

lina, of stinkbugs and coots, and of birds she bands for the Nature Conservancy deftly illustrate her sensitive yet unsentimental connection to the holy web. Through binoculars Russell watches sandhill cranes, the oldest known living bird species, and waits for the female crane to dance, but “with wings fully extended, she springs upward, flapping strongly, the upstroke more rapid than the down as she gains altitude.” The transitions between Russell’s theological writing and her personal observations of nature can be abrupt. But the material is compelling, and we always feel that we are in good hands with Russell, who has written with authority of the natural world in previous books, most recently *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (2005).

Yet in *Standing in the Light*, the nature writing plays a supporting role to human biography. Russell is at her best when she focuses on portraits of Marcus Aurelius, Baruch Spinoza, and Walt Whitman, all pantheistic writers. Even when faced with a besieged empire and the death of nine of his 14 children, Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180) acknowledged a beneficent universe and his role in it. Spinoza (1632–77), exiled from his Jewish community for beliefs that, in the words of an Augustinian monk reporting to the Spanish Inquisition, “reached the point of atheism,” lived out his days in a rented room in Holland, grinding glass for lenses. His posthumously published masterpiece *Ethics* offered what Spinoza saw as a logical “geometric proof” that God was identical with nature. Like Spinoza and other pantheists whose ideas contradict the dominant culture, Whitman (1819–92), a Transcendentalist, was disparaged in his time. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he sought to write a uniquely American poetry that celebrated humanity and the natural world.

In the large sweep of this book, Russell shows us the variety of Western thought on the holy web through the voices of D. H. Lawrence, Robinson Jeffers, Virginia Woolf, and Annie Dillard. And she investigates the many rich Eastern traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, that embrace the call to celebrate the spirituality of the present moment. She widens the lens of her binoculars so that we, too, may see the cranes dance. But she

ends not with the excitement of that sight, but with the act of opening the door to her little yellow house to reveal her serene faith in the wonders of her place on the earth.

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

A Real Gusher

Reviewed by Eric Hand

IT SOUNDS LIKE A NATURAL-ized urban legend, but the rumor holds water: Niagara Falls is turned up for the tourists. At night, and during the off-season, much of its flow is diverted into turbines for peak power generation. When Ginger Strand, an environmental writer from New York City, discovered this fact while taking notes on a foray to the falls, she “stopped scribbling and just grinned like a maniacal toddler.” It is the starting point for *Inventing Niagara*, a picaresque journey that explains how just about everything at Niagara Falls is engineered, Disneyfied, or deluded.

The 176-foot drop in the Niagara River between Lakes Erie and Ontario, on the border between Ontario and New York, is neither the largest nor the tallest cataract in the world. But it does occupy an outsized place in American mythology, sitting at the frontier of a young country just venturing into tourism. As Strand sees it, that virginal experience went horribly awry. Goat Island, a wooded hunk of rock in the middle of the river, became a staging area for parking lots. The Cave of the Winds, a natural cave behind the falls, was blasted away to make room for an eponymous observation deck. The history of the place has been bowdlerized; the waste from falls-powered industries, buried. Taken together, these stories say a lot about America’s relationship with nature, Strand argues, and so she sets herself to

**INVENTING
NIAGARA:**
Beauty, Power,
and Lies.

By Ginger Strand.
Simon & Schuster.
337 pp. \$25

rescuing the true Niagara from the memory hole.

The Native Americans who once lived in the region avoided the falls, with its rattlesnakes and dangerous river rapids. When Europeans arrived in the 17th century, they immediately set to dispossessing the local tribes. The patron saint of Niagara Falls, a city on the New York side of the river, was a 19th-century landowner named Peter Porter lauded for his purported proto-environmental views, but Strand discovers that he was more interested in war profiteering and land grabs than in philanthropy. She moves on to the history of the tacky museums, with their Egyptian mummies and two-legged dogs, and the falls' use as a backdrop to acts of daredevilry. No diversion or digression is too small. While she sketches each tale with humor, the kaleidoscopic narrative at times resembles one of the tawdry casinos around the falls that she deplores—lots of bright lights, jingling and jangling, but ultimately a place to satisfy a compulsion.

Yet it is hard to begrudge Strand her indulgences. Her prose is cheeky and sharp. In two sentences, she limns the early life of Frederick Law Olmsted: "He went to sea and almost died of scurvy. He bought a farm and won a prize for pears." Olmsted, the architect of New York's Central Park, pushed in the 1870s to make Niagara a place of wooded paths for all classes of society to enjoy—though Strand faults him for being patriarchal and elitist. With good reason, she is much harder on Robert Moses, another New York master planner, who, nearly a century later, ruthlessly paved the way (literally—the Robert Moses Parkway divides the Niagara River from nearby communities) for a power authority that spawned toxic waste-dumping industries.

The book's most compelling chapter examines Niagara Falls as a symbol for sex. Strand mixes the history of the honeymoon capital—a tradition hastily evolved through heavy marketing—with ruminations on Marilyn Monroe (the falls, like Marilyn, have "been girdled and boosted into the shape the audience wants"). And she weaves in scenes from an in-town convention of the Red Hat Society, a club for women over 50 that revolves largely around merchandising and the

slogan "Red Hatters Matter." The parallels are incisive, even sadly profound.

Strand has produced a multilayered book that occasionally sparkles and shimmers. But after a point, keeping up with her tireless reportage becomes exhausting. *Inventing Niagara* may best be appreciated in dribbles, like Niagara Falls during the off-season.

ERIC HAND is a science reporter for *Nature*.

In the Genes

Reviewed by Bonnie J. Rough

IN 2004, JOURNALIST MASHA Gessen learned through genetic tests that she was predisposed to develop breast cancer, which had killed her mother in middle age. Faced with choosing whether or not to take preemptive measures, including surgical removal of her still-healthy

breasts and ovaries, she embarked on a research bender. The result was a series of personal essays for *Slate*—which eventually became the frame for *Blood Matters*, an intelligent and imaginatively researched tour of modern genetics.

Today, relatively simple tests can reveal patients' predispositions toward hundreds of diseases—and even diagnose disorders in human embryos before implantation during fertility treatments. With each year the list of detectable genetic diseases grows, as does the number of books about this suddenly common medical experience and its attendant dilemmas. (In last year's *Embryo Culture*, for example, Beth Kohl tackled the ethical quandaries of creating "designer" babies through reproductive technology.)

Characterized by Gessen's publisher as a "field guide," *Blood Matters* is more properly described as a collection of dispatches from the field. Her approach seems to draw from her days as a war reporter: She traverses unfamiliar, often risky terrain in search of interesting stories, visiting with scientists, doctors, genetic counselors, religious thinkers, and a host of individuals and families

BLOOD MATTERS:

From Inherited Illness to Designer Babies, How the World and I Found Ourselves in the Future of the Gene.

By Masha Gessen.
Harcourt. 321 pp. \$25