

# **B** new england

## Poems are inspired by rowing

### Contractor spends time on Connecticut River

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Associated Press

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. — Much of Northampton builder Jonathan Wright's work might be described as earthbound — designing and constructing eco-conscious buildings through his company, Wright Builders. But Wright is also a poet with a deep love for the ethereal world he discovers when he is out on the water, rowing.

Wright's new book of poems, "After the Rain," recently published by Gallery of Readers Press in Northampton, includes poems that describe some of his journeys in the small narrow boat, or scull, that he discovered back in the late 1990s, when his daughter's Northampton high school started one of the first public school rowing programs in the country.

Five or six years ago, Wright began rowing with a friend every Friday from April through November. It was a great way to spend time together, he said, "Under the guise of, 'What's said on the water stays on the water.'"

"It's a sheltered place," Wright said. "It's like a

writing workshop in that sense. It's protected."

When the friend decided to move away, he and Wright took the "de-inaugural last row" described in Wright's poem, "Last Scull," putting their boats into the Connecticut River at the Sunderland bridge and rowing to Hadley.

"I'm deeply devoted to this river," Wright says of the Connecticut. Unlike many rivers he's rowed in, and many rivers in most places, the Connecticut River has long stretches that are not navigable at low water in anything but a kayak or some other kind of small boat.

"These rowing shells are very fragile things," Wright says, with evident fondness. "This wide —" He holds his hands out to either side, maybe a foot-and-a-half wide.

"And 27 feet long, and they weigh only about 30 lbs. They're not forgiving of rocks."

This particular day, the water was so low that Wright had to row backwards under the bridge so he could see where he was going. He could hear the "skeg," a fin mounted on the underside of the boat to help it balance, drag

across the gravel as the water became shallower.

"So it became a very different kind of row," Wright said.

He felt he was suspended at the edge of water and land, sky and water, just as he and his departing friend were "suspended between a past that's familiar and dear, and a future that is not so known."

"Because the river is so shallow, the water is barely present," Wright said, recalling that day. "And there are a lot of shoals."

The river comes to be experienced as, "More of a threshold between the sky and the earth. And that's what starts to move there. It's that 'between' place."

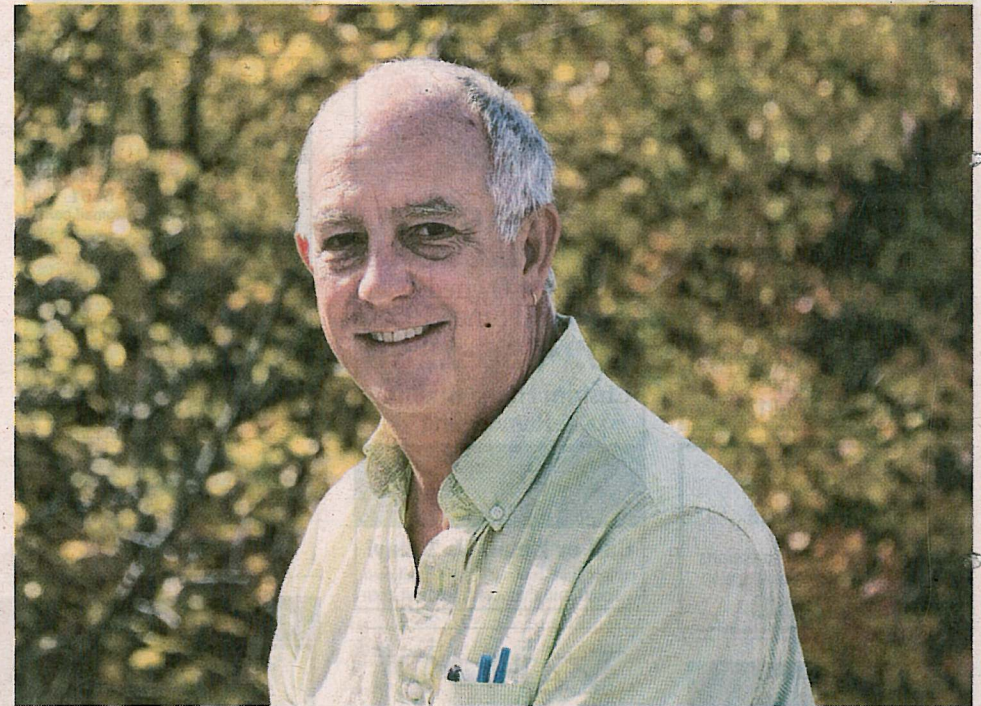
I told Wright that I thought the language of "Last Scull" carries some of the sounds of the gravel and water, and the rhythms of rowing.

"That's an interesting observation," Wright said. "I would only know that kinesthetically. That's not something I would set out to do as an intent."

He supposed that the language of the poem was "bio-mimetic," mimicking the physical exertion of rowing.

"The language picks up the respiration," he said.

Wright turned sideways to the table and leaned forward, taking a posture as if ready to take



Poet and builder Jonathan Wright poses for a photo in Northampton, Mass. His book, "After the Rain," includes poems inspired by his love of rowing on the Connecticut River.

a stroke with his oars.

"This is what the stroke is like," he said. "It's big and open and you're alone in the boat."

There's just the long skinny part of the boat, and the water and the mountains and that's where it starts." He inhales, pulling back.

"It's literally inspiring," he says, smiling. "It's a breath in and then a breath out. It creates a rhythm

that takes over."

Over the years, rowing has become his "health talisman," Wright said, providing him not only with exercise but peace of mind.

"You cannot remain ticked off through an hour of rowing," Wright says. "You just cannot hold it. ... It is oxygenation and it's endorphins and it's all that other stuff but for me, it's being outside and being at

that edge, the surface of the water, which is the edge between the sky and the earth. It just remains magical."

Ask for "After the Rain," by Jonathan A. Wright at local bookstores. Or order online from Gallery of Readers Press by visiting: <http://www.galleryofreaders.org>.