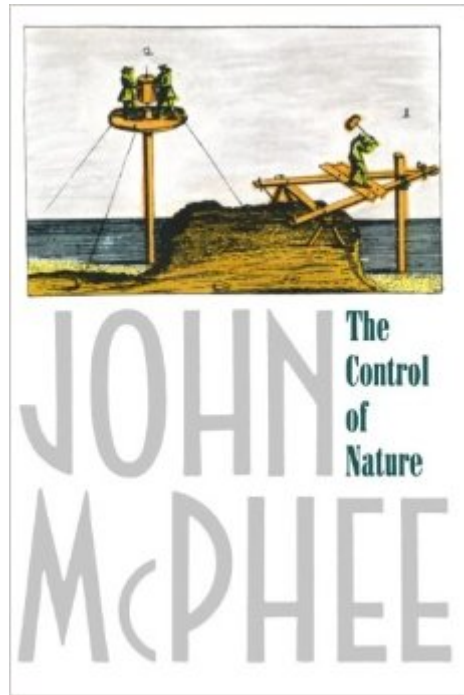


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The Control Of Nature



Synopsis

The Control of Nature is John McPhee's bestselling account of places where people are locked in combat with nature. Taking us deep into these contested territories, McPhee details the strategies and tactics through which people attempt to control nature. Most striking is his depiction of the main contestants: nature in complex and awesome guises, and those attempting to wrest control from her - stubborn, sometimes foolhardy, more often ingenious, and always arresting characters.

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Customer Reviews

A fairly detailed investigation and explanation of three locations where Man is attempting to prevent the course of Nature. The first, the attempt, so far successful, to prevent the Mississippi from changing its exit to the Gulf (it wants to go through the Atchafalaya River, substantially shorter and more attractive to the water), which change would utterly negate the entire economic geography of lower Louisiana. The second, the use of seawater pumped by the hundreds of thousands of gallons onto fresh, hot lava, to prevent said lava from overrunning and destroying the harbour and town of Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. The third, the ongoing attempt to preserve Los Angeles from the self-destruction of the San Gabriel Mountains. All three goals are fully understandable in economic terms; what is not so clear, at least with the first and third, is how long the effort can be kept up. McPhee makes a good case that in human times, not geologic, Nature will win in both cases. One leaves the book with a feeling of excitement and pleasure in the Icelandic battle, a wonder at the power of the Mississippi and the stubbornness of the Army Corps of Engineers, and a sense of amazement at the futility and blindness of people who continue to live under the San Gabriels and

hold the City liable for their foolish choices.

Having completed my Master's thesis on a 300 year flood, I picked up this book to read about Old River and the Corps' struggle to hold its position. However, I found myself even more fascinated with the struggle of the Icelandic people against essentially the Mid-Atlantic Ridge (good luck) and the head-in-the-sand mentality of Southern Californians when it comes to mudslides. McPhee is as artful in explaining geology as geology is complex. When I read his descriptions of complex geological situations put into simple terms, I smile, chuckle, shake my head, and read the line over and over. I just can't believe such complex concepts can be explained so simply using the same language I use everyday. The man is good.

When I learned that John McPhee won a Pulitzer Prize for ANNALS OF THE FORMER WORLD, I blanched a bit at buying and reading that weighty tome. I wasn't sure about tackling it, no matter how highly recommended. Thus, I looked for a smaller volume of his to "test the waters" since I have never read anything written by him before. I chose, almost at random, this volume, and fell in love with the man's work. McPhee definitely has a talent for writing, both in describing the often unusual people he meets in the three locales depicted, and his intelligent and witty turns of phrase. This definitely won't be my last John McPhee book.

I first read Los Angeles Against the Mountains (3rd chapter in the book) in the New Yorker many years ago which is what drew me to the expanded book. It is rare that I remember a title, author and content for many years! There is only one thing I can add to the reviews already given which is a suggestion to readers. The book would be greatly enhanced by maps of the Mississippi River, Iceland and even the LA area. For me, the book merits a second reading and I'll have maps in hand. While McPhee's writing creates wonderful images, it would be helpful to tie to those images and his messages to the physical realities.

The Control of Nature is a collection of three long essays about people trying to engineer their way around forces of nature. The first one about control of the Mississippi river to keep it in the current streambed, the second about anticipating volcanic activity in Iceland and the last one dealing with the literal moving of mountains as Los Angeles population pressure pushes people to build in the San Gabriel Mountains of California. McPhee, as always, tries to stay in the background and let the participants speak on the page, but there is no mistaking his memorably vivid descriptions of people

or nature. His prose are first rate with an eye for compelling detail. The book itself is a quick, thrilling read that leaves the reader with a better understanding of unsung heroes and follies. My favorite McPhee. A warning about some of McPhee's other books: My eyes seem to always glaze over when I attempt one of his "rock talk" full length books on geology.

This is among my favorite McPhee books. Not only does he bring his superb skills at description, characterization and narrative flow to these three linked stories; he manages to set out a subtle subtext without ever being explicit. In a lot of ways, humanity's history on this planet is a struggle against nature. McPhee focuses here on three instances of modern struggles against geologic forces. River flooding, and in particular the channel of the lower Mississippi River; volcanism, and in particular lava flows in Iceland and Hawaii; and erosion, and in particular mass-wasting in the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles. The message in each case is that mankind can triumph - or at least cope - in the short term, but in the long term, the natural forces will prevail. The Mississippi River will change its channel, despite the sometimes arrogant, sometimes defensive efforts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Lava flows will eventually overwhelm Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. The naive and credulous Angelenos who build their homes in the steep valleys of the San Gabriels, despite the mudflow management efforts of the County, are eventually doomed. Nature bats last. The rabbit runs for his life; the coyote runs for his supper. The Corps has to succeed each time; the Mississippi only has to succeed once. McPhee is far too good a writer to ever come out and say this. Instead, he reports what he has seen and what he has been told and lets his narrative convey his points. That reporting is simply brilliant. As I have argued in other reviews, McPhee is America's greatest living expository writer. This is one of his best books. Highly recommended.

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