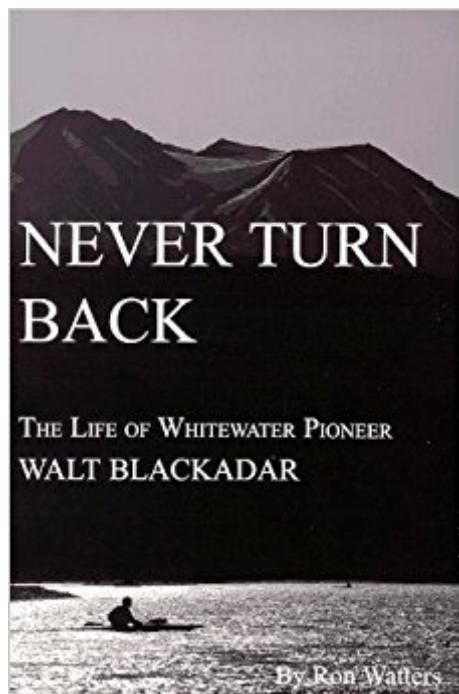


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# Never Turn Back: The Life Of Whitewater Pioneer Walt Blackadar



## **Synopsis**

Never Turn Back is the gripping and compelling life story of Dr. Walt Blackadar, a physician from a small town in Idaho. At the age of 49, he shocked the outdoor world when he made a solo kayak journey down the treacherous rapids of Turnback Canyon on the remote and wild Alsek River in Canada and Alaska. Blackadar's accomplishment on Turnback Canyon was the river equivalent of the first ascent of Everest, and when excerpts from his Alsek journal were published in Sports Illustrated, he became an instant sensation. He was at the top of his sport at an age when most athletes are long retired. Then suddenly, his spectacular rise veered wildly off course when a young woman tragically died on one of his kayaking expeditions. Heartbroken over her death and plagued with mounting physical problems, his kayaking technique began to deteriorate. Yet he had a spirit that was irrepressible, and pitting himself in a race against his body's clock, he sought out and faced off against the world's most formidable whitewater.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"A triumph! I couldn't put it down." -- Jerry Dixon, river guide, author, teacher, and Alaska's Christa McAuliffe Fellow from Seward, Alaska "A work of art. It almost reads like fiction, yet it is all fact." -- Barb Wright, 1967 World Whitewater Champion, Missoula, Montana "Magnificent . . . told with sparkling clarity . . . truly inspirational." -- William Bushnell, Eclectic Book Reviews of the Library Research Associates, New York "Packed with action and real life adventure." -- Diane Donovan, The Bookwatch, Midwest Book Reviews "This is a rare book, intelligently and honestly written, an entertaining and thought-provoking biography of a hero." -- Liam Guilar, Out There, Australia's

Premier Outdoor Magazine."Uncommonly well-written and well edited." -- Eric Evans, Writer, Book Critic & National Whitewater Kayak Champion, Putney, Vermont" Watters captures a surprising tenderness and depth to Blackadar. I guarantee you'll come away from reading this book with a lot of smiles and laughter and a contagious feeling that life is worth living to the fullest." -- Doug Ammons, American Whitewater "Watters has created a book that reads more like a novel than a biography." -- Eugene Buchanan, Editor, Paddler Magazine Los Angeles Daily News gives Never Turn Back their highest rating for a book: Four Stars. "It's the best thing to come across this reviewer's desk in recent memory" -- Brett Pauly, LA Daily News

This is the true-life story of one of the outdoor world's most famous individuals. Told with consummate skill by author Ron Watters, it is a powerful and unforgettable story. It has been enthusiastically received by reviewers and readers, nationally and internationally. It's simply a good story of adventure, excitement, and the power of the human spirit. Brief synopsis of the book: On August 25, 1971, Walter Lloyd Blackadar paddled his kayak into the unknown waters of Turnback Canyon on the Alsek River. He was 49 years old and all alone in the vast, glaciated St. Elias wilderness of Canada and Alaska. That night while trying to repair his damaged kayak, he wrote: "In the gorge and stranded. This has been a day! I want any kayaker to read my words well. The Alsek gorge is unpaddleable!" He described the rapids in the canyon as "a frothy mess that was far worse than anything I have ever seen. I am sure it was 20 degrees down with the most gigantic waves and foam and holes on all sides of me. Very narrow--like trying to run down a coiled rattler's back, the rattler striking me from all sides." Blackadar survived his frightening run through Turnback Canyon, and in doing so, he became whitewater sport's most famous figure. His extraordinary journey down the Alsek is only one part of the story. He was a doctor. Trained at Dartmouth and Columbia, he moved west to a small town in Idaho to be near good fishing and hunting. But in time, the wilderness around him shrank in size and the once great salmon runs dwindled. Alarmed, he began to speak out for the protection of rivers and wild lands and took increasingly unpopular stands in a community whose economy was tied closely to resource extraction. He was also a man with faults and failings. Never Turn Back is not a one-sided story. It is a carefully researched and objective look at all of Blackadar's life. Casting aside the subject-as-hero approach, Never Turn Back is a refreshing departure from most outdoor literature, telling Blackadar's story the way it happened. It is this honest portrayal that makes the book such a captivating one. From the first page through the unforgettable last chapter, it is a fascinating and candid account of a remarkable individual.

I read this while going down the Alsek and ended up donating my copy to the Chillkat Guides "lending library" ammo box. Walt Blackadar's story is an incredible one, and this book is written and researched well enough to do it justice. I focused on the sections to do with Turnback Canyon and his Alsek run, but I also found the parts discussing his move to Idaho, the death of a mentee, and his own passing to be very compelling. I think there's more for kayakers than non-kayakers, but technical terms and required kayaking knowledge are always explained by the author. A worthy testament to the man. The photo I've attached was taken at the site of his oar and cairn at Camp Blackadar above Turnback Canyon on the Alsek. It's still there, and was very moving to visit. Also be aware that there was an 800lbs grizzly bruin who seemed to have set up shop nearby, and he is not scared of air horns or banging pots and pans. Quite an encounter!

Great book, well written story. It will perk anyones fancy who is obsessed with whitewater (like myself) and even appeal to those who do not know much about whitewater.

This book was very interesting. I'd heard about Blackadar my whole life, it was great to read the whole story of an incredible man!

GREAT book! Exciting, informative, top notch adventure. Wish I could have known Walt.

I read this book while on a week long raft trip on the Salmon River. It is a great true life adventure story; the kind that will alternately make you laugh and keep you on the edge of your seat. If you like wild rivers and the folks that dare to go where others fear, don't turn back read this book !

I enjoyed reading about the kayaking legend. It's written pretty well and gives us a glimpse of a real adventurer.

In August 1971, after three days of paddling his fragile kayak through a wilderness of bears and glaciers, Walt Blackadar , a doctor from Salmon, Idaho, tackled what is arguably one of the worst stretches of white water in the world- Turnback canyon on the Alsek river. He was forty nine years old and he was alone.His solo run of Turnback canyon was one of the major breakthroughs in the history of white water kayaking and has been compared to the first ascent of Everest without oxygen. Although techniques and technologies improve, psychological barriers define what is possible. Walt's run of Turnback, no matter how exaggerated it may have been in hindsight, blew

those definitions wide open. In *Never Turn back*, Ron Watters, himself no slouch when it comes to river running, tells the story of this impressive man. Although born in the eastern United States, Blackadar went west looking for adventure. He didn't take up white water kayaking until he was in his forties. He quickly established a reputation through his pioneering runs on the biggest white water in the states. The chapters dealing with Blackadar's solo run are the core of this book, an inspiring description of one man pitting himself willfully against the possibility of his own annihilation. *Turnback* made Walt a celebrity. Seven years later he was dead. Watters deals honestly with Blackadar; he comes across as a loud, brash, boozy man. He also describes Walt's failures and there are some great stories along the way. Blackadar, like Mike Jones, died in 1978. Unlike Jones, Walt died in what seems a stupid accident on a Saturday morning paddle on a local river. The image of him causally trying to drawstroke his boat from under the log he was pinned against is one of the book's most haunting images. There are two underlying themes which make this so much more than an accumulation of well told kayaking stories. The first is the tragic story of a man forced to be the impotent witness to his body's slow decay, a man who was terrified by the thought of dying in bed of cancer and old age, who constantly looked for new challenges to prove he was still young and strong. This is the man who constantly claimed that he was invincible, that he would never die on a river and that he could, and would, one day paddle over Niagara Falls and live to tell the tale. Walt was also a representative of a certain, almost specifically American hero. He comes across as John Wayne in a kayak. Loud, bursting with energy, he went west to find adventure and the adventures he sought were the traditional test of "man in the wilderness". But there was no longer any social purpose to these adventures and the people of Salmon recognized this and protested against their doctor continually risking his life. The days of the great individual, if they ever really existed, were disappearing fast. Salmon was changing from wild west town to settled community. Blackadar's lone yellow kayak in a world of ice grey is a symbol of the final fling of a man unencumbered by corporate sensibility, innocent of economic calculation, impervious to social pressure. *Never Turn Back* is meticulously researched and written in a stylish, understated prose that artfully lets the subject tell itself. If you know nothing about Blackadar and have no interest in white water kayaking, this is still a rare book, intelligently and honestly written, an entertaining and thought provoking biography.

My thoughts have often returned to this book even though I read it several months ago. I cannot quite grasp how Blackadar survived the first descent of Turnback Canyon so long ago with the older equipment and kayak, alone. Such strength, courage, and focus is rarely encountered. He belongs

to an elite group. He is compared to Hillary but I think he is more aptly compared to Mallory. Watters portrays several sides to this most interesting man. I find myself often thinking about how different he is from me. Yet the exercise of comparison is rewarding.

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