



Life's Matrix: A Biography of Water

Philip Ball

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In this brilliantly written and engrossing biography of one of Earth's most common yet unusual substances, Philip Ball reduces the scientific and philosophical inquiry of over two thousand years to one essential question: What exactly is water?

It is one of the four elements of classical antiquity. It is a geological force that shapes mountains and coastlines, with a might that is unleashed in the destructive fury of hurricanes and floods. Water is the fabric of snow, hail, steam, and ice, and the only substance able to exist on earth in all three of its physical states: solid, liquid, and gas. Water is central to our planetary environment. Life's Matrix tells of water's origins, its history, and its fascinating pervasiveness: there are, for example, at least fourteen different forms of ice. A provocative exploration of water on other planets highlights the possibilities of life beyond Earth. Life's Matrix reveals the unexpected in the most ordinary places--a drop of dew, a frozen pond, a cup of coffee--and the familiar in unexpected settings. There is water on the sun and the moon, at the heart of molecular biology, at the core of a cell, and there may be enough of it beneath the surface of the Earth to refill the oceans thirty times over. Life's Matrix also surveys the grim realities of our natural resources, and shows how water will become a scarce commodity in the twenty-first century.

Ball's lively and intelligent book takes us on a journey through the history of science, folklore, the wilder fringes of the scientific world, cutting-edge chemistry, physics, cell biology, and ecology to give a startling new perspective on life and the substance that sustains it. Life's Matrix offers an exhilarating exploration of one of the oldest, most idiosyncratic substances known to mankind, and ensures that we will never think about water in the same way again.

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