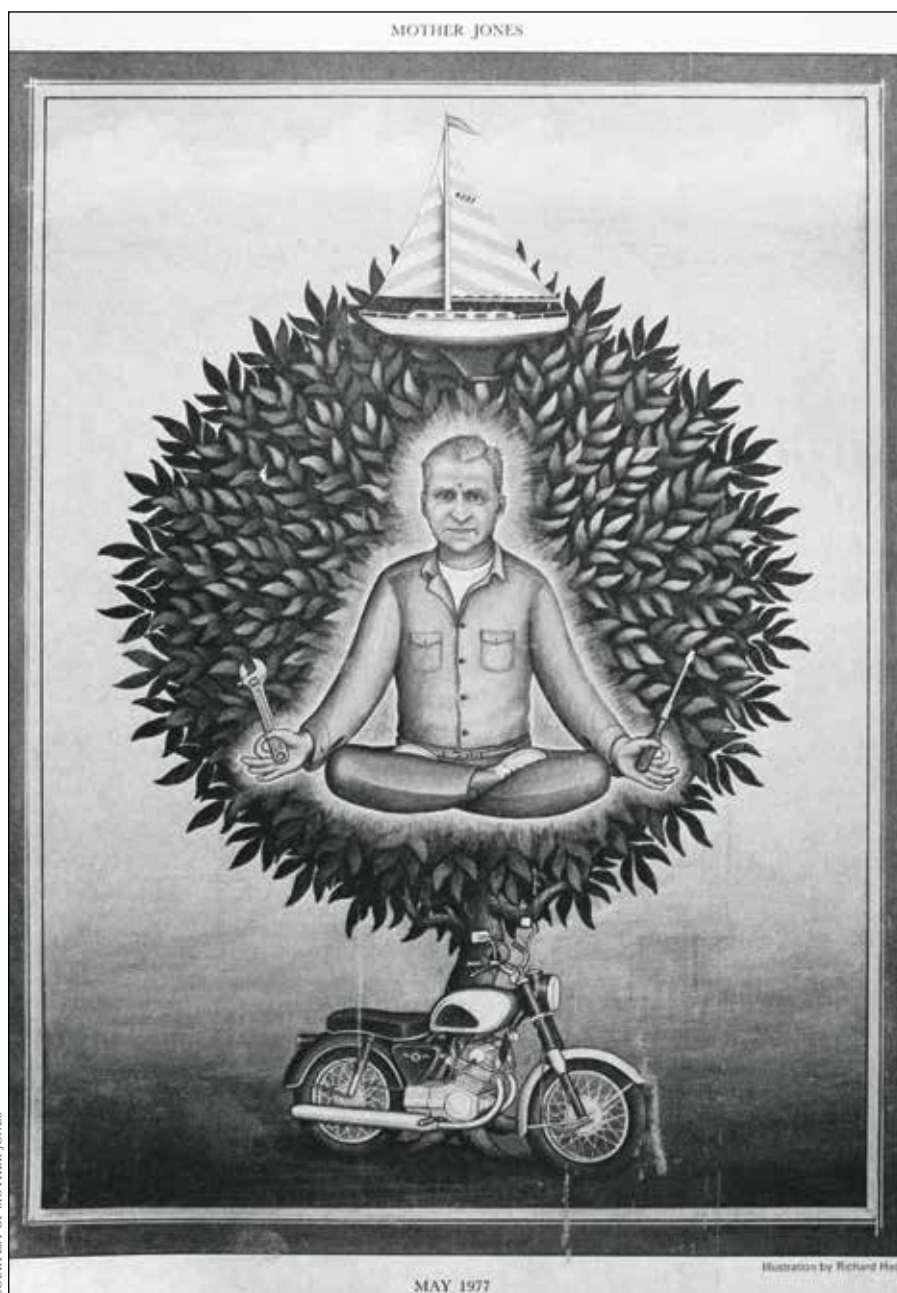
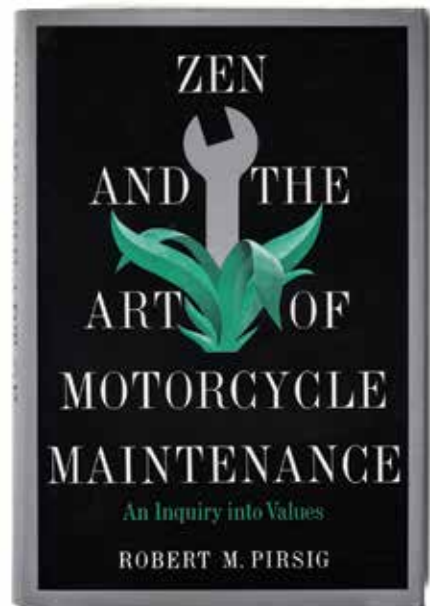


“IF BOAT IS GOING DOWN”— Bikes, Boats, and Robert Pirsig

by Paul F. Johnston

When American author Robert M. Pirsig (1928–2017) published his first book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (ZAMM) in 1974, it—and he—became an immediate sensation. The story was based on a 5,700-mile motorcycle trip that Pirsig and his eleven-year-old son Chris took from Minneapolis to San Francisco and back in 1968. The book’s strong philosophical foundation made it reach beyond the stan-

dard adventure narrative, and resonate with readers from across a wide spectrum. A *New Yorker* review compared it to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*,¹ and within a few short months, it sold more than 50,000 copies. By a year’s passage, the number topped a million. Since then, HarperCollins estimates that well over six million copies of ZAMM—in several editions and 27 languages—are in circulation worldwide, and the book remains in print. It is



COURTESY OF MOTHER JONES

read in college literature, religion, and philosophy courses, and today Pirsig is considered a pioneer in the academic study of the history of technology in the areas of equipment maintenance, tinkering, and do-it-yourself.

What most people don’t know is that Pirsig’s strongest lifelong interest was actually in ships and boats. His first maritime experience was in November 1932 at the age of four, when his family left Minnesota and crossed the Atlantic aboard the old Cunard liner *Mauretania*. His father, Maynard Pirsig, had accepted a short post in England, and the ocean passage the family made to get there impressed little Robert immensely. In July 1933 the family returned aboard *Berengaria*, and the two voyages left an indelible and formative memory that lasted throughout his life, even briefly appearing in his second and last book *Lila* (1991): “...the foghorn that frightened him and made him run up the gangplank. He was only four and the ship was the *Mauritania* [sic] going to England.”²

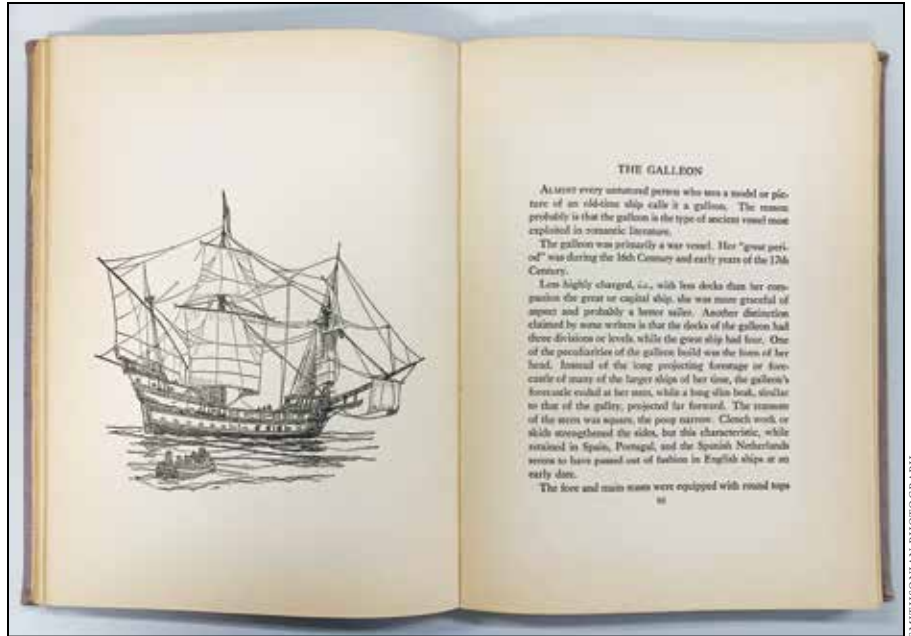
As a nine-year-old elementary school student with a measured IQ of 170, Pirsig won a book for earning good grades. When

This image combining Zen, motorcycle, and boat imagery appeared in a 1977 Pirsig interview in Mother Jones magazine. Note that the boat is at the top of the illustration.

it turned out that he already owned the prize volume, he instead asked for a copy of Henry Culver's 1924 *The Book of Old Ships*, illustrated by Gordon Grant. He kept that book for his entire life, reminiscing in *Lila* that "his favorite book had been a book about old ships, which he'd paged through slowly, again and again, wondering what it would be like to live in one of those little ornamented aft cabins with the tiny windows, staring out like Sir Francis Drake at the surging waves rolling under you. It seemed as though all his life after that, whenever he took long trips, he ended up on a dock in a harbor somewhere, staring at the boats."³

After high school, Bob Pirsig served in the Army from 1946–48 in Korea. Undoubtedly, there would have been at least a voyage or two aboard a troopship, and his military service was notable as it provided his earliest exposure to eastern Zen. After earning a BA in philosophy from the University of Minnesota, in 1951 he spent a year in India at Banaras Hindu University, studying further. He flew to India, but returned by ship, first booking a passage on an unidentified P&O liner from Mangalore to Bombay. The passengers lightered from shore to the liner on a "Jeddah Bumboat"—an Arab dhow—that was unusual enough to warrant one of only about fifty photographs he took of his year-long India sojourn. He booked a deck passage and, as the only westerner on deck for the three-day transit, was entertaining to the crew. From Bombay, Pirsig found an American cargo vessel with a forty-day itinerary to Houston via the Suez Canal. Passengers were not permitted, however, so Pirsig essentially stowed away, partially earning his passage by doing office work for the captain. He had to hide in the ship's hospital during inspection at the Suez Canal, and remembered eating handfuls of wheat from the hold to supplement the meals he could get with the crew. He had bought a pet monkey in India, but that relationship did not survive the ocean passage.

He returned to the Midwest and enrolled in journalism school, but left before finishing. For most of 1954, Pirsig and his new wife, Nancy (née James, who had been an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota when he was studying there), dealt



(above) Robert Pirsig's personal copy of *The Book of Old Ships*, open to the entry on Sir Francis Drake.

(right) This photograph of a Jeddah bumboat is one of only a few pictures Pirsig took documenting his research trip to India.

(below) Pirsig with another stowaway on the cargo ship, 1951.



SMITHSONIAN PHOTOGRAPH

COURTESY OF WENDY PIRSIG

COURTESY OF WENDY PIRSIG

cards at a Reno casino to save enough to hitchhike to Mexico. His plan was to write “the great book,” but a week-long interval with a typewriter in an empty room wrestling with writer’s block promptly put an end to that idea. He then decided to build boats for a living in Mexico, where labor was cheaper than in the States. He wrote to his father back in Minnesota and asked him to mail him a book from his collection at home, *Boats Anyone Can Build*, which had a design for a small ocean-going yacht with an auxiliary engine. Pirsig also asked him to send along builders’ plans of several 30-40 foot auxiliary sailboat designs for future projects. With abundant inexpensive local cedar and mahogany and skilled boatbuilders charging only two dollars per day, Pirsig estimated he could build

a boat for \$500, sail it to Texas, where he could buy and install a used car engine, and sell the finished product for \$2,000.

During this interval he worked with a Cuban carpenter named Pancho Piquet, of whom he wrote: “He was the fastest carpenter I’ve ever seen...And careful. He never slowed down, even in that jungle heat. We didn’t have any electricity but he could work faster with hand tools than most people do with power tools. He was in his fifties or sixties and I was twenty-something. One night a big *Norte*, a norther, blew in off the Gulf of Mexico and it blew so hard...it took the roof off his house and carried it away. But instead of fixing it he got drunk and he stayed drunk for more than a month. After a couple of weeks his wife had to come begging for money for

food. That was so sad. I think partly he got drunk because he knew everything was going wrong and the boat would never get built. And that was true. I ran out of money and had to quit.”⁴ Pirsig spent six months on the project before moving back to the States with little more than some leftover boat cedar.

In the interim, the Pirsigs—now new parents—returned to Minnesota, where Bob would resume his studies in journalism. He then became a freelance journalist and technical writer, even writing “ads for the mortuary cosmetics industry.”⁵ Over the next several years Pirsig undertook writing his book, an autobiographical novel that surfed the zeitgeist perfectly. The book, of course, is his masterpiece, and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* had such enormous and rapid success that it bred “Pirsig’s Pilgrims”—random knocks on his front door and other unwelcome phenomena that triggered the writer’s aversion to public attention.

What did Pirsig do with the *ZAMM* royalties? Buy a new house, car, or motorcycle? Not even close: he ordered a brand new \$60,000 thirty-two-foot Westsail fiberglass cutter from a California yacht builder. A Colin Archer design, this was a heavily built, roomy, oceangoing design for serious long-distance cruising. The Pirsigs had previously chartered a wooden boat with a gaff rig—and a skipper—in Newport, Rhode Island, for a two-day overnight cruise to see how it fit. Although they hit some bad summer weather, the positive experience overall led to the W32—and a fiberglass hull. Pirsig and his second son, Ted, went to California in 1975 to check on the W32 construction. Some 830 W32s were built from 1971–80, many of which were sold as kits. Pirsig contemplated a kit but wisely decided to buy the finished boat, probably thinking back to his Mexican boat-building experience. After it was completed, Pirsig had it trucked to Wisconsin, where he launched it at Bayfield, christening it *Arete*, the Greek word for excellence (a frequently occurring topic in *ZAMM*). Nancy Pirsig had taken

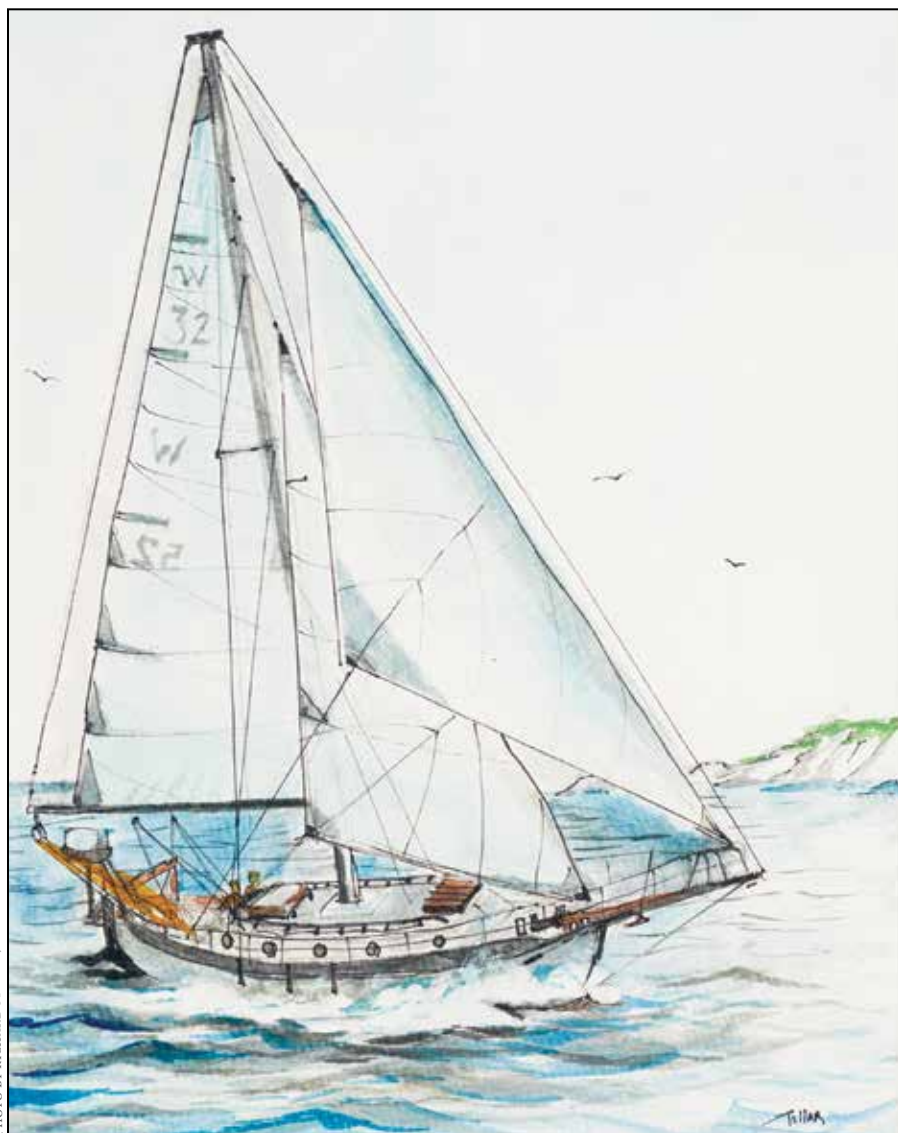


PHOTO BY RICHARD STRAUSS, SMITHSONIAN

Watercolor of Arete, depicted shortly before its British landfall in August 1979. Painting by William Tillar.



COURTESY OF WENDY PIRSIG

Bob Pirsig at the tiller aboard Arete off Miami, 1977.

a sailmaking class over the winter and sewed a big “drifter-reacher” for light air that was rarely used offshore.

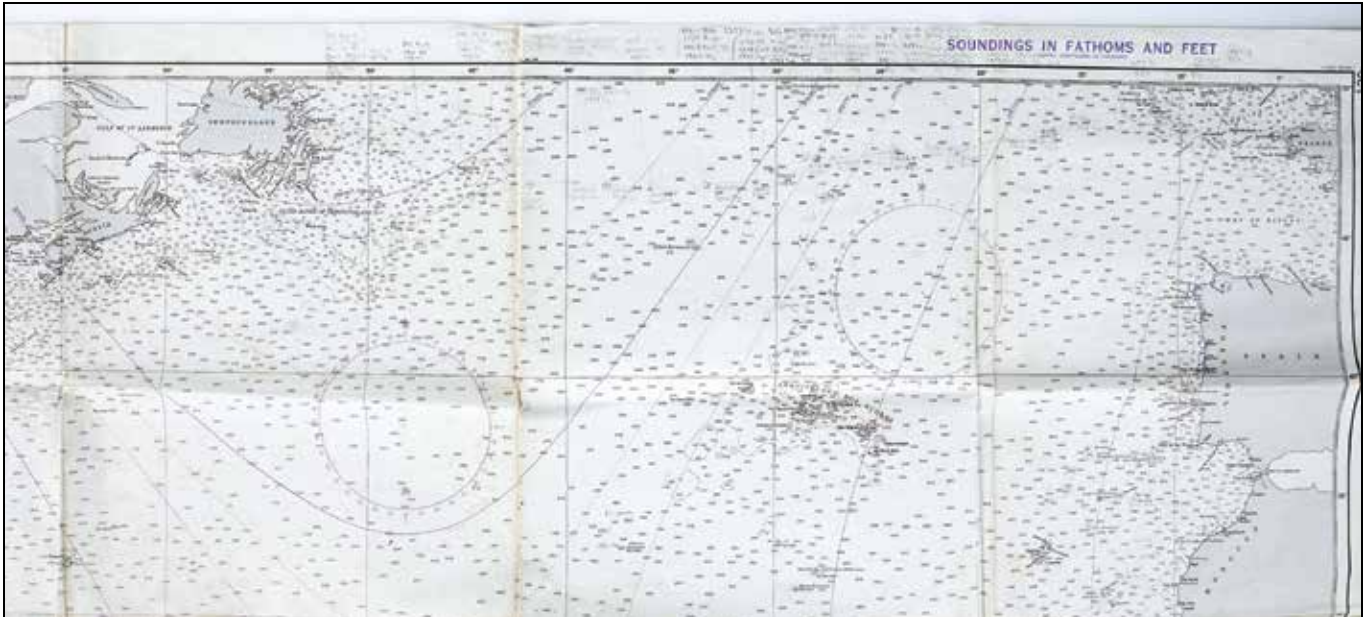
Pirsig and a friend, Paul Leverentz, sailed *Arete* easterly through the Great Lakes into the New York canal system, and then down the Hudson River and southerly along the East Coast to North Carolina. There, son Ted signed on, expecting a relaxing Caribbean cruise, and the trio sailed for the Virgin Islands. By then it was December, and taking a new boat on its shakedown blue-water cruise proved a mistake. *Arete* hit heavy winter weather that sickened the crew, broke the self-steering gear, buried the spreaders on both sides of the boat in high seas, and blew the yacht off course. They put in to Puerto Rico instead of their intended destination in the Virgin Islands. Ted flew back from San Juan to the mainland and never sailed again; Nancy Pirsig replaced Ted onboard, and the couple sailed back to New Haven, Connecticut, via Bermuda. Pirsig worked

on his next book while living aboard *Arete* in New Haven Harbor that spring and summer. The following autumn the couple set sail for Florida again, but Nancy Pirsig bailed in Annapolis. Bob Pirsig arrived in Miami alone, his marriage on the rocks.

What did Pirsig publish after *ZAMM*? Another terrestrial tale building on the success of his prior best seller? Not at all—his first significant post-*ZAMM* prose was a nautical-themed article, “Cruising Blues and Their Cure,” for *Esquire* magazine. He wrote about getaway sailing dreams versus the reality of liveaboard life and long-distance cruising on a small boat, saying “those who see sailing as an escape from reality have got their understanding of both sailing and reality completely backwards. Sailing is not an escape but a return to and confrontation of a reality from which modern civilization is itself an escape...sailing returns to the old realities of dark and heat and cold.”⁶ At some point in his journey, he took some of the timber he’d saved in

his garage from the Mexican boatbuilding episode and routed out some cedar toolboxes for his finer machine tools.

Not surprisingly, Pirsig’s second book, *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*, is about a man and his boat. On Labor Day 1976, Pirsig, who normally shunned publicity, boarded a journalist in Boston Harbor and took him for an overnight sail down the Massachusetts coast. A landsman battling seasickness, the young writer anticipated enlightenment as he watched Pirsig take on maintenance of a frozen traveler block, but he was disappointed when Pirsig pulled out a sharp tool, a rattle can of spray lube, and added to the effort a few salty words, just like anyone else. “I scrape the bottom, clean the deck, keep the boat up, and that seems like High Quality.” At the same time, Pirsig was still grappling with his unwelcome instant fame: “...now the outsider is the number one insider...now I have to watch myself, because I’ll say things which I throw out just for the fun of it, and many people



The Pirsig's nautical chart tracking their 1979 transAtlantic crossing. Arete's daily position is marked in pencil across the top of the chart. The route took them right through the storm that killed fifteen sailors and sank several boats that were competing in the Fastnet Race.

take them very seriously. It's a very unsettling experience."⁷ Pirsig managed fame—along with its stresses and anxiety—by sailing away from it.

Pirsig and his second wife, Wendy, taught themselves celestial navigation and in August of 1979 sailed across the Atlantic from St. Pierre near Newfoundland to

the Scilly Islands, off Cornwall, England. Expecting a smooth and easy transit in August, they navigated with a C. Plath sextant, a wristwatch, and a Texas Instruments TI-59 calculator that Pirsig had programmed with navigational algorithms. Just before setting out, he forgot his own cruising article's advice and conclusion,

optimistically musing "...the passage is like a bus ride nowadays...just set your sails and go read a magazine...cruising is like a Zen sesshin, or meditation retreat. After a while you just wear out even the terror and dread."⁸

As it turned out, blue water ocean voyaging was a bit different from the more casual coastal or interisland cruising the Pirsigs had experienced up to that point. Just a couple of days before making landfall in Cornwall, they sailed smack through the middle of the infamous storm of 14 August 1979 that killed fifteen professional sailors and four spectators in the nearby Fastnet Race—a famous and competitive 600-mile round trip slog from the Isle of Wight in the English Channel to Fastnet Rock off the south coast of Ireland, and back. Of the 303 starters in that year's race, only 86 finished. Twenty-four yachts were abandoned, 193 retired, approximately 75 capsized, and five sank. Of course, the Pirsigs knew only that they were in a really stout boat in a really bad storm that took away their appetites and deprived them of sleep. The day after the storm, Wendy Pirsig's journal ruefully recorded a

With a sextant, log, watch, chart and TI-59 calculator, the Pirsigs navigated easterly across the Atlantic in August 1979.



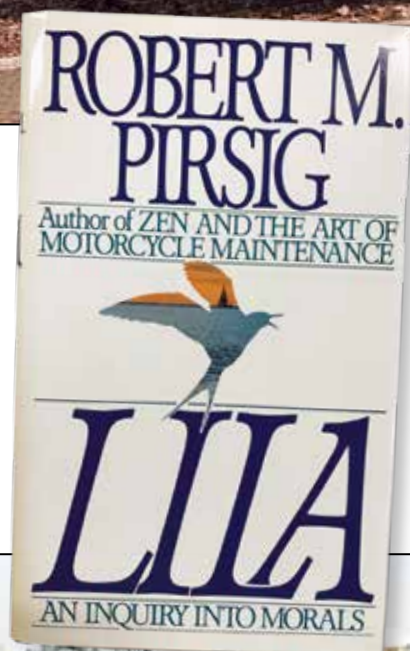
radically different perspective from Bob Pirsig's words a couple of weeks earlier: "Wild horses couldn't drag us across the North Atlantic again and we'll probably try to avoid any ocean sailing anywhere if we can. Day sailing, from port to port along the coast, is the way to go from now on."⁹

Just before he was supposed to visit them in England, Bob Pirsig's twenty-two-year-old son Chris—who had accompanied his father on the now-famous 1968 motorcycle trek—was murdered in San Francisco. The Pirsigs settled into their grief as they settled in Falmouth Harbor as live-aboards for the next several months. Pirsig resumed writing.

The following spring they sailed north up the English Channel to Holland; a year later, in 1981, daughter Nell was born there, with *Arete* tied up in a Dutch canal. Just two months later, the family sailed across the North Sea and spent the next three years in Norway and Sweden as Bob kept adding chapters to *Lila*.

In late 1984 *Lila* and daughter Nell were both far enough along for the Pirsigs to make the voyage homeward, taking it slow as they sailed south, transiting German, Dutch, Belgian, and French canals to the Mediterranean. The next year Bob

Bob Pirsig and daughter Nell aboard Arete in Tananger, Norway, 1981.



Bob and Wendy Pirsig with Arete hauled out so they could clean and repaint the bottom in advance of their transAtlantic crossing.

and two Swedish crewmembers sailed *Arete* back across the Atlantic, while Wendy and Nell flew back, carrying with them the completed *Lila* manuscript and an Apple II computer.

Pirsig spent almost seventeen years writing *Lila*. It was another autobiographical novel, and a loose sequel to *ZAMM*, about a boat captain on the Hudson River and in Long Island Sound, and a philosophical discourse on "Morals" that also revisited "Quality." Although it was a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *Lila* never achieved the widespread popularity of its older sibling. It would be Pirsig's last book.

The Pirsigs kept *Arete* in New England and continued to daysail for many years, with Bob Pirsig repairing and maintaining the vessel offseason in his driveway until its sale in 2014. In late 2016, with her husband in failing health, Wendy Pirsig contacted the Smithsonian and asked if there might be interest in her husband's motorcycle. A visit to the family home in Maine revealed not only motorcycle-related items, but also extensive materials relating to Bob's boating life. A selection of items illustrating both sides of Robert Pirsig's life now resides at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

The track chart of the three-week 1979 Atlantic transit is among the donated items, along with the sextant, log line, and calculator used to navigate that and later voyages. A watercolor of *Arete* by Morrow editor Jim Landis's father-in-law was derived from a photo taken by a Royal Navy helicopter checking on the survivors of the 1979 Fastnet Race. A worn *Arete* propeller, the lantern that illuminated the cabin, a sail repair kit, and other items from the boat augment the collection, providing unparalleled material context to the writer and his surroundings. Bob later wrote: "It was always in my mind when I bought my boat and we took that trip to Europe. We were following the trip of the *Mauretania*." Particularly poignant—even prescient in hindsight—is a two-page, single-spaced list Bob typed up titled "IF BOAT IS GOING DOWN BRING THIS LIST," as though there might be adequate time to consult it, gather up its long and detailed list of contents, and hop into a life raft with everything all snugly fastened down.

Wendy Pirsig donated the typewriter on which Bob's books were written, together with the Apple II computer on which he also wrote and programmed games for Nell. He had hot-rod'd his Apple II, stacking seven cards inside that attest to his technical computer prowess. The Smithsonian has another Apple II, which had belonged to a computer programmer and was loaded with only three cards, but that's another story for another day.



PHOTO BY RICHARD STRAUSS, SMITHSONIAN

(above) Pirsig's typewriter and Apple II computer, on which he wrote his two books. The Apple is shown with the top off, displaying the seven aftermarket cards for extra speed, graphics, and memory.

(right) Pirsig routed out some of his leftover boatbuilding cedar from Mexico for a custom case for his tap and die set.

(below) In 2004, Pirsig replaced Arete's pulpit in his garage in Maine.



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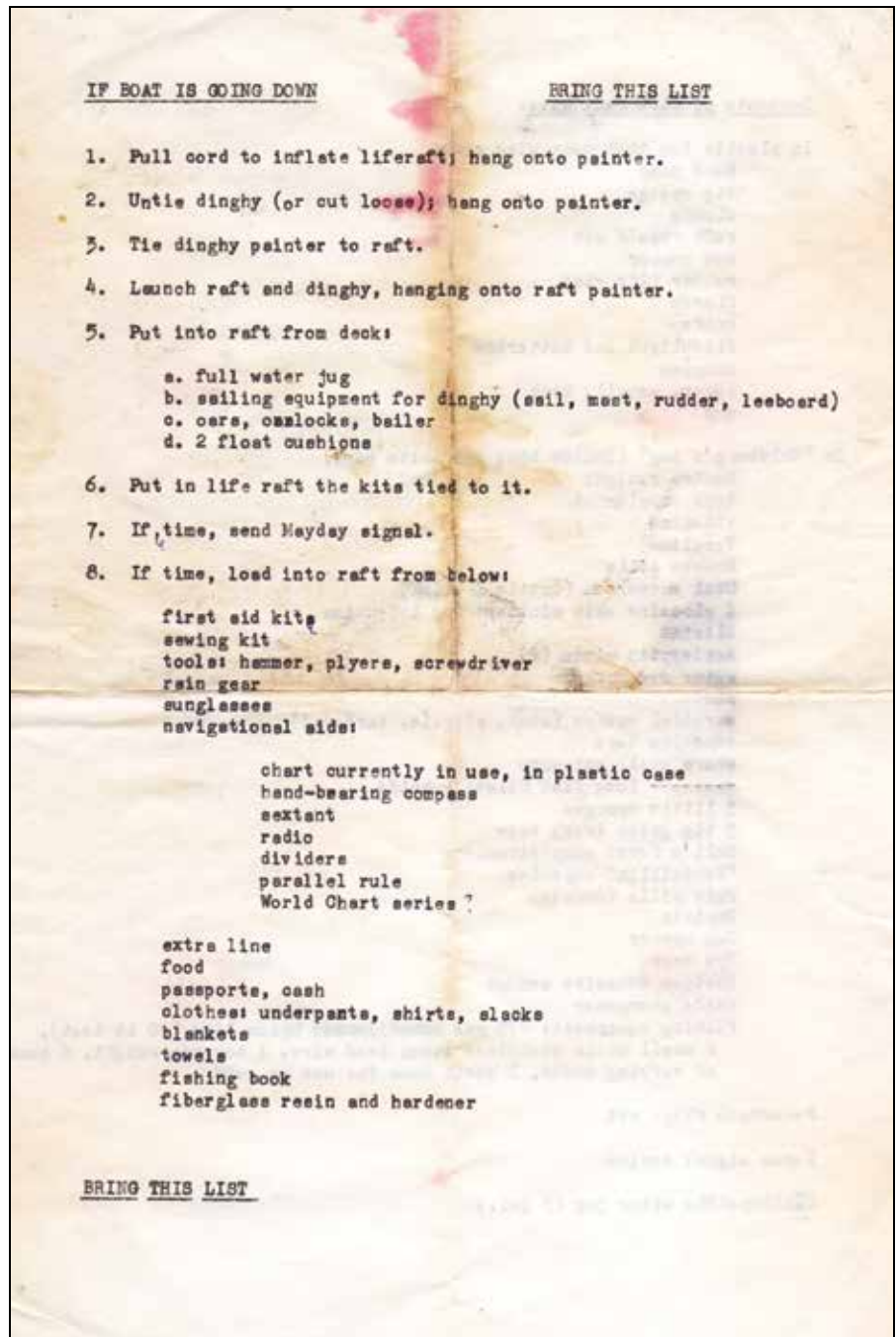
COURTESY OF WENDY PIRSIG

The community of historians, writers, and museum staff with both motorcycle licenses and an interest in boats is very small. I regret not meeting Bob Pirsig, but I do feel an affinity through shared interests, and I especially appreciate kindred experiences that those with bikes and boats at heart can know. It's interesting to talk about the different artifacts in the life-spanning collection—especially the tools—and speculate about their use in light of ZAMM's influence and its impact on American culture, as we measure and document them and the maritime objects. Rarely are we offered such deep context relative to an individual's personal material culture. We plan to present this extraordinary gift to the nation soon, in an exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of ZAMM's publication in 2024. ⚓

Dr. Paul F. Johnston is Curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC; he also works with the museum's motorcycle collection. He is profoundly grateful to the Pirsig family, together with retired William Morrow editor James Landis, for many of the stories, details, and images in this article. The museum is located on the National Mall at 14th Street and Constitution Ave., NW. (<http://americanhistory.si.edu>)



Robert M. Pirsig died at home in South Berwick, Maine, on 24 April 2017 at age 88.



SMITHSONIAN PHOTOGRAPH

NOTES

- ¹ George Steiner, "Uneasy Rider," *The New Yorker*, 15 April 1974.
- ² *Lila*, chapter 28, p. 378.
- ³ *Lila*, chapter 28, p. 382.
- ⁴ *Lila*, chapter 14, p. 189.
- ⁵ See Tim Adams, "The interview: Robert Pirsig," *The Guardian* for 18 November 2006, occasioned by a new edition of *Lila* (1991) on its fifteenth anniversary. Pirsig was remarkably candid in this interview.
- ⁶ "Cruising Blues and Their Cure," *Esquire* 87.1 (May 1977) 65-68. It can be found

- online at <http://moq.org/forum/Pirsig/cruisingblues.html>
- ⁷ Ed Zuckerman, "Zen And The Art of Sailboat Maintenance: At Sea with Robert Pirsig," *Mother Jones* (May 1977) 56-61.
- ⁸ Wendy Pirsig journal for 18 and 30 July 1979.
- ⁹ Renowned America's Cup sailor and raconteur Gary Jobson was tactician aboard yachtsman Ted Turner's yacht *Tenacious* in the 1979 Fastnet Race and made a film about it (www.jobsonsailing.com/ac/53).