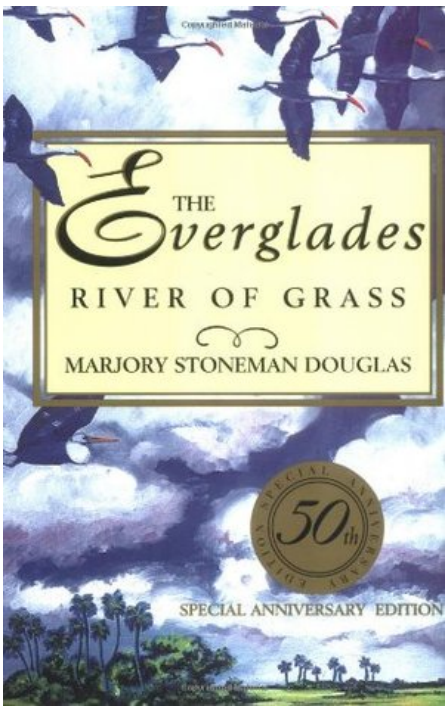

The Everglades: River of Grass

Marjory Stoneman Douglas , Robert Fink (Illustrator)

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Before 1947, when Marjory Stoneman Douglas named *The Everglades* a "river of grass," most people considered the area worthless. She brought the world's attention to the need to preserve *The Everglades*. In the Afterword, Michael Grunwald tells us what has happened to them since then. Grunwald points out that in 1947 the government was in the midst of establishing the Everglades National Park and turning loose the Army Corps of Engineers to control floods--both of which seemed like saviors for the Glades. But neither turned out to be the answer. Working from the research he did for his book, The Swamp, Grunwald offers an account of what went wrong and the many attempts to fix it, beginning with Save Our Everglades, which Douglas declared was "not nearly enough." Grunwald then lays out the intricacies (and inanities) of the more recent and ongoing CERP, the hugely expensive Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

The Everglades: River of Grass Details

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From Reader Review The Everglades: River of Grass for online ebook

Jennifer says

I was somewhat disappointed, but I should say right now that this was very-well written and parts – especially in the first chapter – were quite poetic. But I had been hoping for a book about the ecology of the Everglades and the movement to preserve it, and instead of natural history this focused almost exclusively on human history, although several chapters near the end did discuss some of the conservation issues. The book included some vividly gory accounts of people dying in bloody massacres (and they weren't even quotes from primary sources), and I found them sickening enough that I almost put this on my did-not-finish shelf. A few parts seemed to drag for me as well. However, in fairness I cannot say this was a bad book, only that it was not for me.

That said, I did come across several passages I especially enjoyed, and I would have been thrilled if the entire book had gone on in this vein:

"The great piles of vapor from the Gulf Stream, amazing cumulus clouds that soar higher than tropic mountains from their even bases four thousand feet above the horizon, stand in ranked and glistening splendor in those summer nights; twenty thousand feet or more they tower tremendous, cool-pearl, frosty heights, blue-shadowed in the blue-blazing days." (Page 17).

"The water is timeless, forever new and eternal. Only the rock, which time shaped and will outlast, records unimaginable ages." (Page 33).

Ann says

This book is a love letter to the Everglades. The author gives us the history of the area as well as a lesson in how to care for and to preserve the precious resource we have. The writing is a bit old fashioned but it was written many years ago. It is amazing to me and very sad too, to read about the vast numbers of deer, bears, panthers and other wildlife that are simply now gone because we have introduced pollution and other influences that are destroying the area faster than we can imagine.The book is a must read for anyone who cares about the environment and the future of humanity.

Fred E. Parker says

Ms. Douglas was a pioneer and hero in every sense of the word. This book helped to raise awareness of the living waters of The Everglades as a vibrant ecosystem - not a swamp that needed to be drained and filled in. Her tireless efforts resulted in the creation of this area as a national park, long before people and industry encroached upon this shimmering jewel under the shining Florida sun. Unfortunately, what is left is a tiny fraction of what once was, and half-hearted efforts to restore some of its former glory have done little if anything to improve that situation.

Chris Leuchtenburg says

Frankly, I cannot understand how this book became a classic of environmental writing. The first chapter describes the glories of the plants and critters of the Everglades in cloying, purple prose. But the next two hundred pages veer into the human history, much of which does not take place even in Florida let alone the Everglades. There is a brief, often moving section towards the end describing the politics that led to the partial draining and widespread destruction of the Everglades leading up to the establishment of the National Park.

The author's passion for the Everglades peaks through from time to time, but I cannot recommend this book as an introduction to the Everglades from any perspective.

This book is part of a long running series of books on rivers that were specifically designed to express a poetic, artistic view rather than a traditional historical approach. It shows.

Scott Cox says

“The Everglades: River of Grass” by Marjorie Stoneman Douglas helped introduce the incredibly rich natural history of Southern Florida to many. It is a history of the region, as well as a natural history primer. My favorite sections of Everglades National Park are Shark Valley (Snail Kites & Limpkins) and the Snake Bight trail (Greater Flamingos). This is truly a fantastic region to explore; hopefully the title of Douglas’s chapter, “Eleventh Hour,” has not already passed!

Margaret Harris says

Marjorie Stoneman Douglas writes magically. Her word images make an attentive reader breathe with the peoples of ancient history or with the scents of salty breeze over decay or fresh regrowth of trees, grasses, flowers and of myriad animals of land and water. But the story in this book is larger than its title suggests.

The Everglades geology is said to have begun in the ice ages, when volcanic uplifting of the undersea floor built up over millennia a limestone foundation upon which the south half of Florida now rests. Its botanical nature rests in a shallow, fresh water river, surrounded by ocean but protected from salt water intrusion by a slight rising of the rock around the wide river's edges, so that its thick vegetation may feed (and house) thousands of animals and millions of birds. Its archeology is traced through 1,100-year-old human bones and pottery fragments that match with descendants of the Asian peoples who first populated the American continents after crossing the northern land bridge into Alaska.

Its modern human history begins when the first men and women migrated over the continental miles to land's end, and settled near the shores on the southern tip of what would later be called Florida. From that estimated date of about 900 AD, those who stayed established homes and multiplied themselves for six centuries. Then other men, who had multiplied on the European continent, learned to build very large ships and attach to their masts great woven cloths to catch the wind, so that they propelled themselves out into and across a great ocean until they came to Caribbean islands and then to the mainland shores of America. And so, as tribes of peoples in all parts of the world had always done, the newcomers and the older settlers clashed with each other.

Internecine conflicts within each group expanded to wars between the more distinctive cultures. Over the next three centuries there were pirates, scavengers, outlaws, runaway slaves, squatters, bootleggers, bank robbers, and a few cult leaders infiltrating the mysterious wilderness inhabited by the small families of Everglade dwellers, who were scavengers themselves of the shipwrecks just off the southern shores. As the populations of all sides grew, conflicts waxed and waned. There were skirmishes, murders, ambushes, massacres. The more peaceful interludes were times when larger wars in far-away places distracted the ever-encroaching white settlers.

As Spanish claim to the land of Florida gave way to English claim which gave way finally to American claim, in the early 1800s, new settlers pushed down into the new state. For another century there grew conflict between traditional glades dwellers, new farmers, cattlemen, hunters and fishermen, railroad builders, then developers, and—always—more outlaws and fugitives, then politicians. As early as 1839, while "Indian wars" continued, John J. Audubon visited Indian Key and began painting images of the beautiful birds. A few US military forts and small civilian cities were built along both east and west coasts, but the interior of the vast, wet, "river of (saw)grass" remained unexplored as late as the early 1900s. As curiosity and the desire to "use" the mysterious inland swamp grew, a few individuals (or "committees") attempted to learn what was "in there."

In 1899 Frank Cushing became the first archeologist to come upon large burial mounds on Marco Island from which he was able to build a story of the earliest human life in the area. And for the next century the lower half of Florida was loved almost to death. New settlers loved the beaches, the orange, lemon, lime, grapefruit, mango, avocado, and palm trees, the sunshine and warm escape from northern climates, the fishing and hunting. Cities expanded. Developers built hotels, schools, churches, and homes for every budget. A fashion industry grew of making hats and other clothing decorated with plumes from the beautiful egrets and other wading birds, which were then slaughtered by hunters, both Indian and independent scavengers. Meanwhile, well-meaning "planners" dug canals to reallocate water from the glades to where they thought it was "needed." The dried saw grass caught fire and was killed. Farms were established in the new dry grounds of dead saw grass, resulting in fertilizer pollution to the previously clean, sweet water. Deer and water animals died by the thousands. Meanwhile, at the advent of the automobile, two major highways were constructed across the middle glades which blocked the water flow into the southernmost tip, drying it to dangerous levels and killing more alligators and beautiful swamp birds.

It took intermittent hurricanes to demonstrate the disastrous consequences of man-made interference with the nature of such a vast landscape ecosystem of water, plant life, and animal habitat. Effort to reverse as much of the damage as possible began in the late 1930s after a US Geological Survey and Agricultural Department Soil Conservation Service produced the first official mapping and scientific study of the area. In 1947, as Marjorie Stoneman Douglas published her monumental manuscript of exhaustive research, the Everglades National Park had just been officially established. As of the final postscript in the book's 1997 edition, recovery was mixed. To know the Everglades National Park is to love it. To read its history in this beautifully written book, is only to love it more.

Rob Saunders says

A difficult read for me (hard truths expounded in overwhelming detail) but I view this book as an essential chronicle of Florida human and natural history. The story of the Everglades is a conservationist's nightmare; the battles for it's control an American heartbreak. MSD's writing roller-coasters between tediously ground detail, becomes newsreel-ish in places, has some flow issues with numerous flashbacks that detract from the story (though included for historical accuracy), yet at times the prose becomes crystalline and soaring, astonishingly satisfying. The book is the American story of continent and culture, an examination of the

prehistoric and near past, the present, and frankly (a half century past it's publication in 1947) prescient of the future. MSD's work is an essential gift - an extraordinary lifetime achievement.

Matthew Harris says

"There are no other Everglades in the world..."

Then Douglas describes the Everglades for us and tells us how they came to be, even how Florida came to be from an underwater expanse before the ice ages to what we see now, how people came to Florida and lived there, to the coming of the Spanish explorers. A very nicely done concise history for those interested in these things. Along the way, people decided that this large 'swamp' was a waste of space, better to drain it and make it useful. After draining much of the Everglades, the land dried out, turned to dust and blew away, then caught fire, with fires that wouldn't go out for months.

"Anybody could see, in this time between two wars, that the Everglades had been changed. There were more changes coming. The Everglades were dying." (page 348-349) then on page 385...
"The rain came again over the Glades in the summer of 1946. There were no fires. In the blackened and burned-down soil, thin spears of the indomitable saw grass thrust up again, faintly green. There were tender leaves here and there in the burned-out hammocks. Over the ancient course of the saw-grass river the rain drummed and blew. Water in widening pools lay over the destruction like the mercy of God."

Making the Everglades a National Park didn't save it entirely. There are still problems to be solved. I recently spent a month in the 'Glades and loved it, and this book helped greatly in understanding what I was seeing. There is still the issue of how much water to let in and when. The sugar cane growers are in competition with the Everglades for water, and the invasive Burmese pythons are exterminating all the smaller mammals. The whole time there, I never saw a squirrel or raccoon, they are almost gone. Seems that when people try to fix what Mother Nature is doing 'wrong' then things don't go well.

This is an excellent book, I recommend it for anyone interested in nature and environmental issues, in Florida history, or our National Parks in general.

Sugarpuss says

I read this book after reading Michael Grunwald's THE SWAMP (It was deemed required reading by Mr Grunwald) so I think I was expecting something different from this book. While I know you cannot tell the story of the Everglades without including the recklessness of humans, I was interested much more in the descriptions of the Everglades than I was about the people living in them. This is truly a love letter to the 'River of Grass,' but I could've lived without some of the unnecessary tangents Ms Douglass chose to take us down. All in all though, I am glad I read it. We need more people like Ms Douglass to care about such things others take for granted & outright ignore.

Sharon Thomas says

I hate to criticize a classic, but here goes. I think that at least half of the book could have been cut, with no damage to its impact. There are major sections that are only marginally related to the Everglades (Spanish

explorers reaching South America and the islands, for example).

The vast middle section is devoted to depictions of fierce, brown people with rippling muscles and innate characteristics. I know that we have to read this in the context of attitudes when it was written, but it is still quite disappointing. Here is a ridiculous, but typical, example. Describing the corn dance ceremony: “The black drink was so quickly emetic that the men walked from the Square Ground to vomit, that habit which all Indians seem to exercise with ease.”

Some of the information on plants and evolution of man’s presence in Florida has been rendered obsolete by subsequent discoveries. I found this to be distracting because I couldn’t be sure which information is still considered to be accurate and which is not.

The book is strongest at the end, where she constructs an indictment of the Army Corps of Engineers, agricultural interests and others for almost killing the Everglades. However, there is a *much* better book on that topic called The Swamp, by Michael Grunwald.

So, we are all indebted to the author for writing it, and thereby altering the fate of the Everglades, but I think that it has limited appeal today. Consider reading it as a slice of history, but I’m not sure it’s worth the time.

Paul Haspel says

The Everglades exist in their present form – as a contiguous national park protected by the power and dignity of the United States Government – in large part because of this book. When Marjory Stoneman Douglas wrote *The Everglades: River of Grass* in 1947, the “river of grass” that is the Everglades faced enormous pressure from developers eager to profit from the rapid population growth then taking place in South Florida. This book is a good example of how the right author, composing the right book at the right time, can change the world.

The Everglades: River of Grass was written and published as part of Farrar & Rinehart’s *Rivers of America* series that drew upon the talents of literary artists to convey the history of the United States of America in a poetic manner by telling the stories of the nation’s rivers. The books of the series, published between 1937 and 1974, are of great value for students of American regionalism, and have been widely republished by university presses and small regional publishers across the nation. As a Marylander, I am glad to have read the Maryland-related volumes in the series – Hulbert Footner’s *Rivers of the Eastern Shore: Seventeen Maryland Rivers* (1944) and Frederick Gutheim’s *The Potomac* (1949); and whatever part of the U.S.A. you hail from, live in, or identify with, there is a *Rivers of America* volume for you. Floridians may read *The Everglades: River of Grass* with special pride, but this is a book for everyone who appreciates the beauty of the U.S.A.’s wild regions and wants to see that beauty preserved.

Douglas, a *Miami Herald* journalist and freelance writer, lent her pen, her courage, and her critical insights to many subjects, including women’s rights and civil rights – not easy topics for a woman author to engage in the mid-20th century South. But it is for her environmentally related writings generally, and for *The Everglades: River of Grass* specifically, that she is best remembered.

Douglas starts by considering the Everglades’ very beginnings in geological and hydrological terms, arguing persuasively that the Glades are not a “swamp,” as many would say, but rather “one thick enormous curving river of grass….It reaches one hundred miles from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico, fifty, sixty, even seventy miles wide. No one has ever fought his way along its full length….There is no other river like it” (p.

10). From her initial consideration of the Glades as landscape, riverscape, and wildlife habitat, Douglas moves on to discuss the human history of the Everglades: the region's original Native American inhabitants, European explorers, Spanish adventurers and conquerors, the Americans who took over when the U.S.A. purchased Florida from Spain, the wars in which the Seminole people resisted the U.S. Army's efforts to forcibly relocate them to the West, the American Civil War, and finally the impact of large-scale settlement in the region during the post-war era.

Throughout these historical passages, Douglas speaks of the past as something that foreshadows the present, as when she writes of a beach that Ponce de Leon visited without taking much notice of, somewhere around modern Cape Canaveral, sometime in 1513:

"Except perhaps for a few houses now, if we knew where the exact place was, bathers here and there, or a man surf fishing, perhaps a dog running happily, this beach has hardly changed in essence throughout all the centuries, although not so very far inland between towns, billboards, filling stations and tourist cabins now runs that amazing highway U.S. 1" (p. 100).

As Douglas points out, the human wish to "improve" the Everglades, usually by draining it and destroying all that is valuable and unique about its ecosystem, goes all the way back to Florida's entry into the Union in 1845, when American veterans of the U.S. Army's wars against the Seminole people a decade earlier "remembered now with pleasure the sea about those southern beaches and the sun glinting along the great levels of the saw grass, the unending openness, the great light, the fine air….The idea sprang up spontaneously that the Everglades ought to be drained. It was an idea more explosive than dynamite, which would change this lower Florida world as nothing had so changed it since the melting of the glacial ice four thousand years ago" (p. 253).

The Civil War interrupted that impulse toward destroying the Everglades; but in the post-war years, as powerful industrialists like Henry M. Flagler and Henry B. Plant continued to extend railroads ever farther southward along the great peninsula that is Florida, the drive to drain the Everglades continued – usually with little or no consideration of the possible impact of Everglades drainage upon the entire region. Douglas points out with rueful accuracy that "in all those years of talk and excitement about drainage, the only argument was a schoolboy's logic. The drainage of the Everglades would be a Great Thing. Americans did Great Things. Therefore Americans would drain the Everglades" (p. 286).

Against the boom-and-bust economic cycle that characterized the first half of the 20th century, it went unnoticed for a time, as the cities of South Florida grew and grew and kept on drawing upon the Glades as a water source, that "The Everglades were dying. The endless acres of saw grass, brown as an enormous shadow where rain and lake water had once flowed, rustled dry" (p. 349). Once-fresh water went brackish or dried up altogether; terrible fires ravaged the land that had been thus dried out. It is no wonder that Douglas calls the last chapter of this book "The Eleventh Hour," or that she concludes by calling upon private industry and state and federal authorities to respect the testimony of the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey regarding what needs to be done to save the Glades. As Douglas puts it in her conclusion, "Perhaps even in this last hour…the vast, magnificent, subtle and unique region of the Everglades may not be utterly lost" (p. 385).

In 1947, not long after *The Everglades: River of Grass* was published, U.S. President Harry S Truman signed legislation making possible the purchase of private land within the boundaries of Everglades National Park, giving the then-13-year-old park continuous undisturbed wilderness for the first time, and improving this ecosystem's chances of survival. Like Rachel Carson's later book *Silent Spring* (1962), this is a book that made a vital difference for the cause of environmentalism nationwide and worldwide.

I have toured the Everglades twice. The first time, we were in an airboat at the northern end of the Glades, close to the Miccosukee Nation; when our guide would stop the airboat, alligators would swim up through

the sawgrass, hoping for a treat. The second time, at the Flamingo Visitor Center at the park’s southern end, my wife and I saw two manatees, a mother and a calf, drinking fresh water from a water pipe that jutted out over the brackish water of the Glades. The mother would watch her baby take a turn at drinking the sweet fresh water, and then she would take a turn. Not far away, on an old canal bank by a jeep trail, we could just see a good-sized American crocodile as it basked in the sun, looking for all the world like a dinosaur at rest.

On both occasions, however, I could not help looking to the horizon, to the east and northeast, and reflecting that every day, nearly one thousand people move to Florida. The South Florida metropolitan counties of Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach have a combined population of almost seven million; and cities like Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and West Palm Beach, with all their numerous associated suburbs, will continue to grow. The challenge of preserving the Everglades, and other irreplaceable wilderness areas across the U.S.A., continues today. Marjory Stoneman Douglas would want all of us to embrace that challenge.

Sean says

I was staying at a friend's house and was looking for something to read. He handed me this. I read it pretty much straight through -- most of the best US writing is non-fiction, and this is a good example.

It begins with a natural history of the Everglades, going into geology, weather patterns, ecology, etc. She even throws in a flashback to the Age of Mammals for us paleo-freaks.

Then she deals with the human history of the Everglades. It is a remarkable story, full of vivid characters, and the author's fundamental humanism shines through in her treatment of the ongoing conflict in the area.

The book ends with a description of the dangers facing the Everglades when the book was written, and a couple of recently-written addendum's bringing us up-to-date.

Frequently distressing, always beautifully written, deeply thoughtful and humane.

David says

As a native Floridian, this essential 1947 classic was very moving, and one I'm sad that I never read while I lived there. It's hard to overstate the importance of this book which, in the first chapter, creates a scene in the Everglades so vividly that you feel like you're there. She also states in this chapter a fact that was mind boggling at the time: The Everglades are not just a swamp, but a slow moving river covered with swamp grass. The last two chapters describe the conquering white man's ignorance of the nature of the 'glades, and the willful and aggressive attempts to drain it - all while proving ineffective but still coming close to ruining the Everglades for years to come. The book premiered the same year as the Everglades National Park. History has shown that this is still a battle, but her book may have bought Florida's most precious resource some time. Sandwiched in between these chapters is a fairly comprehensive history of Florida (not just the 'Glades) from prehistoric times through present day. At times, I think she dwells too much on this, taking away from her main point, but that doesn't take away the importance of this book, and the fact that it is quite enjoyable.

Isaac Jensen says

The first part of this book was an amazing exploration of the natural history of the Everglades. The rest of the book was a slog of names and dates, telling the story of its violent colonization and exploitation, ending with a (faintly) hopeful portrait of what must be done to save this national treasure and the people who live around it. Overall, I'm glad I read it, but am also glad to be finished, and might recommend that people read only the first 100 pages or so, before the book gets bogged down in historical minutiae.

Jean says

My book club is doing a reread of this book. I first read it when I came to Florida in 1982. Douglas is such a gracious writer and poet. Her verse is strong with color and you can feel like you're in the Everglades while you read. I also appreciated the afterward by Grunwold. He let's us know that once we knew what we had [or maybe we didn't] we just haven't been able to get it right. I now live, boat and swim near the mouth of the St Lucie River. Over the years even I can see the changes in the lagoons and waterways from the Big O runoff. The Everglades continues to be an amazing area we need to treasure and preserve

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