



## Sex and the River Styx

*Edward Hoagland , Howard Frank Mosher (Foreword)*

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Called the best essayist of his time by luminaries like Philip Roth, John Updike, and Edward Abbey, Edward Hoagland brings readers his ultimate collection. In *Sex and the River Styx*, the author's sharp eye and intense curiosity shine through in essays that span his childhood exploring the woods in his rural Connecticut, his days as a circus worker, and his travels the world over in his later years.

Here, we meet Hoagland at his best: traveling to Kampala, Uganda, to meet a family he'd been helping support only to find a divide far greater than he could have ever imagined; reflecting on aging, love, and sex in a deeply personal, often surprising way; and bringing us the wonder of wild places, alongside the disparity of losing them, and always with a twist that brings the genre of nature writing to vastly new heights. His keen dissection of social realities and the human spirit will both startle and lure readers as they meet African matriarchs, Tibetan yak herders, circus aerialists, and the strippers who entertained college boys in 1950s Boston. Says Howard Frank Mosher in his foreword, the self-described rhapsodist -could fairly be considered our last, great transcendentalist.-

## Sex and the River Styx Details

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# From Reader Review Sex and the River Styx for online ebook

## Phillip says

I white knuckled through these essays, enjoyed the scenery of travel and ordinary observations from a life long lived. I stumbled over a few rabbit trails and exited to the dictionary too many times. Loved his stark honesty, recognized my fast approaching life inventory, felt a sense of urgency to the ticking clock.

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## Kenny Chaffin says

Very enjoyable, but style-wise requires some concentration. He tends to write in long complicated sentences and passages with lots of adjectives and adverbs. Good stuff if the style doesn't bother you too much.

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## Cathy says

I love Edward Hoagland, who writes personal essays about nature, and human nature. My favorite of his books is still "The Courage of Turtles," but this collection is interesting, especially since, at seventy nine-years-old, Hoagland has formed some strong opinions about marriage, benefactorship, and the future of the planet. He repeats himself on certain topics but his travel essays are fresh. My favorite pieces are the first and the last in the collection: "Small Silences," and "Sex and the River Styx" Great title, too, isn't it?

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## David Kessler says

Many thoughts from his travels about the globe but with the firm point of view from a 67 yo man. Maybe a little too firm is his observations so leaves little to our thinking. I would rate it a little too harsh.

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## Deb says

I was excited about this book: the modern day Henry David, reflections of a wanderer, and observations of life. With four chapters left to go, I am struggling. Like Thoreau's writing, this is not light reading. Often during the narrations I found myself pondering, thinking of the objective and consenting to the sage's wisdom. But, what I was seeking were the descriptive passages that transport you to another time or place, laced with resurrected ideals: the first chapter was exactly that -- WW II and a young boys exploration of a new environment, recently plucked from the city to a rural farm and the joys of nature and eccentric personalities he finds. Prose that twists (as an example: Into the void slips obsessional pornography, fundamentalist religion, strobe-light showbiz, and squirmy corporate flacks such as the old power brokers seldom employed. How is that for GREAT command of the English language?!?!?), on and on it goes and farther and farther away from the meditations of his life experiences, the sentences choppy and shifting until my focus is sadly not upon the ruminating assembly but instead dozing or inattentively staring at some

object. I wanted to love this book. Small doses of the writing could lead to interesting conversations, but none more than the title of the book which has caused numerous people to comment and even boldly state their surprise regarding someone so openly reading a sex book in public arenas ? Aside from the catchy title and the transcendentalist similarity, the book has weighed me down . . . to the stack of not-quite-finished it goes. Now I may never truly know if Sex and the River Styx is a metaphor or musings of a life altering event that defined a character. My adoration of Thoreau and the similarity of Hoagland's style force me to give this book 3 stars, tempted to give it 2 but the writing is very lovely and it is unfair to penalize a review due to my unmet expectations.

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### **Marc says**

Thirteen essays on the twilight of life by an author well-know for his saltiness. I bought this book used (McKay Books, Nashville TN) based simply on the title: My interest in the River Styx is based on the location of my Grey Havens property on a modern day river system of that name. Grey Havens and Styx mythology are irresistible to me and lately books on the topic seem to be drawn to me like filing scraps to a magnet.

Hoagland's essays are meandering and circuitous. Annie Dillard's genre. The later, I never really liked but Hoagland's are engaging and interesting. The titular climactic essay (pun whole-heartedly intended), "Sex and the River Styx" is fun and insightful. Only those over 60 should be allowed to read this.

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### **Kristina says**

Unfortunately I can not add this to my count for the year as I didn't finish it. It was just too pretentious. The author tried to sound intellectual by trying to use a lot of big words and flowery language that just led to the flow of the essays being stilted and hard to concentrate on.

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### **Gaylord Dold says**

Edward Hoagland. Sex and the River Styx, Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont  
(272 pp. \$17.95)

Edward Hoagland is one of my favorite writers and a beloved figure in American letters. He is my review of one of his latest books.

Biologists worldwide warn that we are entering a sixth great extinction event. Songbirds are dying off, the great mammals are disappearing, as are forests, frogs and fishes of the sea, victims of human expansion, habitat destruction, climate change and the economics of grown. In "Sex and the River Styx" Edward Hoagland, America's greatest essayist and nature writer (our 21st century equivalent of John Muir) ruminates not only on the luminous wealth of nature and its gradual diminishment, but also on his own mortality.

Hoagland (author of the immortal "Notes from the Century Before") is, like Jim Harrison, Joan Didion and John McPhee, a national treasure. And, at age 78, he can sense the end of his life. But the smell of death in

the air, the aura of massive extinction to come, the blinding white brilliance of cities that obliterates constellations and the night itself---none of these, nor any sense of foreboding about the future can overwhelm this man's exalted love, a love that extends not only to the glorious web of nature, but also to his fellow man.

"Sex and the River Styx" is a series of 13 linked essays exploring such subjects as Hoagland's rural Connecticut childhood, working with elephants in the Ringling Brothers circus during the early 1950s, the traditions of American political dissent, and travels in such places as Vermont and on the African veldt. Hoagland describes driving a rattling Model A across America on Route 66, with only a "twenty dollar bill tucked in my shoe for emergencies."

Other topics include Tibetan barley and yaks, becoming a "codger", marriage, and always, his beloved Africa, where he seems most at home, especially among the "shattered" wild herds on a continent which Hoagland describes as a "crucible of mayhem, torture and murder". Gone are the African days when on the vast plains of East Africa "pristine herds browsed among the thorn trees as creatures do when engaged in being themselves."

Yet, despite Hoagland's obvious passion for elephants, lions and reptiles large and small, he reserves a special love for humans and cities: Two essays in particular concern his life-long affair with New York City and its people. And in "A Last Look Around,"

Hoagland writes passionately about the 2 million people who have died in southern Sudan during decades-long fighting. In "Visiting Noah", Hoagland describes a visit to a Ugandan family to whom he's been sending \$20 dollar bills slipped "into a greeting card so they wouldn't show through the envelope if a larcenous clerk were looking for them."

It is this theme that is most fundamental: How to remain human and loving in an era when "not just honeybees and chimpanzees are disappearing, but incomprehensibly innumerable species that have never been discovered at all."

The drawbacks of the book are few: In my copy attributions to the magazines and journals in which articles first appeared were missing. The volume could have used some illustrations, and perhaps a photograph or drawing here and there, just to enhance the presentation. However, these technical faults are negligible. The book is a treasure.

And what of death? How hard will it be to leave the earth whose beauty is fading and whose mystery is dispersed? Hoagland writes: "...accepting death as a process of disassembly in humus, then brook, and finally seawater demystifies it for me. I don't mean I comprehend bidding consciousness goodbye. But I love the rich smell of humus, of true woods and soil, and of course, the sea---long rivulets and brooks, lying earthbound on the ground. The question of decomposition is not pressing or frightening. From the top of the food chain I'll re-enter the bottom. Be a bug; then a shiner shimmering on the closest stream...or partially mineralized---does one need a hippocampus? A green shoot a woodchuck might eat seems okay. I believe in continuity through conductivity: that the seething underpinnings of life's flash and filigree may appear temporarily dead, but may spark across a species like the electricity of empathy, or as through paralleling the posthumous alchemy of art."

In other words, the starlight that made us shines on in cosmically infinite forms. Who needs a hippocampus, indeed?

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## Kevin says

I feel bad giving it 3 stars since he is such a good writer. At times it is like prose poetry. I think the problems with this book are mostly poor selection and ordering of essays: the entire middle of the book is given over to a series of redundant, pessimistic, repetitive ones. The essays nearer the ends deal with travel, sex, nature - these are much better and more interesting.

Regarding the central essays, all given practically the same name: "Endgame," "Curtain Calls," "Last Look Around" ... they rubbed me the wrong way. These ruminations on the inevitable apocalypse or dystopia the future will bring -- seemed like run-of-the-mill old codger thinking, just more eloquently stated. It started making sense when I saw they had been independently published in Harper's, The Atlantic and such -- seems like he was saying his literary "farewells" by rewriting the same essay for publication in all the channels he published in, over the years.

I have read books written by yet older authors brimming with ideas, advice, and hope. (It's a very different sort of book, but "Thinking, Fast & Slow" comes to mind.) If this book represents the legacy Hoagland wishes to pass along ... well, I'll just say: I pass.

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## Richard says

When we were surly, and mumbling teenagers, my friend's dad used to regale us with a bit of verse that went: Speak clearly if you speak at all; carve every word before you let it fall. And although we mocked this for all it was worth, it has stuck with me.

Edward Hoagland is an author who carves words, and each essay in "Sex and the River Styx" seems to be a small monument to thought and language. They've achieved that quality of being things unto themselves, and not just words and ideas hanging on sheets of paper. He sent me to the dictionary thrice in the first two essays with: pelagic, tessitura, and jactitating. His writing is old fashioned in the way beautiful sentences are old fashioned. They're longer than what we're used to, and contain ideas within ideas even as they're expressing one idea - like a sentence should. They're ornate, and polished in the way I imagine a gorgeous Gilded Age tavern. Remarkable.

Mr. Hoagland is definitely an old coot regaling us with the wisdom of 80 years, and a don't give a damn attitude in his delivery. He's an old guy with great stories, and though he sometimes goes on a little longer than necessary, and may preen with erudition when he uses four descriptives when two would have done the trick, he's truly entertaining.

In the first essay in this book, Mr. Hoagland manages to discourse on: coming of age, the wariness of a stutterer, servants and race relations, shrunken heads, parrots, elephants, mountain men, species extinction, Homer, Hardy, and Melville. Now there's a bar room chat worth having.

He's also honest, and calls 'em like he sees 'em - he holds up the mirror, and we might not like what we see. His essay on dissent is a must read for all of us who claim to be engaged in the democratic process.

I'm in my final third, and find that there are not a lot of writers or friends my age or older who are willing to lay it on the line about sex, death, and the vagaries of aging, so I consider Mr. Hoagland a real find as he

sums up a life well lived.

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### **Melody says**

Hoagland's an old man reflecting on life and society. He's quite analytical and intellectual, but there are more than a few times that he slips into what seems to me to be knee-jerk old geezer territory. He routinely bemoans the fact that the Internet is keeping us from communicating authentically, and that cyberspace insulates us from understanding real Nature. I tend to disagree with these conclusions, but he does reason his way into them with conviction.

His paeans to his early days, roaming the face of the earth and being seduced by the glories of Nature, are sheer delight. His trips to third world countries are wrenching and interesting. His meditations on age and the Divine, on dying and humus, on global extinctions and personal ones, approach the transcendent. Since it's a collection of essays written over time but herein gathered, there's a fair bit of repetition that maybe could have been edited out. I only needed to read the bit about George Orwell saying that every man has the face he deserves by 50 once or maybe twice. Not every other essay. His essays reflecting on his wives and his travels are less wonderful to my eyes than the others. And the one about circus people is just... weird.

Quibbles aside, it's well worth reading.

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### **Leah Darrow says**

Edward Hoagland is an extremely skilled writer, but his essays too often devolve into the same ideas and topics. He beats the same drum again and again, bemoaning the destruction of the environment and the loss of biodiversity. These are important issues, but unfortunately they are rather less interesting to the reader than the scintillating personal anecdotes Hoagland too often foregoes in favor of further rhapsodizing on the merits of the spotted swamp frog.

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### **Kasa Cotugno says**

Hoagland's memories span a 60 years period enhanced by a poetic sensual writing style. During his early years his parents allowed him the leeway to develop and feed his insatiable curiosity, affording him access to mentors who informed him while whetting his appetite for knowledge and experience. The life that evolved was unusually rich, and these essays are redolent with description of first hand experience. He recognizes the importance of a closeness with nature beginning in childhood, but points out it is best when paired with a balance of metropolitan living. He clearly delineates the differences in perceptions of world view between our generation and our predecessors.

Essays on the aging process are presented without regret or self pity. It is oddly comforting to discover that someone who has led the life as Mr. Hoagland has is experiencing similar sensations as we are funnier and more surprising and more informative than one would expect.

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**Beth says**

Good perspective on what to expect after 70 -- now that so many of us will have a chance to get there!

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**Rebecca H. says**

Edward Hoagland's book *Sex and the River Styx* is a collection of essays about nature, travel, and what he has learned from life. He self-consciously situates himself as someone nearing the end of his life looking back and taking stock. This is the first Hoagland book I've read (which I got from the publisher on NetGalley), although I've read single essays of his from various collections before. It's an interesting book and a number of things stand out about it, most obviously the quality of the writing, as in this passage, where he writes about his own death:

. . . accepting death as a process of disassembly into humus, then brook, and finally seawater demystifies it for me. I don't mean I comprehend bidding consciousness goodbye. But I love the rich smell of humus, of true woods soil, and of course the sea — love rivulets and brooks, lying earthbound, on the ground. The question of decomposition is not pressing or frightening. From the top of the food chain I'll reenter the bottom. Be a bug; then a shiner shimmering in the closest stream . . . or partially mineralized — does one need retinas and a hippocampus? Because I don't particularly want to be me, my theory is no. A green shoot a woodchuck might munch seems okay. I believe in continuity through conductivity: that the seething underpinnings of life's flash and filigree, its igniting chemistry, may, like fertilizer, appear temporarily dead, but spark across species like the electricity of empathy, or as though paralleling the posthumous alchemy of art.

His descriptions are so specific, so precise, that you can imagine exactly what he's describing, even if you haven't actually seen it with your own eyes. I also admired the strong sense of joy that runs through the book, alongside the equally strong (or stronger, perhaps?) sense of doom. As one who loves nature deeply, Hoagland mourns over all that we've lost on the earth and all that we will lose in the future. When he says he's glad he won't be around to witness the future destruction that is inevitably on the way, I sympathize.

Read the rest of the review at [Of Books and Bicycles](#).

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