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River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics, and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Disaster by Jonathan P. Thompson (Torrey House Press, 296 pages; 2018)

Sarah McLain
University of New Mexico - School of Law

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BOOK REVIEW

River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics, and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Disaster by Jonathan P. Thompson (Torrey House Press, 296 pages; 2018)

“Oh. Shit.” These were the first words spoken when mine sludge carrying heavy metals began spewing out of the side of Level 7 portal of the Gold King Mine. On August 5, 2015, EPA staffers and contractors were working to start clearing out debris from the mine, and instead opened a hole on the side of an old mine tunnel which released three million gallons of water and sludge into the Animas River below. The sludge would travel downstream, passing the old mining community of Silverton, CO, continuing past Durango, CO, and eventually crossing state lines into New Mexico where it would affect the communities of Aztec and Farmington before traveling through the Navajo Nation. The sludge eventually settled into Lake Powell, but not before it turned the Animas River a bright orange hue. The 2015 Gold King Mine Spill, as disastrous as it was, was not the first time the Animas River or valley had experienced such a large polluting event. In *River of Lost Souls: The Science, Politics, and Greed Behind the Gold King Mine Disaster*, Jonathan Thompson dives into the history of the San Juan Mountain Range, the Animas Valley, the inhabitants, and the Animas River.

Thompson’s family has lived in the Animas Valley for six-generations, allowing Thompson to intertwine his own family history with the development of industry and the decline of nature throughout the area. Thompson’s training as an environmental journalist shines throughout the book. *River of Lost Souls* leads the reader throughout the history of the Animas Valley, allowing a deeper understanding of the importance of the area, including the exploitation leading up to the Gold King Mine Spill. Thompson’s writing challenges the reader to ask, “what if?” What if white settlers didn’t move into the area seeking riches? What if the General Mining Act of 1872 didn’t allow the complete and total exploitation of the West? What if Indigenous peoples were allowed to stay on their lands and have their voices heard? While tempting the reader to question the policies that lead up to the disaster, Thompson also creates a historical insight of the people in the area.

River of Lost Souls is organized into three distinct sections. Beginning with “Part I: Headwaters,” Thompson builds the foundation of human and environmental atrocities that have occurred in the Animas Valley since the arrival of white settlers. From the removal of the Ute tribes, to violence toward Chinese American settlers, and the devastation of natural disasters, the reader begins to understand the historical complexities of the area. In “Part II: Fossils” the book moves from the past into the present by examining extractions affecting the lower basin today—oil and gas. While miners in the upper valley continued pursuing large payoffs from metals, oil and gas were found in the San Juan basin. The continued development of the oil and gas industry eventually led to the creation of the Navajo Business Council, which in turn gave away all of the Tribe’s oil and gas leasing negotiating power. The effects of the Council at that time can still be seen today, as members of the Navajo Nation are exposed to the toxic waste generated from the Four Corners Power Plant and San Juan Generating Station. Thompson’s interview with Raymond “Squeak” Hunt

reflects the environmental injustice in the surrounding communities. The coal fired power plants created air, surface water, and groundwater pollution, which in turn affected the community's crops and health. Finally, in "Part III: We're All Downstreamers" Thompson covers the extensive and continuous negative impacts of mining in the area, ultimately leading up to the Gold King Mine spill itself.

Having grown up in New Mexico, I was impressed with Thompson's thoughtfulness in collecting an extensive history of the of the Four Corners area. Particularly, in his consideration of the lives of the individuals who developed, and were affected by, the mines in the San Juan Mountains. While it would have been easy to focus solely on the mass destruction of the environment, Thompson considers the lasting impact of a mining identity on the area. However, although the historical insight of what led to the Gold King Mine spill is fascinating, the book lacks a deeper look into the policies and science that impacted the area. Despite extensive footnotes throughout the book and reading aids available online, readers may be left wondering what acid mine drainage consists of and what policies are needed to prevent another disaster. Nevertheless, for a non-technical reader, the book creates an excellent picture of the past and present affects mining has had on the area.

Anyone interested in the long-term effects that mining can have on a region, the history of the Four-Corners area, or the events that lead to the Gold King Mine Spill should read this book. Although a more technically adept reader may wish the book delved into the geology, hydrology and chemistry of the spill, Thompson introduces the reader to regional issues in a conversational manner.

Sarah McLain
Class of 2021
UNM School of Law