, 1,000-mile journey. It is the first time he does not travel alone.

“I’m very much a person that likes being on his own. And that’s almost an oxymoron in Africa. In Africa you are not on your own. And even if you think you’re by yourself, there’ll be somebody walking out of the bush just to check on you.”

Perkins and Lunga must endure the hardship of traveling in southern Africa during the winter. Many of the riverbeds are dry, forcing them to carry their canoe, rather than paddle. Moments like these offer viewers a glimpse into the special bond the two men have formed. “We’re both river men and do speak that language,” Perkins says. “But where there’s less water, it’s hard to talk.”

In the final minutes of “The Crocodile River,” the two men achieve their most personal goals: Lunga sees the ocean for the first time and Perkins discovers what lies beyond loss. “It’s risky to travel into the unknown. You don’t know what you’ll find,” Perkins says. “But it’s equally risky to dream and not dive in.”

“One Man’s Journey” is produced by Crocodile River Productions, Inc. The writer, producer, and director is Robert Perkins.

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The co-executive producer is John Willis.

The executive producer is David Fanning.

Press Contacts:

Erin Martin Kane 617/300-3500

Chris Kelly