

# The Myth of the River: American Rivers and American Literature



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Austin Water - Center for Environmental Research



A Greek philosopher of the late 6th century BC, Heraclitus criticizes his predecessors and contemporaries for their failure to see the unity in experience and that all existence is in flux or change.

Plato indicates the source of the flux doctrine: "Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things go and nothing stays, and comparing existents to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river"

What Heraclitus actually said is the following:

“On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow.”

Understand?



American artistic engagement with rivers

The meaning of rivers for American culture



## American Literature and Art

-Fiction

-Non-Fiction

-Poetry

-Painting

-Music

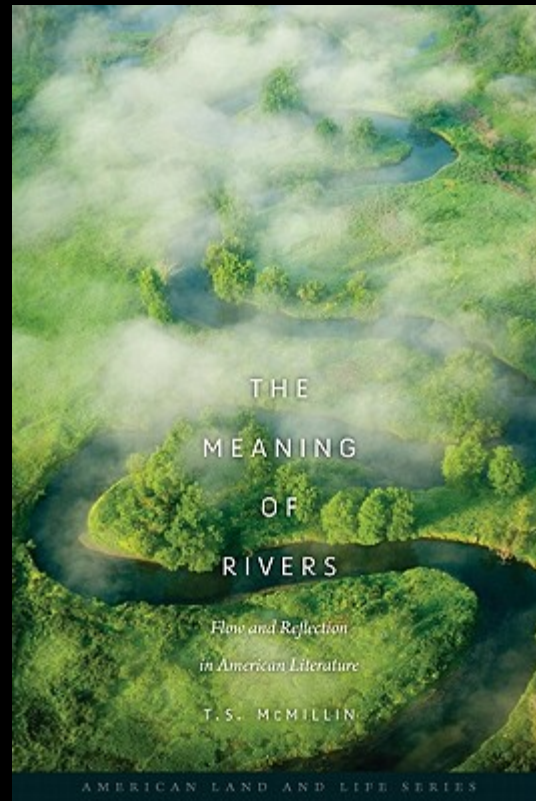


haunted**by**waters



FLY FISHING IN  
NORTH AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

Mark Browning



THE  
MEANING  
OF  
RIVERS

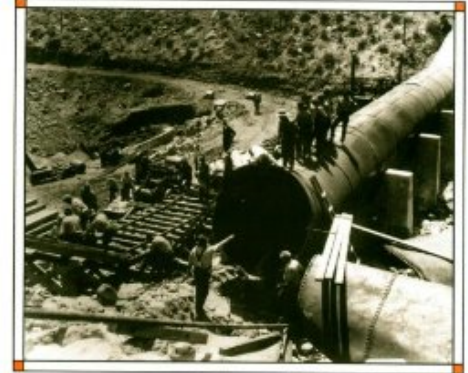
*Flow and Reflection  
in American Literature*

T. S. MCMILLIN

AMERICAN LAND AND LIFE SERIES

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# RIVERS OF EMPIRE



*Water, Aridity, and the Growth  
of the American West*

DONALD WORSTER

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## Rural Arcadia

### Hudson River School Early 1800s

The Hudson River School was a mid-19th century American art movement embodied by a group of landscape painters whose aesthetic vision was influenced by romanticism. The paintings for which the movement is named depict the Hudson River Valley and the surrounding area.

**Thomas Cole (1801-1848)**

**Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)**



## Urban Romantic

### Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set!

drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me;

Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!

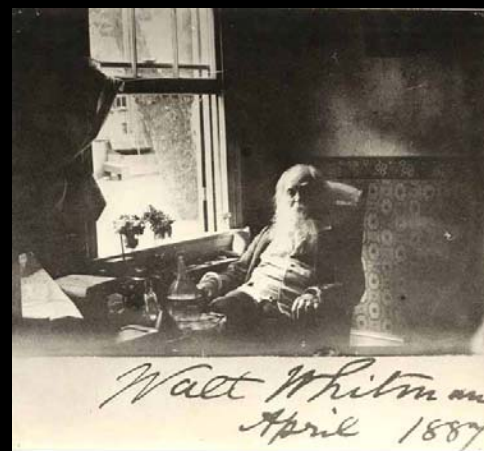
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!—stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!

Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!

Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!



Walt Whitman 1819-1892



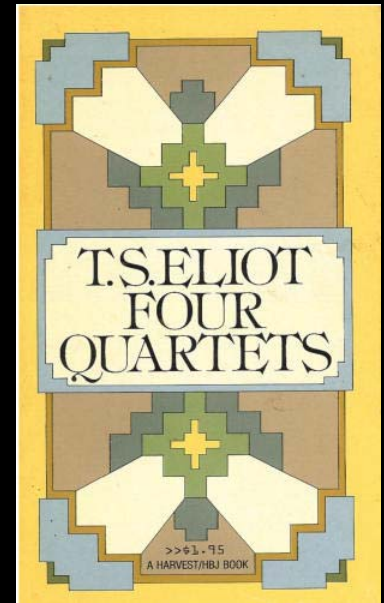
## T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets

### The Dry Salvages

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river  
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,

Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier;  
Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce;  
Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.  
The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten  
By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.  
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder  
Of what men choose to forget. Unhonored, unpropitiated  
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting.  
His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,  
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,  
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,  
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

### Mythical River





## Langston Hughes

### The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than  
The flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

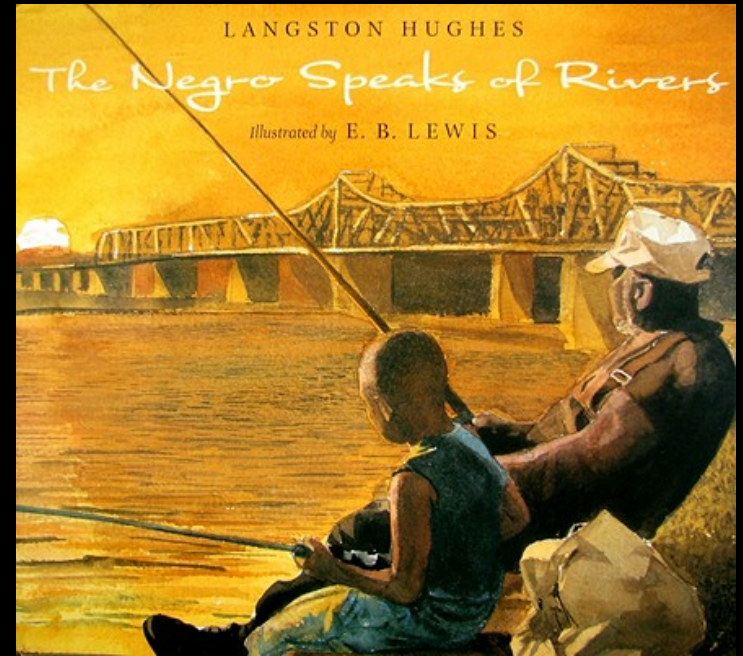
Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its

Muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.



"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was composed in 1920 on the train to Mexico when Hughes was still in his teens (eighteen to be exact), and published a year later in Crisis.

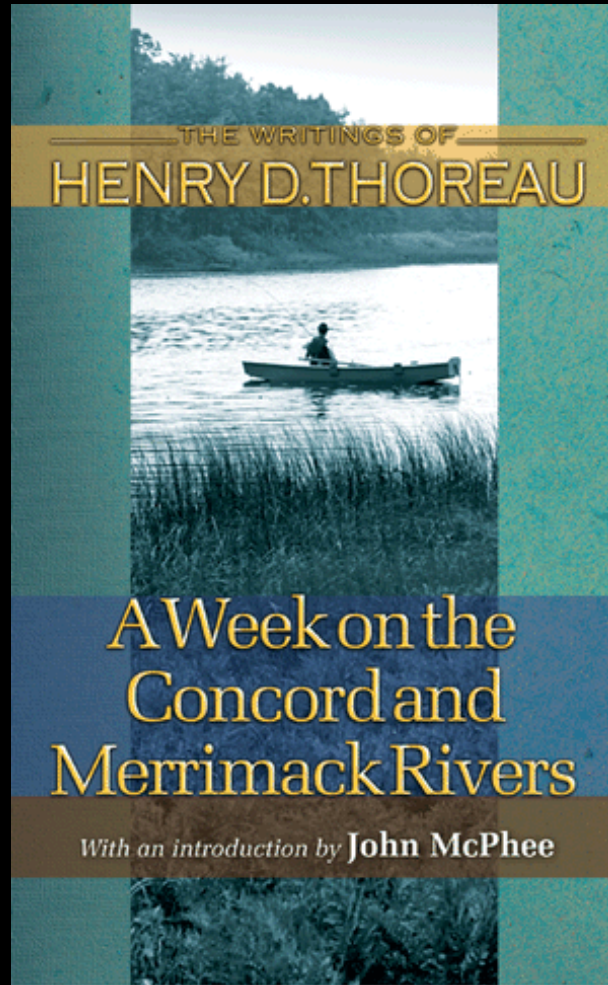




1817-1862

Published 1849

(Walden 1854)



## Exploration and Reflection

I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made; the weeds at the bottom gently bending down the stream, shaken by the watery wind, still planted where their seeds had sunk, but ere long to die and go down likewise; the shining pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips and weeds, and occasional logs and stems of trees that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at last I resolved to launch myself on its bosom and float whither it would bear me.

*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* relates the two-week boating and hiking trip that Thoreau and his brother John took through Massachusetts and New Hampshire in 1839. As John had died from tetanus in 1842, Thoreau wrote the book as a tribute to his memory

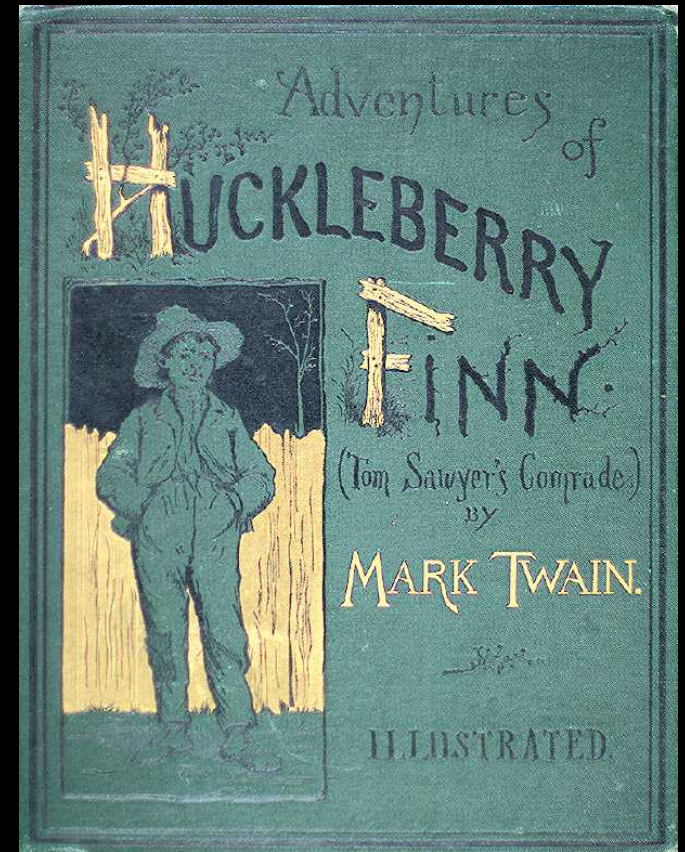
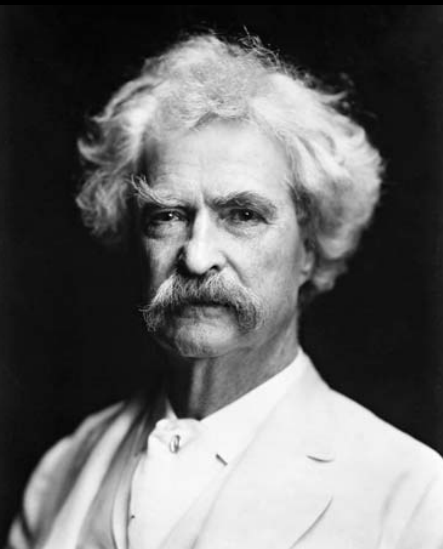
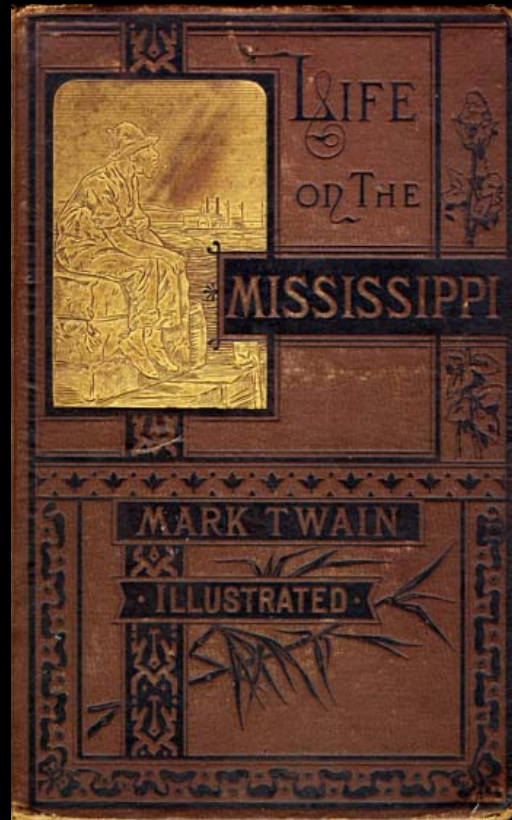


Mark Twain

1835-1910

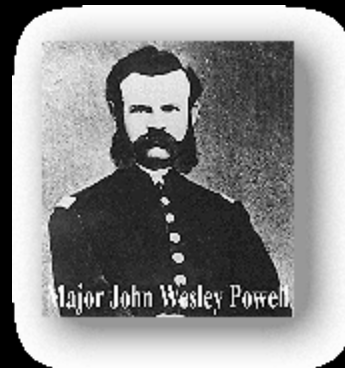
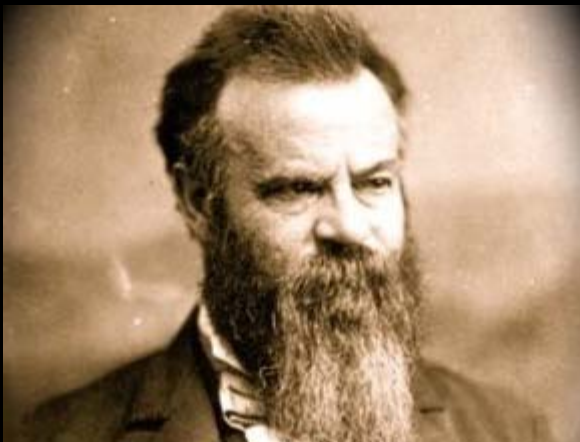
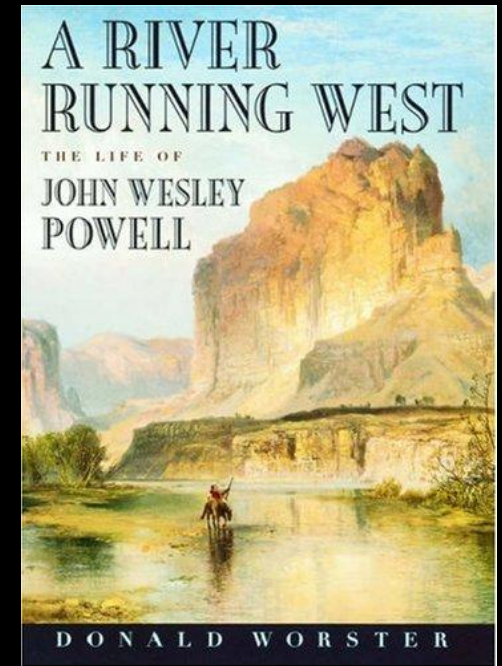
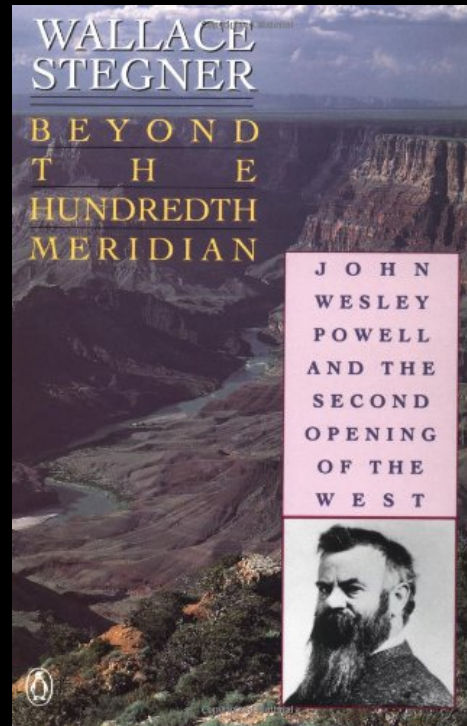
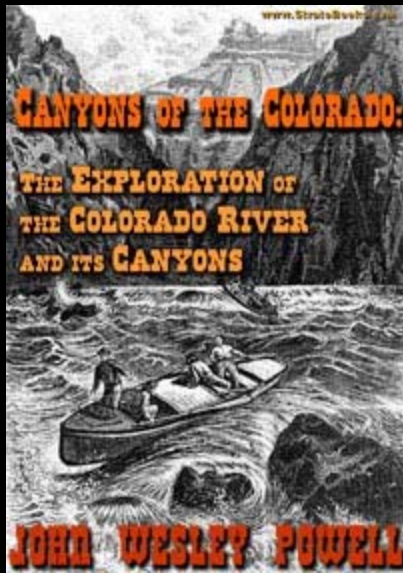
*Life on the Mississippi* is a memoir of his days as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River before the American Civil War, and also a travel book, recounting his trip along the Mississippi many years after the War.

Published 1883



Published 1884

BUT the basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION. All the other parts are but members, important in themselves, yet more important in their relations to this.



John Wesley Powell  
1834-1902

## Rivers and Remembrance

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

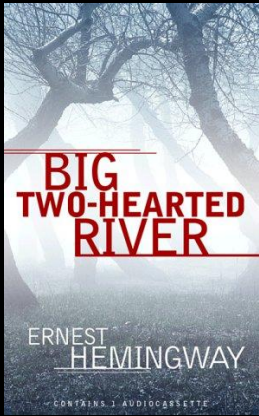
"**Big Two-Hearted River**" is a two-part short story written by American author Ernest Hemingway published in 1925 in his first collection of stories, *In Our Time*.

The story is generally viewed as an account of a healing process for Nick Adams, recently returned from WWI. In the story, Nick returns to his boyhood activities of camping and fishing.

Hemingway use of the theory of omission allows him to present Nick's camping trip while the crux of the story is Nick's return to nature to heal from the devastation of war, which is never explicitly stated.

Nick looked down into the pool from the bridge. It was a hot day. A kingfisher flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout. They were very satisfactory. As the shadow of the kingfisher moved up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long angle, only his shadow marking the angle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and then, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the current, unresisting, to his post under the bridge where he tightened facing up into the current.

Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling.

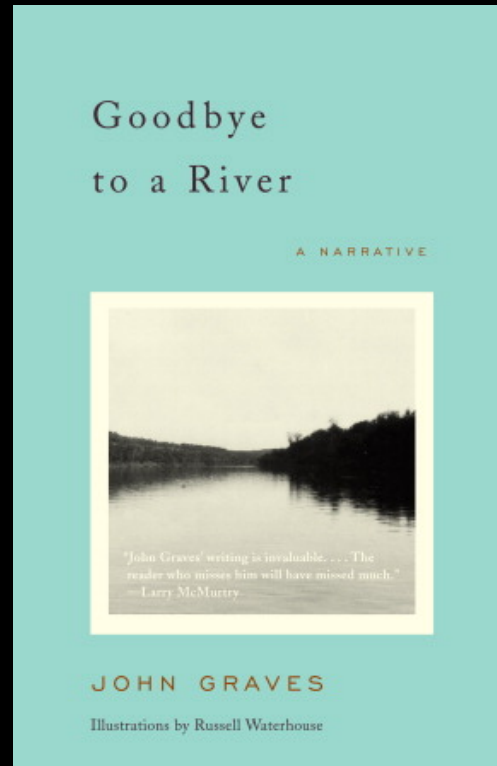
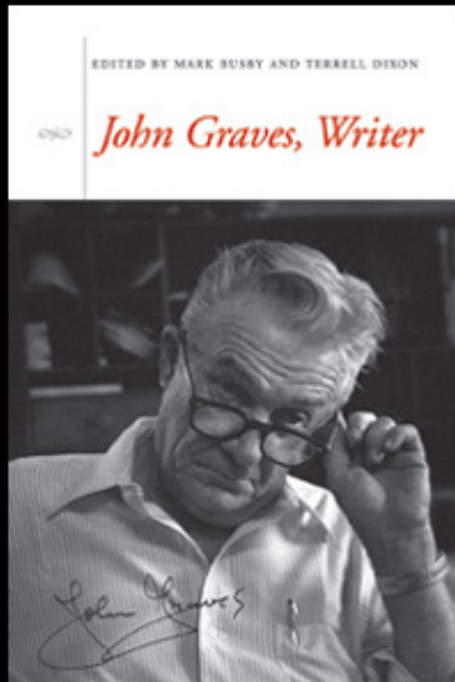


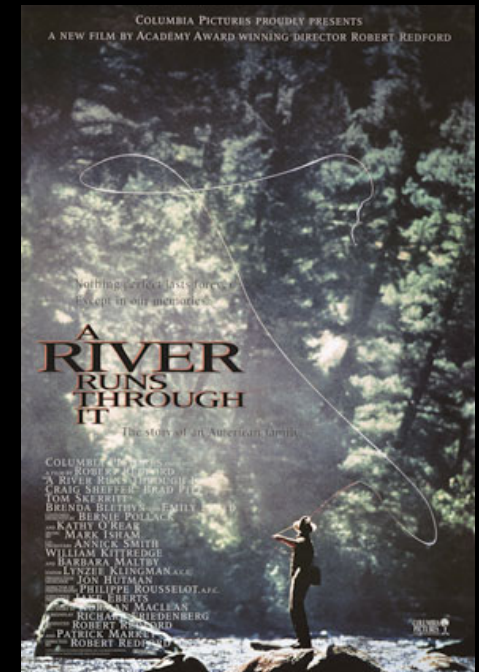
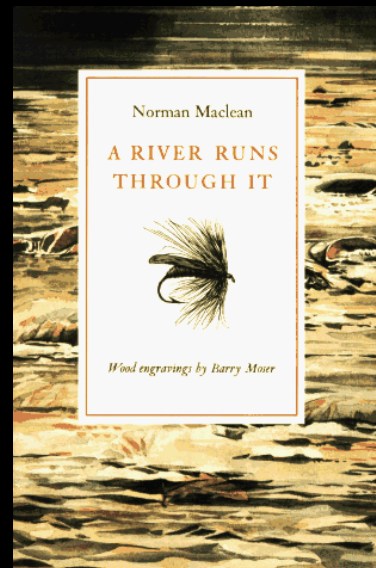
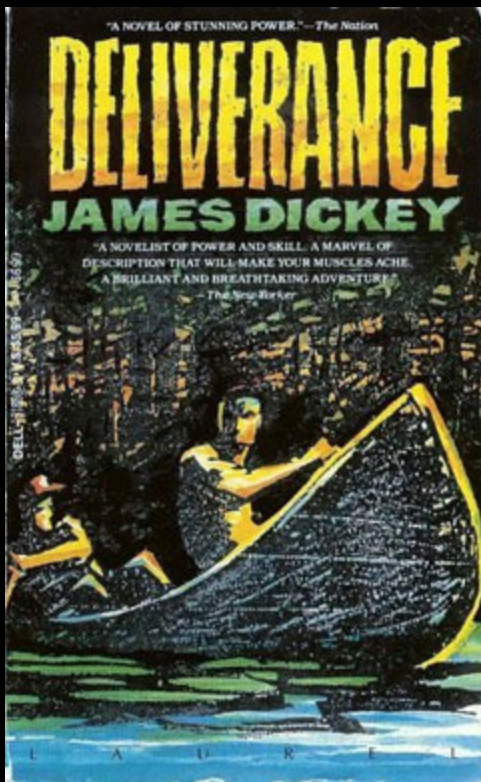
John Graves

*Goodbye to a River* (1960).

In the spring of 1957 Graves returned home to help care for his gravely ill father. In November of that year, Graves completed a three-week canoe trip down part of the Brazos River that he feared was about to be changed forever by dams.

His narrative chronicle of the trip was first published as a magazine article in *Holiday*, and later Graves added history, philosophy and folklore which resulted in his first major book, *Goodbye to a River* (1960). The book attracted national attention and critical praise for its original style.





Life Journeys

## Search for passage

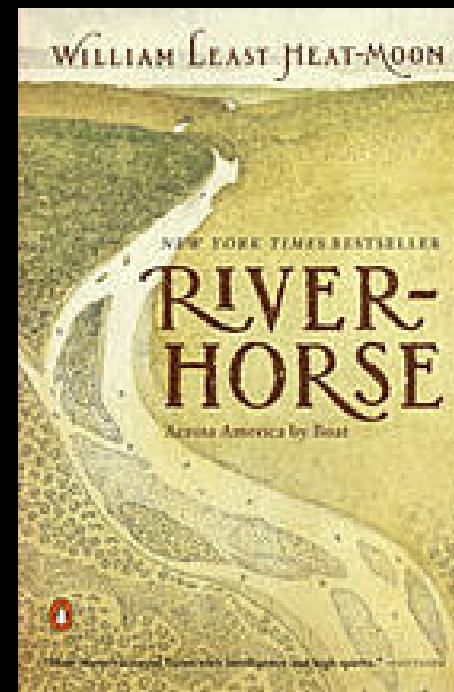
*RIVER-HORSE: Across America by Boat*

William Least Heat-Moon

"'And that's how it begins,' said my friend, a blue-water sailor, one whom I shall call Pilotis (rhymes with 'my lotus').

It wasn't, of course, the beginning, for who can say where voyage starts --- not the actual passage but the dream of a journey and its urge to find a way?

For this trip I can speak of a possible inception: I am a reader of maps, not usually nautical charts but road maps. I read them as others do holy writ, the same text again and again in quest of discoveries, and the books I've written each began with my gaze wandering over maps of American terrain."





## Contemporary Environmentalism - Endangered Landscapes and Wilderness

Edward Abbey

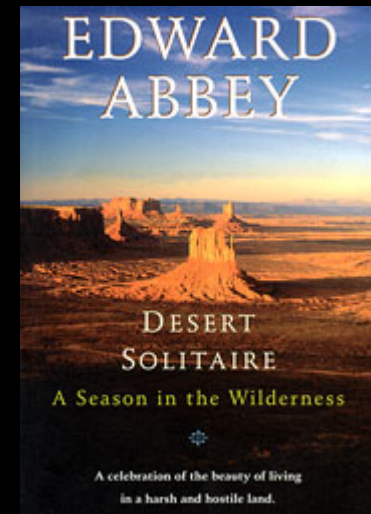
***Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*** is a literary nonfiction work by Edward Abbey (1927–89), published originally in 1968. (Chapter 12 Down the River)

In the hours and days of solitude on the river we hope to discover something quite different, to renew our affection for ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass.

The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here not only to escape for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us

A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself. If industrial man continues to multiply its numbers and expand his operations he will succeed in his apparent intention, to seal himself off from the natural and isolate himself within a synthetic prison of his own making. He will make himself an exile from the earth

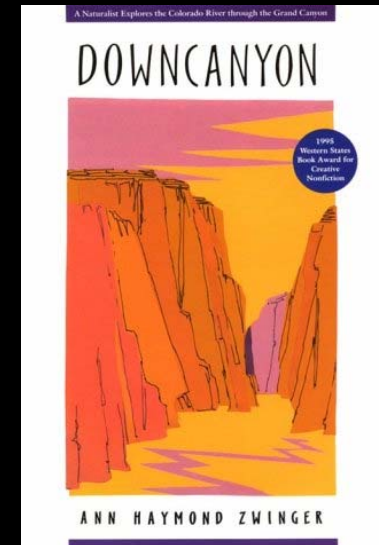
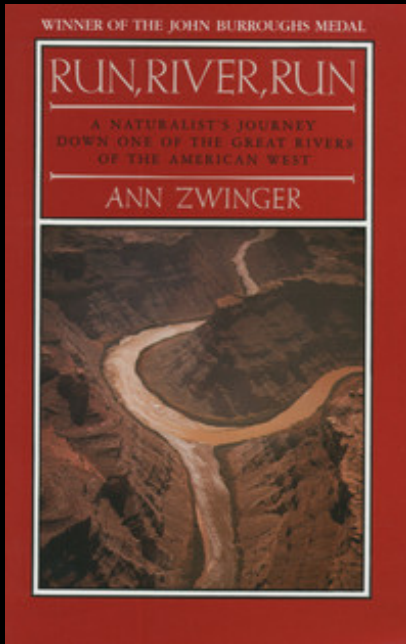
No, wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread



## Contemporary Environmentalism - Endangered Landscapes and Wilderness

“. . . a river is a peculiar and insidious affair that is not always what it seems  
and . . . it slides into other dimensions in lovely and mysterious ways”

- Ann Zwinger



Downcanyon: A Naturalist  
Explores the Colorado River  
Through Grand Canyon

The Green River – Wyoming – Utah – “how it relates to the landscape and how it goes and what it shows of rock and wind, how people have used it and how it has used people”

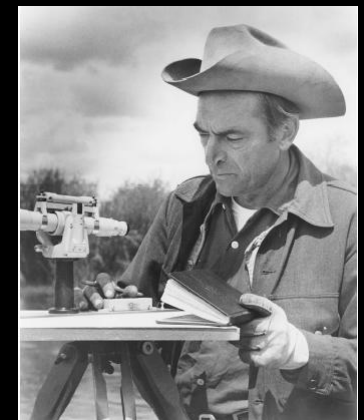
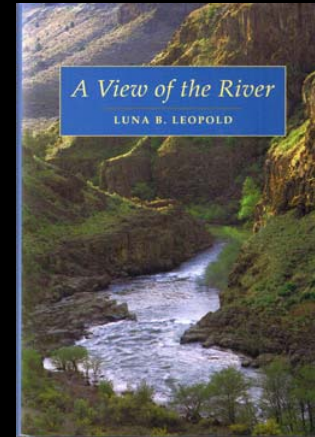
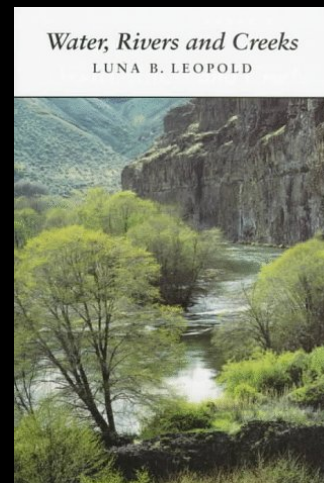
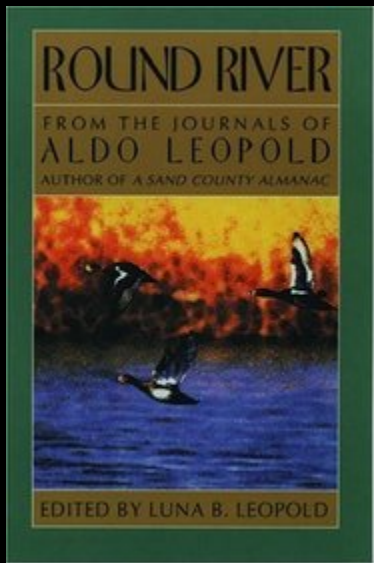
"One of the marvels of early Wisconsin was the Round River, a river that flowed into itself, and thus sped around and around in a never-ending circuit. Paul Bunyan discovered it, and the Bunyan saga tells how he floated many a log down its restless waters."

Aldo Leopold. *Round River*.

1887-1948

Metaphor for ecology –

Heraclitus ...



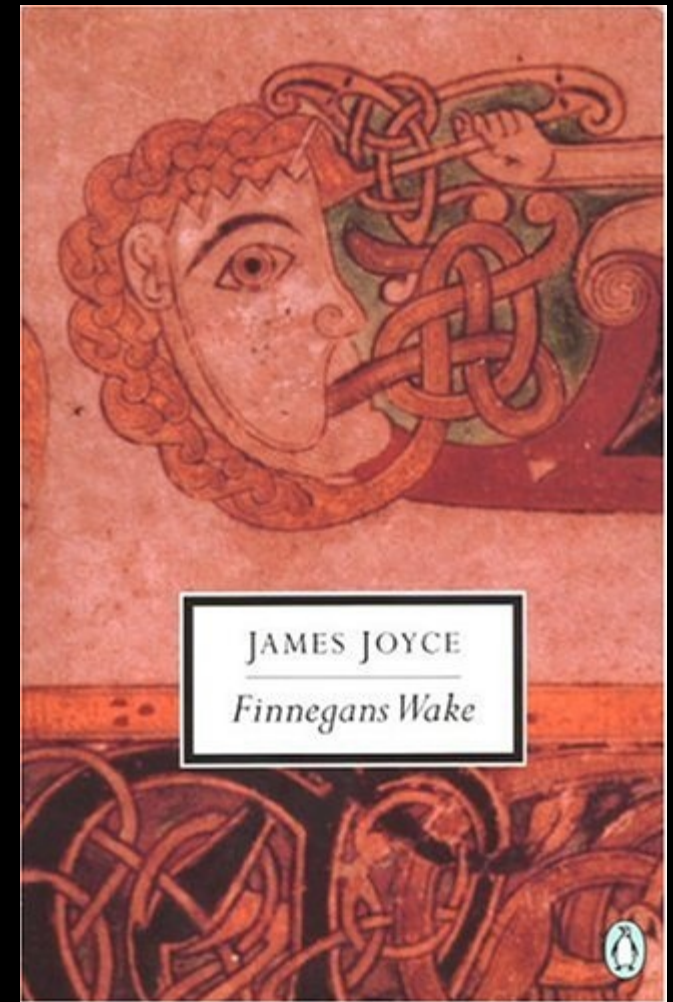
Luna Leopold 1915-2006

## James Joyce

“riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay...”

### *The Round River*

*Finnegans Wake* opens with the words "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." ("vicus" is a pun on Vico) and ends "A way a lone a last a loved a long the". In other words, the book ends with the beginning of a sentence and begins with the end of the same sentence, turning the book into one great cycle.



Book 1 Chapter 8 known as the "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter, is interwoven with hundreds of river names from all over the globe, and is widely considered the book's most celebrated passage. The chapter was described by Joyce in 1924 as "a chattering dialogue across the river by two washerwomen who as night falls become a tree and a stone."



1882-1941

"Heraclitus, I believe, says that all things go and nothing stays, and comparing existents to the flow of a river, he says you could not step twice into the same river"

What Heraclitus actually said is the following:

"On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow."

Understand?





# Center for Environmental Research at Hornsby Bend



## AWU-CER Lunchtime Lectures May - August 2011

Each talk begins AT NOON Waller Center [625 East 10th Street – between I-35 and Red River] Room 104

The 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday of the Month! Free and Open to the Public – bring a lunch and learn

### Rivers: Myth, Meaning and Culture in America

Over the next four months, I will put on my Cultural Geographer's hat and draw on my English major to look at the meaning of rivers and waterways in American and Texan literature. The four lectures will descend in scale from an overview of American rivers and American literature to Texas and finally to Austin. Join me for a journey down rivers through literature, the first Wednesday of every month.

May 4 Noon-1pm

The Myth of the River: American Rivers and American Art

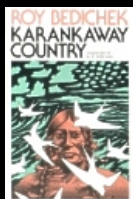
June 1 Monday Noon-1pm

Texas Rivers: On the Brazos with John Graves "Goodbye to a River"



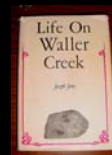
July 6 Monday Noon-1pm

Texas Rivers: On the Colorado with Roy Bedichek "Karankaway Country"



August 3 Monday Noon-1pm

Life On Waller Creek – The Legacy of Joseph Jones





Applause!

# Questions?







## CER Monthly Activities 2011

Join us – free events – all are invited!

### River Monitoring Trip- Travis County

1<sup>st</sup> Saturday of Every Month - All day [meet at CER 8am]

### HBBO Bird Survey

2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of Every Month 7am-11am and 4pm-dark

### Birding Field Trip - Travis Audubon Society

3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of Every Month 7:30am-11am

### River Monitoring Trip – Bastrop County

3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of Every Month - All day [meet at CER 8am]

Lunchtime Lecture Series – a free monthly public lecture about different aspects of Austin’s ecology, the 2<sup>st</sup> Monday of the month at Waller Center 625 East 10th Street between Red River and I-35, Room 105 NOON-1PM – bring a lunch and learn!

Ecological Literacy Days – three hours of outdoor volunteer work and an hour of ecological education on the last Saturday of every month at Hornsby Bend [9am-1pm]