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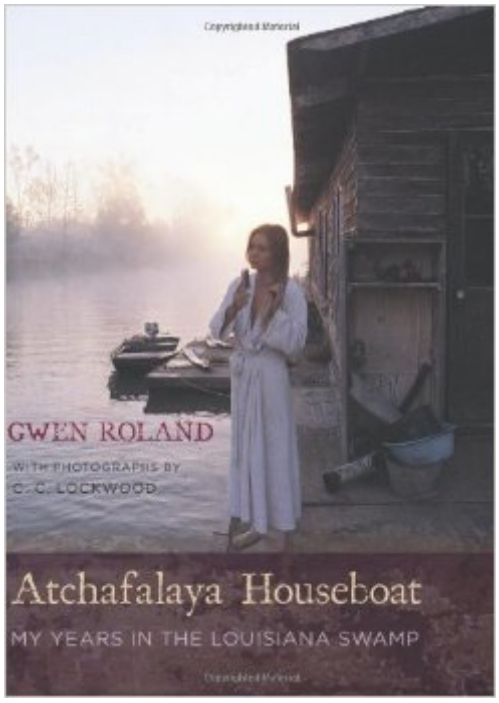
Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years In The Louisiana Swamp



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Synopsis

In the early 1970s, two idealistic young people -- Gwen Carpenter Roland and Calvin Voisin -- decided to leave civilization and re-create the vanished simple life of their great-grandparents in the heart of Louisiana’s million-acre Atchafalaya River Basin Swamp. Armed with a box of crayons and a book called How to Build Your Home in the Woods, they drew up plans to recycle a slave-built structure into a houseboat. Without power tools or building experience they constructed a floating dwelling complete with a brick fireplace. Towed deep into the sleepy waters of Bloody Bayou, it was their home for eight years. This is the tale of the not-so-simple life they made together -- days spent fishing, trading, making wine, growing food, and growing up -- told by Gwen with grace, economy, and eloquence.Not long after they took up swamp living, Gwen and Calvin met a young photographer named C. C. Lockwood, who shared their "back to the earth" values. His photographs of the couple going about their daily routine were published in National Geographic magazine, bringing them unexpected fame. More than a quarter of a century later, after Gwen and Calvin had long since parted, one of Lockwood’s photos of them appeared in a National Geographic collector’s edition entitled 100 Best Pictures Unpublished -- and kindled the interest of a new generation.With quiet wisdom, Gwen recounts her eight-year voyage of discovery -- about swamp life, wildlife, and herself. A keen observer of both the natural world and the ways of human beings, she transports readers to an unfamiliar and exotic place.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It’s hard to go wrong with this subject matter, and I would recommend this book wholeheartedly.But

that said, I was a little disappointed in the book, not for what was in it, but for how much more she could have told us. The author has had a rare experience -- who else do you know who has lived on a houseboat in a swamp, without electricity or most modern conveniences, for a decade? Yet I was left feeling that she only related the bare minimum about her years in the swamp. Part of the problem is that the first half of the book appears to contain only her previously-published articles about her life at that time from a small regional magazine, and they are short and lacking a lot of detail. I'm left thinking how much better this book could have been if she had gone back and fleshed those out, adding more information and context. She doesn't discuss how it felt to adjust to such a rustic life, her relationship with the man she shared this life with, or any problems that they encountered, other than their dislike of returning to civilization for supplies every so often. In other words, she doesn't inject much of herself into her descriptions -- her feelings, her hopes or fears.The second part of the book talks about temporarily working as a cook on a river boat, meeting the man she would later leave Calvin for, and her life since she left the swamp. In many ways, this is the more descriptive part of the book, especially as she details honestly the boredom of riverboat life and the pain of falling in love with another man. I was left imagining what could have been if she had applied the same descriptive style and writing technique to the earlier part of her work.

Gwen Roland's memoir "Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in a Louisiana Swamp" is magical. After the 1973 flood destroyed their first home Roland and her then-partner Calvin Voisin built a house made of cypress on a barge in the Atchafalaya River Basin in south-central Louisiana. The houseboat deep in the dark, black swamp waters of Bloody Bayou and Bayou Sorrel became their home for eight years.Roland's quiet wisdom and eloquent descriptions of swamp life and everyday routines captured my imagination. Living off the land with no running water or electricity she learned how to drive a boat and how to set nets for catfish. She said, "I became acquainted with my body. Awakened from sanitary air-conditioning hibernation to the trickle of sweat down my arms, the green fragrance of crushed cypress pine needles, and the sensuous luxury of a bath with Ivory Soap in the bayou at sunset."Roland became absorbed in mastering the not-so-simple skills of the simple life. She said, "I tried my hand at cutting wood, canning vegetables, preparing a smokehouse and making a quilt. Every day there was something new I wanted to learn." Although the days were filled with fishing, cooking, canning, growing food, making wine, tending chickens and trading there were many unexpected pleasures. She writes, "We stand on the porch to watch the last of the sunset. There's not another human being for miles in any direction. The water is perfect in its stillness. A

lone owl hoots softly in a nearby tree, shy in front of people who share his woods tonight."To meet expenses Roland worked as a cook on a river boat for 30 days on two occasions. She later left Voisin and married Preston Roland one of the riverboat engineers. In time Voisin married, had a daughter, and eventually divorced.

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