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Mythical River: Chasing the Mirage of New Water in the American Southwest, by Melissa Sevigny

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BOOK REVIEWS

Mythical River: Chasing the Mirage of New Water in the American Southwest by Melissa L. Sevigny (University of Iowa Press, 244 pages; 2016)

In her new book *Mythical River*, Melissa L. Sevigny, takes her readers on a written voyage down a river that exists only in the minds of conquistadors and politicians as she explores the origin of the myth of new water in the West. A science writer with a background in environmental policy and creative writing, Sevigny has worked as a science communicator in the fields of western water policy, sustainable agriculture, and planetary science, and was a member of NASA's Phoenix Mars Scout Mission during its ground operations on Mars. Sevigny's study delves into maps, articles, recounts, and books to track through the ages how different groups abused and misused the unforgiving region. Sevigny guides her readers through forested-over ghost towns on the Colorado River, following the river's run towards the sea and exploring where the river stops and the dam begins. Both through her descriptions and photography of these wondrous places, Sevigny elucidates what has truly been lost as a result of trigger-happy environmental policies; local, state, and the federal government, Sevigny argues, have often made policy decisions without sufficient scientific forethought or consideration.

Mythical River starts with a reflection on the ill-drawn maps of the sixteenth century, which depicted a river running from the Rockies clean across to the Pacific Ocean, and ends with criticism of Supreme Court science to make a convincing argument that politicians and regulators have been looking at water the wrong way for centuries. The book is split into 11 chapters, each telling the story of a blunder in our approach to water appropriation and conservation. In doing so, Sevigny slowly unpacks that the overarching problem in Western water governance is not how to create more water, but rather how to continue to grow with the water we have. In economics terms, Sevigny argues, we should stop focusing on increasing supply and instead focus on reducing demand.

The book's title, *Mythical River*, is a nod to the Rio Buenaventura, the river whose myth led many early explorers into the untamed West in search of new places for settlement. This river did not and does not exist, yet many early cartographers put in on their maps because they thought it should be there. By starting her book at the Rio Buenaventura, Sevigny sets the stage for this pervasive idea that water should be there. This mindset has not been purged from our water politics despite many experiences proving that, more often than not, the water that is there will not be there with any level of consistency. Sevigny takes this theme one step further and compares the belief in this nonexistent river to the use of the Colorado River by those estates dependent upon it.

Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, and California all have claims to Colorado River water. On top of that, the United States has the responsibility of delivering a certain amount of the Colorado River across the border to Mexico. The current apportionment of the River is unsustainable, primarily because the act of Congress which settled fights over appropriations between Arizona and California

overestimated the yearly flow of the River and has not since remedied this error. Sevigny details some of the ways in which states have attempted to develop new water supplies: rainmakers, cloud-seeding, and constructing desalination plants. Her case study of Tucson even explores the city's use of Colorado River water, delivered through the mountains by the Central Arizona Project, a 336-mile canal. Humans are incredibly resourceful, and we will continue to think of ways to meet the water demands of our cities and towns. However, Sevigny argues that at some point we need to stop looking at water solely for its utility and instead look at water for our reflection to see how we can adjust our lives to be less water-intensive.

Mythical River is not a book without hope and praise. Sevigny honors the actions of activists that have led to the widespread adoption of home wastewater treatment plants and rainwater harvesting systems, and a greater focus on water recycling. The takeaway message from these examples is that we cannot wait for our water politics to change, we must change the public approach to water. The best example of this comes from rainwater collection barrels in Colorado. Worried about rainwater reclamation affecting downstream user allocations, the state of Colorado did not allow homeowners to install rain barrels until very recently.¹ After a grassroots effort advocating for rainwater collection, Coloradans can now install these barrels on their houses in order to continue that state's legacy of environmental responsibility.

Sevigny leaves the door open for future researchers and writers to develop possible government solutions, at various levels and extents. She devotes the beginning of the book to the South African approach to water governance, but does not return to this idea in a way sufficient to show how the United States may handle this issue moving forward. Water governance varies across the U.S., and perhaps because of the complexity of any possible longstanding solutions, Sevigny sets the stage for possible avenues of thought, but does not venture down those avenues to fully develop and propose solutions. *Mythical River* stands as a challenge to activists, environmentalists, industry, city councilors, county supervisors, and legislators at all levels of government to find solutions now before we leave portions of the Southwest without adequate water supplies or violate our treaty with Mexico.

An Arizonan, Sevigny is not a foreigner to issues surrounding water in the West. This adds authenticity to her call for action on water conservation and for lifestyle changes in *Mythical River*. Sevigny does not try to hide that what she is advocating for constitutes a substantial change both legally and culturally, but that does not change her timbre as she advocates for changing our approach to water demand. *Mythical River* is a journey along a river of history, arriving at the banks of today, and calling us all to attention if we want to continue the rich heritage of the Southwest for generations to come.

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1. COLO. REV. STAT. 37-96.5-101 (2016)