

## The Water Shelf Top 20

<https://mavensnotebook.com/watershelf>

The following “Top 20” list of books on my water shelf are personal favorites from an admittedly California local water manager perspective. I invite Water Shelf readers to [send me books I've missed!](#)

1. *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* by Marc Reisner ([Penguin](#), 1986; reissued 2017) [[Amazon](#)]
  - The definitive evocation of water development in the western U.S., whose thesis continues to unnervingly predict our current predicament and point to the future.
2. *The Dreamt Land: Chasing Water and Dust Across California* by Mark Arax ([Knopf](#), 2019 hardback; [Vintage](#), 2020 paperback reprint) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A beautiful journalistic and personal epic prose poem of California's water past and present, focused on its vast agricultural legacy yet spanning the state's full water story.
3. *The Three Ages of Water: Prehistoric Past, Imperiled Present, and a Hope for the Future* by Peter Gleick ([PublicAffairs](#), 2023) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Gives an almost impossibly expansive, informed, and elegant depiction of humanity's engagement with water, organized into three acts the last of which has yet to play out.
4. *The Profits of Distrust: Citizen-Consumers, Drinking Water, and the Crisis of Confidence in American Government* by Manuel P. Teodoro, Samantha Zuhlke, and David Switzer ([Cambridge University Press](#), 2022) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A unique and timely disquisition on the modern public water sector, exemplifying the conflict and promise of local government in the face of private industry assault and our current political malaise.
5. *Water Always Wins: Thriving in an Age of Drought and Deluge* by Erica Gies ([University of Chicago Press](#), 2022) [[Amazon](#)]
  - An in-depth analysis of water resource management challenges under the increasingly dynamic conditions of a changing climate, and how a better understanding of what water wants may help us survive and thrive.
6. *Superman's Not Coming: Our National Water Crisis and What We the People Can Do About It* by Erin Brockovich ([Pantheon](#), 2020) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Calls all citizens to actively engage with their local water providers to ensure their local tap water is safe to drink, putting the public into public water.
7. *Beyond Chinatown: The Metropolitan Water District, Growth, and the Environment in Southern California* by Steven Erie ([Stanford University Press](#), 2006) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Takes up where *Cadillac Desert* left off in narrating Metropolitan Water District's emergence from its mythic past to the modern conflicts, challenges, and achievements - a sequel is needed!

8. *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water* by Maude Barlow ([New Press](#), 2008) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A strident ethical manifesto pitting public trust and human rights against privatization and commercialization of water resources, setting the stage for current conflicts over water protection, extraction, and access.
9. *Living with Water Scarcity* by David Zetland ([KYSQ Press](#), 2022 2nd edition) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Challenges the status quo to argue that water resource management must use an economic perspective to shift from the prior age of abundance to a future of limits.
10. *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi ([Vintage](#), 2015) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A pulpy, dystopian, speculative thriller set in a hopefully-worst-case future Colorado River basin - for any water professional in the Western U.S., a guilty if sobering pleasure.
11. *Troubled Water: What's Wrong with What We Drink* by Seth M. Siegel ([Macmillan](#), 2019) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Comprehensive critical assessment of the water quality challenges faced by utilities and drinking water consumers in the modern age - disturbing and important.
12. *Water: A Biography* by Giulio Boccaletti ([Pantheon](#), 2021) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Tells water's story as a pervasive and powerful figure in humanity's history, shaping our societal organizations, political structures, and economic goals.
13. *Rivers of Power: How a Natural Force Raised Kingdoms, Destroyed Civilizations, and Shapes Our World* by Laurence C. Smith ([Little Brown Spark](#), 2020) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A modern and impressive exploration of the human watershed - the all-important riparian nexus between nature, culture, and life.
14. *Water 4.0: The Past, Present, and Future of the World's Most Vital Resource* by David Sedlak ([Yale University Press](#), 2014) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Provides a peek into the water future from a high-minded engineer's perspective, with a vision of retooled utilities and technologies that we are now seeing take shape.
15. *Too Good to Be True: Scottsdale and Privatization in the 1980s* by Paul Brown ([Paul Brown](#), 2020) [[Amazon](#)]
  - An entertaining and informative meal-by-meeting account of a water treatment plant public-private partnership project, valuable in its detail, tactics, and predictions.
16. *The Big Thirst: The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water* by Charles Fishman ([Free Press](#), 2012) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Rakes the muck out of water discourse with a journalistic and engaging discussion of major water issues and what is and can be done about them, with a focus on entrepreneurial opportunities.
17. *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It* by Robert Glennon ([Island Press](#), 2009) [[Amazon](#)]
  - A classic and important intervention into America's perpetual struggle with our misperceived abundance. Dr. Glennon's inscription in my signed copy still holds true: "Let's keep the crisis from becoming a catastrophe!"

18. *Downriver: Into the Future of Water in the West* by Heather Hansman ([University of Chicago Press](#), 2019) [[Amazon](#)]
  - Unique intellectual and actual transit down the Green River, a Colorado River tributary, revealing the history and prospects for the U.S. West's collective water journey.
19. *California Water* by Arthur Littleworth and Eric Garner ([Solano Press](#), 2019 3rd edition) [[Amazon](#)]
  - The unsurpassed (and expensive) overview of California water law and policy by the preeminent partners (and humanitarians) of one of California's leading water law firms.
20. *Water to the Angels: William Mulholland, His Monumental Aqueduct, and the Rise of Los Angeles* by Les Standiford ([Ecco](#), 2015) [[Amazon](#)]
  - In another attempt to get “beyond Chinatown,” takes the torch from Catherine Mulholland in telling the Los Angeles Aqueduct story from the actual headlines and documents of the time.