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**Book Review**

# Raw Power of Wild Water

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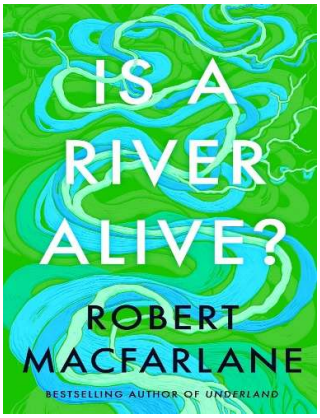
## ABSTRACT

For more than two decades, Robert Macfarlane has been mapping the places where human consciousness meets the landscape, seeking words for things that resist language. In his earlier books, he climbed toward the sky, traced the tracks of ancient footpaths, and descended into the deep history of the subterranean world. Now, his focus shifts from the solid and stationary to the fluid and continuous. His recent work poses a question that is at once deceptively simple and radically disruptive to the modern worldview: Is a river alive? The question is not a mere rhetorical exercise or an indulgence in poetic metaphor. It serves as the entryway into a sweeping, deeply immersive examination of nature writing, legal philosophy, and environmental activism.




**KEYWORDS:** Rivers, Environment, Sustainability, Water, Rivers

**Book:** Is a river alive?
**Author:** Robert Macfarlane
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Macfarlane argues that our relationship with the natural world is broken primarily because our grammar is broken; we view the earth's great waterways as passive objects, resources to be dammed, diverted, piped, and polluted, rather than as active participants in a shared existence. By weaving together travel literature, legal history, and intimate ecological observation, he builds a compelling case for a revolution in how we perceive, speak of, and legally protect the veins of the earth.

The architecture of the book mirrors the very movement of water. It does not follow a rigid, linear academic argument but instead advances through a series of long, exploratory journeys, separated by quiet, local interludes. The visual motifs associated with the book—often depicting a shape-shifting, winding current exploring a vibrant landscape—perfectly capture its narrative style. Macfarlane writes with a symphonic sensibility, guiding the reader through distinct emotional and geographical movements that shift from light to shadow, and ultimately toward a profound, collective power.

The structural anchors of the book are three major global journeys, but the emotional heart is found close to Macfarlane's home in England. In a series of moving interludes, he documents the changing fortunes of a small chalk stream located just a mile from his house. Witnessing a devastating summer drought, he records the slow fading of this tiny waterway as it shrinks to a dry bed of pale stones. This local crisis grounds the book's larger global concerns in a deeply relatable experience. When the autumn rains finally arrive and the springs come back to life, the event feels less like a routine weather occurrence and more like a profound resurrection. By starting with this intimate, close-up look at a dying stream, Macfarlane reminds us that the ecological crises happening across the globe are also unfolding right at our doorsteps.

When Macfarlane leaves his home ground, the book transforms into an expansive travelogue that illustrates the diverse struggles facing the world's waterways. His first major destination is the cloud forest of Los Cedros in northern Ecuador. Here, under a dense and thriving canopy, he introduces the reader to an ecosystem teeming with interdependent life. In this section, Macfarlane steps back to give space to local conservationists and scientists who have dedicated their lives to protecting the forest from the pressures of commercial mining and deforestation. Among these portraits is an unforgettable description of a mycologist with an astonishing, almost supernatural capacity for locating and sensing rare fungi. This focus on the interconnectedness of underground fungal networks and surface streams reinforces a central

theme: a river is never an isolated channel of water, but part of a larger, breathing ecological network.

From the lush abundance of Ecuador, the book takes a dark, unsettling turn in its second major journey to southern India. In Chennai, Macfarlane encounters the Adyar River, a waterway that has been systematically choked by industrial waste and urban expansion. Here, the prose loses its celebratory tone and takes on the weight of an elegy. The Adyar is described as a ghost of its former self, its clear headwaters poisoned and its life-giving capacity snuffed out by urban pollution. This section functions as a sober reminder of the devastating impacts of unchecked development. Macfarlane handles these scenes with a sense of quiet grief, avoiding distant academic analysis to focus on the immediate, tangible loss experienced by the communities that rely on the river.

The final movement of the book takes the author to the fast-moving rapids of Canada. This section brings a dramatic shift in energy, filled with moments of real physical tension as Macfarlane experiences the raw power of wild water firsthand. Hurdling down tumultuous rapids, he describes a feeling of complete surrender to a force far greater than any human institution. On these wild waters, the river ceases to be an abstract concept or an environmental problem to be solved; it becomes a ruler, a presence, and an ancient survivor demanding absolute respect.

While the travelogues provide the book with its rich sensory detail, its intellectual framework is built around the Rights of Nature movement. Macfarlane explores a radical legal philosophy that seeks to grant rivers, forests, and entire ecosystems the same legal personhood status currently enjoyed by corporations. He traces how this concept, which has long been a core part of Indigenous worldviews, is beginning to reshape modern legal systems in countries like New Zealand, Ecuador, and Bangladesh.

The book explains how changing our legal language can fundamentally alter our moral responsibilities. If a river is recognized as a person under the law, polluting it is no longer just a regulatory violation or a property dispute; it becomes an act of assault against a living entity. Macfarlane is realistic about the challenges of implementing these laws, acknowledging the bureaucratic inertia and corporate resistance that block such reforms. Yet, by highlighting the real-world successes where communities have used these legal frameworks to halt destructive

mining projects, he infuses the narrative with a genuine sense of possibility. He demonstrates that the idea of a living river is not a sentimental dream, but a practical, revolutionary tool for environmental survival.

Macfarlane's writing remains distinct in its rich lyricism and innovative use of language. His prose surges and eddies, intentionally mimicking the fluid movements of his subject matter. He has an extraordinary ear for the music of a sentence, using rhythm and descriptive flair to bring the natural world into sharp, vivid focus. At his best, he writes with an infectious sense of wonder that encourages readers to look at familiar landscapes with entirely fresh eyes.

However, this highly expressive style occasionally pushes the boundaries of the genre. At times, the writing can lean toward a dense, almost overwhelming register, where every close observation is treated with equal, breathless intensity. In some chapters, the book's focus expands so widely—stretching to include long passages on sea turtles, nocturnal moths, and personal reflections on childhood—that the central theme can feel temporarily diluted.

Yet, these minor detours ultimately serve a broader purpose. The wide-ranging scope reminds us that to understand a river, we must look beyond what is wet. A river is a complex web of relationships that connects the mountaintop to the ocean, the fungus in the soil to the bird in the sky, and human memory to the landscape. What might look like a narrative tangent is actually an illustration of ecological interdependence. Macfarlane walks a fine line between deep emotion and critical analysis, but he avoids falling into empty sentimentality by anchoring his work in the real, hard work of the activists he meets along the way.

Ultimately, *Is a River Alive?* functions as a profound meditation on human responsibility in an era of unprecedented environmental loss. It enters a crowded field of environmental literature not to add to the existing sense of despair, but to offer a clear, alternative way of seeing. Macfarlane answers the question in his title with a definitive, deeply felt affirmative, demonstrating that when we begin to view rivers as living co-creators of our past and future, our relationship with the earth undergoes a permanent shift.

The book leaves the reader with a renewed sense of attention. It challenges us to step outside, find the nearest stream or spring, and sit by its banks with a new level of awareness. By the final pages, the idea that water is merely a commodity feels entirely hollow, while the concept

of the river as a living entity feels completely natural. Macfarlane has written an essential book for our times—a beautifully crafted, urgent appeal to rediscover our wonder for the natural world and to defend the vital systems that keep our planet alive.