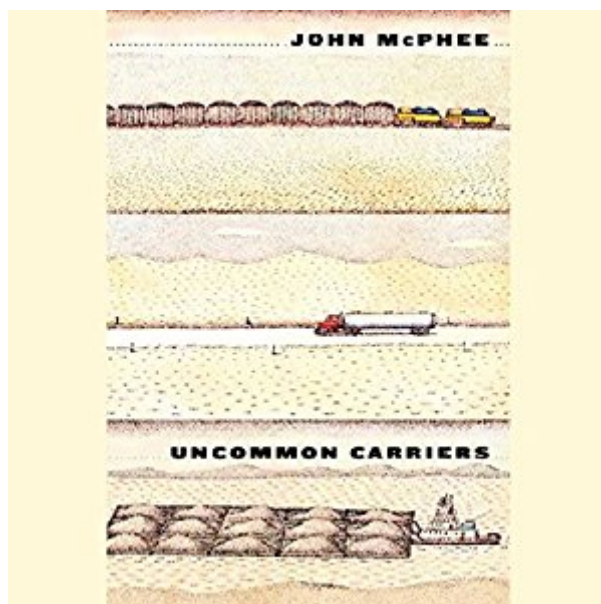


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# Uncommon Carriers



## Synopsis

From Pulitzer Prize-winner John McPhee, author of *The Founding Fish*, comes the fascinating story of an often overlooked, yet vitally important part of America. This first-hand account of the transportation sector features evocative portraits of the men and women who deliver our consumer and industrial goods. McPhee begins his adventure riding with Don Ainsworth, owner and operator of an 18-wheeler hauling nearly 30 tons of highly toxic chemicals from North Carolina to Washington. He continues his journey on a towboat pushing over 1,000 feet of barge up the narrow channel of the Illinois River. He rounds out his account crawling through Nebraska, Kansas, and the Powder River Basin of Wyoming in massive coal trains. Along the way, he tells the stories of the people he meets and the places he visits. McPhee's sense of humor, incisive observations, and historical asides make for a highly entertaining journey across America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote that "to do common things perfectly is far better worth our endeavor than to do uncommon things respectably." The focus of John McPhee's excellent new book, *Uncommon Carriers*, is on people who do uncommon things remarkably well. On my first, nervous day in the ocean shipping industry (an industry that carries most of the world's cargo in international trade) my boss took me to a run down diner in lower Manhattan. We sat at the counter and the waiter came up to us with a fish in his hand. "You have to have the fish. Look at this. The boss picked it out at the market this morning. You have to have this." After he walked away my boss

told me that in our business I was going to be entrusted with other people's cargo. He said that as long as I treated that cargo, and my job, like that waiter treated that fish, I'd eventually learn how to do my job the right way. I could have quit then and there because I've probably never had a better lesson about how to do a job right than I got at that lunch. "Uncommon Carriers" is about a group of people who transport other people's cargo as if it were "their fish". It is a fascinating look at the people and methods by which we get food on our tables, heat in our furnaces and clothes on our back. I've admired McPhee since I read his wonderful overview of life in the liner shipping industry, "Looking for a Ship". He has a way of taking complicated processes or procedures that are little known to the general public and writing about them in a way that the general public, and even I, can understand. When it comes to describing the people who operate these machines, McPhee doesn't get in the way of the voice of his protagonists. He lets their natural eloquence come through.

"The most beautiful truck on earth-Don Ainsworth's present sapphire-drawn convexing elongate stainless steel mirror- get s smidgen over six miles to the gallon. As its sole owner, he not only counts it calories with respect to it gross weight but with regard to the differing fuel structures of the states it traverses. It is much better to take Idaho fuel than phony-assed Oregon fuel. The Idaho fuel includes all the taxes. The Oregon fuel did not. Oregon feints with an attractive price at the pump, but then shoots an uppercut into the ton-mileage." In "Uncommon Carriers" we come to know Don Ainsworth, the intelligent, fastidious owner-driver of a meticulously kept 18-wheeler. And, we are privy to all of his first hand knowledge about trucking and life in general. John McPhee rides from Atlanta to Washington state with Don Ainsworth, owner and operator of a sixty-five-foot, five-axle, and eighteen wheel chemical tanker carrying hazmets. John McPhee's writing carries us along in the seat with Don and John, and I have a new hero now, Don Ainsworth. A trucker worth his weight in gold, and like Reader's Digest's old series, "a most unforgettable character". This book is "a grown-up version of every young boy's and girl's, I might add, fantasy life," This is John McPhee's 28th novel. What John McPhee's books all have in common is that they are about real people in real places. Over the past eight years, John McPhee has spent time in the company of people who work in freight transportation. He attends ship-handling school on a pond in the foothills of the French Alps, where, for tuition of \$15,000 a week, skippers of the largest ocean ships refine their capabilities in twenty-foot scale models.

John McPhee is a national treasure. Through 28 books, he has brought participatory journalism to high art, bringing us stories of interesting people doing interesting things. This time, he takes a

series of essays first published in New Yorker magazine, all addressing aspects of transportation of cargo, and presents them in "Uncommon Carriers." McPhee includes stories on trucking hazardous material, barging on the Illinois River, a school for oil tanker captains and the coals trains carrying coal from Wyoming the southeastern coal-fired power plants. As always, McPhee makes it fascinating. Partly, it's because he finds such fascinating characters. Trucker Don Ainsworth, for example. Partly, it's because he finds such fascinating tidbits. Rabbis who assure kosher truck transport, for example. But mostly it's because he finds and tells of fascinating subjects. Ranging from 1.3 mile long coal trains to 1,100 foot long strings of barges pushed up the narrow Illinois River, you have to ask how he finds out about this stuff. Would-be writers could do worse than study a McPhee paragraph, or analyze the organization of subjects across an essay. McPhee's skills include the ability to make it all seem effortless. When you consider the welter of detail he brings to each subject, without ever overwhelming the reader, your respect for his skills will grow. And I admit to a certain envy about how much fun McPhee gets to have. The book includes a tangentially related essay; McPhee and his son-in-law retrace the path of Henry David Thoreau and his brother in 1839 up an abandoned commercial waterway. The abandoned locks and channels of the canal system on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers speak to another time and another definition of commerce.

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