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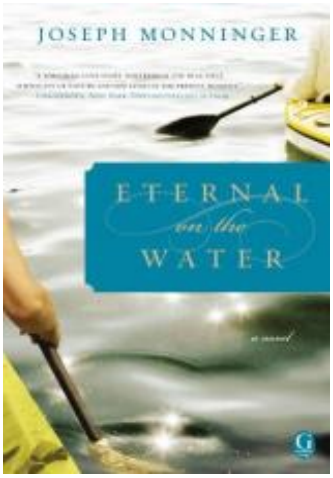
# Eternal on the Water

by Joseph Monninger




## About the Book

From the day Cobb and Mary meet kayaking on Maine's Allagash River and fall deeply in love, the two approach life with the same sense of adventure they use to conquer the river's treacherous rapids. But rivers do not let go so easily...and neither does their love. So when Mary's life takes the cruelest turn, she vows to face those rough waters on her own terms and asks Cobb to promise, when the time comes, to help her return to their beloved river for one final journey.

Set against the rugged wilderness of Maine, the exotic islands of Indonesia, the sweeping panoramas of Yellowstone National Park, and the tranquil villages of rural New England, **Eternal on the Water** is at once heartbreaking and uplifting --- a timeless, beautifully rendered story of true love's power.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Cobb has taken a sabbatical from teaching to learn from nature. Specifically, he wants to kayak down the Allagash, along Thoreau?s path. How do you think Cobb?s trip into the unknown alludes to or is a metaphor for other aspects of his life?

**2.** Early in the book, before Cobb meets Mary, a moose blocks his way in the road. Then, a female moose crosses, and the male trots after her. How does this foreshadow his meeting Mary? What other appearances do moose make in the novel, and what do you think these appearances signify?

**3.** During their first meeting, Mary asks Cobb if he?s a bear. The mythology of bears turning into humans to steal dances and charm people is a recurring one throughout the novel. Mary?s mythological stories about crows pop up throughout the novel, too. Examine the use of mythology and folklore in the story and discuss their role in the novel.

**4.** Cobb?s fondness for Thoreau is illustrated in his love for nature and his desire to live life simply. Even when they are spellbound in their first romantic days together, Mary respects Cobb?s desire to follow in Thoreau?s footsteps and gives him some time to be alone on Pillsbury Island where Thoreau camped, and he agrees even as he wants to be with her. What does this say about his dedication to Thoreau?s way of life? What draws him to it so strongly? What does it say about Mary?s respect for others?

**5.** Cobb describes his motto as hurry gradually. What do you think he means? Do you think he and Mary managed to live by this motto? Why or why not?

**6.** We know from the very first pages of the novel that Mary has died on the river. What effect did knowing the ending have on your reading experience as you traveled back in time to read about Cobb and Mary?s budding relationship? Might you have felt differently had you not known what was coming? Why or why not?

**7.** The novel features many references to circles throughout. For example, Mary eats her sandwiches in circles, Cobb describes himself as a circular kisser, and birds circle around carcasses. Identify the ways in which circles appear in or influence the story and discuss their significance.

**8.** Francis is a secondary character who has an emotional impact on Cobb and Mary, just as they do on him. How did you feel about the way Cobb and Mary took Francis under their wings during his difficult times? How would you have reacted if Francis was a student or protégé of yours?

**9.** The Chungamunga Girls play an important part in Mary?s life. What do you think was their main function in the novel? How does their motto, we are Chungamunga girls, we are eternal on this water, have an added poignancy for Mary?

**10.** Freddy, Mary?s brother, says that ?the real world is always somewhere else? (page 187). What do you think he means by this? Compare and contrast his love for sea turtles with Mary?s love of crows. How else are the siblings similar or different?

**11.** Why do you think the author decided to make reference to Edgar Allan Poe?s poem, ?Annabelle Lee?? How is the love described in the poem similar to that of Cobb and Mary?

**12.** Mary does not want to know her test results because, if she tests positive, she does not want to live in fear of the disease and its inevitable conclusion. But Cobb encourages her to find out so she?ll know how to plan. How do you feel about this aspect of the story? What does it tell you about these characters? If you were in Mary?s position, would you want to know whether you had a terminal illness?

**13.** Cobb wants what is best for Mary, but he finds it painful to go along with her decision to end her life on her terms --- in dignity, before the effects of her disease totally take over. How do you feel about her desire to end her own life doing something she loves? Did you find her decision believable given what you learn of her throughout the novel? Why or why not?

**14.** This novel delves into the full meaning of love. Was there a scene or a moment that seemed to sum it all up for you? Do you think love can be defined in a moment, or is it the compilation of many moments? Did you find the evolution of

Cobb and Mary?s love realistic? Why or why not?

**15.** Why do you think the author chose the title, **Eternal on the Water?** Discuss the significance of the river to Mary?s story in particular.

## Author Bio

Joseph Monninger has published several award-winning YA novels and three books of nonfiction, including the memoir HOME WATERS, and has been awarded two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. He lives and teaches in New Hampshire, where he also runs a dog sled team.

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