

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

An Angler Lands the Best of Friends

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

Last year James Prosek, while still an undergraduate at Yale, published a dazzlingly brilliant collection of watercolor paintings, "Trout: An Illustrated History," which set him on a course to becoming the Audubon of fish. In the introduction to that book, Mr. Prosek thanked his father for introducing him to nature and "the security she afforded."

But in his acknowledgments, he added: "One day, fishing illegally on Connecticut's Aspetuck Reservoir with my friend, I was caught by a warden named Joseph Haines. In the five years since, he has taught me much about trout, fish of the ocean, birds of the sky, plants of the woods, and the pleasures of eating wild things from mushrooms to fish and game."

Now, fresh out of Yale, Mr. Prosek makes art of that friendship with Joe Haines in a charming, physically attractive memoir, "Joe and Me: An Education in Fishing and Friendship." In it he shows that he can paint with language as simply and refreshingly as he does with watercolors.

He begins with the story of being caught poaching by the warden on a miserably rainy day. (His friend was caught by another officer.) Instead of arresting James, Mr. Haines took him to his own home in Easton, warmed him by his woodstove and told him he was only going to issue him a warning. Mr. Prosek writes: "There was a look in his eyes that told me he, too, had also once been a poacher, and a damn good one. After all, who better to catch a poacher than one who had reformed?"

A few days later, Mr. Haines invited the boy fishing, ostensibly to show him "that there are just as many fish in legal waters." They exchanged flies they had tied. They caught fish. A friendship began to take hold.

In each of the succeeding 16 brief chapters, Mr. Prosek describes a different adventure he and Mr. Haines shared: hunting, crabbing, clamming, fishing for everything from striped bass to salmon to trout. What the older man mainly taught the author was how to observe the minute details of nature. But there were specific lessons, too: how to keep your rod tip high when playing a fish, how to lure razor clams out of the sand by pouring salt down their breathing holes, how to bleed a fresh-



Todd France/Rob Weisbach Books

JOE AND ME An Education in Fishing and Friendship

By James Prosek

Illustrated with watercolors. 190 pages. Rob Weisbach Books/William Morrow & Company. \$23.

ly butchered bull (killed because it was a troublemaker) to prevent the meat from spoiling.

Yet even more telling than the nature lessons is Mr. Prosek's quiet account of how the friendship formed. Mr. Haines believed in sharing. "A thing you'll learn, James," he said, "you take care of someone and they'll take care of you." But his methods of caring were subtle. As Mr. Prosek explains: "Haines had a way of talking about people without bothering to tell me who they were. Instead of bothering me, it made me feel instantly like I was becoming part of his world."

Little tests ensued: a nephew of the warden's who aroused James's jealousy; his discovery of how competitive his mentor was. But by and by James found that "the long silences between us no longer bothered me, and I didn't think it was necessary to always ask questions."

And then came the ultimate trial. James prevailed on Mr. Haines and a friend of his to go ice-fishing in Bantam Lake, near Litchfield, which didn't greatly interest Mr. Haines because they would be fishing for pike, and since pike were protected, anything they caught would have to be released instead of taken home to eat. On the way to the lake, James, a

newly licensed driver, nearly collided with a tractor-trailer, which set everyone on edge. Finally, on the ice, James allowed a heavy blast of wind to blow Mr. Haines's gear away, and the older man lost his temper: "Oh, well, there goes a day of fishing, James," he said angrily, "and a couple of hundred dollars of equipment. I ask you to do one thing, and look what happens, you screw it all up."

Yet the author was by this time sure enough of the older man's affection not to let this outburst seriously bother him. And Mr. Haines didn't feel the need to soften his criticism. He apparently understood that James now understood him.

What James understood best was that the older man was not simply teaching him things out of a sense of responsibility: "I imagined that it got lonely — day after day riding along the same tracks in the woods, looking for poachers. Had he lost some enthusiasm that he hoped I could help him recapture?"

Later that day, Mr. Haines challenged James to a stone-throwing contest, that ultimate expression of boyish companionship. "Haines was a patrolman for sure," Mr. Prosek writes, "but he was as much a boy in the woods as I was. I imagined a young Haines with a gun racing through the trees after squirrels and setting traps in the swamp for muskrats. The woods from his time had receded to the boundaries of the reservoir property, large farms and miles between houses only memories."

Here, as in so many passages, one can see what must have attracted the warden to the author on that rainy day of poaching. Here was a young man with unusual gifts, not the least of them being the capacity to understand what it is like not to be so young anymore.

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