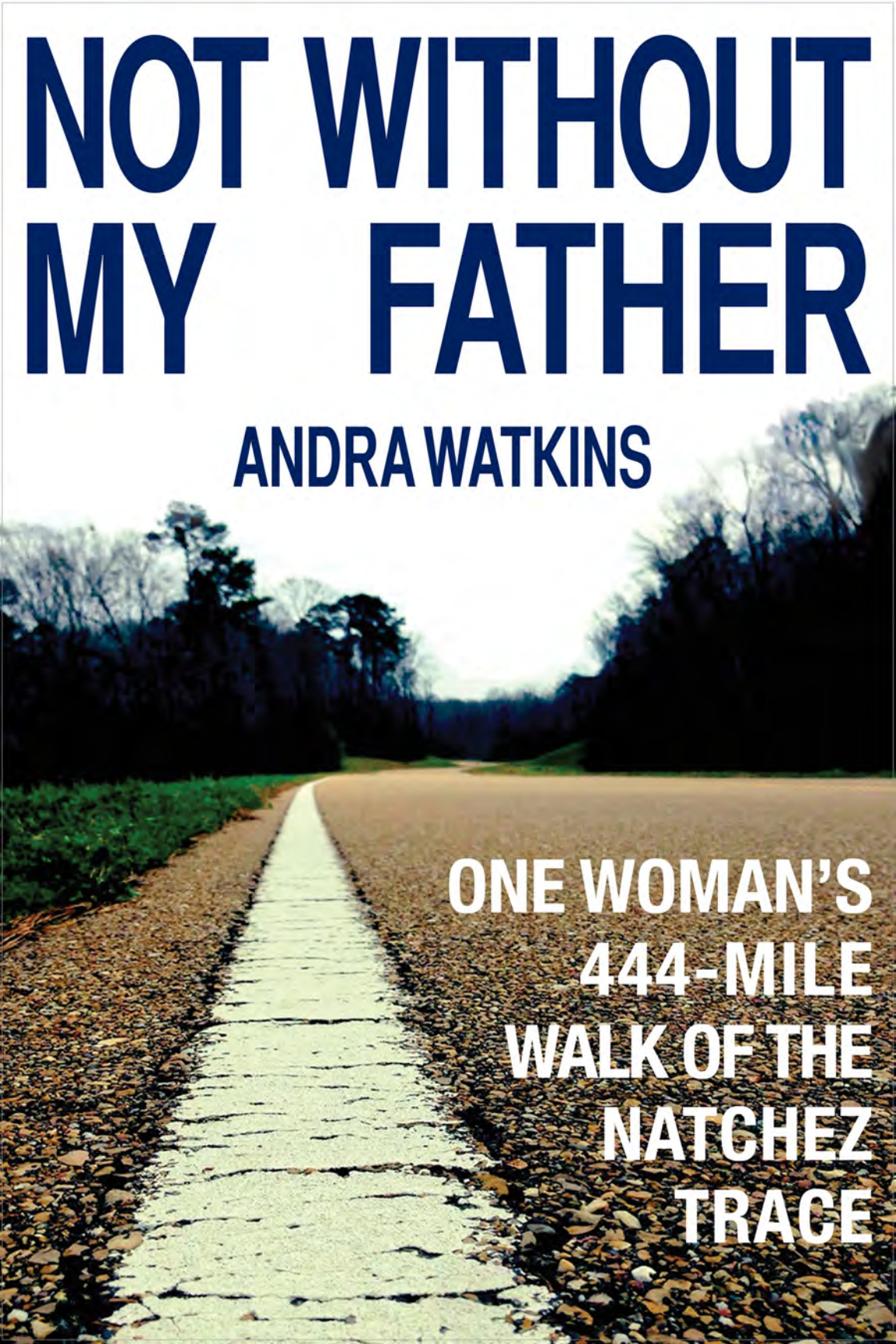


NOT WITHOUT MY FATHER

ANDRA WATKINS

A photograph of a gravel path leading into a wooded area. The path is made of light-colored gravel and leads from the bottom left towards the center of the image. The path is flanked by dark, dense trees and foliage. The sky is bright and overcast. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

ONE WOMAN'S
444-MILE
WALK OF THE
NATCHEZ
TRACE

NOT WITHOUT MY FATHER:
ONE WOMAN'S 444-MILE WALK
OF THE NATCHEZ TRACE

ANDRA WATKINS

WORD HERMIT PRESS LLC

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Not Without My Father: One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace is a memoir. It chronicles the author's actual experiences with real places and people. Some identities and locations are disguised or combined. The author's father's narration is a product of the author's imagination.

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One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace

NOTE ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE MEMOIR

This is a memoir.

And it isn't.

My narration is my voice. My experience. My truth.

My father's narration (*in italics*) is comprised of his stories. Some as he tells them. Others as I imagine them.

The chapter titles are a playlist of road music and walking songs. If you spend 34 days walking 444 miles, you need a soundtrack to keep you company.

One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andra Watkins lives in Charleston, South Carolina with her husband, Michael T Maher. A non-practicing CPA, she has a degree in accounting from Francis Marion University. She's still mad at her mother for refusing to let her major in musical theater, because her mom was convinced she'd end up starring in porn films. Her acclaimed first novel *To Live Forever: An Afterlife Journey of Meriwether Lewis* was published by Word Hermit Press on March 1, 2014. Read more about Andra at andrawatkins.com.

Andra's upcoming novels include *Hard To Die*, to be published in Spring 2015; *Your True Love Lives*, to be published in Summer 2015; and *I Am Number 13*, to be published in Fall 2015.

Natchez Trace: Tracks in Time is a book of photographs taken by Andra on her 444-mile walk. It is a companion volume to *Not Without My Father*, and is available in print from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and everywhere books are sold.



One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace

BOOKS BY ANDRA WATKINS

Non-fiction

Not Without My Father: One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace
(January 2015)

Photography

Natchez Trace: Tracks in Time
(January 2015)

Fiction

To Live Forever: An Afterlife Journey of Meriwether Lewis
(March 2014)

Hard To Die
(coming Spring 2015)

Your True Love Lives
(coming Summer 2015)

I Am Number 13
(coming Fall 2015)

One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace

MAP OF THE NATCHEZ TRACE



ROAD TO NOWHERE

Talking Heads

The journey is a long slog with an unpredictable number of mileposts. One can make the trip alone, but why not share it?

As I traversed familiar mile markers and pulled up in front of my father's house, I could predict where I'd find him.

In his recliner, his belly a shelf for a vat of popcorn. At eighty, he whiled away days feeding his face and shouting at the television. Whenever his throne was vacant, I eschewed all temptation to occupy it.

Because I imagined how many times he farted into the velvet upholstery.

Sometimes while naked.

I could hear the television when I stepped from the car. "Why am I doing this again?" I whispered as I slipped through the back door.

"Andra!" There he was, sprawled in his recliner. A jagged scar played peek-a-boo through his open pajama top. "What're you doing here?"

I opened my mouth and clamped it shut. Once I uttered my request, I couldn't take it back.

I needed a wingman while I walked the 444-mile Natchez Trace from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee. I planned to launch my debut novel and become the first living person to walk the 10,000-year-old road as our ancestors did. Nobody could convince me



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that an unathletic woman and her mid-life paunch were incapable of walking more than a half-marathon every day for a month.

Even though my aversion to exercise was as spectacular as my father's.

I wanted my walk to redeem my novel's hero, American explorer Meriwether Lewis, one-half of the Lewis and Clark duo. He died of two gunshot wounds on the Natchez Trace, seventy miles south of Nashville.

He was only thirty-five.

Was it suicide? Or murder? His death is one of America's great unsolved mysteries.

To walk a forgotten highway for five weeks, I needed a wingman who could shuttle me to my first daily milepost and pick me up fifteen miles later. Someone who wasn't busy. Someone available. Maybe this person even craved an adventure.

I scrolled through a list of prospects. My husband Michael couldn't be absent from work for five weeks, especially since his job paid for my predilection to write. My friends all had children. Husbands. Gainful employment. I discarded people for an hour, my list a scribbled mess that highlighted one harrowing name.

Dad.

My father wasn't doing anything. He was available to go on a five-week jaunt through Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee.

His stomach pooled over his thighs and his triple-chin jiggled as he leaned into his response. "Go on a five-week trip? Just you and me? I don't want to do that, Andra."

"Why not?" I shouted even louder to penetrate his VA-issued, circa-1980 hearing aids.

"Well." He chewed a handful of popcorn. "Because.....I got furniture to refinish."



"It'll be here when you get back."

Dad dug his fingernails into the arms of his chair. "I can't be away from my Sunday school class for that long."

"God won't care if you miss church to spend time

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with your only daughter, Dad.”

“Well, uh.....I.....Linda might need me here.”

Mom preened into the room with his bowl of ice cream. I never understood why she didn't just hand him the carton. She placed the spoon between his fingers and smiled. “I don't need you here, Roy.” Her flawless makeup matched her leotard. “I'm going to the gym. Be home in four hours.”

She flounced out the door, leaving me with my jiggly arms and red hair I forgot to brush.

I sighed and turned back to Dad. “Why don't you want to do this, Dad? I mean, you haven't been anywhere since your appendix ruptured two years ago. You're just sitting here in this recliner, waiting to die.”

Dad picked at his ice cream and avoided my gaze. “Spending five weeks with you don't sound like much fun, Andra.”

Dad and I shouted down my teens, harangued through my twenties and seethed away my thirties. For most of my life, our every interaction disintegrated into hurtful words and pregnant silences. Yet, I was willing to cast our history aside and endure his company for more than a month, while he rejected me?

Wrong answer, Old Man.

I gnawed my tongue to regroup. Dad was my last hope to take readers into my book's world. To help my scribblings make me somebody. In a universe of words with little meaning and even less point, I believed I created something valuable, a story that could make a difference, a tale that would leave readers fundamentally altered and pining for the next installment.

All writers are convinced whatever they write qualifies, be it dreck or brilliance. Our words are sperm and egg on the page. Merge them together, and one can hold a physical chunk of the writer. It's a shame a book can't arrive covered in blood and filth from the birth canal, screaming and howling to breathe.

But to get anyone to care about a story, the writer must make it about the reader.

My breathing even, I flashed my most fetching smile.



Not Without My Father

“All right, Dad. Look at it this way. We’ll be riding near hundreds of tiny towns with lots of strangers who’ve never heard your stories. Think of all the junk shops and dive diners where you can enchant people. Don’t they deserve to meet you before you’re gone?”

Dad’s eyes took on a dreamy tinge. His yarns were Southern gothic legends, tales he rolled out for every stranger he encountered. I imagined myself spending the entire trip with a view of his broad back, regaling everyone but me. He must’ve conjured the same scene. “I’ll do it, Andra. If the Lord lets me live ’til March, I’ll go with you.”

Dad would be my wingman on the Natchez Trace. Visions of literary stardom floated in front of my faraway eyes. Because my secret dream was *The New York Times* headline:

- Debut Novelist Walks Her Way to Blockbuster Best Seller! -

I basked in the mirage of that proclamation, in the glory of staggering to my Nashville finish line with crowds of people. News crews. Fans waving my book and clamoring for an autograph.

My swelling imagination burst when Dad heaved himself from the chair, scratched his crotch and farted. “Yeah, Andra. This is gonna be real fun.”

What had I done? Besides self-scratching and legendary gas, his sleep apnea machine didn’t stifle his explosive snoring.

And the bathroom. I would have to share a bathroom with my father, whose hulking belly obscured all ability to aim. A sodden fact that seeped into my legs when I locked myself in Dad’s bathroom and plopped down on the toilet.

I didn’t want to spend five weeks with my father.

As I winced through a sink bath, I studied my face in the mirror. The beginnings of forehead wrinkles and crows feet. A hint of Dad’s bulldog jowl. I stuck my tongue out at my green-eyed self. “Welcome to Hell, you idiot.”



EPILOGUE
MAKE A MEMORY

Bon Jovi

Who matters to you? Maybe you're like me, with aging parents who are still somewhat healthy. Or perhaps this story finds you near Life's end, with adult children and grandchildren.

We can all name people we take for granted, because everybody's swamped. Overwhelmed. Harried. We mean to make memories with people who matter, but often, we put it off for someday. And someday morphs into never, as Life's unpredictability claims the people we love.

I wrote *Not Without My Father* to inspire others to make a memory. Now. Today. To grab someone and turn "I wish I had" into "I'm glad I did."

If you enjoyed this story, the best tribute you can pay lies in making a memory of your own. You don't have to spend five weeks. Take an hour. Or an afternoon. A day or several.

Make a Memory is a MOVEMENT.

Help start it by making your own memory.

- Post a picture or video online.
- Include your name, where you live, and who you're inviting to make a memory.
- Show the memory you want to make with a photo, a map, a gif or a video. Be creative. Make everyone who sees it want to Make this Memory



Not Without My Father

with you.

- Tag the person you're inviting to Make a Memory so they can respond.
- Hashtag your post with #NWMFMakeaMemory.

We'll collect your Make a Memory submissions and showcase them on andrawatkins.com.

This isn't a contest to impress everyone with your grand travel aspirations or lofty goals. It's a sincere plea to spend time with someone who matters, to be able to say "I'm glad I did." If you need ideas, go to andrawatkins.com/makeamemory.

Your Make a Memory entry could change your life.

But your participation will help make enough memories to change the world.



Not Without My Father is ambitious adventure memoir. It is funny, poignant, agonizing, raunchy, and delightfully "out there."

—*Portland Book Review*

A book without traditional heroes, but one in which you'll find yourself rooting for the non-heroes who struggle to give meaning to their lives.

—*Story Circle Book Reviews*

NOT WITHOUT MY FATHER

One Woman's 444-Mile Walk Of The Natchez Trace

ANDRA WATKINS

Can an epic adventure succeed without a hero?

Andra Watkins needed a wingman to help her become the first living person to walk the historic 444-mile Natchez Trace as the pioneers did. She planned to walk fifteen miles a day. For thirty-four days.

After striking out with everyone in her life, she was left with her disinterested eighty-year-old father. And his gas. The sleep apnea machine and self-scratching. Sharing a bathroom with a man whose gut obliterated his aim.

As Watkins trudged America's forgotten highway, she lost herself in despair and pain.



Nothing happened according to plan, and her tenuous connection to her father started to unravel. Through arguments and laughter, tears and fried chicken, they fought to rebuild their relationship before it was too late. In *Not Without My Father: One Woman's 444-Mile Walk of the Natchez Trace*, Watkins invites readers to join her dysfunctional family adventure in a humorous and heartbreaking memoir that asks if one can really turn *I wish I had* into *I'm glad I did*.

Andra Watkins lives in Charleston, South Carolina. A non-practicing CPA with a degree in accounting from Francis Marion University, she's still mad at her mother for refusing to let her major in musical theater, because her mom was convinced she'd end up starring in porn films. In addition to her writing talent, Andra is an accomplished public speaker. Her acclaimed first novel *To Live Forever: An Afterlife Journey of Meriwether Lewis* was published by Word Hermit Press in 2014.

