

What the River Carries

Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte.

By Elizabeth Mack

A well-informed and inspired collection of essays by Lisa Knopp, *What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte* explores these three rivers of our landscape with the reverence of an inhabitant and the detailed precision of a historian and geographer.

In the first section of the collection, “Part I: The Mississippi,” Knopp recounts the forced surrender of land along the Mississippi from the Sauk, Meskwaki (Fox) and Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) tribes that become Burlington and Catfish Bend, Iowa. We learn of the legend of “Old Moe,” a two to three hundred-pound flathead catfish who supposedly lives deep in Burlington’s river bottoms. Fishermen attempted to pull Old Moe out with “two hundred yards of one-thousand-pound-test nylon rappelling rope” connected to “the hitch of a four wheel drive pick-up.” Whether the tales are true or legend is left to the reader.

An undercurrent of the Mississippi’s ecological problems is always present, as Knopp suggests that attempts to control the river with levees offers what many believe is “a false sense of security that encourages risky development,” as the levees produce a “higher and faster” river flow, creating a recipe for disaster, as many along the rivers have come to learn.

Weaving personal stories of family with the history behind prehistoric American Indian burial mounds, Knopp takes the reader on a journey in “Mound Builders,” as she recounts a trip with her aging mother to Effigy Mounds National Monument in Northeast Iowa. Although the history behind the construction of the 1,500-year-old mounds is fascinating, the real story is of family: children growing and leaving home; aging parents and parents that have passed; and contemplations on the passage of time.

In “Part II: The Missouri,” Knopp

finds the Missouri a “familiar stranger,” unlike the Mississippi that she grew up to know intimately. But her stranger vantage point is deceiving, as she becomes a learned expert through interviews and painstaking research. “This wasn’t a geography I had chosen,” Knopp says, as she begins her Missouri River journey in St. Louis, attempting to uncover exactly where Lewis and Clark began their own Missouri journey some 200-odd-years earlier. In “The Overlook,” we see the once-wild river reshaped by shortsighted intervention into a “relatively controlled and predictable river,” resembling more of a “drainage ditch” than free-flowing river, a cautionary tale of the outcomes of insinuating our desires upon a landscape.

As we travel further into Part II, “Missouri River Music” details the heritage of the river, from Conor Oberst and the burgeoning Indie scene in Omaha to Kansas City’s jazz district, where jam sessions were an “undammed, unchanneled river, meandered, looped, braided ...”. The essay recalls perhaps the first Euro-American musician to play along the banks of the Missouri, Pierre Cruzatte, Lewis and Clark’s keelboat oarsman. The groups’ journal keepers tell of Cruzatte’s evening fiddle-playing as the expeditioners danced and sang.

Part II concludes with the poignant “Restorations” at Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge, where the Corps is working to restore the river and provide habitat for endangered species. In this personal and compelling essay, Knopp parallels the refuge’s restoration with her own troubled son’s restoration that being around nature provides.

In “Part III: The Platte,” the writer describes this river as one she is coming to know as a relocated inhabitant. Knopp recalls on first seeing this river it seemed more a creek with its shallow, flat bottom, often running dry, a river that seemed to creep more

than rage.

But as the writer travels deeper into the river, learning more about the diversity of the Platte River region (boasting a more diverse flora between eastern and western Nebraska than between eastern Nebraska and New England) she admits a newfound respect for a river that she has grown to love.

The collection concludes with “Meanderings,” originally published in *NEBRASKALand*, which brings nature – and a “Phantom River” – right to the author’s Lincoln front door after a raging storm. Throughout these detailed and often intimate portraits, Knopp urges readers to consider their relationship to the landscapes they love, or landscapes they might want to learn to love. “Growing to love a landscape is similar to growing to love a person. Both require time and intention, if one is to develop and sustain a love that is deep and committed,” Knopp writes. By understanding the narratives of the rivers that run through the land we inhabit, perhaps it is possible to understand ourselves a bit better. We are all sojourners in any landscape we inhabit, and Knopp’s informed essays show the importance of being a respectful caretaker. ■

Lisa Knopp’s What the River Carries is available at bookstores throughout Nebraska and at Amazon.com.

