

## Essence, energy of water

Holownia, Thurston collaborate on book about Atlantic salmon and their rivers

By MARY JO ANDERSON



Photographer Thaddeus Holownia and essayist Harry Thurston visit River Philip during one of their many trips to salmon rivers in Atlantic Canada. They took five years to complete the book *Silver Ghost*. (INGA HANSEN)



The Upsalquich River in New Brunswick.  
(THADDEUS HOLOWNIA)



Miramichi River, N.B., top, and Margaree River, Cape Breton, below. (THADDEUS HOLOWNIA)

writers — and a poet. Holownia is a teacher, visual artist, letterpress printer and publisher. He is also head of the fine arts department at Mount Allison University.

SALMO Salar, the irreducible, mythic, quicksilver Atlantic salmon and the liquid world in which they struggle to exist shape the text and photographs of a breathtaking new book *Silver Ghost* (Anchorage Press, \$150) by photographer Thaddeus Holownia and writer Harry Thurston.

But to call this a book, to say Holownia is a photographer and Thurston a writer, is like calling Mount Everest a hill.

There are several photographs in the book in which the currents against the river bottom or even the solid granite walls of the riverbanks seem to take the fluid shape of fish, though it is water and stone that we are seeing.

*Silver Ghost* artfully shows that we cannot know the salmon except to know the river also.

I met with Holownia and Thurston in a noisy café to talk about the collaborative and creative process that produced this exquisite book.

"Each project that I embark on — if it's going to involve other people — it has to involve people that I really, really respect from their own individual art world," states Holownia.

"Harry and I have been friends for a long time and have collaborated on other things ... (but) I did not know he was an angler."

But Holownia did know that Thurston is one of Canada's best and most lyrical naturalist

The fact that Thurston has been a longtime fisherman brings to the essays what Holownia calls "a second level of amazing knowledge."

Thurston suggests that "one of the ironies of the collaborative process is that it actually gives you more independence."

Over a five-year long collaboration, there has to be considerable trust that the "two visions (are) moving in parallel."

Holownia as both photographer and publisher means that he had complete control of the printing and production of the book. So he brought book designer and publisher Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press into the project. "Steeves was a natural to involve in this project," Thaddeus says in praise of the award-winning designer's "ability to understand what book structure was."

Holownia explains the qualities of his Wisner field camera that produces seven x 17 inch negatives.

"The book has a certain physical structure to it. . . . The camera that I work with uses film that is the same size as the images that you are looking at in the book. . . . So when I set up my camera, and the light reflects off the subject, it creates an impression on the film. It's a direct relationship of every molecule that is reflecting light directly to the film (so) that when I take a negative and process it and lay that on a piece of photographic paper and expose it — all of that is transferred; . . . there's no changing of the physical dimension of information."

The result of these three artists' expertise is the limited edition, slip-cased edition of *Silver Ghost*, a book whose presence in your hands is the embodiment of beauty.

Thurston and Holownia, separately and together, spent years travelling rivers in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec. The Restigouche, Miramichi, French, Pinware, Philip and Margaree are among the rivers in the 50 photographs and six essays that comprise the 80 pages of the book.

The book was not a hurried process with a deadline but a process that Holownia describes as "part of a continuum."

I asked Thurston if he wrote the essays in response to the individual photographs. "No, I didn't actually. What I think was more important was experiencing the river together. . . . So it wasn't a question of me trying to write something imitative of the photographs, it was coming to my own sense of passion for the subject and what knowledge I could bring ... both as a fisherman and an environmentalist."

There is one particular photograph of the Margaree River that I fumblingly try to talk about with Holownia. "I wouldn't attempt to describe it because I made the picture and that's my language," says Holownia. "What I discovered . . . in the making of this book is that there is an energy in the water that's ever-changing and ever-present and it's solid and it's liquid and it's ephemeral."

Thurston talks too of that specific photograph and more. "That picture — coming at it as a fisherman — embodies a lot of the mystery of fishing. Water, we think of as a medium we can see into. In fact, there is something impenetrable. . . . It's another element."

It takes this poet and naturalist writer, Thurston, to create the equivalent in language of the detailed and infinite photographs in which Holownia captures the essence and energy of water and its environment.

Thurston's first essay in the book is exhilarating and elegiac. He details his apprenticeship as an angler in such perfect prose and so few words it is stunning. He evokes wonderment and the attempts of a novice to spy the tricks of the older anglers on the river. "Leaving the curved warmth of my wife, creeping burglar-like through the summer kitchen of the old house, in the first light I would take the river road," but Thurston can never get to the river before Jack.

"Often as not, I followed Jack in the rotation, squinting to read the cursive, illuminated text of the water as he did..."

The "text" that Thurston crafts to illuminate the world of the salmon and its rivers is a powerful current that carries the reader to reverence, awe and wonder. As do the photographs that Holownia creates.

"When biologists tested trees along Pacific salmon rivers they were surprised to find traces of salmon DNA in the tree tissue. The trees, it appeared, were themselves being nourished by the salmon. It was a short leap to understand that bears carried salmon into the forest, where remains of the seasonal fish-feast became fertilizer, rising through the tree roots to the canopy. We should not have been surprised to find that all life is so intimately connected, that life begets life."

We can hope the book inspires humility and action as well as reverence.

*Mary Jo Anderson is a freelance writer who lives in Halifax.*