



COM's Lou Ureneck and his son, Adam, on the Anchor River in Alaska in 2000. "We hadn't shaved or bathed in days," says Ureneck. "We look it."

FLY-FISHING AND FATHERHOOD

A NEW BOOK BY LOU URENECK RECOUNTS AN EXTREME FISHING EXPERIENCE INTENDED TO MEND RELATIONS WITH HIS SON BY ART JAHNKE

WHEN LOU URENECK set out with his eighteen-year-old son on a fly-fishing excursion to the Alaskan wilderness, salmon wasn't the most important thing he hoped to come home with. At the top of his list was a heartfelt connection with his son, something that had been slipping away in the wake of a difficult divorce.

"Fishing," says Ureneck, chairman of the College of Communication journalism department, "had always been part of our lives. It was a gift we had whenever we hit trouble. We had fished together in the Bahamas, Canada, Wyoming, and Montana."

So when he started to worry that the father-son bond was dangerously frayed, an extreme fishing experience seemed like the best way to solve the problem. He set to work planning a 110-mile journey that would begin at the headwaters of the Kanektok River and carry them from the Ahklun Mountains to the Bering Sea. Ureneck knew there would be some delicate moments; he fully expected a few emotional sorties with his angry teenager. What he didn't anticipate were the howling

rainstorms, the terrible violence of Alaskan rivers, and one way-too-close-for-comfort meeting with a brown bear and her cub.

The many trials and rewards of the trip, physical and emotional, are now the stuff of *Backcast: Fatherhood, Fly-fishing, and a River Journey Through the Heart of Alaska*, recently published by St. Martin's Press. In November, the book won the 2007 National Outdoor Book Award (NOBA) in the Outdoor Literature category. "Backcast plays out like the long and splendid arc of a fly line," the NOBA judges wrote. "The result is a realistic and heartwarming story of a father and his son — and a work of outdoor literature of the highest order."

Ureneck says he started writing the book the summer of their trip and finished the project three years later. "I spent the whole first summer writing the first ten to twelve pages to tune the voice of the book," he recalls. "Once I got the voice right, the rest more or less poured out."

And while the book is built around the Alaskan trip, what poured out of him is a much

broader and deeper meditation on three generations of family life. The reader sees how Ureneck's own childhood, blighted by the divorce of his parents and confused by a troubled stepfather, molds a man who is determined to make his own marriage last. When that didn't happen, he took it hard.

"My divorce was devastating," Ureneck says. "I saw the consequences of divorce in my mother and in my brother and me. And I had sworn that divorce would never be anything that happened to me. When it emerged as a possibility, it was shattering."

The wilderness journey, an expensive, long-shot effort to pull together some of what divorce had torn asunder, provides a solid center of gravity for many thoughts about family and fatherhood in the last half of the twentieth century. Ureneck says he found that the Alaskan landscape offered a useful set of metaphors that allowed him to tell the story in a nuanced and powerful way.

"In Alaska we were lost on the river," he says. "But it wasn't until I started writing that I realized I was also lost in my life.

And the way we found our way back from being lost on the river is not unlike the way I found my way back from being lost in life. The river was dangerous. There were opportunities for panic. But what I did instead of panic was to become a parent. I took charge of the situation, and the confidence that I began to show in myself was received by my son in a way that restored some of his confidence in me."

In the end, says Ureneck, the trip did not solve his problems. "What it did do," he says, "is remind me of who I was. It allowed me to come to terms with what I had done. I began the trip as a guilt-ridden father, and I finished the trip with more confidence and more strength in the decisions I had made and more willingness to move forward with my life." **B**



TOP: Adam Ureneck, with a fishing guide during a family vacation in the Bahamas, displays his catch.

BOTTOM: Adam playing a fish on the Kaktuli River during a 2004 trip to Alaska .

* web extra

A slide show about Lou Ureneck and his Alaska excursion with his son is at www.bu.edu/bostonia.