

Cowboys at Sea

by **Petr Kos**



For those who aren't afraid to weigh anchor and venture into the unknown

Petr Kos makes his debut with a book steeped in the scent of fish, tar, and authenticity. The product of fifteen years of lived experience—seasons in Alaska, life at sea, and countless hours aboard the century-old sealing ship *Anna* from Tromsø – it charts the journey of a man who, instead of dreaming, weighed anchor and set sail for adventure. First to the icy waters of Alaska, then along the rugged Norwegian coast, his tale weaves ship repairs, long voyages, and the camaraderie of fishermen with quiet reflections on a harsh childhood in communist Czechoslovakia. A raw, uncompromising account of will, freedom, and the search for one's place in the world.



Petr Kos (b. 1981) wears many hats – bookseller, librarian, sound engineer, graphic designer, fisherman, deck-hand, and carpenter. He spent eight seasons aboard Alaskan fishing boats, and for the past seven years has been restoring the century-old wooden ship *Anna* from Tromsø, sailing her along the Norwegian coast. In winter, he builds wooden houses and writes. His debut carries the scent of tar, the sea, and unvarnished adventure.

Petr Kos

Cowboys at Sea

The Story of Anna

Cowboys at Sea is a raw, literary memoir of the sea, part adventure chronicle, part portrait of a disappearing breed of men who chose freedom, risk and hard work over safety. At its centre stands Anna, a fifteen-metre wooden sailboat built in Norway in 1907, and the narrator's almost irrational decision to buy her, repair her and sail her along the Norwegian coast. But Anna is never only a boat. She becomes a vessel for memory, male friendship, exile, old stories, lost lives and the stubborn belief that some dreams must be paid for in full.

The narrator, Petr, buys Anna in Norway in 2018 after several seasons working as a fisherman in Alaska. He knows he will not sail around the world, and he does not pretend otherwise. What drives him is something more complicated: the need to keep moving, to test himself once more, and to do something before it is too late. The boat he finds is beautiful but derelict — empty, stripped, green with neglect, with a broken engine and an interior “like the belly of a whale”. Yet as soon as he steps aboard, he feels he already knows her. Back home, encouraged by his wife, he makes the deal. Soon afterwards he quits his job in a Czech boatyard, packs tools and camping gear into an old Ford pickup, says goodbye to his wife and children, and drives north.

His journey to Anna is also a journey back to Alaska. The book opens with Petr driving from Alaska to Seattle, remembering the stories he once wanted to write down but later preferred to keep private. These were not barroom anecdotes, he says, but stories told face to face by men who had earned each other's trust. Now most of them are dead, and he realizes that if he does not write the story of these “sea cowboys”, no one will. Their lives — reckless, funny, brutal, lonely and heroic in an unheroic way — form the second current of the book.

The most important of them is Tonda, an old Czech émigré fisherman whom Petr met during his first trip to Alaska, when he was twenty-four and travelling with a backpack in search of adventure. Tonda, soaked by rain and sea spray, takes him aboard almost without question and gives him work. Through him Petr enters the world of Alaskan fishermen: men who sleep in lockers and on boat floors, cook dumplings in storms, drink hard, work harder and measure one another not by words but by what they can endure. Tonda becomes a mentor, a legend and eventually a ghostly presence. A postcard from him, apparently sent after his death, reaches Petr just as he is setting off for Norway — a strange, almost supernatural sign from the old world of Alaska to the new life beginning with Anna.

Alongside Tonda stands Fífa, another Czech émigré and fisherman, whose life carries the same mixture of courage, damage, absurdity and stubborn pride. Through their stories the book moves between Norway, Alaska, Seattle, Texas and the Bering Sea: Tonda building his own crabbing boat, men chasing salmon openings, broken machinery, lost fortunes, divorces, storms, lawsuits, near-death situations and moments of wild comedy. These

episodes never become simple adventure folklore. They are always shadowed by exhaustion, loneliness, alcoholism, ageing and the price of freedom.

Meanwhile Anna demands everything from Petr. In Norway he lives on the boat, scrapes, paints, caulks, rebuilds the engine, fights rot, cold, rain and lack of money. Around him gathers a loose brotherhood of people who still belong to old boats: Alex, a Norwegian traveller with a wooden boat of his own; Atle, an old-timer connected to whaling and shark-hunting vessels; Jirka, a Czech in Norway who brings him expired food from supermarkets; mechanics, sailors, dreamers and men who recognize in Anna something that is disappearing from the modern world. Step by step, the wreck begins to come alive.

The first sailings are full of fear as much as triumph. Anna is heavy, old and unpredictable; every departure means that something may break, and every return to harbour is another test. Petr sails through fjords, storms and long Nordic light, sometimes with friends or family, often alone. He experiences the exhilaration of finally moving under sail, but also the humiliations of leaking fuel filters, engine trouble, financial collapse, bad weather, failed plans and the constant anxiety of keeping a century-old wooden hull afloat. During the Covid years, Norway closes, borders shift, work disappears, and Anna becomes at once refuge, burden and obsession.

The further north Petr sails, the deeper the book enters Anna's own past. He discovers that she was built in 1907 and once worked as a fishing, sealing and expedition vessel. Archival fragments reveal earlier owners, photographs, voyages to the ice, expeditions to Svalbard, wartime episodes and deaths aboard. The boat becomes a keeper of other people's lives: captains, crews, hunters, sealers, scientists, soldiers, families. When Petr reaches Tromsø and meets Leif, whose grandfather once owned Anna, the boat's history becomes intimate. Anna is no longer only Petr's project; she is a survivor returning to the places and people that remember her.

In the final movement, the personal and historical journeys merge. Petr sails Anna north again, toward Svalbard, despite the sceptical smiles of those who ask whether he really means to go "with this". After days of hard sailing, noise, cold, stress and the constant threat of damage, Anna reaches the first fjord of southern Svalbard. For Petr it feels like landing on the moon. The old wooden boat has returned to waters she once knew decades earlier. The voyage is not a clean victory and not a romantic ending: Anna remains difficult, expensive, exhausting and half impossible. But that is precisely the point. To sail her is to accept that freedom is never pure; it is always mixed with fear, debt, fatigue, danger and loss.

Cowboys at Sea is a book about boats, but even more about inheritance: the stories men leave behind, the skills that disappear with them, the friendships formed in danger, and the need to live one's own adventure rather than merely listen to the adventures of others. Written in a direct, colloquial, muscular voice, it combines memoir, oral history, travel writing and maritime documentary. The photographs and graphic design underline its documentary texture, while the narrative itself is driven by the rhythm of the sea: work, waiting, departure, damage, repair, fear, beauty, return.

At its heart lies one question: how much of your life are you willing to pay for your dream? Anna, Tonda, Fífa and Petr each answer it differently — but none of them gets anything for free.

PETR KOS



KOVBOJOVÉ

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NA MOŘI

“AH! - AND I SAY IT NOW,
AFTER THE YEARS - COULD JOHN
BARLEYCORN KEEP ONE AT SUCH
A HEIGHT, I SHOULD NEVER DRAW
A SOBER BREATH AGAIN. BUT
THIS IS NOT A WORLD OF FREE
FREIGHTS. ONE PAYS ACCORDING
TO AN IRON SCHEDULE - FOR
EVERY STRENGTH THE BALANCED
WEAKNESS; FOR EVERY HIGH
A CORRESPONDING LOW; FOR
EVERY FICTITIOUS GOD-LIKE
MOMENT AN EQUIVALENT TIME
IN REPTILIAN SLIME. FOR EVERY
FEAT OF TELESCOPING LONG DAYS
AND WEEKS OF LIFE INTO MAD
MAGNIFICENT INSTANTS, ONE
MUST PAY WITH SHORTENED LIFE,
AND, OFT-TIMES, WITH SAVAGE
USURY ADDED.”

 Jack London: *John Barleycorn*



I WAS DRIVING back from Alaska in an old Ford pickup, down through Canada. South, to Seattle. I wasn't in any hurry.

Thousands of miles to think.

A journey of a few days.

At night, I slept in a sleeping bag in the truck bed and thought back over the months and years behind me.

Fragments of stories came back to me – stories I had once wanted to capture, every last one of them. I wrote them down in notebooks, on scraps of paper, in diaries. At first, I tried not to forget anything, not to leave anything out. But over time, I came to prefer it when they simply flew past me, when I heard them and knew they would evaporate, that they were being told only in that one unique moment. The scratch of pencil on paper would have spoiled it all.

In the moment when two men sit opposite each other and talk face to face. They are not meant for anyone else. These are not stories you tell in bars. You have to earn them.

You have to grind out years at sea, fight storms, stagger
and sweat on deck, and not screw it up. And then, years later,
when you meet again,
when you are equals,
when you are living your own story, your own life, which
may resemble theirs,
and maybe you are even the same age they were back then,
only then do they let you come a little closer.

At first, I thought it was great material for a book.

That I would write it,
because they deserved it,
because they had told me everything,
because I had lived part of it myself, and surely I could not
just let their lives disappear.

But then, for many years, I had no desire to write.

**I DID NOT WANT TO SHARE WITH ANYONE
THE MEMORIES THEY HAD ENTRUSTED TO ME;
THEY HAD TOLD ME THINGS THEY HAD NOT EVEN TOLD
THEIR CHILDREN, LET ALONE THEIR WIVES.**

Maybe I felt that as long as only they and I knew about it, and
no one else, I was part of the story. But if I wrote it down, they
would become just stories, and I would lose them.

But today I know that I no longer have to listen to other
people's stories about life, that I no longer have to dream about
other people's adventures,

that I do not have to tell only other people's adventures when
I have my own.

And yet, in the end, no one else will write the story of those
sea cowboys. No one else knows the whole of it. So it falls to
me. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since it all hap-
pened. I have forgotten many details and names, or I did not
notice them even then.

But that is not the point. The point is the feeling, the trust
a person has to earn. This story is made up of many lives.
I could have pieced it together exactly as they lived their
lives, according to the truth, or I could have invented it. I could
even have ended the story with their deaths. Because none
of them are alive now anyway, though who knows...

We have already paid for our adventures – with a piece
of our lives, interest included. How much are you willing to
pay for your dream and your freedom? What are you pre-
pared to risk?

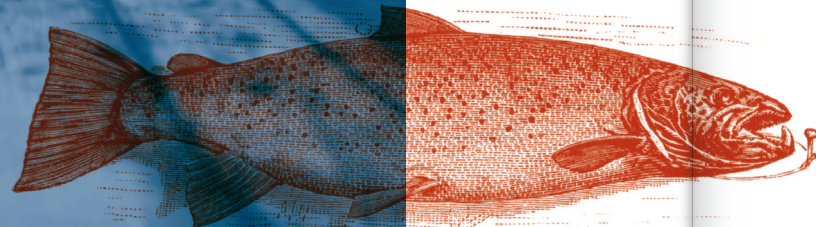


"ANNA av Tronsø"
Norway - Stz+helle 3.5. 2024

Foto: ANNA av Tronsø



1



EVERYTHING COMES FROM THE SEA

JUNE 2018

I bought an old wooden sailboat in Norway. I had not gone to look at any other boats; I had not been searching for any. I had not discussed it with anyone, had not asked acquaintances or friends what I should buy. Which boat would be best. I had not sent anyone photos from adverts asking what they thought of this one or that one. I had not told anyone I wanted to buy a sailboat and sail around the world.

Because I knew I was not going to sail around the world, so there was no point talking about it when I was not going to do it anyway.

I had some money left from fishing in Alaska. I knew I was not going back. By then, after eight years, most of the fishermen and captains I had fished with had retired and hung it up. And it was terribly far away when I had small children and a happy marriage.

I knew it was my last season, even though I could have had work there for years to come. I could see I already knew more than the captains and the guys in the crew. I knew there was only one path left for me in Alaska, and that was to start fishing with my own boat, but that was not possible. I did not have the papers I needed to be there legally, or to buy a boat. And I was tired of dodging questions about why I did not buy my own boat with a licence. I was tired of playing that game, falsifying various documents, a driver's licence and a **crew licence**¹. True, the longer and more often I went there, the less I stood out. But it had no future. It was a shame, because it was the best job I had ever had up to that point. And I was good at it.

But that last season went well. In fact, it was the best I had ever had there. There were plenty of fish, we caught a lot, and the price was decent too. I had twelve percent of the catch as the **skiffman**².

That meant I spent long, endless days sitting in an open boat, pulling the net from the big boat to shore. Then we closed the net. I headed out from shore, dragging the big net in an arc back towards the main boat. Once the two ends met and the net was closed, whatever we had caught, we had caught. Long days of nonstop work, always outside.

So I had money left from that season. I was not rolling in it, but it was not nothing either. Only, money goes fast. I came home.

1

licences for crew
members of fishing
vessels

2

a crew member
who operates
a powerful open
skiff at the other
end of the fishing

In Alaska, you fight the sea, the boat, the fish, the crew. You are ruler of the seas, a sailor, a fisherman, your pockets full of cash – who is better than you? And here, no one knows any of that. I can go fell trees or build some house or repair other people's little boats, the ones they take out on the reservoir. Throw away everything that came before? Work somewhere where some prick who would puke his guts out on a boat in five minutes tells you what to do...?

Buy a used car, or some big old boat?

Maybe that old boat will earn me enough for a car...?

A flight to Norway, a quick there-and-back for the weekend. How easy. Just a few hours on a plane. It was winter 2018 and it was pissing down, and yes, of course, the wind was howling. Normal northern weather.

I walked from the centre to the harbour. The kid was not there yet. I had a look at the boat and went to get a coffee in a shop. I stood inside by the window, drinking coffee from a machine. Looking out at the boat.

**I DO NOT HAVE TO BUY IT. IT IS PRETTY BATTERED.
BESIDES, THE WEATHER IS FOUL AND I AM COLD.
AND IT IS BIG: FIFTY FEET – FIFTEEN METRES.**

But as I stood there looking at her in the harbour, I liked her. I had never seen a boat like that. A little bit of every kind of boat, and yet she was incredibly pleasing to look at. Even under her cover. Even though you could see the paint was peeling, that she had gone all green from neglect. The

harbour was nice, with a few old boats, near the centre of a nice town. There would definitely be good people here who cared about old boats.

Then I saw some guy walking around the boat, so I crushed the cup, threw it in the bin, and went over.

Kris, that was how he introduced himself. We exchanged a few words. He stayed on the quay and I climbed down from the pier – the tide was out – onto the boat. I clambered around on deck; then he joined me and opened the hatches to belowdecks. We went down the steps. He switched on a bare bulb; I had a torch with me.

There was not even any mess inside the boat, because there was nothing there. She was completely empty, stripped out. A chair, a few slats knocked together as a bed. No panelling on the walls or over the ribs of the hull. Stripped to the bone. Like inside the belly of a whale.

At least everything was visible. I did not spend much time there. But maybe it was enough. I could already see it! I had that feeling, as if we already knew each other. I already knew what was what, what would go where; my mind was racing.

I did not see the mess of the broken engine. I knew from Kris that it did not work, that it had been flooded with salt water. But I did not mind. I climbed back up on deck into the light. It had stopped raining, and today I would even say that maybe the sun had broken through the clouds.

I said goodbye to Kris and we arranged to meet in a bar that evening for a beer. I walked around town, then made one more circuit and found myself back in front of the boat

again. I did not know it myself yet at that moment, but it had already been decided, already settled. A boat is woman-shaped, yes, physically and in language too. In English, it ought to be neuter, “it”, but no one uses that; it is always “she”. So a man can fall in love.

That evening in the bar. Kris brought along his girlfriend from Poland or Lithuania, I do not remember now. We talked, drank wine – yes, it was more of a wine bar than a bar. I never went back there afterwards, though I know where it was. We talked about boats, what else. I told him I was flying home the next day, but that I would let him know in a few days.

When I got home, my wife said, “Well, give it a try. You’ve got nothing to lose except money. Otherwise you’d only keep reminding me later that you hadn’t tried!”

So I made some kind of offer. Today I know he would have sold it for less, but whatever.

We made a deal.

SHE IS ANNA.



