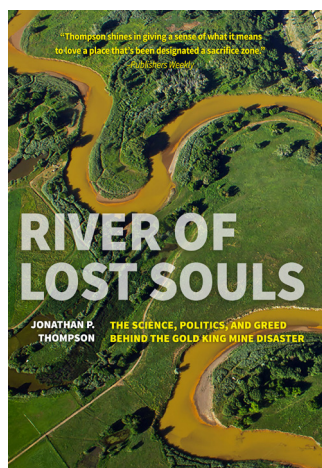




VOICES FOR THE LAND
torreyhouse.org

Reading Group Guide RIVER OF LOST SOULS

THE SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND GREED BEHIND THE GOLD KING MINE DISASTER
BY JONATHAN P. THOMPSON



INTRODUCTION

What was really behind the 2015 Gold King Mine disaster in southwestern Colorado?

When the river that his ancestors had settled next to in the 1870s turned orange with mining-related pollution in 2015, Jonathan P. Thompson knew he would write a book about it. Thompson, an award-winning investigative environmental journalist, digs into the science, politics, and greed behind the 2015 Gold King Mine disaster, and unearths a litany of impacts wrought by a century and a half of mining, energy development, and fracking in southwestern Colorado. Amid these harsh realities, Thompson explores how a new generation is setting out to make amends.

"Thompson's debut work tells the tale of the Four Corners, its history, its people and their interaction with the land—all from the perspective of a fourth-generation Durango resident."

—*THE DURANGO HERALD*

"Thompson's investigative chops are impressive. But the book is most evocative when the author negotiates the strange eddies of his personal connections to this landscape." —*SIERRA MAGAZINE*

"Part elegy (the Animas River watershed is still compromised by the spill), part ode (Thompson grew up playing in the Animas while staying at his grandparents' farm in the fertile valley), and part investigative journalism (he examines unsparingly how extractive industries past and present befoul rivers by setting up practice near precious water sources)." —*OUTSIDE*

"Thompson documents the sacrifice of the entire area with unusual detail, vibrancy, and no small amount of passion, and with a keen eye for the effects on people and other living things. Highly recommended." —*CHOICE*

"A vivid historical account of the Animas region, and Thompson shines in giving a sense of what it means to love a place that's been designated a 'sacrifice zone.'" —*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

"Aficionados of Western history, environmentalists, and even general readers will enjoy this cautionary tale that takes an intimate look at the side effects of human industry."
—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I've long wanted to write a book about my "hometown," otherwise known as the Four Corners Country. But I was too busy writing magazine articles about it, and I never stumbled upon a good focal point. Then my writings about the Gold King Mine Spill of August 2015 took off, breaking readership records on the *High Country News* website, garnering me a dozen radio interviews, and the like. On Twitter, my followers all started urging me to write a book. When I wrote a cover story about the spill, my editors also said I should write a book. So here I am! In some ways I've been researching this book since I started as a cub reporter at the *Silverton Standard & the Miner* newspaper in 1996.



Jonathan P. Thompson has been an environmental journalist focusing on the American West since he signed on as reporter and photographer at the *Silverton Standard & the Miner* newspaper in 1996. He has worked and written for *High Country News* for over a decade, and his work has appeared in numerous other outlets. He is the author of *Sagebrush Empire: How a Remote Utah County Became the Battlefield of American Public Lands*. He and his wife, Wendy Thompson, and daughters Lydia and Elena split their time between Colorado and Bulgaria.

Learn more at riveroflostsouls.com.

Thompson is available to discuss *River of Lost Souls* with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, email kirsten@torreyhouse.com.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. In *River of Lost Souls*, Thompson explores and interrogates the ways in which we have historically "othered" the landscape—treated it as intrinsically different from or alien to ourselves. What are some of the major ways in which people other the land? What are the seemingly innocuous, everyday ways and/or microaggressions people show toward the land? How can we begin to dismantle this othering?
2. On page 10, Thompson complicates a capitalist-driven relationship to the land, stating, "That which fuels our existence fouls our home. Our history is a history of pollution." What does this mean to you? How and why does Thompson begin to complicate this notion of human evolution being tethered to environmental degradation and destruction?
3. Thompson grapples with some of the ways the Gold King Mine Spill and Silverton, Colorado, are tied to his personal and familial history. Does this personal history of place resonate with you? What factors contribute to our sense of place and belonging?
4. On page 25, when discussing ancient pueblo communities, Thompson writes, "The place shapes them, not the other way around," and that "the environment can force you to be humble." Is this notion that place shapes us still relevant today? How did the place or places where you grew up inform and shape your identity?
5. How does the history of violence in the West affect your cultural, social, and political understanding of the region?
6. Thompson uses the term "industrial sacrifice zones" to describe the justification that once a landscape is polluted there is no need to preserve or protect it. He writes, "Better to abandon the stream or the forest to industry, and redefine it as a dumping ground" (p. 77). Do you agree or disagree with this sentiment? Can you think of any "industrial sacrifice zones" in or near your community that affect you or others?

7. Thompson notes that the beginning of white environmentalism “championed for the intrinsic value of the river” but he also begins to complicate the history of white environmentalism. What were some of its negative effects?
8. The late-19th-century land surveyor Franklin Rhoda described cranes in the San Juan Basin as adding a “funereal aspect to the scenery” (p. 35)—many white settlers that came to this land didn’t find it to be a beautiful place. How and why does our conception of nature, land, and place change and how does a dominant culture inform the ways in which people experience and think about nature? Can you think of both historical and current examples of this? Do the historical examples have lasting impact?
9. Thompson not only explores the catastrophe of the spill locally, but also describes its pernicious effects in other states, reminding us that no environmental catastrophe exists in isolation. Did this alter your view of environmental issues in your community? Do you find this bigger-picture view helpful? Overwhelming?
10. *Outside Magazine* describes *River of Lost Souls* as “part elegy, part ode.” What are some of the ways in which you and your community mourn the land? How do you celebrate the land?



TORREY HOUSE PRESS
VOICES FOR THE LAND

Torrey House Press publishes books at the intersection of the literary arts and environmental advocacy. THP authors explore the diversity of human experiences with place and engage community in conversations about landscape, literature, and the future of our ever-changing planet, inspiring action toward a more just world. We believe that lively, contemporary literature is at the cutting edge of social change. We seek to inform, expand, and reshape the dialogue on environmental justice and stewardship for the natural world by elevating literary excellence from diverse voices.

www.torreyhouse.org