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To the River

Olivia Laing



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To the River

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To the River Olivia Laing

A beautiful, lyrical book tells the tale of the river in which Virginia Woolf drowned, and heralds the arrival of a major new voice in nature writing

One midsummer week more than 60 years after Virginia Woolf drowned in the Ouse in 1941, Olivia Laing walked that same Sussex river from source to sea. The result is a passionate investigation into how history resides in a landscape—and how ghosts never quite leave the places they love. Along the way, Laing explores the roles rivers play in human lives, tracing their intricate flow through literature and mythology alike. She excavates all sorts of stories from the Ouse's marshy banks, from the brutal Barons' War of the 13th century to the "Dinosaur Hunters," the 19th-century amateur naturalists who first cracked the fossil code. Central among these ghosts is, of course, Virginia Woolf herself: her life, her writing, and her watery death. Woolf is the most constant companion on Laing's journey, and this book can be read in part as a biography of this extraordinary English writer, refracted back through the river she loved. But other writers float through these pages too—among them Iris Murdoch, Shakespeare, Homer, and Kenneth Grahame, author of the riverside classic *The Wind in the Willows*. The result is a wonderfully discursive read, interweaving biography, history, nature writing, and memoir, and driven by Laing's deep understanding of science and cultural history.

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