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Review: Writing on Water: A Terra Nova Book

Edited by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus

Reviewed by [Enzo Ferrara](#)

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David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (Eds.). *Writing on Water: A Terra Nova Book*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. 288pp. ISBN 0-262-18211-4 (Hardcover). US \$24.95

The Terra Nova project aims to assess the artistic and cultural aspects of environmental issues, provided that they are scientific and political. The second book in the series, *Writing on Water*, is an effective selection of short works. It covers almost everything about water, from the practice of resource management and protection to the mysteries that water hides. Geology, ecology, chemistry, sociology, economics, myth, and history are included.

The book is divided into five sections, with each one devoted to a specific theme. Several questions are posed and analyses of human relationships with water are offered. A scientific and philosophical approach is taken, mainly through introspective debates. Reflections are complemented with black and white photographs.

"Source and Substance," the pilot chapter, contains a scientific essay on the properties of aqueous solutions, remarking on how our understanding still fails as the investigation gets deeper. Political reflections on watersheds follow, along with poetry celebrating water as the ancestor of life.

"Teaching of the Flow" warns us to respect the environmental equilibrium of water as taught by reflections upon the ancestral odysseys of men and salmon meeting in fisheries, or by the question of the immorality of weather modification proposed about the flood that struck Rapid City in 1972. Self-reflections are suggested when we are asked how much awareness exists in us about some kinds of subtle pollution, unconsciously circulating underground.

"Diving Deep" is on the hidden, profound soul of water. Or, metaphorically, it is about the abyss where humans choose to keep their fears and hopes. An amusing novel here treats the inner conflict of scientific and poetical moods. Different rationales are found, but continue to be sought amid the covert aqueous straits of a mountain lake.

"Swept Away" deals with the cycling rhythm of life, quiet as a shore can be or tumultuous as a swift river. One contribution smartly invokes correspondences

with waves and flows of economic markets striking upon human destinies.

"Rising Currents" presents an overview of the different permutations of water (rain, fog, snow, ice, etc.) and its fascinating physical manifestations (oceans, drops, tears, waterfalls, waves, etc.). These are meaningfully described according to their motion, as through Leonardo's writings, or personified as in a drowning story by Octavio Paz, the 1990 Nobel Prizewinner for literature.

Consideration of water absence has been moderately included, such as seasonal drought, and the experience of the perpetual lack of water has been only skimmed. But a water-covered planet facing a water crisis is paradoxical, or embarrassing. That emerges among the social and philosophical conclusions of the book, which is largely successful in demonstrating that poetical and literary viewpoints are appropriately enclosed within the environmental contexts.

Our rapid development weakens the memory of water's significance, and prospects are not encouraging. The technological strategies to obtain an adequate supply for humankind will be effective sooner if respect and regard are recovered for any of the aqueous gifts. *Writing on Water* is highly recommended for public libraries and for those specializing in any specific issue about water.

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