



RiverTime: Ecotravel on the World's Rivers

Mary A. Hood

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“This was old-fashioned biology, the philosophical kind that gave meaning,” comments Mary Hood in this earnest ecotravelogue about her excursions to the watersheds of eighteen rivers both large and small across the world. Hood is professor emerita of biology at the University of West Florida, and it is with the even-handedness of a scientist that she describes her visits to rivers including the Amazon, Willamette, Yangtze, and Mississippi. The result is a traditional work of nature writing—plush with tidbits about these waterways’ natural history and preoccupied with the interconnections between all living things.

Like other biologist-poets—Donald Culross Peattie and Rachel Carson come to mind—Hood infuses her writing with an appreciable scientific curiosity. *River Time*’s strength lies in Hood’s description of some of the more unusual flora and fauna she stumbles across, including the purple milkwort, one of only thirty-six species that produce flowers underground, or the army ant, who travels in foraging packs 10,000 strong, pouring over the ground like streams of “black oil.” Of course, natural history aside, Hood’s experience of the places she visits is also a modern one—shaped by corporate influences and muddied with the pollution and ecological devastation she too frequently encounters. An unsurprising number of chapters conclude with Hood’s ruminations on the way humans exploit both nature and each other (as a woman, she is particularly sensitive to the treatment accorded other women in countries abroad). Throughout, it is with simple, and honest prose that Hood makes her clear-sighted reflections. Though these traits lend the book a respectable quaintness, infusing the diction with more emotion and complexity may have lent the book a higher degree of poetic lyricism (one wishes, for example, that an editor had pushed her to cut overly instructive lines like: “apple-picking involves choosing the ones that look and feel the best, filling a bushel basket, and hauling the fruit back to the house”). But this is a weakness that most armchair ecologists will be able to overlook.

That’s not to say that the audience for this book is limited to scientists; as Hood points out, “observing plants is not just for little old ladies, naturalists, biologists, or gardeners. Everyone can relate at some level.” But of course one must have a reason and occasion to do so; and as Hood articulates in this sweet tribute, it is rivers with their ability to “connect us to each other and to our fellow species” that provide this opportunity.

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