

## Roving the Prairies

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I have a small library of books about American rivers. These books provide wonderful focal points on the world at large, with authors using the trope of the river to unpack the science, history, and mysticism of American times and places. If you asked me today, I'd say that the crown jewel of the genre is Mark Twain's memoir, *Life on the Mississippi*. But environmental historian Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire*, which reframes the pre- and post-settlement of the American West as a story of the control and manipulation of water, literally changed the way I think about nature and culture.

*Riverine Dreams* is a great river book; it is also simply an excellent book. The story follows author George Frazier's canoe and hiking journeys on and along the reaches of seven American grassland rivers: the Upper Missouri, Grand, Kaw, Purgatoire, South Platte, Niobrara, and lower Missouri. Each story meanders back and forth among the river's past, present, and future.

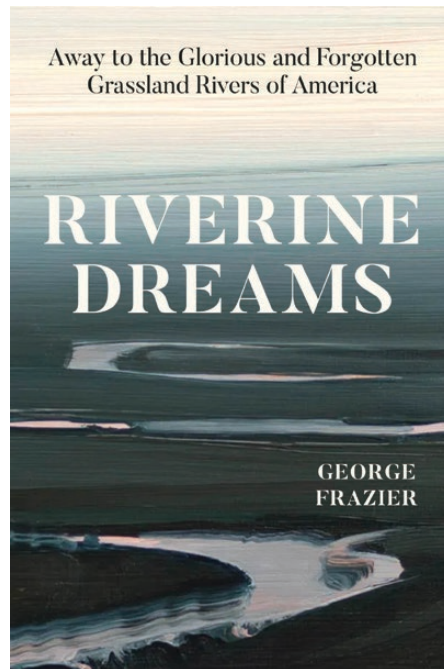
Looking backward, Frazier describes each river in its pre-European settlement context. The rivers were a key feature of the tallgrass, mixed-grass, and shortgrass prairies that once anchored the trans-Mississippi West, less than 5% of which remain today. As Frazier writes, "Prior to interstates and railroads and overland trails, grassland rivers were interior highways for migratory birds, mountain lions, Native peoples, *courriers*

*des bois*, steamboats, and anybody who needed a dependable thoroughfare.” He describes what each river has become, depicting the urbanization, water pollution, biodiversity loss, and dams and diversions that have transformed these rivers. He details US Army Corps of Engineers exercises in channelization and bank stabilization, along with the effects of groundwater drawdown, industrial monoculture agriculture, lack of connectivity with adjacent terrestrial systems, the specter of climate change, and flotillas of drunken inner-tubers.

Happily, Frazier also draws the contours of a future that could look in places a bit more like it did before the arrival of white settlers. The book offers a glimpse into his “fantasy world,” one in which the “tattered fragments of our native grasslands” are stitched back together and people begin to realize that America’s prairie heritage should be revived rather than chronicled in museums and Wikipedia pages.

Each chapter of *Riverine Dreams* illuminates aspects of the science and art of grassland restoration. The book provides a nice introduction into the new science of prairie rewilding, gliding deftly between microbiological aspects to landscape-scale considerations and treatments. Moving from grid-scale research into the realm of application, Frazier describes efforts to reestablish viable parcels of grassland, such as plans to build a 3.2 million acre “American Prairie Reserve” in Montana. Other preservation projects include the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge and Joseph H. Williams Tallgrass Prairie Reserve in Oklahoma; Konza Prairie Biological Station in Kansas; Dunn Ranch Prairie in northern Missouri; and others.

Frazier is an old-fashioned naturalist in the tradition of John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz, or John Muir. Unhampered by disciplinary stricture or parlance, he describes beautifully the metabolism of each of the rivers using a vocabulary informed by a smorgasbord of sciences including botany, riverine geology, paleontology, fungal ecology,



**Riverine Dreams: Away to the Glorious and Forgotten Grassland Rivers of America**

by George Frazier. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2025, 296 pp.

and rhizospheric chemistry. He uses the language of American settlement history, ethnohistory, American literature, various flavors of geography, and—to help his prose resonate broadly—popular culture. He gracefully collapses the definition of three basic types of prairies into a few short sentences: “Prairies can be classified into three moisture categories: dry, mesic, and wet. Dry prairies are found on well-drained hilly uplands and slopes. Their soils are poorer for agriculture, so much of the remaining unplowed tallgrass prairie in America ... is dry prairie. Mesic prairies hold more moisture. They were choice pastures and most of them were plowed. Wet prairies are like mesic prairies, but their soils are sandier, have fewer nutrients, and are often found near rivers. During floods, they reduce peak storm flows.” He also does a great job of weaving in how US policies such as the Homestead Act of 1862 fueled the demise of prairie ecosystems, while other laws, such as the Bankhead-Jones

Farm Tenant Act of 1937 (which led to the establishment of protected national grasslands) and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, are helping to set the stage for prairie revivals.

Frazier has a playful way with words. He “half-mooned” his canoe from the Kaw into the main stem of the lower Missouri, turns “kudzu” into a verb, and characterizes Nebraska as a state “delirious” with rivers. He describes the sound of a screech owl as a “butterscotch tremolo” and communicates with his daughter by imitating the calls of a black-capped chickadee. Frazier really knows his birds, trees, and plants, especially prairie grasses. I love this about the book: I carry with me mental images of the iridescence of an indigo bunting splashed in sunlight and the beacon-like epaulets of a redwing blackbird. I have shrieked at the flush of sharp-tailed grouse. I know how difficult it is to battle a Russian olive tree invasion, especially if you’re reluctant to use chemicals. But it made me wonder: Would folks who aren’t bird or plant freaks find this less evocative, maybe a bit dry? Which brings me to a point of critique.

In my view, the book needs more and better visuals. Frazier works his literary fingers to the bone trying to describe, for instance, the federally endangered blowout penstemon plant: “blue-green leaves ... tubular lavender flowers ... a runway of dark yellow lines ... golden hairs.” But he treats readers only to a black and white photo. I know this isn’t a coffee table book, but why not include a few color images? Frazier describes the work of landscape artist Karl Bodmer and compares the rolling hills of Missouri to Thomas Hart Benton paintings but, inexplicably, includes not a single example of their work. This isn’t a small thing.

Frazier is not trying merely to convey information about American grassland rivers’ past, present, and future. Rather, he’s trying to ignite within readers a genuine yearning to be part of a future that includes more intact, fully functioning prairie systems. He is

seeking affect, not just description. He wants us to become emotionally attached to places that do not yet exist. This is a heavy lift—one for which words alone are probably not enough.

Another point of critique: Frazier puts considerable effort into including the Native American experience in his historical description of pre-settlement prairies. He also does a good job describing how the demise of grasslands and grassland rivers coincided with—indeed spurred—the demise of Native American lifeways. However, in his speculations about reviving prairie ecosystems, he neglects to consider deeply the role Native American tribes might play in such a project. He fails entirely to consider how a grassland revival might also entail cultural revival. Here's a fantasy question: What if restored prairie ecosystems were ceded back to the tribes upon whose lands they are situated?

I loved how Frazier spices his descriptions with charming asides. I never knew that early Mormon leaders thought the Garden of Eden was located in what is now Jackson County, Missouri. He made me wish I could go back in time to see Nirvana play at the Outhouse in Lawrence, Kansas, or meet Abe Burns, a man who fished the Kaw River by diving into deep holes, gaffing giant catfish, and then wrestling them ashore. I loved Frazier's story about losing his canoe in a storm, because that's just the kind of thing that would have happened to me. And his account of hallucinating monkey faces leering out from between riverside tree branches on the lower Missouri is by itself worth the price of admission. Yarns like these add an element of joy to a book that would otherwise be "merely" elucidating.

Early in the book, Frazier references the late geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who said that space plus culture equals place. Prairie ecosystems and grassland rivers are clearly Frazier's place, and the book describes them in a way that is vivid and infectious. His passion is conveyed through scientific explanation, historical

and cultural explications, and an ineffable sense of adventure and fun.

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