



## Thames: Sacred River

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## **Thames: Sacred River** Peter Ackroyd

'Thames: Sacred River', by the bestselling author of 'London: The Biography', is about the river from source to sea. It covers history from prehistoric times to the present; the flora of the river; paintings and photographs inspired by the Thames; its geology, smells and colour; its literature, laws and landscapes; its magic and myths; its architecture, trade and weather.

This book meanders gloriously, rather as the river does itself: here are Toad of Toad Hall and Julius Caesar, Henry VIII and Shelley, Turner and Three Men in a Boat. The reader learns about the fishes that swam in the river and the boats that plied on its surface; about floods and tides; hauntings and suicides; sewers, miasmas and malaria; locks, weirs and embankments; bridges, docks and palaces. All the towns and villages along the river's 215-mile length are described.

Peter Ackroyd has a genius for digging out the most surprising and entertaining details, and for writing about them in the most magisterial prose.

## **Thames: Sacred River Details**

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Author : Peter Ackroyd

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# From Reader Review Thames: Sacred River for online ebook

## Jonfaith says

Early in Thames: The Biography the first post-Roman bridge is noted at being at York in the eighth century; we know this from church records stating that a witch was thrown from such and drowned. So, okay, what is the significance of this? We don't know, the events is passed over and the facts and images keep flowing. Employing a riparian model, Peter Ackroyd allows the jetsam and debris of history to be washed and buried in the mud immemorial. Thames proceeds thematically, but each sections is scattered in bits: Pepys, the Saxons and Victorian industry may appear under a heading, or maybe Turner, Satanism and angling. You never quite know and it doesn't appear to ultimately matter. Walter Raleigh appears a few times and Ackroyd notes that several volumes of his History of the World only led to a led B.C. timeline. Maybe Mr. Ackroyd should consider such focus. But that isn't the point here, is it?

Sure enough Ackroyd has since started his history of everything British. He and Simon Schama can now stage pay-per-view pissing contests. Just remember 30 million years ago the Thames was connected to the Rhine.

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## William says

It's hard not to respect this book. Peter Ackroyd has included an amazing amount of detail and political history is blended with cultural and anthropological references.

But in general it's just too much information, with numerous very similar examples used to bolster each point made. Poetry is quoted on almost every page (or at least it feels that way after you finish the book, but none of it was moving, and the quotes are mostly snippets. They serve, perhaps, more to glorify the author than entertain the reader.

I also lost patience with the effort to link the river with a kind of mystical or religious sense. I'm comfortable with a river having a major impact on commerce, politics, and perhaps even culture. But I am not convinced that the Thames possesses a distinctive individual character which has shaped the theology and emotions of the people who live near it.

I don't read much non-fiction these days, so it's perhaps my shortcoming that I miss having at least some kind of story line. The 441-page book has 45 chapters, so most are pretty brief. There is a logical sequence no doubt in the author's mind, but it read to me like a fairly random parade of subjects.

This book will be most entertaining for individuals who really know the geography of the Thames Valley. I know London well enough that the references to the various towns in that area were more interesting to me. But I got lost in the innumerable references to smaller places with which I was unfamiliar. There are a lot of maps (the best ones are hidden at the end, by the way) but I did not have the patience to check them on every page I read.

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## **K. says**

Trigger warnings: suicide (there's a whole chapter devoted to death and the Thames, a lot of which focuses on suicides)

3.5 stars.

This is a very comprehensive look at the Thames - its history, its geography, its flora and fauna, the way it has influenced artists and writers, the way that it's shaped life in the UK over the centuries.

Some chapters are incredibly short. Others were a little too long. And honestly, it jumped around a liiiiiiittle too much for my liking. But it was very readable, and full of interesting facts. Plus, that dust jacket is super freaking cool.

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## **Chris says**

Ackroyd's *The Thames* is a love poem to the river. Instead of a linear history, which undoubtably would've made the book dull, Ackroyd sections the chapters by theme; there is a chapter on the river and death, on fishing, on wildlife and so on. This structure makes the book far more easy and interesting to read.

Ackroyd tells stories about the river, for instance a swimming race between a man and a dog; or about the wreck of the *Princess Alice* and the connection one of the survivors has to Jack the Ripper. Combined with the stories are Ackroyd's own wonderful and at times poetic observations. He writes, "The birds of the sea do not sing. Many of the birds of the river do sing. It may be that they imitate the flowing sound of the river. Perhaps they are singing to the river. Perhaps gulls do not sing to the sea". It's the type of passage that you once realize contains a truth.

A nice addition to the book is the alternate topography where Ackroyd takes the villages and places along the river's route and gives a brief description. In this section, we learn that Fair Rosamund (Henry II's mistress) died in Godstow and her coffin was later used to line a path. We learn about the sad, and yet amusing, fate of Thomas Day.

If you like England, this book is well worth reading.

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## **Pete daPixie says**

Peter Ackroyd's 'Thames-Sacred River' published 2007, is a companion volume to his very much celebrated 'London:The Biography' from 2000. More than just a good read, Ackroyd has produced a wonderful and evocative masterpiece for 'Old Father Thames'. The writing is poetic, scholarly, fact packed and flows as gracefully as the river itself.

Typical of this authors work, here is a fully comprehensive biography of this 215 mile long river from Thames Head to the sea. It's history is excavated from Pangaea all the way to the London Olympic Games of 2012. The human river dwellers from the last ice age to Canary Wharf. The spirits of this meandering flow from Celtic river gods to Richard the Lionheart's crocodile. All the flora and fauna from the most ancient

yew to the swan with two nicks. The river inspired artists from Turner's watercolour to Monet's impressionism. Writers from Tacitus to Jerome K. Jerome. Poets from Spenser to Shelley. All the human habitation from Kemble to Canvey Island, with all the springs, creeks, weirs, wells, wharfs, canals, bridges, locks and docks in between.

Read this book, and if there are not at least a thousand facts for you to learn, then I'll jump off Waterloo Bridge.

Almost fifteen years ago, I set off from Lechlade and sailed on the Thames, up river, in search of the source. How nice to learn that another romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley attempted the very same voyage almost two hundred years before. It seems we both failed at the same place.

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### **Brynn says**

When Ackroyd tackles people, his biographies are utterly engrossing. Wider topics (river, cities) tend to exacerbate his tendency to meander with little thought to relevance or coherence. This book also suffers from his tendency to elevate anything British beyond all reason.

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### **Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says**

(Mostly) lovely read. Review to come shortly.

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My book blog -----> <http://allthebookblognamesaretaken.bl...>

It is strange to be a little in love with a river? Maybe obsessed is a little more accurate, but there is something so lovely and melancholy and of course historic about this stretch of water, easily one of the most famous rivers in the world. Perhaps that is my bias, given my love of that little island where she flows. Ah well.

If you read my review of 'Foundation' by the same author earlier in the week, you can imagine my trepidation with beginning this one. Foundation was so terrible, not at all what I have come to know and enjoy from Peter Ackroyd, so I was nervous that he would somehow have screwed this one up too - though how can you really screw up a biography of A RIVER? Luckily, he did not. It was everything I expected and thought it would be.

Ackroyd offers up a whole slew of information, from the origin of the name 'Thames', through to where the Thames becomes the sea. I found many of the chapters highly informative, though naturally cared less for the information regarding the river in Victorian times and beyond. Not the river's fault of course, but I am just less interested in how the Victorians used the river, because from then on it is not really new information. But to learn about the Iron Age, Bronze Age, etc settlements? That is something else entirely and always among my favorite topics.

My two favorite sections easily were 'Shadows and Depths' and 'The River of Death'. They were broken down further into sections, among the most interesting being 'Legends of the River'. Unfortunately it was just a few short pages and dealt with the paranormal element. Surely some of the more well-known stories could

have been elaborated on, if Ackroyd could spend 80 pages talking about those who work on the river. Some of those chapters I skimmed, not going to lie. 'Offerings' was another chapter I found most interesting, as it dealt with the many hundreds of thousands of objects recovered from the Thames, constantly. From weapons and brooches to skulls, the Thames is a keeper of secrets that we will never be able to know. It really is fascinating in a macabre sort of way the amount of skulls that have been discovered.

Side note to Ackroyd - don't suppose things about Eleanor of Aquitaine. At one point he mentions a location where Henry II's mistress 'Fair Rosamund' lived until her death, stating, "...It was said that she was eventually poisoned by Henry's wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine." While a little revenge in the middle ages would not have been unheard of, let's be realistic. Henry had imprisoned Eleanor for fifteen years, seeing as how she kept inciting their sons into rebellion against him. She was powerful enough in her own right and had little need for Henry at that point in their lives.

But, to end on a positive note, I loved the many maps included - especially in the additional material, 'An Alternative Topography, from Source to Sea' where Ackroyd takes the reader from the beginning of the Thames to the end, stopping at the various villages, castles, and cities along the way. There were many photographs as well to enhance the descriptions throughout and despite that massive amount of pollution, I still want to follow the river myself from start to finish. What a journey that would be.

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## **Gerry says**

A majestic work, brilliantly researched, succinctly chronicled and superbly written, 'Thames: Sacred River' enhances Peter Ackroyd's glowing reputation as an excellent writer of historical works.

Only 215 miles in length, the Thames has as much history about it as almost any river in the world and the author takes us back to neolithic times and then meanders through time with great detail through to the modern day Canary Wharf and industrial landscapes around the mouth of the river.

History, legend, literature, art, trade, pleasure, bridges, flora and fauna are all covered in detail and each section is told in such a way that the reader's attention is avidly held. Henry VIII features constantly, Shelley, Dickens, Turner and many other arty and literary figures feature prominently, the bridges are described in detail as are all the Churches, Abbeys and Monasteries that abound along the banks of the river. Indeed, very little, if anything, is missed.

And finally the book finishes with the topography of the river, each town and village along the way getting a mention together with historic associations, such as Cookham where Stanley Spencer spent much time and wrote lengthily about the Thames.

It is such a good book that when finished, one tends to think of starting it all over again and reliving the millions of years and enjoying again the associations with the many people that have featured in the glorious tale.

... but there again there are many other books awaiting reading! Perhaps at some later date.

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## **Benjamin Eskola says**

Good in places, but unfocussed. Marred by Ackroyd's seemingly mystical ideas about the Thames, and how it has had some psychic influence over the people living nearby across the millennia. For Ackroyd it seems as though the Thames itself is some sort of deity, and this book is not so much a history of the human activity in and around the Thames as a history of the deity; people come second. Even when he's not going quite so far, he seems convinced that the Thames is unique and that even when it shares superficial similarities with other rivers, the Thames is somehow special. Some examples:

- One chapter talks about the discovery of mutilated pagan statues in the Thames, dated to the early Christian period. Ackroyd interprets this not as the destruction of pagan idols by recent converts to Christianity but as (subconscious?) worship of the Thames-deity by sacrificing the lesser gods to it.
- “Swans exist in many other places, and can be found in locations as far apart as New Zealand and Kazakhstan, but their true territory might be that of the Thames.” What does this even mean? What special quality does the Thames have that elevates it above all the other places swans are found? (Englishness, I presume.)
- A chapter on the pollution of the Thames, which makes the observation that different kinds of pollution have been given different names. Well, gosh, I wouldn't expect people to use different words for different things, what a shocking revelation.

I really enjoyed his *Foundation*, and hoped that *Thames* would be more of the same. Now I'm just glad I read *Foundation* first, since if I'd read *Thames* first I may not have bothered to read his other works.

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## **Kent Hayden says**

More than you'd ever need to know about the gods and fairies and folklore surrounding the Thames. I usually enjoy Ackroyd (His 'London' is great!) but this I couldn't get into.

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## **Philip says**

*Thames: The Biography* by Peter Ackroyd purports to offer a sister volume to the highly successful *London: The Biography*. To a point it succeeds, but in general the feeling of pastiche dominates to such an extent that the idea of biography soon dissolves into a scrapbook.

The book presents an interesting journey and many fascinating encounters. But it also regularly conveys a sense of the incomplete, sometimes that of a jumbled ragbag of associations that still needs the application of work-heat and condensation in order to produce something palatable. Thus a book that promises much eventually delivers only a partially-formed experience.

Ostensibly the project makes perfect sense. *London: The Biography* described the life of the city, its history and its inhabitants. There was a stress on literary impressions, art and occasional social history to offer context. This was no mere chronicle and neither was it just a collection of tenuously related facts. It was a

selective and, perhaps because of that, an engaging glimpse into the author's personal relationship with this great city.

Thames River flows like an essential artery through and within London's life. Peter Ackroyd identifies the metaphor and returns to it repeatedly, casting this flow of water in the role of bringer of both life and death to the human interaction that it engenders. And the flow is inherently ambiguous, at least as far downstream as the city itself, where the Thames is a tidal estuary. At source, and for most of its meandering life, it snakes generally towards the east, its flow unidirectional. But this apparent singularity of purpose is complicated by its repeated merging with sources of quite separate character via almost uncountable tributaries, some of which have quite different, distinct, perhaps contradictory imputed personalities of their own.

Thus Peter Ackroyd attempts by occasional geographical journey but largely via a series of thematic examinations to chart a character, an influence and a history that feeds, harms, threatens and often beautifies London, the metropolis that still, despite the book's title, dominates the scene. These universal themes – bringer of life, death, nurture, disease, transcendence and reality, amongst many others – provides the author with an immense challenge. Surely this character is too vast a presence to sum up in a single character capable of biography. And, sure enough, this vast expanse of possibility is soon revealed as the book's inherent weakness. Thus the overall concept ceases to work quite soon after the book's source.

A sense of potpourri and pastiche begins to dominate. Quotations abound, many from poets who found inspiration by this great river, but their organisation and too often their content leaves much to be desired. Ideas float past, sometimes on the tide, only to reappear a few pages on, going the other way. Sure enough they will be back again before the end. Dates come and go in similar fashion, often back and forth within a paragraph. No wonder the tidal river is murky, given that so many metaphors flow through it simultaneously.

And then there are the rough edges, the apparently unfinished saw cuts that were left in the rush to get the text to press. We learn early on that water can flow uphill. Young eels come in at two inches, a length the text tells us is the same as 25mm. We have an estuary described as 250 miles square, but only 30 miles long. We have brackish water, apparently salt water mixed with fresh in either equal or unequal quantities. Even a writer as skilful as Peter Ackroyd can get stuck in mud like this.

At the end, as if we had not already tired of a procession of facts only barely linked by narrative, we have an 'Alternative Typology' where the bits that could not be cut and pasted into the text are presented wholly uncooked – not even prepared.

Thames: The Biography was something of a disappointment. It is packed with wonderful material and overall is worth the lengthy journey but, like the river itself, it goes on. The book has the feel of a work in progress. This may be no bad thing, since the river is probably much the same.

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## **AnnSo says**

I truly love Ackroyd's style of writing. Having read *London. A Biography*. as well as *London Under* I had very high hopes for this book as well. While it did not truly disappoint me, it did also not thrill me. As the review by the *Sunday Times* rightfully says, the book is "meandering". Ackroyd has a couple of theses connected to mythology and psychology that seem important to him, but that in my eyes could be said about many of the world's great rivers, but that Ackroyd presents as if they were a specific yet timeless truth about



the Thames in particular.

The book contains a lot of information, but is reader friendly. The meandering takes you along as if you were on a river cruise. However, it is advisable to know the geography and place names of the Thames a little or at least look at the maps at the beginning and the end of the book.

Ackroyd covers a variety of topics and many of those in depth. I went to London having read the book halfway and I truly did see the Thames with different eyes. Thus, if you have a connection to London or any other place by the river, the book will give you a new outlook and is great to read.

The final part of the book is an overview of all the towns from the source of the Thames to the sea. Ackroyd covers the etymology of the place names as well as important historical events and trivia. This last part has really made me put walking the Thames source to sea on my bucket list and I will definitely take a copy of that last part with me.

Overall, *Thames: Sacred River* is great to read if you have a connection to the river, a bit of time, and if you do not need the historic facts rendered in absolute precision.

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## **Mike says**

Having been to London several times, this book is an excellent companion for those who have ventured across the pond and those who wish too.

Ackroyd takes you a boat trip from source to sea and all parts in between. Historical and a bit modern, his 2007 biography is a must read.

Helpful note: one may wish to buy a map of England and or London where the Thames is shown in detail. It's a great aid in points of reference and adds to the enjoyment of the book.

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## **Peter says**

After reading this book I will never look at or read any reference to the Thames the same again. History, literature, folklore, human drama, newspaper reports and mythology all swirl and eddy around this study of the great river of England.

There is much covered in this book, too much perhaps in too little and too brief a manner. Ackroyd's knowledge is unquestioned. I learned much, but, on reflection, too little about any one specific point or issue. It seemed at times that facts, quotations, and anecdotes tumbled with hurried intensity but little depth.

Still, Ackroyd's London is an excellent book in that it does cover so many facets of the storied history of the river. For anyone who wants any knowledge of the river the 15 Chapter headings with their attendant sub-headings will guide you and instruct you. I was fascinated by the scope of the river and how Ackroyd's was able to unfold so much information.

The book is well represented with illustrations and pictures. You can feel the joy Ackroyd has as he presents this river to his readers.

I highly recommend "London" to anyone and everyone. I also hope that with this book many people will be inspired to dig deeper into the many varied aspects of the information presented. There is so much to learn

and Ackroyd is a fine writer.

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## **Bruce says**

I wish I knew what went wrong with this book. I thought it would be one that I would really enjoy, the kind of quirky history that focuses on one element, and then ties everything together around that element. Also, I am a huge fan of Peter Ackroyd. He is an elegant and entertaining writer. Beginning with fiction (Chatterton, Hawksmoor, Milton in America, etc.) and then extending into history and biography (Dickens, Pound, Chaucer, London the City...) he has created a bookshelf full of well written, entertaining and informative work.

But somehow, he seems to have lost himself in this one. This book feels as though he spent ten years doing research, and filling out thousands of little note cards, then organized them together by topic and period, and then just dumped the damn things into his word processor. The sense one gets is of list after list after list, ad infinitum; followed by little story after little story, with no unifying theme at all. Ironically, his comment on John Leland's work *Itinerary*, describes his own book perfectly. "His was an anecdotal and perambulatory style, a collection of notes rather than a coherent narrative."

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