

Following Three Rivers

Over the course of this project, I've learn about tawny frogmouths and river red gums, kangaroo apples and Pacific black ducks. I've also learnt about road building and community garden projects, sewage treatment plants, agriculture, and fences to keep out dirt bikes. Going into it, I expected myself to be writing almost exclusively about nature, picking out plants and animals or places and thinking about them. But when it came down to it, I was just as drawn to the human experience of rivers. It's one thing to relate to a river that's tranquil and green, but it's another thing to relate to that same river when it's running past empty factory buildings, chemical plants, and housing developments. What happens when the river isn't only "beautiful"? How do we relate to places beyond the usual mode of "looking at pretty things"?

Writing about a river you've never been to is a funny thing. Everything you'd usually rely on for a sense of a place – walking through it, looking around, listening, spending time there – is impossible, so you have to find new things to rely on. Luckily, there were plenty of other resources to draw on. The staff at the Werribee River Association told me all about their river. I was taken on two riverside walks over zoom, and led two virtual workshops with Werribee residents. Everyone I spoke to was generous with their stories and enthusiastic about their home, and I managed to build a picture of what the Werribee River is like.

And although the Werribee River a ten-thousand-mile plane ride away from my home in Norwich, UK, that picture was in lots of ways similar to my experience of the Wensum and Yare rivers that run through the county of Norfolk. Like the land around the Werribee River, Norfolk is known for being flat. But like the Werribee River's views of the You Yangs and the K Road Cliffs, Norwich has hills. When I showed a picture I'd taken of a calm spot on the River Yare in a workshop, the participants told me the sky looked as big as their sky, and we shared what it's like to live in a place where the view is always at least eighty per cent sky. I thought I'd end up writing mostly about the River Yare, which runs below Norwich and out into the countryside of East Norfolk, and which I always thought I related to more. I thought I'd be pondering how the Yare and the Werribee share a kind of tranquillity. And they do. But the Wensum – which runs through the middle of Norwich – made some more interesting connections. It gave me space to explore the more complicated relationships we might have with rivers in our cities.

It is winter here. As I was watching the weather warm up in Melbourne, it was dramatically cooling down in Norwich. There's something wonderfully jarring about being on a zoom call at 7.00am on a -1°C day and watching a group of writers walk down to the river in sandals on a balmy evening on the other side of the world. It made me want to think at once about these rivers as both endlessly sunny and beautiful, and as bleak and built up and exploited. Because they are always both. And, as I found on my zoom calls, in conversations, and through reading about and listening to stories of the Werribee, Wensum, and Yare rivers, even when it looks like there's nothing to

redeem a part of the river, even when it looks like there's no way of looking beyond or around a negative human impact, there is something beautiful to find.

This is the kind of hopefulness that emanated from everyone I spoke to about their local river. I chatted with workshop participants and WRA staff about the Werribee, and I spoke to people at the National Centre for Writing and Norfolk Museum Service, as well as some fellow Norwich residents, about the Wensum and the Yare. Everyone had something personal and hopeful to say. The first poem here, 'Instructions for Interacting with a River,' is made up of these reflections, by Fatima Measham, Jess Fairfax, Vicki Fairfax, Melinda Lloyd, Charlotte Williamson, John Forrester, Lisa Field, Peggy Hughes, Chris Gribble, Lewis Buxton, and Fiona Ashley. That poem, and this project as a whole, has opened me up to new ways of interacting with and appreciating rivers not just as things to visit and places to look at, but as integral parts of our everyday lives, drifting along often unseen and underappreciated. This project has made me actively love the rivers that flow through my city, and I take more and more notice of those sluggish streams every time I walk through town. This project has also made me love a river that flows through a city ten thousand miles away, that I have never even been to. And that, I think, is something worth writing about.

Instructions for Interacting with a River

1. Walk slowly. Listen and feel.
2. Stop and sit a little while.
3. Ask yourself, *where is the sun? How are the sun and river talking to one another?*
4. Approach her on her own terms.
5. Go at night. Watch for bats. Count how many times they dip in the glow.
6. Hold you hard! The harnser might be at home.
7. Be sure to visit often; soak it up with your eyes and ears; allow yourself to become its friend.
8. Record the changes.
9. Go to the ugly sections. Pick up crisp packets and cigarette butts. Look for otters.
10. Speak out loud what you might need to say. Tell the bats, or the bugs, or the river.
11. Cry a little. What's a few more drops?
12. Walk silently. Focus on all the sounds around you.
13. Be one with the river community.
14. Don't put anything in there you wouldn't like to swim through.
15. Let nature expand your sense of being.
16. Walk.
17. You have to return.
18. Try not to fall in.

The river is a basin of stolen things

A shopping trolley

and a mattress.

A white stork.

The original name.

A tawny frogmouth's chick.

What lived before the European starling muscled in.

Wood ducks, almost.

A ferryman's family business.

Sewage-sludged traffic cones.

Sand.

Trade routes and meeting places

and food and joy

and quiet.

A river as it's heating up and a river as it's cooling down

It is frosty in my city this morning.
Teasels and emaciated buddleia
crunch with minus temperatures
and the river is high and sluggish
under the bridge to the plastics plant
and the motor repair shop
and the bakery warehouse.

But on the other side of the world
small brown chicks are fledging
and the sun flashes like the feathers
of an orange bellied parrot
and the warm breeze lifts the brims of sunhats
and I try to remember that it is warm somewhere

as I stuff my red hands in their fleecy pockets.

Flat, but not

That's what I say to people about where I live.
People think it's fen-flat and it's not.
I lived at the top of a hill for years
and moved to the top of another hill
and there is not path to the shops that doesn't
undulate
and I know it's not like we live up a mountain
but when they say that Norfolk is flat they're only thinking
of its edges; salt flats and the inland fens and the marshy broadland,
the bit near Yarmouth and the brecks.
They're not thinking about the rolling landscape
of the chalky middle,
or the forested cliffs and sloping fields of the north
and they're not thinking of the rivers that cut down
into the flat land, make invisible ditches,
rivers that take their time moving the fresh water to the sea.

It's flat ten thousand miles away
but for the You Yangs and the K Road Cliffs
and the river red gums and the way the clouds move
across the giant sky. It's possible to see for miles,
over borders to countries that precede the English names.

The Unofficial History of the Werribee River

found poem using memories from listeners of 'Drive' on ABC Radio Melbourne

Flowing from the Great Dividing Range down to

the "backbone"

waterway,

the Werribee trails, feeds the

Traditional Owners.

Remember the K Road cliffs,

birdlife cutting Werribee in two.

Rapids running through the heart.

A dramatic moment when the river

went into labour:

a mad dash

was born

and washed up days later.

The Werribee drainage basin

had a field trip to

the principal's office.

It was actually an Indonesian cigarette.

Its current

runs onto

the You Yangs.

The Werribee

is spectacular dawn, bird life,

the Jesuit Seminary,
early morning platypus.
40 years ago
we used to swim in the mystical
spirit of Bungey.
We dared each other to
land in
summer afternoons,
timeless in denim cutoffs and wild wind.
We'd pack up suburbia,
drive in to the real stories.

Wensum River
after Jack Cooper

I like how the lights
of the Playhouse garden
bounce Christmas
onto the winter water
and how the troubadour
on the bridge sings us
into the old city walls,
but mostly I like the swans
that shout across the banks
and raise their babies
by the old printing factory
and how the dogs that walk
along the old railway line know
to give the goslings space.

At the Mouth and at the Source

The water lives for tomorrows
and ecologists.

It grants wishes,
lifts its lips with a snarl and asks, informally,
for a raise.

The water is a purple sun.

The water defeats perspective.

The River Wensum Stops Flowing Through Mill

found poem using an Eastern Daily Press article from August 2022

The rain-starved river

has stopped a century.

After Norfolk's driest July on record,

the lack of rainfall

is leaking

into another

year.

Mr Seaman leaves the channel, choked.

I lay in the flow, missing something, losing my empathy with the river.

It is not talking to me anymore.

It has dried up.

There is not enough.

Sky Country

We swap sky stories
which themselves travel
through the sky
– or at least I think that's how
it works.
At opposite ends
of the world the same sky
stretches over different geology
and wakes up and goes to sleep
at the same time and we are talking
about clouds
which have probably themselves
been in both skies
or the same sky
or both rivers
and I get dizzy thinking
while I look at the sky on my screen
and the sky out of my window
and the water on my screen
and the water at the end of the road
about how big the world is

and how small.

The Werribee River via Zoom and an Eleven Hour Time Difference

The cross walk sound is different. Here it beeps so loud it feels like a wire between your ears but there, faintly, through early morning microphones, the crosswalk ticks like the cogs on a wooden toy we made at school and becomes background for a Bad Guy as the image bounces across the road and I am distracted for a moment by the sound and don't notice the overpass coming alive in the way-to-work traffic.

Giant emu feet
walk you down to the river,
grey, sunrise, magic.