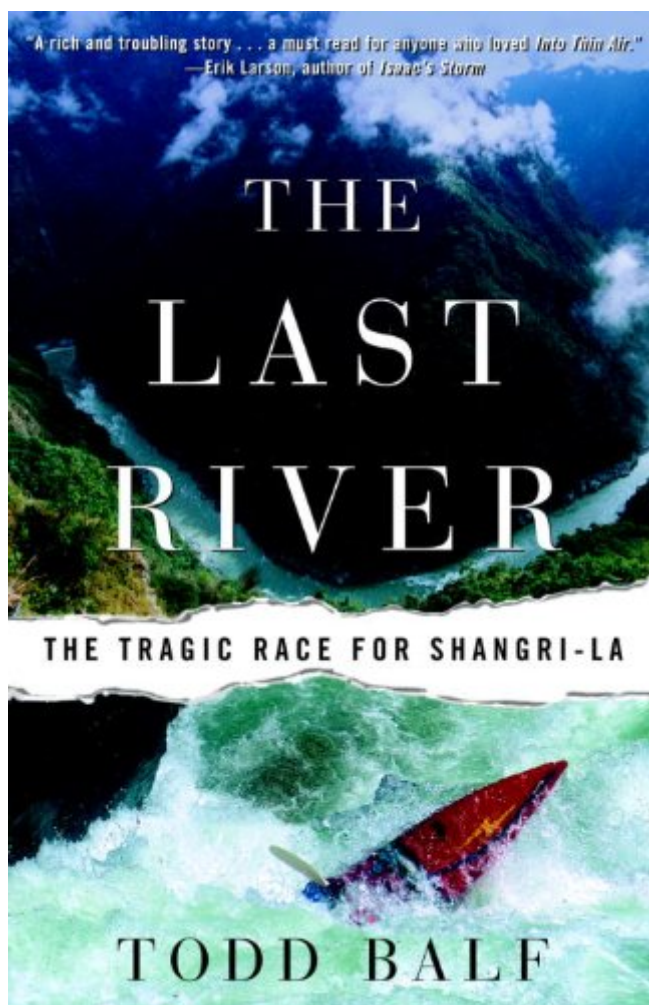


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# The Last River: The Tragic Race For Shangri-la



## Synopsis

It was the ultimate whitewater adventure on the Mount Everest of rivers, and the biggest challenge of their lives....October 1998 an American whitewater paddling team traveled deep into the Tsangpo Gorge in Tibet to run the Yarlung Tsangpo, known in paddling circles as the "Everest of rivers." On Day 12 of that trip, the team's ace paddler, one of four kayakers on the river, launched off an eight-foot waterfall and flipped. He and his overturned kayak spilled into the heart of the thunderous "freight training" river and were swept downstream, never to be seen again. *The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangri-la* is a breathtaking account of this ill-fated expedition, a fascinating exploration of what propelled these kayakers to take on the seething big water and perilous Himalayan terrain of the deepest gorge on the planet. This was the magical Shangri-la of legend, a 140-mile-long canyon framed by 25,000-foot snowcapped peaks, a place of unimaginable beauty called Pemako in ancient Buddhist texts that was rumored to contain mammoth waterfalls. At the close of the twentieth century, an end-to-end descent of the gorge filled the imaginations of some of the best boaters in the world, who saw in the foam and fury of the Tsangpo's rapids the ultimate whitewater challenge. For Wick Walker and Tom McEwan, extreme whitewater pioneers, best friends, and trip leaders, the Tsangpo adventure with Doug Gordon, Olympic medal-winning paddler Jamie McEwan (Tom's brother), and Roger Zbel was the culmination of a twenty-five-year quest. Fueled by narratives of early explorers, Walker and McEwan kept their dream alive and waited until the Chinese government opened the gorge to Westerners. With financial backing from the National Geographic Society, the group was finally good to go in 1998. Swollen to three times the size they had expected because of record rains and heavy snowmelt, the Tsangpo lived up to its fearsome reputation. On numerous occasions the team questioned whether to continue, but chose to press forward. *The Last River* probes beyond the extreme sports clichés and looks at the complex personal and intellectual reasons for the seemingly irresistible draw of Tibet's Great River. For Walker, Gordon, Zbel, and the McEwans -- husbands, fathers, friends, and brothers -- the Tsangpo wasn't a run toward death but a celebration of life, adventure, and the thing that tied them to one another -- awe-inspiring rivers. *The Last River* is also a riveting journey to one of the world's wildest and most alluring places, a thrilling book that invites us into the Himalayas of Jon Krakauer's classic, *Into Thin Air*, but from a totally new perspective -- on a historic river so remote that only the most hardy and romantic souls attempt to unlock its mysteries. Visit [www.randomhouse.com/features/lastriver](http://www.randomhouse.com/features/lastriver) From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There are troubling questions in *The Last River* that are never fully dealt with: Did our intrepid kayakers blunder into a dangerous situation because they were racing others to be the first to explore and conquer a new territory? Were they pressured by big money sponsors to move forward with an ill-timed expedition? Well, there's been another race, too, a rush among big-money publishers to be the first to capitalize on the Tsangpo saga. This race is to blame for Todd Balf's faltering missteps. In a book ostensibly about kayaking the last great untamed river, there's almost no kayaking. Some guys plan a trip, things go wrong, they go home, and people argue about it in Internet newsgroups. There's no bone-pounding thrill of whitewater; the river is just cubic feet per second. The landscape isn't spiritual or ugly or haunted or massive; it's just a curvy line on a globe. And the kayakers aren't driven or psychotic or lonely or deluded; they're just pins on a map. And the pins are all the same color. Balf wasn't there, and the people who were haven't shared much with him, and it shows. Don't buy this book; don't read this book.

Very well written with interesting in depth background of the region and the paddlers. The last 50

pages or so were mostly about the reaction of the paddling community to the tragic death of one of the team. I lost interest in that part

Even with our satellite photos, gps and other technical advances, nature still has the last word. I hope this river is never tamed!

I enjoyed it completely.

i really enjoyed this book. i am a whitewater kayaker myself, and i was very interested in the planning and dynamics of the expedition. it seemed like real life to me. the only thing i wish is that there were some photos or maps...

The book The Last River I have ordered came fast and in excellent condition. I was very satisfied.

Like others, I wondered at the number of people who slammed this book, which I found to be gripping, enjoyable, and in places hard to read for all the right reasons. The answer is simple: this book is not written for the armchair adventurer, for someone who will watch the Discovery Channel but never actually go to any of those places they'll see on the screen. It tells some hard truths, and I can easily understand why those who bought the book hoping to be entertained by someone else's tragedy would be greatly disappointed. If, however, you've ever been closer to real adventure than picturing yourself in an SUV ad, I have a feeling this book will work for you. It is not a fun book. No book with a tragedy at its center should be fun or light reading, really. But it is fascinating, compelling, a page-turner. It is highly educational, particularly for those who are inclined to view adventure athletes as brain-dead adrenaline junkies. By taking the reader through the expedition members' hard work and preparation, the hassles and hardships they endured, the book forces us to see them as being in many ways the antithesis of the stereotype: they are patient, painstaking, and thorough. The bottom line is that this book isn't the literary equivalent of America's Most Death-Defying Videos. It's not written to titillate the folks back home. It seeks to tell the truth about a pursuit that many people find simply incomprehensible. If read with an open mind and without an expectation of being thrilled by death-defying feats, I think it will give the reader that understanding.

Todd Balf chronicles a team of kayakers as they embark on an incredible journey to paddle the dangerous whitewater of the remote Yarlung Tsangpo River as it carves out one of the deepest

gorges through Tibet while flowing away from the Himalayas. Despite record high level waters which made running the river exponentially more difficult and dangerous, the team decides to boat what they can and portage the rest. Early on, team member Doug Gordon inexplicably takes a dangerous line over a waterfall, fails to right his kayak, and is swept down the river to his death. The team is devastated, ending the water portion of their exploration and they begin the arduous trek out of the region. They are greeted by waves of criticism and accusation, ultimately drawing few lessons from the tragedy and coming to the simple conclusion that they practice a sport with inherent risks clearly known to all involved - any day on a river could be their last. Balf has written an engaging and comprehensive account of the ill-fated Walker-McEwan expedition. However, the story itself is rather short and more than half of the book takes place before anyone has set foot near the river. For the non-boating reader, the lengthy intro may make for less than engaging reading. In addition, the book suffers from its incessant comparison with Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* and Everest mountaineering in general. The designation the "Everest of Rivers" and the constant comparison with *Into Thin Air* distracts the reader from the story at hand. Unfortunately for adventure writers everywhere, the coincidental circumstances which occurred on Everest in 1996, and the fact that a reporter with mountaineering skills just happened to be there to cover them, may never be duplicated and volumes such as Todd Balf's *The Last River* would benefit by leaving the comparisons out.

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