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Lost and Old Rivers

Alan Cheuse
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This collection of short stories, including a long, somewhat autobiographical piece, is a book filled with short snatches of fairly ordinary lives.

These stories describe moments in the lives of various men and women. There are no real connections between them except for the broad theme of rivers or rushing and running water or fluids—from the vomiting of a drunk onto his maid's dead body to the changing river that encompasses and defines a man's lifetime. The book seems to say that life and humanity are merely rivers: rushing, meandering, always moving, and never-ending, with no time for stopping or starting over again.

Although well written, the characters are largely ordinary and normal except for the main character in "Hernando Alonso," which deviates from the others because it is a story about a man who lived in the 1500s. It is also the story of a man who was punished for merely living his life and helping his government. A story that resonates with truth, it is the highpoint of this book. All of the stories contain good writing and description, but only a few achieve the depth and truthfulness that "Hernando Alonso" does. Most deal with the nitty gritty rawness of everyday life and everyday people, describing moments when the characters? lives change in some definitive way. Although many of the stories have moments of identification and/or insight for the reader, a few of the stories fall short of having much value for the reader who is looking for a fresh and innovative view.

Cheuse, who is an author of other books, a literary critic, and a university writing teacher, has written a decent book that offers a few memorable highlights that readers may value for its strong writing and graphic description.
JODEE TAYLOR (December 16, 1998)

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