

Long Legacy of the “Shorter” Colorado

River of Contrasts: The Texas Colorado

by Margie Crisp

College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. 228 pp. \$29.95 flexbound.

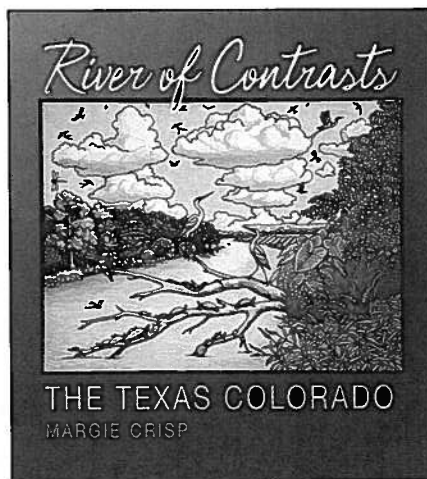
Reviewed by
Jim Kimmel

Rivers are some of Earth's most complex ecosystems due to their dynamic variations through time and space. What results is a great variety of changing habitats. When human interactions are included, the story becomes even more complex. Thus, rivers are compelling subjects for many writers, but selecting a theme is difficult. Excluding technical books, river books range from ones such as Patrick Dearen's *Devils River: Treacherous Twin to the Pecos, 1535-1900*, which uses the river to define a regional history, to books like William Least Heat Moon's *River Horse*, which we might call the “my river trip” genre. The river-trip genre is more common but harder to execute well. However, it seems to have the greatest potential to create lasting literature as evidenced by Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and John Graves' *Goodbye to a River*. Margie Crisp has chosen the river trip approach for her book on the Texas Colorado River and has carried it out very well, resulting in a compelling book that effectively conveys her delight and despair for a river that she loves.

Crisp organized the book into six chapters, primarily based on the ecoregions that the Colorado River flows through, except for the section of the river that was completely changed by the dams that created the Highland Lakes and Lady Bird Lake. This effective organizational scheme is reflected in the book's title, *River of Contrasts*.

The focus is primarily on the natural history of the river and its riparian area. But the natural history has been substantially changed by humans, so the book includes sufficient cultural history to support this aspect of the story.

Crisp's compelling narrative holds the reader's interest. She does this not only with the fine craft of her writing but also by emphasizing human connections. Much of the narrative involves her, with or without her husband Bill, and people who have intimate experience with the river. This is a very human and personal book. While the stories are reminiscent of Graves' *Goodbye to a River*, the style remains distinct.



This is a very human and personal book. While the stories are reminiscent of Graves' *Goodbye to a River*, the style remains distinct.

The book is compelling partially because of the substantive detail sprinkled throughout the narrative. However, because the details are embedded in the narrative, some readers who want to be able to retrieve the facts might be frustrated. Subheadings within the chapters are limited to geographic locations, and there are no sidebars. This arrangement works well given the down-the-river organizational scheme, but a serious reader will need to make notes in the wide margins to locate details for later use.

In addition to being a skillful writer, Crisp is a talented and accomplished artist. She has illustrated the book with

beautiful original linocuts, lithographs, and occasional photographs. These illustrations complement the text by helping portray the ambience of the river and inspire the reader to experience the river visually. The illustrations do not particularly add to the information conveyed in the book, but her aim is more about feeling and inspiration than information. The narrative and illustrations work very well together. In addition to the artwork, Crisp includes seven useful maps that she evidently prepared.

Given a topic as complex as a river, it is inevitable that some errors will go undiscovered in the manuscript. On page 117, the flood that exceeded Canyon Lake's capacity was in 2002 rather than 1998, and the water went over the spillway rather than the dam as stated. On page 122, the forerunner agency of the Natural Resources Conservation Service is stated as “the Soil Erosion Service,” but that name was used only from 1933 until 1935, when it was changed to the Soil Conservation Service, which was retained until 1994. On page 141, “niche” should be “habitat,” and on page 178, “the U.S. Geological Services” should read “the U.S. Geological Survey.” But these small errors do not detract from the book's overall value or credibility.

River of Contrasts is beautiful and inspiring and will provide a legacy for one of Texas' most important rivers. As the population of Texas grows and the demand for water increases, all our rivers will be under added pressure to be used in ways that will reduce their natural character and functions. *River of Contrasts: The Texas Colorado* helps us recognize the value of the river, and the book will serve to help defend the river against the pressures that might diminish or even destroy that value. ✧

Jim Kimmel is professor of geography at Texas State University-San Marcos. He is the author of *The San Marcos: A River's Story* and *Exploring the Brazos River*, which received the 2011 Globe Book Award for Public Understanding of Geography by the Association of American Geographers.