

## TELEVISION REVIEW

*Traversing Vast Wildernesses in Search of the Self*

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

"One Man's Journey," which starts Sunday on Channel 13, is an adventure story, but not the kind with bravado or derring-do. Instead, it's the contemplative, solitary kind, a three-part documentary about a depressive loner named Robert Perkins who likes to take his canoe down far-flung rivers whenever he's feeling especially grim. Much of the film consists of radiant nature shots narrated by Mr. Perkins as he reflects on the meaning of life.

If it sounds a little like Jack Handey's "Deep Thoughts," it is, and there's no reason three hours of this should be anything other than lugubrious and precious, which at times it also is. The surprise is that the movie is also unexpectedly stirring, informed by Mr. Perkins's considerable, if dark, charm, and the beauty of the remote landscapes he is drawn to.

In 1987 Mr. Perkins completed the first part of the film, "Into the Great Solitude," which will be televised on Sunday night. This is the story of his solitary canoe trip through the Canadian Arctic, 72 days and 650 miles, during which he thought a lot about his father.

As we learn in flashbacks, Mr. Perkins's father is a stolid figure, partial to traditional employment; his peripatetic son, who left a job with an insurance company to pursue life as a riverman with a camera, worries that he has let the old man down. Mr.

Perkins sets off for his trip while his father is recovering from heart surgery, establishing an unnerving pattern — duplicated in Part 2 of the documentary — of leaving town when his loved ones get sick.

In this first part we see the rivers in various kinds of light; we also get to know the wildlife, especially the

small birds and flowers that to Mr. Perkins make the vastness of the tundra less abstract. The camera on the prow of the canoe also records Mr. Perkins as he confronts high winds or low water. He has a strange habit of licking his lips — in voice-over he explains that his beard was itching him — which makes him seem a bit compulsive, but also endearing. Later we learn that he spent time in lockdown in a mental hospital.

In general, Mr. Perkins is uncannily appealing. He starts out each of his three adventures cleanshaven, and we see clips of him in his current life. He is bald, with a courtly, lonely manner. But as soon as he gets on the river, he gets tan and grows a beard. His formality dissolves, and his outbursts — fury at the wind one minute, at himself for losing his knife the next — are entirely sympathetic. His soft voice, which is initially feathery and bothersome, becomes so soothing that the voices of others, when they can be heard, sound harsh.

In the second part of the trilogy, "Talking to Angels," Mr. Perkins takes leave of his girlfriend, who is sick with breast cancer, as she con-

tends with chemotherapy, while he returns to the Canadian Arctic in his canoe. This time he thinks about intimacy, and concludes — after many addresses to the camera — that he's ready for it.

In "The Crocodile River," the third part, Mr. Perkins takes on a partner: Bongus Lunga, a Zimbabwean in a Sean John cap, with whom he travels 1,000 miles down the Limpopo River in southern Africa. Here Mr. Perkins contends with his disappointment: the river is heavily dammed, and he and Mr. Lunga must carry the canoe for long stretches. He cannot in good conscience oppose the dams, however, because the farms they help irrigate also employ many southern Africans who might otherwise go hungry.

Caught between his love of the unspoiled river and his compassion for the people he meets, Mr. Perkins gives serious thought to the value of the dams.

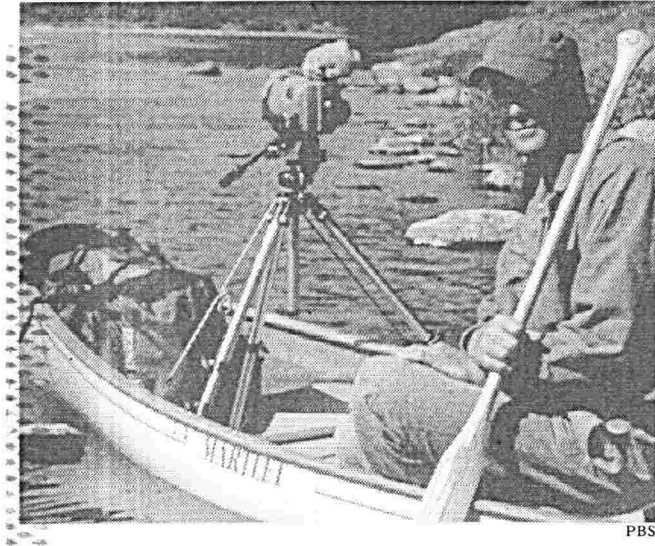
He also gives serious thought to everything else. The movie, in fact, is so frank a plea for seriousness that it's easy to laugh it off. But give it a chance and its meditative style becomes hypnotic, and the deep sorrows of Mr. Perkins come to seem epic, like one's own deep sorrows.

**'One Man's Journey'**

PBS, on Sunday, and Jan. 23 and 30; check local listings.

Directed, produced and written by Robert Perkins. A Crocodile River Productions.

*In Canada and southern Africa, a man paddles his canoe while pondering big questions.*



Alone with his thoughts, Robert Perkins covered 650 miles in the Canadian Arctic.

PBS