In *Down the Wild Cape Fear: A River Journey through the Heart of North Carolina*, Philip Gerard, a professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and an author of three novels and five works of non-fiction, documents two hundred miles worth of travel down the Cape Fear River, from Mermaid Point, at the confluence of the Deep and Haw Rivers, to the Cape of Fear, where up to 3.9 million gallons of water a day flow into the Atlantic. At one end, the dam at Jordan Lake constrains the river, strongly influencing its depth and flow; at the other, dredging for commercial and military shipping has shaped the river. In between there’s a lot of wildlife, people, communities—and history.

Gerard’s desire to travel the entire length of the river was driven by “a philosophy of wholeness.” This “wholeness” is akin to Gerard’s understanding of the Cape Fear as a complex ecosystem, which is on display in the range of his work; a trip mate refers to the trip as a “survey” of the river. Gerard sees—and wants the reader to see—the relationship between the blue herons who nest along the river, the role of the river in establishing plantation culture in North Carolina, and battles past and current, from that of Fort Fisher to those over the proposed concrete plants and super port at Wilmington. Gerard displays a concern for the life of the river and for those who depend on it, whether to make a living or to have clean water to drink.

Gerard states that for most of us a river is an abstraction on a map. He shows, to the contrary, that a river is an extremely complicated thing, a combination of natural, economic, political, historic, and cultural variables. Mastering a river, or getting as close to mastery as one can, requires a practicality founded on sensitivity. Gerard has developed that sensitivity for the Cape Fear as a topic of study.

As a matter of practicality, Gerard broke his trip into several legs. Each leg, corresponding to a region of the river, has its own section in the book. A map at the start of each section helps orient the reader. The book is well illustrated with photographs by the author and his traveling companions. The book’s back matter includes select sources and a substantial list of acknowledgments, proving what the reader will have already concluded regarding Gerard’s generosity toward others. However, there is no index; this might be the only real mark against the book.

*Down the Wild Cape Fear* should have wide appeal to North Carolina readers. It is engaging, thoughtful, and very well written. It would be an appropriate addition to the collections of public libraries, colleges and universities, and high schools.

Brian Dietz
North Carolina State University Libraries