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RIVER of two
minds

Text by Ginger Strand ~ Photography by Dana Matthews



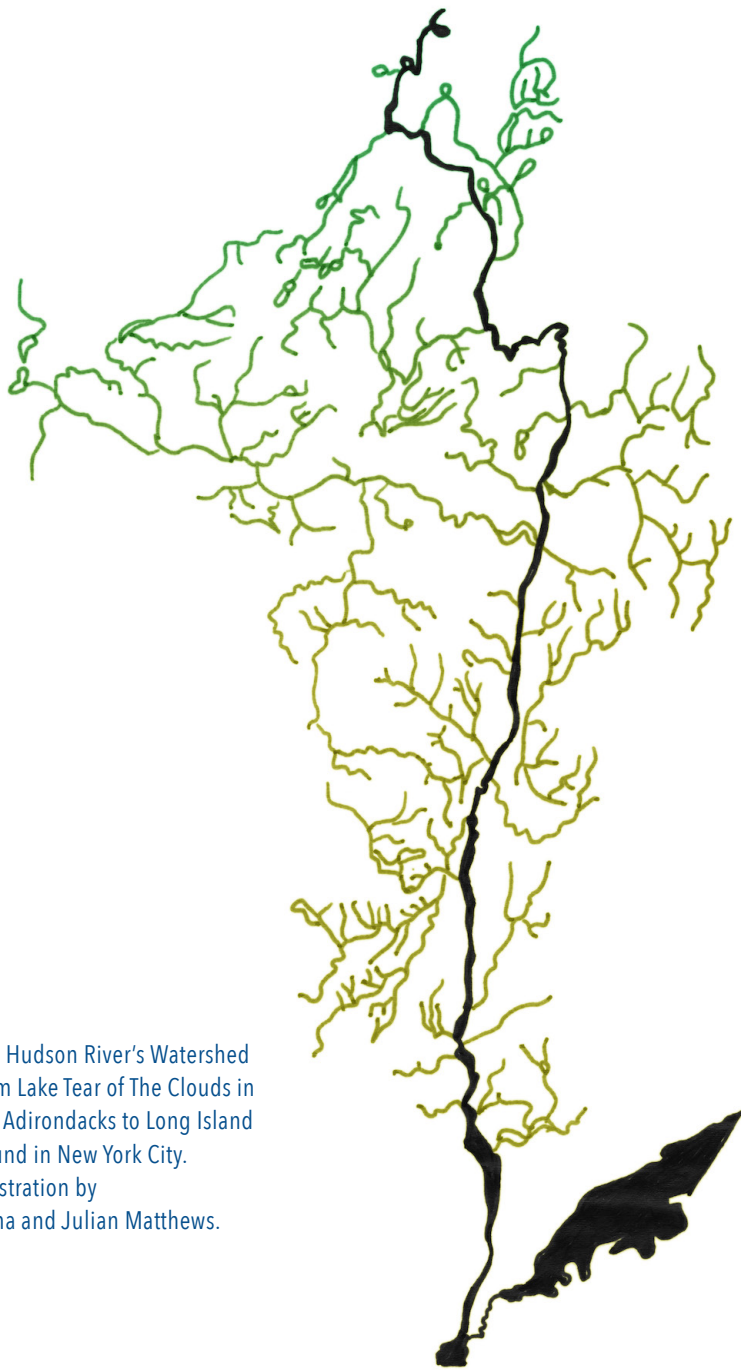


What we call the Hudson River has had many names. River of Steep Hills. Grand River. Rio de Gómez. Rio San Antonia. Rio de Guamas. River of Prine Mauritius. Noortrivier. Groot Rivier. Manhattes Rievier. Nassau River. All name a river but the Hudson was only a river when, nameless, it charged down from the mountains through valleys and canyons, traveling 900 miles from Lake Tear in the Clouds to the sea. It plunged off the Continental shelf into the ocean one hundred and twenty miles past where the coast is today. But the glaciers came, and when they receded, rising seawater drowned the river's last 120 miles. Today whales swim where mammoths once grazed. The Hudson River is now in constant opposition with itself, as freshwater flows down to sea and seawater surges back in, taking salt as far as 75 miles upstream. Some call the Hudson a tidal estuary; some call it a fjord;

others call it a drowned river. The Mohicans called it Muh-he-kun-ne-tuk, river that flows two ways.



In 1609, Henry Hudson sailed his boat, the Half Moon, up the river, in search of the Northwest Passage. American natives came out to meet them. The Europeans were unsure what to do. But the Americans had brought oysters and valuable skins, and the Europeans delightedly purchased them for trifles. Hudson's officer, Robert Juet, called the locals "very loving people." He reported that the American chief took Henry Hudson to his own home for a ceremonial feast.



The Hudson River's Watershed from Lake Tear of The Clouds in the Adirondacks to Long Island Sound in New York City. Illustration by Dana and Julian Matthews.

When the river grew too narrow and shallow for it to pass, the Half Moon turned around. As it passed the mountains again, its crew traded once more with the Americans. But when one of the natives took two shirts, two bandoliers and a pillow from Juet's cabin, the master's mate shot and killed him. The friendly encounter turned hostile. Most of the Americans fled in their canoes, but one angry man tried to climb onto the ship. The cook cut off his hand. He sank into the river and drowned.

Human beings have taken many things out of the Hudson River: shad, bluefish, weakfish, porgy, sturgeon, flounder, alewife, herring, sunfish, black bass, yellow perch, northern pike, eels, crabs, oysters, goldfish, water. Human beings have put many things into the Hudson River: goldfish, tires, dead bodies, strontium-90, untreated sewage, oil, mercury, cadmium, pesticides, zebra mussels. Some of the nastiest things they have put into the river are polychlorinated biphenyls, whose adverse effects on humans include loss of short-term memory and attention deficit disorder.

EPA ordered General Electric to remove PCBs from the Hudson River in 2002. The company began dredging in 2009, making PCBs, like goldfish or rainbow trout, something human beings both put into and take out of the Hudson River.

The American shad begins life as a freshwater fish, a transparent eyeball of egg laid and fertilized in the river. After their orgy of spawning, the egg's progenitors head back to the sea. The eggs are left to drift blindly downstream. Saltwater would kill them. After the larvae hatch, they spend their time darting and hiding in the river's darkness, frantically evading the striped bass, smallmouth bass, and perch who want to eat them. In the fall, the shad physiology changes. Instead of freshwater, now they need saltwater to survive. The fish who have survived make schools and swim towards the sea, where they live for three to six years, until the urge to reproduce sends them coursing back to their origins. They find the same river; they swim to the place where they were born. No one knows exactly how they do this.

Shad were abundant in colonial America. Before the Revolution, it was considered poor people's food. But by the time of the Civil War, planked shad was considered delicious. Then canneries on the West coast began distributing tinned salmon throughout the nation. People began eating salmon instead of shad. When salmon stocks ran low, the factories began canning tuna, which people thought was disgusting, until advertising changed their minds. Canned tuna became more popular than canned salmon. After the Second World War, giant trawlers and factory ships began bringing in huge hauls of haddock and cod. Americans decided they loved fish sticks and filet-o-fish sandwiches. In the 1960s, Americans discovered shrimp. Then aquaculture offered up farmed salmon and tilapia, a bland white fish farmed in China. Today, almost all the fish Americans eat is farmed somewhere far away and brought here in the hulls of ships.



In 2010 New York State closed its Hudson River shad fishery. There were too few shad. Dams were blocking their passage. Pollution and sewage were killing them. Sport fish stocked by the state were eating them. The railroad line along the river was blocking their access to streams. The shad fishery is expected to recover around 2050.



In 1825, artist Jonathan Trumbull's eye was caught by three paintings in the window of a Manhattan bookstore. The paintings showed scenes in the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill Mountains. They were by an unknown artist named Thomas Cole. Trumbull bought one of the paintings, and his artist friends Asher Durand and William Dunlap bought the others. America's first distinctive school of art was born, a group of painters dedicated to celebrating the sublime natural landscapes of the young nation. Soon, no well-appointed drawing room could be without a landscape by Cole or Durand or Kensett or Gifford or Church. But in the late nineteenth century, impressionism stormed into the art world, and the old landscapes were drowned in disdain. Paintings were sold off or discarded, and the movement that gave rise to them came to be known, contemptuously, as the Hudson River School.



In 1963, Con Edison proposed building a huge pumped storage power plant on the shore of the Hudson at Storm King Mountain. The group Scenic Hudson was formed in 1965 to "protect and restore the Hudson River and its majestic landscape as an irreplaceable national treasure." In 1980, Con Edison canceled its plans for Storm King. The Environmental Protection Agency declared 200 miles of the Hudson a Superfund site requiring remediation in 1983. Congress declared the Hudson River Valley a National Heritage Area in 1996; the National Park Service webpage for the area is titled "Inspiring Landscapes." In 2016, after Congress ended a 40-year ban on exporting U.S. crude oil, the Coast Guard proposed building anchorages so 40 oil barges at a time could anchor on the Hudson River.



Cement factories began operating at Smith's Landing on the Hudson River in the nineteenth century, lured by its limestone and its access to river transport. In 1906, with three plants manufacturing Portland cement there, the town changed its name to Cementon. Two of those plants are now closed. In 1992, the town changed its name back to Smith's Landing. Washington Irving wrote a story about a made-up town called Sleepy Hollow. The town he had in mind was known as Upper Mills or Beekman Town. In 1914, when GM began making Chevys there, it called itself North Tarrytown. For most

of the century, GM was its main employer. In 1996, the GM North Tarrytown plant closed its doors. That year, the village voted to change its name to Sleepy Hollow.

In 1825, the first cell block of a new prison was completed in the town of Sing Sing, chosen for its proximity to New York City. The prison was named Sing Sing, after the town. When you got sentenced to Sing Sing, you were sent "up the river." By 1901, the prison had become so notorious, the town changed its name to Ossining. In 1970, the prison changed its name to Ossining too. People in Ossining were unhappy. In 1985, two years after a violent prisoner riot, the prison's name was changed back to Sing Sing.



Once I was on an Amtrak train from Saratoga Springs to New York. The railroad line runs along the shore of the Hudson, and passes right through the center of Sing Sing prison. When the train stopped at Ossining, a number of men got on. One of them immediately got into a loud conversation on his cell phone. He told the woman on the other end he was coming home. She didn't seem to want him back. Or she wasn't sure. He debated. He cajoled. He argued. He threatened. He loved her and he was coming home, he said; she'd better take him back or she'd be sorry. The other passengers and I sat in silence, unsure what to do. Eventually another man approached the talker and asked him to show more respect. The friendly encounter turned hostile. Fisticuffs broke out in the aisle. Outside, the sun set and the Hudson flowed out with the tide, unconcerned with the snakelike creature sidling along its shore, the row of dimly lit windows drowning in a river of dark.

As artists, we are responding with words and images that speak of the river as a sentient being in possession of a soul, a pulse and a past that is more ancient than the ocean itself. This is our first edition of this unique limited edition artist book. Images and text are archival pigment prints.

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