



The River

Helen Humphreys

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We tend to look at landscape in relation to what it can do for us. Does it move us with its beauty? Can we make a living from it? But what if we examined a landscape on its own terms, freed from our expectations and assumptions?

This is what celebrated writer Helen Humphreys sets out to do in this stunning, groundbreaking examination of place. For more than a decade Humphreys has owned a small waterside property on a section of the Napanee River in Ontario. In the watchful way of writers, she has studied her little piece of the river through the seasons and the years, cataloguing its ebb and flows, the plants and creatures that live in and round it, the signs of human usage at its banks and on its bottom.

The River is the result, a gorgeous and moving meditation that uses fiction, non-fiction, natural history, archival maps and images, and stunning full-color photographs to get at the truth. In doing this, Humphreys has created a work of startling originality that is sure to become a new Canadian classic.

The River Details

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Author : Helen Humphreys

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Genre : Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Autobiography, Memoir, Cultural, Canada, Science, Natural History

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From Reader Review The River for online ebook

Tracy says

This is a physically beautiful little book, full of gorgeous photos of the river that is its subject, as well as archival material and artifacts. It is a delight to hold (something I appreciate in hard copy books), with a good size and weight and nice paper stock. Given the package, I really wanted to love the writing as well. There are some wonderful nuggets, but ultimately I found it fell short of my hopes.

The first chapter, "Beginnings" was promising - a series of possible beginnings for the book, many quite lovely, and each setting a slightly different tone and capturing a different aspect of the river. I found it an intriguing way to introduce and explore the many human and natural facets that a river brings together, much like tributaries flowing into a main branch.

The remainder of the book consists of an alternating series of short fictional vignettes about characters interacting with the river and its surrounding ecosystem throughout history, along with essays describing the human and natural history of the river. It is an interesting structural idea, but it didn't play out quite the way I hoped it would. I found the vignettes too short to get very invested in the characters. They were also somewhat repetitive and heavy handed in their theme of people feeling remorse for exploiting the non-human denizens of the river. The essays were interesting, but not compelling. After the promise of the first chapter, I was hoping for more poetic sensibility and lyrical language to draw me into the environment. There were glimmers, but in general, I found the essays to be more straight-forward and factual.

Overall, The River was an enjoyable read, but suffered from not living up to my expectations.

Rebecca says

(2.5) Humphreys has lived along Ontario's Napanee River for over a decade. I was expecting a blend of personal reflection and natural observations, but instead the book is mostly composed of brief fictional passages illuminating a handful of species: cattails, the cabbage white butterfly, cardinal flowers, the great blue heron, and so on.

I liked the passages about the heron best – Humphreys successfully imagines the life of a plume hunter and contrasts it with the excitement of two women involved in the foundation of a bird conservation charity (see *The Year of Necessary Lies* for more on this topic). However, much of the book felt like unconnected vignettes, not building to any kind of grander picture of a location.

The book is richly illustrated, but my Kindle download does not do justice to the images and makes the layout look screwy. Reading this in print would likely be a much better experience, more like looking through a historical photo album. I also enjoyed the lists: of species (by kingdom), and of the random objects the river has brought Humphreys over the years. I've heard good things about her writing, so wouldn't rule out trying out more of her books even though this one didn't quite live up to expectations.

Orla Hegarty says

A new genre to me by Ms. Humphreys. She is an excellent writer and this was a different sort of book for me

to read but I enjoyed it.

Mj says

“The river flashes black and shiny, coiling between winter trees. In another few months it will be hidden by rushes and swamp grass, will glide silently through the bog under a shroud of burgeoning green.” The River by Helen Humphreys begins - a book to be savoured, full of gorgeous descriptions of Depot Creek, one of the headwaters of the Napanee River in Ontario.

Lovely and unique describe this book but this sounds far more saccharine than the book really is. I think creative, contemplative, wide ranging and well written are much more suited to the overall impact of the book. This is my first Helen Humphrey’s read but it definitely will not be my last. Her writing is sublime and for anyone to elevate a book about a river to this degree is definitely a writer worth reading.

Tama Baldwins’s great photography needs mentioning as well. The light and the life that she captures on film about the river are integral to the book and support Humphrey’s vision for this book. Humphreys also includes other photographs, historical documents, illustrations and other archived materials along with her prose.

“The book is richly illustrated . . . But most important to the book is the linkage that holds this all together: the writing.” — The Province.

Humphreys writes about the river from its beginnings when the Algonquin nation travelled on it and lived alongside it. She also includes Europeans who immigrated to the area, cleared the scrub and forest in order to settle and build their homesteads. They also brought flora and customs from their old world and introduced them to the area. Humphreys continues documenting the changes up to and including the present day; on the river she canoes regularly, and makes evident in the book that she loves dearly. It is a fascinating, thoughtful and well-researched tribute to a river about its own ever changing his/herstory, so full of life and constantly in flux.

With Humphrey’s superb investigative and writing prowess, the river really comes alive. It is a full-blown, extremely multi-dimensional character in constant flux with a past, present and future. She describes many of its characteristics as if the river was a person. Her intimate knowledge of the river, its flora and fauna, beside and inside the river is evident. She has watched the river through every season for many years and has canoed alone on the river as far as she could go. It is almost as if Helen Humphreys is sharing her love affair with the river. Sounds a bit overly sentimental – yes, but that is the awe, the wonder, the joy and yes the love that Humphreys conveys in her very personal story of the river.

In the following link <http://ecwpress.com/products/river-1> you will read what the publisher ECW Press - a Canadian Indie Publisher that was an offshoot of a literary magazine called Essays on Canadian Writing has to say about the River by Helen Humphreys in its description on their website. They also include some selective and excellent synopses of the book by major reviewers.

The Malahat Review, which I read after the fact, suggested that for best appreciation of The River to read The Evening Chorus first. I have it in my hands to read as I write. I cannot imagine how much more I would have enjoyed and appreciated The River if I had followed the correct order but plan to reread it soon and find out.

The Literary Review of Canada writes - “Its untarnished eloquence smites the reader on a level of intimate

innocence so beautiful that at times it leaves the reader breathless . . . Despite her many awards, Helen Humphreys is an under-appreciated writer who runs as quiet as subterranean as water.”

I have also included another favourable review in The Toronto Star by a compatriot author Robert Wiersema. “Threaded through the book are short pieces of fiction, between anecdote and story, in which we see not only how the river can figure in fiction, but how a gifted writer can make use of the raw material of the world around her.” See Wiersema’s full review below:

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment...>

I hope my own words do The River justice. It is a 4 1/2 star book in my opinion, and perhaps I am mistaken by rounding it down rather than up. This is primarily due to its petite size and not the impact it delivered. I think the publisher sings it praises well when it starts the book description with “**A breathtaking mix of observation, prose, natural history, and art.**” This pretty much sums up this well-researched and beautifully written book in a few but very accurate and all-encompassing words. The River by Helen Humphreys is pure pleasure to read and savour.

Stephanie says

This is another jewel from Helen Humphreys, as immersive and captivating as The Frozen Thames (although the books are quite different). It's not a novel but it's novelistic; it's not a naturalist guide but it's a study of nature around a site. It also maps the historical geography of a place, and ties present to past. My only criticism is that it was too short -- but that's part of it's charm. Make sure to get the print version because the presentation and images are lovely (same goes for The Frozen Thames).

CynthiaA says

This is a lovely wee book. Pretty inside and out. Full of wisdom and reflection in all forms of prose and poetry. This book is a piece of art that makes you look at all rivers differently. More mindfully. My favourite bit was where she contemplates the river's potential for intelligence. Wonderful, pensive, relaxing and lovely to look at. This will be on display on my shelves for awhile.

Meg Morden says

An interesting combination of memoir, nature journal, historical research and historical short fiction.

Karen says

What an unusual little book. Part memoir, part essay, part fiction, all poetry.

Helen Humphreys is a lovely writer, one of those people who sees all and squirrels it away, letting it percolate until it emerges as something profound and pretty. There are lots of lovely turns of phrases here, and lots of slow, immersive moments, where you feel you're sitting on the bank or submerged in the murky

river water with Humphreys.

The short fiction was the weakest link for me, but still so inventive and I loved the juxtaposition of the factual with the imagined. It brought a whole new level of understanding and experience to read about an inhabitant of the river, or its banks, and then see that specimen show up in a little piece.

Deborah Sowery-Quinn says

A small lyrical book about the river that Humphreys has a cottage on (Napanee River). Along with Humphreys' observations about the river, its' seasons & wildlife, there are fictional (historical fiction really) pieces about life as it was connected to the river at various times in history. I couldn't put this book down. As someone who loves the water & would love such an idyllic setting, this book just flowed into my body like the river itself.

Beverly says

What a beautiful book! Helen Humphreys artfully tells the story of the Napanee Rive as experienced from her cottage on Depot Creek at Bellrock, Ontario. Observations, musings, short stories, photos, sketches and artifacts are woven together in one book to tell a story of this river over time.

Joanne says

This lovely little book is a meditation on nature, in a way that I haven't seen before. A combination of short fiction, essays on flora and fauna, and recollections of moments with the river, it was achingly beautiful to read. I wanted to close my eyes and drift downriver in a canoe, feeling the breeze waft over me and listening to the birds and insects go about their days.

The photos and illustrations were perfectly matched to the words. This is a treasure of a book.

Pat says

It's a beautifully made book, ie: cover art, photos. I wasn't that impressed with the prose.

Kiirstin says

This book is lovely and melancholy and exceedingly beautiful, both in prose and as a physical item. In addition to Humphreys' perfect ear for a descriptive turn of phrase, the photographs and drawings she has included perfectly round out the package. Recommended for anyone who loves beautiful words and is interested in history, natural history, and the attempt to peer into the heart of something so prosaic and so unknowable as a river.

More here at the blog.

Sarah says

This book was quite lovely, beautiful photographs that really took me back to my childhood living out in the country. I enjoyed reading most of the passages, very description and put me in a generally "feel-good" and content mood.

The picture on the pages before the acknowledgements really stood out to me, I looked at it for a good 5 minutes, just enjoying the sight of falling snow on that house. This will definitely be a book I'm keeping in my collection to look through and enjoy again.

*I received this book from a goodreads giveaway.

Julie says

This is a gorgeous book in every way. Humphreys writing is luminous; the material in the book reminded me of Williams's Refuge. The design of the book is stunningly; full color, gorgeous photos and art work, am small, square book. The River is an extraordinary aesthetic object in every way. I wish I had written it, made it, but I am happy to have read it.
