

Atomic Geography: A Personal History of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation

Melvin R. Adams

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For a book about nuclear waste cleanup, paradox and irony figure prominently—*Atomic Geography* is an intelligent, probing, and strangely poetic read.

Environmental engineer Melvin Adams spent more than two decades working at the Hanford nuclear site in eastern Washington. His keen personal history reveals how a rural stretch of arid steppe along the Columbia River was converted into America's preeminent plutonium factory during World War II and the Cold War. That weapons of mass destruction sprung from an idyllic setting of sagebrush and bunchgrass is one of the book's overarching ironies.

Adams explores technical issues of environmental mitigation with clear, personable prose reminiscent of nonfiction greats like John McPhee. The scale of both contamination and cleanup at the Hanford site are mind-boggling, but the book does a good job of putting scientific information within a human context.

The paradox that emerges is a rather amazing one: life flourishes even in a toxic environment. Adams waxes poetic about the resilient species of plants and animals that thrive in and around the site. Hanford has since become a national monument and part of a historic park dedicated to the Manhattan Project. In this transformation, the author sees redemption of the human race. *Atomic Geography* doesn't merely map a specific place in time; it charts a greater course away from nuclear armament and toward environmental stewardship.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Winter 2017)

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