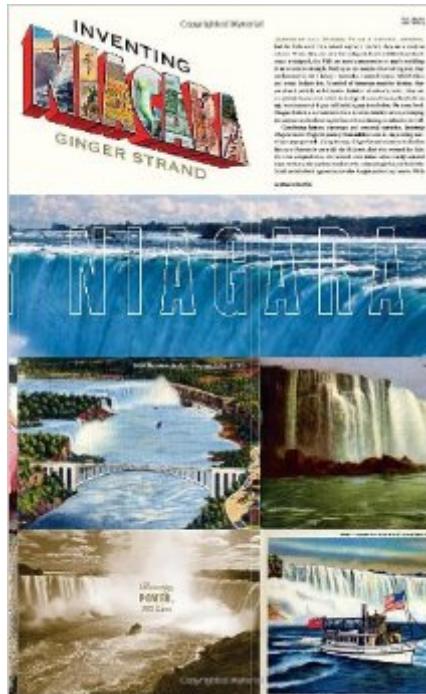


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Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power, And Lies



Synopsis

Americans call Niagara Falls a natural wonder, but the Falls aren't very natural anymore. In fact, they are a study in artifice. Water diverted, riverbed reshaped, brink stabilized and landscape redesigned, the Falls are more a monument to man's meddling than to nature's strength. Held up as an example of something real, they are hemmed in with fakery -- waxworks, haunted houses, IMAX films and ersatz Indian tales. A symbol of American manifest destiny, they are shared politely with Canada. Emblem of nature's power, they are completely human-controlled. Archetype of natural beauty, they belie an ugly environmental legacy still bubbling up from below. On every level, Niagara Falls is a monument to how America falsifies nature, reshaping its contours and redirecting its force while claiming to submit to its will. Combining history, reportage and personal narrative, Inventing Niagara traces Niagara's journey from sublime icon to engineering marvel to camp spectacle. Along the way, Ginger Strand uncovers the hidden history of America's waterfall: the Mohawk chief who wrested the Falls from his adopted tribe, the revered town father who secretly assisted slave catchers, the wartime workers who unknowingly helped build the Bomb and the building contractor who bought and sold a pharaoh. With an uncanny ability to zero in on the buried truth, Strand introduces us to underwater dams, freaks of nature, mythical maidens and 280,000 radioactive mice buried at Niagara. From LaSalle to Lincoln to Los Alamos, Mohawks to Marilyn, Niagara's story is America's story, a tale of dreams founded on the mastery of nature. At a time of increasing environmental crisis, Inventing Niagara shows us how understanding the cultural history of nature might help us rethink our place in it today. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

There may be many reasons for going to Niagara Falls. Sure, you have to be awed by the spectacular falls themselves. You might go to start up a marriage, or to re-start one. You might go gamble. "I went to Niagara Falls because I wanted to laugh at it," says Ginger Strand, author of *Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power, and Lies* (Simon and Schuster), and she finds plenty of the historical and regional environs funny. But wanting to laugh was the reason she went there during her college years, just to smirk at the tackiness and kitsch. She has been going back, though, over and over since then, because "I do love hydroinfrastructure - water tunnels, reservoirs, canals, sewers, aqueducts." She finds it inspiring, but she also finds that the natural wonder that everyone loves about the falls is not natural at all. It has been used, changed, prettified, trivialized, exploited, and poisoned. There is thus a great deal of amusement in this wide-ranging account, but a good deal of loss and sadness as well. "Niagara Falls as a natural wonder does not exist anymore." It is originally hard to believe this. It is not surprising that the water does not fall exactly as it did three hundred, or three thousand, years ago, but it is surprising how much people have made the changes happen in recent years. This is not entirely because of using the water for hydroelectric power, although this is certainly one cause of the change. The waterfall has hours of operation. In the summer, and during the daytime, when people come to see the falls in action, the water gets turned up to maximum flow. At night, it gets dialed back "like a fancy massaging showerhead" so that more electricity is generated.

If you live in the US or Canada, I would imagine that you would be in the minority if you say that you have never been to Niagara Falls. According some sources, over 2 million people visit the Falls every year. But what you see is just a small portion of the area. Ginger Strand, in her book, *Inventing Niagara*, shows you Niagara Falls and the surrounding area in a way that no travel guide will; She debunks the myths, shows you the environmental damage, takes you behind the scenes of the massive power plants, and introduces you to the many people that have shaped the area. And when I say "shaped," that is exactly what you see - men who have turned a natural wonder into something fake. At the end of the book, you have to wonder if Disney had something to do with the Falls, as what you see is manufactured realism.

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- Chapter 1: White Man's Fancy, Red Man's Fact**
- Chapter 2: The Eighth Wonder of the World**
- Chapter 3: Skipper the Two-Legged Dog**
- Chapter 4: The Other Side of Jordan**
- Chapter 5: Free Niagara**
- Chapter 6: King of Power, Queen of Beauty**
- Chapter 7: Sentiment in Liquid Form**
- Chapter 8: The Bomb and Tom Brokaw's Desk**
- Chapter 9: Boulevard of Broken Dreams**
- Epilogue: The Voice of**

the LandscapeSources and AcknowledgementsIndexStarting the book with a critique of the "Maid of the Mist" mythology, Strand moves along to other historical figures such as the early explorers, the indigenous Indians, and the developers. One of the stories that amazed me was the spectacle of the schooner Michigan, which is curiously omitted from all current guide books. In 1827, two businessmen contracted to have the schooner Michigan towed to currents above the falls with a crew of caged animals.

When most Americans conjure up an image of Niagara Falls what most likely comes to mind is artist Frederick Church's iconic 1857 painting. In those days the Falls really were wild and wonderful and although a certain amount of development had already begun to take shape in the surrounding area those who loved revelling in the splendor of nature were likely to make a trip to Niagara a top priority. But unbeknownst to most of us what we see today at Niagara Falls is largely a mirage. The powers that be in New York state and Canada literally have the ability to turn the Falls completely off if they choose to! Just what has occurred over the past two centuries that has led this venerable natural wonder to be degraded so dramatically? Ginger Strand has had a lifelong fascination with Niagara Falls. In "Inventing Niagara: Beauty, Power and Lies" Strand traces the largely unknown and unreported history of this national treasure. What you will discover will likely surprise and greatly disturb you. I certainly had no idea of the long and diverse history of Niagara Falls. Although my wife and I have visited the Falls twice in the past 15 years we were totally unaware of just how much of the scene we were observing was being manipulated. For nearly 200 years vastly competing interests have been vying for economic advantage at Niagara Falls. In the pages of "Inventing Niagara" you will be introduced to many of the key players in the ongoing saga of the Falls and the adjacent communities. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 the Falls area immediately became a popular tourist attraction. It was fun reading about so many of the offbeat amusements that sprang up in the area during the middle of the 19th century.

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