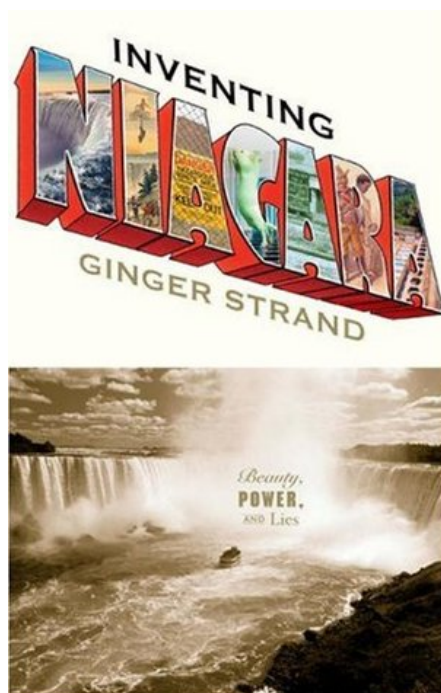




Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power and Lies

Ginger Strand

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Americans call Niagara Falls a natural wonder, but the Falls aren't very natural anymore. In fact, they are a study in artifice. Water diverted, riverbed reshaped, brink stabilized and landscape redesigned, the Falls are more a monument to man's meddling than to nature's strength. Held up as an example of something real, they are hemmed in with fakery -- waxworks, haunted houses, IMAX films and ersatz Indian tales. A symbol of American manifest destiny, they are shared politely with Canada. Emblem of nature's power, they are completely human-controlled. Archetype of natural beauty, they belie an ugly environmental legacy still bubbling up from below. On every level, Niagara Falls is a monument to how America falsifies nature, reshaping its contours and redirecting its force while claiming to submit to its will. Combining history, reportage and personal narrative, "Inventing Niagara" traces Niagara's journey from sublime icon to engineering marvel to camp spectacle. Along the way, Ginger Strand uncovers the hidden history of America's waterfall: the Mohawk chief who wrested the Falls from his adopted tribe, the revered town father who secretly assisted slave catchers, the wartime workers who unknowingly helped build the Bomb and the building contractor who bought and sold a pharaoh. With an uncanny ability to zero in on the buried truth, Strand introduces us to underwater dams, freaks of nature, mythical maidens and 280,000 radioactive mice buried at Niagara.

From LaSalle to Lincoln to Los Alamos, Mohawks to Marilyn, Niagara's story is America's story, a tale of dreams founded on the mastery of nature. At a time of increasing environmental crisis, "Inventing Niagara" shows us how understanding the cultural history of nature might help us rethink our place in it today.

Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power and Lies Details

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Tracey says

I'd first heard about this book on the NPR Fresh Air program 26 May 2008; however, it was as a pass-along from my Mom that I finally had a chance to sit down and read it.

I visited the Niagara Falls area back in 1999 and remember clearly the disparity between the US and Canadian sides - now, thanks to this book I want to go back to explore the nooks and crannies a bit more thoroughly.

Inventing Niagara reads a bit like a Sarah Vowell book - Strand explores the history and sociology of the Niagara Falls area, from Native American times to modern day. She covers its history of exploitation quite well - I was particularly fascinated by the struggle between the hydroelectric contingent and the nature lovers during the late 1800's and their compromise. I wish there had been more info about Tesla's involvement - tho I was surprised to learn that Frederick Law Olmstead played such a huge part in the development of Niagara Falls as a tourist location (and how much landscaping went into making it look so "natural"!).

And much like Vowell, Strand digs into the less savory elements of the area's history - such as Love Canal, and the post Manhattan-Project radioactive dumping. She even veers off into a history of the Red Hat Club (they held a national convention at the Falls while Strand was there) as well as follows the remains of one of the original Niagara Falls tourist attractions - a museum of natural history - to its current owner in New York City. Strand puts a lot of herself into this book - discussing how she performed the research, as well as some of her own conclusions about the area's current situation.

If you enjoy nonstandard place histories, where the author plays an active part in the narration (again, see Sarah Vowell), I can recommend this book.

Elizabeth K. says

This was an enjoyable "of local interest" book, looking at Niagara Falls through American history, from the transition of control of area from the Tuscarora tribe to the new settlers in the region, the creation of the whole concept of the honeymoon in America, hydro-electric power, Love Canal and other chemical and nuclear waste, and most recently, the introduction of casinos on both the Canadian and American sides.

It's a very chatty book, and I enjoyed the tone -- this is someone who clearly likes history and trivia and weird asides but will also come out and offer her fairly educated opinion about some of the goings-on she discovers in her research, both historical and in the present day.

There's this on-going theme, that comes up in the title, that there's been this contradiction about what is really going on with the Falls and how it is presented in order to promote whatever it is people were/are trying to market - everything from the creation of the park to how the power is generated. I get it, but I thought it might have been slightly improved with less repetition.

I would recommend to people who like the conversational history approach, there's something similar to Sarah Vowell, although not nearly so over the top. I was saying recently that something that annoys ... well, annoys is a strong word, so maybe not that strong but *anyway*, Sarah Vowell is often making these self-

depreciating comments in her books about how her various socio-historical obsessions make people think she is odd and so they'll avoid her at parties and things, but that always seems a little disingenuous to me, she's *famous* and her friends are well-known quirky writers and other celebrities so I honestly doubt too many people are avoiding her at parties, in fact I bet people try to get her going so they can enjoy whatever engaging thing she comes out with. With this author, on the other hand, when she describes the awkwardness of her social interactions involving things like her love of hydro-infrastructure, I *believe* her and empathize with her.

Emmkay says

Wow, there are a lot of interesting things to think about when it comes to Niagara Falls: there's the history of European exploration and conflict with First Nations in the area, the early and continuing history of tourism, the extent to which the Falls as we know them today are a manmade (or remade) creation, the development of hydro power, the terrible pollution and industrial decay wrought by ready access to hydro power, including waste from the area's role in nuclear weapons production. Taken altogether, it made for a fascinating read. Strand used too much of the paint-by-numbers narrative non-fiction style popular these days, interspersing her research with little anecdotes about meeting this or that librarian or community activist, a brief description of what they were wearing and a quirky fact or, in lieu of quirk, what they were eating when they met at such-and-such a diner. So that was a little grating, but overall I really enjoyed this.

Lori says

The best example of using history + pop culture to learn. An easy and fascinating read. The perfect travel book for anyone who is going to Niagara Falls, or has been there. It's the story of America, from the British and the French, Indians, the first state park, democracy, the Erie Canal, Harriet Tubman crossing to freedom in Canada and the Underground Railroad, daredevils in the news, the power of advertising, hydroelectric plants transforming society, industrialist greed and corruption, toxic waste from the first atomic bombs dropped on Japan, Marilyn Monroe, honeymooners, Love Canal, urban decay and reinvention, casinos. Think of it as the "Turn Right at Macchu Picchu" but for Niagara Falls.

Don says

I really enjoyed her style of writing. I didn't think I'd ever laugh so much reading about Niagara. I'm going to try one of her other books hoping that I'll like it as much.

Stephenie says

this one is taking me some time- it reads like a textbook. i read for hours last night and i only made it to page 45! what is that?! i'm trying to absorb everything and learn something, so i keep rereading sections. when i was put in the position of tour guide last month to some people who had never been here, i quickly realized how much i don't know about the area. this book will hopefully help me with that.

Sean Owen says

Niagra Falls is an interesting subject worthy of exploration unfortunately that's not the real subject of this book. Ginger Strand is a boring narcissist who cannot stop talking about herself. If I wanted to read an idiot complain about not being allowed to look at her cellphone while in a research library I'd sign up for twitter.

Avoid this if you want to read about something interesting. Pick this book up if you'd like to hear a boring middle aged women prattle on about herself.

Katie says

The author is like that friend of yours, the one who geeks out over some subject you've never considered the least bit interesting (hydroelectric power, for instance!), and whose passion for it is so infectious that you find yourself suddenly wondering why **you** never geeked out about hydroelectricity before. Reading this book was like having what starts out as a straightforward conversation with your friend, and as her favorite subject comes up, finding her bursting with weird and fascinating details and an unstoppable enthusiasm that you can't help but share. I grew up about an hour and a half from the Falls, but never saw them as anything more than the gateway to legal alcohol at age 19. There was something banal, tacky even, about the whole region, that I couldn't quite identify, despite thinking of Church's painting as a breathtaking masterpiece.

Strand delves into a thorough history of development at Niagara Falls, from the Native Americans whose "Western Door" was a corridor of economic activity, through the succession of cutthroat land barons and profit-driven small-time merchants of the 1800s, past Olmsted's reconstruction of "nature" at the turn of the century, and into the region's well-known associations of the 20th century: the atomic bomb; honeymooners on a budget; Love Canal; and the return of tribal economic activity via casinos. While the extent of her research is impressive, she takes a personal rather than academic tone, poking fun at her geekiness and providing colorful descriptions of the characters (librarians, PR people, curators of bizarre collections, historians, indignant activists, engineers, tour guides, Native Americans, and more) she meets along the way. Through it all, she explores Niagara's ever-shifting double meaning: both an awe-inspiring, unquenchable, even spiritual force of nature, and a highly engineered, carefully-constructed showpiece for the dominion of mankind. Like the waterfall itself, the region is in constant flux.

Occasionally her tone gets a little too "cute"; I noticed this more at the beginning, but found the storytelling (because this reads like a story) quite satisfactory overall. I do wish she had spent more time with the Canadian history of the Falls, which she mostly sets aside to deal with the US side.

Highly recommended and lots of fun - one of my favorite reads in some time.

Michelle says

Being a Niagara native and a local history buff, I found this book to be the absolutely very best thing I've ever read on the subject. Her style was beautiful and it kept me through each and every page. She covered the good and the bad with an eye that saw a bit deeper into things. She showed me a whole new way of looking at the place I call home. I love how she made a parallel with whatever was going on in NF and the

history of this country. We have always been kind of a live exhibit of the symbolic state of our nation. We were the seat of power in early times, a violent wilderness, the last stop before the promised land, the dawn of the modern age, the war machine, the cesspool of technology, the glitz and the boom of globalism, as well as the poverty and desolation that trails behind.

I can't wait to meet Ginger Strand and let her know that in some strange way she made me proud to call this strange and paradoxical place my home.

Joseph says

It's more a book about the author's experience of Niagara Falls than just a dry look at the history of an area and community with more wrinkles than we'd expect. However, that makes it a much more interesting read, even considering Strand's tendency to go overboard on illustrative metaphors on every subject imaginable. Sure, the falls at Niagara would move anyone to wax eloquent describing their beauty, power, and charm, but, consider this description:

"broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, metal linebackers striding across the Mohawk Valley". That's the author's description of ...power lines, in a blip about her drive to the Buffalo/Niagara area. It seems every mundane element she encounters gets such a poetic description. Still, she keeps you involved in the landscape, the stories, and the dream of Niagara Falls, even when you realize the sad state of affairs - "there's something downright impressive about the desolation of downtown Niagara Falls. If city planners had set out to lay waste to a town, they couldn't have done a better job."

Who knew, about Niagara's connection to the Manhattan Project, nuclear waste, and the massacre of settlers by a local Native American tribe that essentially gave the white men the justification to demand the falls? Informative and engaging, Strand's storytelling method keeps the surprises coming, makes the history more personal, and draws you into the myth and magic of the area and its natural and harnessed potential. Add it to your list.

Martha says

"Environmentalism is a way of seeing. It's time to look the world squarely in the face and try to understand our role in it. There's no painting ourselves out of the picture. This is not to say we must always make something of nature, never leaving it alone. It's to say that we are it, and it is us, and until we stop trying to separate the two, we'll never get beyond seeing the natural world as either virgin or whore, something to be put on a pedestal and admired, or else used up with little regard for its own potential. It is to say that in order to find balance, we must consider the natural world not as merely waiting to be of service or to be saved, but must respect it as equal partner in shaping the future of our planet. To do so surely starts with opening our eyes to what we have done to it, and what we are doing to it now."

Melinda says

The story of Niagra Falls is also the story of America. This titan of staggering power and beauty, symbolic of the monstrous uncharted wilderness of the new world, was wrestled out from under its original inhabitants, groomed into a commercial attraction, hydroelectrically harnessed to the power grid, cast as host to post-

nuclear progress and its attendant pollutants, and then abandoned in the wake of economic collapse. Ginger Strand tells this sprawling story in a series of journalistic meditations in which the historical facts she uncovers are presented in a lively present-day narrative. The reader is invited along with Strand as she explores Niagra's archives, treasure troves of tourist-attracting oddities, post-industrial wastelands. She curries the favor of protective librarians, has coffee with Native America activists, and even hobnobs with the Purple Hat society. This double-layered approach to the telling of Niagra's story and the author's story as she tells Niagra's story is reminiscent of a Michael Moore documentary or a "This American Life" piece. At times Strand pushes the conceit a little far. Some of the points she tries to make strain the under the weight of their own ambition (The Niagra tight rope walker craze as metaphor for America's dangerous ambivalence regarding slavery??? Come on!) but the intelligent charm of her narrative voice and her obvious love of the subject allows her to get away with it.

David says

The central premise of this book is that the natural wonder we know as Niagara Falls is in fact an example of how nature is manipulated for man's own purposes but still sold as "nature." The author's love of the subject is obvious--this is as much about her own voyage of discovery as it is about Niagara Falls. We follow her as she meets interesting people associated with the Falls. She describes her many visits to the region, the many people she meets, what she uncovers at the library, the local records, etc. It all comes across in a way that is interesting to read. What we learn in this book is how the power of Niagara was harnessed and then ultimately re-shaped for the benefit of tourism, making it more user-friendly rather than literally just letting it run its course. The history of industry in the area is explored; how manufacturing once thrived until it mostly left for places with cheaper power and lower taxes. The toxic history is presented, from the region's unwitting role in the development of the atomic bomb to Love Canal and beyond. The last chapter is about the state of the American side of the falls, which has not fared as well as the Canadian side, partly due to the fact that the Canadians had casino gambling to draw people over to their side. Apparently now there is a casino on the American side, but is it really enough to save the region? And should a beautiful natural treasure like Niagara Falls ever need "saving?" The history of the American side reads like a horror story of something that has happened to a lot of once-great American cities. Over all, this is a good read. It is more of an exploration of the author's curiosity than it is a call to action for the environment, which is probably a good thing, cause, well, I'm pretty lazy.

Amanda says

A really fascinating, engrossing book, not dry at all, with sections about the development of industry in Niagara Falls, urban development, encounters between Native Americans and explorers in the area, the Power Vista, nuclear weapons production, Love Canal, the Honeymoon Industry, and the extensive engineering projects that have completely remade the Falls. It was especially interesting for me because I grew up in Niagara County and it addresses the little stories people here always tell about the Bomb, Love Canal, engineers turning the Falls on and off, etc... I've been to the Falls a thousand times and I'm dying to go back and look at all the places Strands talks about. The chapter about the creation of the atomic bombs was a completely vital retelling of that history which highlights the casualties at home.

Joann Bloxsom says

There was a lot of history in this book, but I felt that sometimes it was slanted to fit the premise. I had no idea that water levels could be controlled, but some the measures just make sense.
