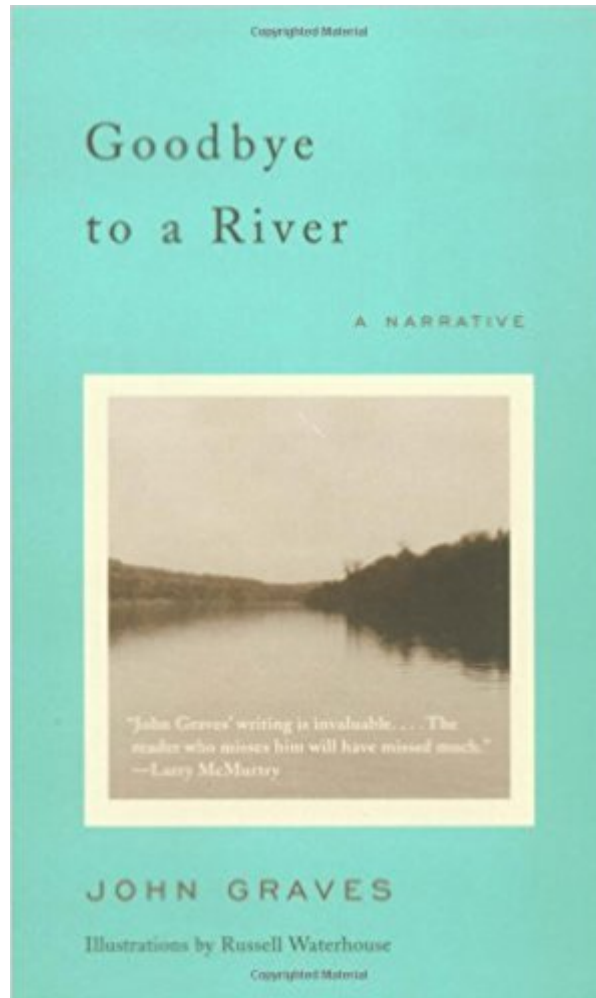




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Goodbye To A River: A Narrative



Synopsis

In the 1950s, a series of dams was proposed along the Brazos River in north-central Texas. For John Graves, this project meant that if the stream's regimen was thus changed, the beautiful and sometimes brutal surrounding countryside would also change, as would the lives of the people whose rugged ancestors had eked out an existence there. Graves therefore decided to visit that stretch of the river, which he had known intimately as a youth. *Goodbye to a River* is his account of that farewell canoe voyage. As he braves rapids and fatigue and the fickle autumn weather, he muses upon old blood feuds of the region and violent skirmishes with native tribes, and retells wild stories of courage and cowardice and deceit that shaped both the river's people and the land during frontier times and later. Nearly half a century after its initial publication, *Goodbye to a River* is a true American classic, a vivid narrative about an exciting journey and a powerful tribute to a vanishing way of life and its ever-changing natural environment.

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Customer Reviews

"John Graves's writing is invaluable. . . . The reader who misses Graves will have missed much." --Larry McMurtry "As you read, you have the feeling that the whole colorful, brutal tapestry of the Lone Star State is being unrolled for you out of the biography of this one stream." • The Atlantic Monthly "Graves's originality and flair turn this local scene and regional lore into an honest and powerfully evocative picture of frontier life anywhere." • The Chicago Sunday Tribune "One of the most pleasing books I've ever read. I love the way it weaves together remote history, not so remote history,

present events, and landscape. — Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, author of *The Hidden Life of Dogs*

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John Graves will eventually be remembered as a 20th century Mark Twain. A through and through Texan, but with an unusual sensitivity to nuance and nature, capable of capturing in words sentiments that move and inspire the reader. I once complained to *Texas Monthly* magazine that they were not publishing enough of his work and much to my surprise, an assistant editor contacted me and arranged for me to meet Mr. Graves at a book signing event. I was not disappointed as a somewhat wizened, sun burned gent eyed me over while offering his gnarled hand. I related to him how as a youngster I too had traveled down a favorite "creek" that was soon to be lost under the flood waters of a new dam. He listened carefully and muttered about progress destroying nature. I left with his signature and warm wishes, and have read everything he has published.

Not the kind of book I usually read, but I'm soon going on the Brazos River and had heard about this book. The author writes in a conversational, sometimes cowboy sort of style, about his trip down the Brazos River and camping out of his canoe. He interjects a lot of stories from the days of the Comanches and pioneers. It's very interesting to hear about a particular skirmish that occurred near the spot that you're going to visit. Very colorful. Good reading.

John Graves was a Texas writer with a connection to its history and the people of the State. *Goodbye to a River* provides history and creates a feeling of the value of the Brazos River including the prospective loss to be experienced when the waters long free were expected to be impounded by two Dams. One was ultimately built, but John Graves provides a window to the native Indians that possess the area, the characters and adventurers that formed the North Texas ranches and the quiet river trip providing an opportunity for enjoyment of it all. A good book.

I love this book. It's so lyrical and slow and meandering, like the river the author is traveling down. The first time I read it, I found the style a bit odd and jolty, but the second time, I get caught up in his language, his observations, and the way he intermixes his trip down the river with a trip down memory lane -- memories of the forefathers of those who settled in wild Texas in the mid-1800s amid the Comanches. This is a no-holds-barred oral history of lives along the Brazos River

northwest of Fort Worth in Texas. It's no apology for savagery of the clash between Anglo settlers and the Indians who reigned supreme until killed off or relegated to reservations in Oklahoma. Chapter 9 is especially brutal, but if you skip that one, the book is a fabulous addition to any high schooler's Texas History study. It brought me to realize that most of what Texas History courses teach has failed to include the wildness and danger of northwest Texas, and that the state's "six flags" is missing a seventh which lasted longer than all the others: that of the Comanche nation.

This is a singular piece of writing. While it came well recommended, its title made me avoid it for months; but it is an enchanting and engaging book. *Goodbye to a River* was written well ahead of its time for its global view of human behavior and long-term consequences of land mismanagement. A proposal to dam Texas's Brazos River at multiple sites prompted John Graves to canoe the stretches of the river that held personal memories for him, before the area was inundated. Intentional spoiler alert: the plan was abandoned, but not before Mr. Graves created a remarkable narrative. The author interweaves personal observations and experiences with local and regional history to make a memorable book with passages I know I will revisit. This would make a worthy addition to college curriculum, and would be a great book club selection.

An astonishing book, by an extraordinary writer, and more importantly, an extraordinary human being. The book assumes the form of a narrative of the author's three week solo canoe trip down the Brazos, a river about one hour by speeding car west of Ft. Worth, Texas; the journey was taken "way down in the fall," in late November, 1959, when the northerners begin to howl, and bring snow. By most estimations, it is not much of a river, and even the author says: "...on a salty river unloved, unlovable except by a few loners and ranchers and cedar-hill misanthropes." Graves gives only glimpses into his background, and if you blink, you might miss them. But consider, here is a man who has read Joyce's "Ulysses," and recalls that Leopold Bloom's father had slept with his dog, Athos, in order to cure the father's aches and pains, just as Graves was carrying a six-month-old dachshund he routinely refers to as "the passenger," for his own comfort. But Graves is equally well-grounded in the natural world, knows all the various types of trees, how they burn, and the appearance of the wood's grain, and that: "the white oaks are prime...one of the finest of aromatic fuels is a twisted, wave-grained branch of live oak..." Graves was a Marine Captain during World War II, wounded on Saipan, but again the reader only gets the slightest glimpse of that in one passage in which that perspective is used to reflect on the casualties of this countryside during the frontier days: "I once saw 4,000 Japanese stacked like cordwood, the harvest of two days' fighting,

on one single islet on one single atoll awaiting bulldozer burial, more dead than the Brazos could show for its whole two or three decades of travail..." Graves has traveled as well, slight glimpses of which are permitted in "I'm familiar with the washed silent streets of Manhattan at five o'clock in the morning..." and "...did see dawn wash the top of the old wall at Avila..." and it was almost certainly there that he watched a man carve out a pair of wooden clogs with an ax, in fifteen minutes; a skill now permanently lost. An aspect of his life we are not afforded even the slightest glimpse are those that might be characterized, with a bit of leniency, as his "women problems," and thus why he might be alone. In anticipation of that conversational gamut, he rebukes us all: "Few people are willing to believe that a piece of country, hunted and fished and roamed over, felt and remembered, can be company enough." Graves wrings so much meaning, and numerous stories, just like Faulkner has done before him, about a similarly "postage-stamp size" part of America; in the former's case it is the upper-middle Brazos river, maybe only a twentieth of its total length. He knows the history of the area well, particularly as it was settled during the frontier days, and one tectonic plate overwhelmed the one that had been there the longer, represented by "The People," the Comanche's, the "Lords of the Plain," and the Kiowas. He weaves some beautiful vignettes from that period into his journey, with my favorite being the hanging of Cooney Mitchell; but there are numerous other memorable ones, including the smoking out of the recluse, Sam Sowell, from his shack. Graves teases the reader at the end, indicating that there is "No room..." for so many other tales that he has left untold. The central theme is the river itself, and his farewell to it. At the beginning he describes his "enraged awe" when learning that it would shortly not exist, at least as he knew it, since it was being damned at several locations. Graves is one of the best naturalist writers extant, describing with love how the land lays "this way and that," and the wildlife along the way, some of which he kills for his food. He is inspired by Thoreau, whom he repeatedly calls "St. Henry." At the end, he questions whether it is all "a lament," but overall, you get the sense of acceptance; that things change, and this is one more, as so many residents flee to the factories of Fort Worth, Dallas, and Detroit. And how many nature writers, traveling down a river, sleeping in skewed tents, and eating squirrels, could wryly reflect on his existence through the prism of Veblen's "The Theory of the Leisure Class"? Graves's book is chock full of philosophical takeaways, that should last me a long time, if not forever. I've traveled over the Brazos, about eight times in my life, each time I was going between 70, and hopefully 80 mph, trying to get out of Texas before nightfall. Thus, Graves rebuke stung: "The hard thing is to get slowed down." A more ironic thought recently resonated, when I was traveling with my wife to Death Valley. She said, of a road 30 miles to the east of DV: "We've been on this road before." And she was right: it was so like some other road we had previously traveled down in a

desert landscape. I had to chuckle, because I assured her that it was quite impossible, but I shared with her one of Graves' insights: "On the fringes of the middle age and after, the dÃfÂ©ja-vu is likely not to be illusory." Even less so, considerably beyond such a fringe! Graves is one of the wonderful members of the exclusive 6-star read club.

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