

## Wade in the Water

We understand in an existential way that water is life and that to a very great extent we are water. It only takes a few experiences of deprivation of water to realize that without water, not only are we unable to flourish, we are unable to survive. The majority of our very being is composed of water with the average adult male being composed of 60% water and the average adult female being composed of 55% water. Babies and small children have an even higher water percentage of their bodies. Infants are 75% water, and children are 65% water. Seventy-one percent of our planet is covered in water, and this fact became beautifully and powerfully evident when NASA took that first amazing perspective-changing photo, *Earthrise*, while orbiting the moon on December 24, 1968, just over 50 years ago. In our solar system, we are the water planet, and this is why we are also the living planet. In the midst of the abundance of water on Earth, only about 2.5% of the water is what we call freshwater, and only 1% is easily accessible by human beings and the many other forms of life that do not live in our oceans. How we manage this 1% is one of the most pressing challenges facing all of humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Over the next two years, Oklahomans will have an excellent opportunity to reflect together on the importance of water in our lives and the challenges that we face as we work together to maintain a sustainable relationship with water. Oklahoma Humanities in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institute's Museum on Main Street program is hosting a traveling exhibit that will be displayed in five communities around the state of Oklahoma in 2019 and 2020. The content of the museum exhibit focuses on the many complex ways in which the human community interacts with water – spiritual, cultural, agricultural, economic, political, legal, ecological, and existential. The exhibit also highlights many of the challenges in the present and future in relation to water – water shortages, pollution, more pronounced droughts, more extreme flood events, increasing conflict over water, the ecological stresses on our oceans, and the impact of climate change on our water systems.

The *Wade in the Water Let's Talk About It Oklahoma* (LTAIO) book series complements the *Water/Ways* Museum on Main Street exhibit, but it also serves as a stand-alone series to help cultivate conversations among Oklahomans about the

importance of water in our lives, our ways of interacting with water, the issues and challenges in relation to water that we are currently facing, and how we can relate to water in sustainable and resilient ways in the future so that human and ecological flourishing might continue to be a possibility throughout our world.

The realization that water is life includes the awareness that the lack of access to water hinders human flourishing and in worst cases leads to intense suffering and death, not only from thirst, but also from conflict and disease. The five novels in this LTAIO series address many of the forms of conflict that exist in relation to water. *A Long Walk to Water* focuses on the water wars of the past and present in northeast Africa and their impact on families, communities, countries, and regions. The conflicts over water and land that indigenous peoples experience as their sovereignty and traditional ways of relating to water are not respected are featured in *Green Grass, Running Water*, while the conflicts between environmental activists and industrial entities that are misusing our oceans and the life within them are addressed in *The Activist*. The fourth book in the series, *Forty Signs of Rain*, presents the political conflicts over water and strategies to address climate change. The conflicts over the use of budding controversial technologies that, although they are meant to help, may have unintended negative ecological consequences, are a part of this novel. Lastly, the potential water wars of the future in a world where water shortages are exacerbated by mismanagement, climate change, and catastrophic weather events make for compelling science fiction in *The Water Knife*.

Conflict is a common theme throughout the five books in this theme. The challenges of sharing and managing the 1% of Earth's water that is suitable for human use without resorting to desalination processes are daunting as are the challenges of maintaining a sustainable relationship with the life in our oceans. As we humans continue to live in arid regions that do not naturally support large populations, and as our population expands generally with the concomitant needs for more agricultural development, more access to water, and more demands on the oceans; the challenges related to water and the conflicts these challenges generate will continue to grow. The pollution of both freshwater sources and our oceans from agriculture and other industrial processes adds to the complexity of our water challenges, making it even more difficult to maintain a stable and sustainable relationship with water in our world.

As if the challenges of a growing population and growing demands on fresh water and our oceans were not enough, the reality of climate change and its effects on water

systems further complicate an already difficult situation. Rising temperatures, more pronounced droughts, more extreme flood events, changing growing seasons, more intense wildfires, and dying coral reefs throughout the world all magnify the challenges we are facing and increase the likelihood of a more dystopian future filled with violence, human suffering, and ecological degradation. The urgency of now in addressing the reality of climate change and preserving a livable climate for both human and ecological flourishing is the elephant in the room that must be recognized if we hope to have a sustainable relationship with water both now and for future generations. Maintaining a livable climate for all life is the greatest challenge not only of our time, but for all time in the history of human civilization on earth.

### ***A Long Walk to Water***

**by Linda Sue Park**

Written with young readers in mind and based on a true story, Linda Sue Park's *A Long Walk to Water* is a dual narrative of two young people from Southern Sudan, a boy (Salva) and a girl (Nya), from two tribes in conflict with one another in Southern Sudan, a conflict that is often exacerbated by lack of water. The ongoing larger conflicts in the region, though often driven by complex political and religious division, are also made worse by the challenges related to water in Sudan. The story of Salva begins in 1985, while Nya's story begins in 2008.

At the age of eleven, Salva was separated from his family by civil war in Sudan and forced to flee his country and live in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya throughout his teenage years and a significant portion of his young adult life. His harrowing escape from violence included the crossing of rivers teeming with crocodiles and the traversing of waterless deserts that seemed to have no end sight. Salva's experience eventually led him to look for ways to address the underlying problem of lack of access to water in his homeland that contributes so much to the ongoing cycle of violence.

At the age of eleven, Nya had to make two long roundtrip daily walks (once in the morning and once in the afternoon every day during seven months of the year) from her family's tribal village to a pond to gather water for her family. During the five driest months of the year, Nya and her family resorted to digging holes in a dry lake bed to collect muddy water for their necessities. Members of Nya's family experienced a lack of formal education, a higher risk of disease, and greater overall instability caused by their

lack of access to clean water. The impact was especially negative for girls like Nya who were given the task of transporting water each day instead being able to attend school and enjoy the enhanced opportunities an education affords. Her family came to realize that a stable and clean source of water had the power to transform their lives away from a constant daily struggle for survival towards a life in which water became a means for the end of greater human opportunity and flourishing.

### ***Green Grass, Running Water***

**by Thomas King**

The cultural and mythological significance of water in Native American traditions is an underlying theme in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*. The celebrated Cherokee author explores the tensions and challenges of Native American identity within a predominantly white culture. Many of the characters in the novel make their way between two worlds - worlds that are not only in tension with one another, but in which immersion in one world can lead to alienation in the other.

Broken promises around Native American sovereignty in relation to land and water are a backdrop of the novel, and four Indian elders and their coyote companion retell the story of creation that highlights the centrality of water in such a way that it becomes a thread holding together what at first appears to be disparate stories that increasingly flow together as the novel progresses. The retelling of the creation story also provides insight into the centuries of attempts by colonial powers to suppress and control Native American identity and culture. The treaties of the Canadian and U.S. American governments often contained promises that agreements would be valid "as long as the waters flow and the green grass grows," and the reader is reminded that the government authorities rarely lived up to these promises, especially when not doing so was in their interest, as is exemplified in the novel by a major hydroelectric dam project that floods a significant portion of the Blackfoot Reservation and puts the family home of one of the main characters of the novel, Eli, in peril. In the end, some surprising breakthroughs are made as mythological waters and real waters find a way of reconnecting many of the characters with their culture and with each other.

### ***The Activist***

**by Alec Connon**

In *The Activist*, the debut novel by Alec Connon, a university student named Thomas who has passion for marine conservation finds himself increasingly drawn to activism on behalf of life in our southern oceans. Over a period of time and through a journey of self-discovery, Thomas becomes more aware of what human activity is doing to damage life in our oceans. Eventually this leads Thomas to join the crew of marine conservation group, Sea Shepherd, known for its often dangerous and legally precarious encounters with the Japanese whaling fleet on the open ocean. The novel does not point to evil villains or secret conspiratorial groups that must be defeated to save our oceans and our planet, rather it provides a sobering and realistic assessment of the systems (in which we all participate in one form or another) that perpetuate our unsustainable relationship with ocean life in particular and with all of nature more generally. *The Activist* serves as both a compelling story of one person's call to activism as well as a call to all of us to find ways to allow our passion to lead us towards action for systemic change for the well-being of this planet that is our only home.

### ***Forty Signs of Rain***

**by Kim Stanley Robinson**

The politics of science in general and more specifically the politics of climate change are the focus of *Forty Signs of Rain*, the first novel in the *Science in the Capital* trilogy by renowned science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson. Set in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the novel reflects on the political and scientific race to address the challenge of climate change before it is too late to preserve a livable climate for human civilization and the world. Robinson's work highlights economic pressures, political divisions, and complexities of international cooperation that are making it difficult to take the necessary national and international measures to change systems and policies. He tackles the complex relationship between science and politics as well as the pressures to find technological solutions in a warming world, some of which may be quite controversial. What will it take to cultivate the political will to address the most urgent challenge facing human civilization? Will we rely too heavily on technological fixes rather than making the systemic changes that are necessary? Will it take massive extreme weather events to convince us that such changes are necessary, and by that time will it be too late?

## ***The Water Knife***

**by Paolo Bacigalupi**

Set in the future, when the Colorado River has long been unable to meet the needs of large populations in the Desert Southwest and in which many coastal cities have been abandoned owing to climate change induced sea level rise and extreme storm events, *The Water Knife* by award winning science fiction author Paolo Bacigalupi portrays a dystopian future. In it, the cities and states of the southwestern United States are in constant violent conflict with one another over access to water.

In this water-restricted world, those who control the water have the economic and political power within society. You do not want to be a person living in communities with junior water rights as those with senior water rights may cut your water off temporarily or permanently at a moment's notice through "legal" means or even at times through stealth para-military action. What happens when there is not enough water for everyone, when cities like Las Vegas and Phoenix are pitted against one another and against a fire-ravaged California in a battle of survival over what is left of the water of the Colorado? The result is a dehumanizing battle for survival in the Desert Southwest in a vision of the world that we should all hope to avoid.

### **For Further Reading**

Thomas King, *Medicine River*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Fifty Degrees Below*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2005.

Kim Stanley Robinson, *Sixty Days and Counting*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2007.

Smithsonian Museum on Main Street, *Water/Ways*.

<https://museumonmainstreet.org/content/waterways>

The "Wade in the Water" theme was developed by Mark Y. A. Davies, Wimberly Professor of Social and Ecological Ethics and Director of the World House Institute for Social and Ecological Responsibility at Oklahoma City University in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mark is the Oklahoma Humanities State Scholar working with the *Water/Ways* traveling exhibit of the Smithsonian Institute's Museum on Main Street program. The exhibit will be hosted in five locations throughout Oklahoma in 2019 and 2020. Mark's teaching and research focus on the issues of environmental ethics, social ethics, interfaith cooperation, and ecological sustainability.

