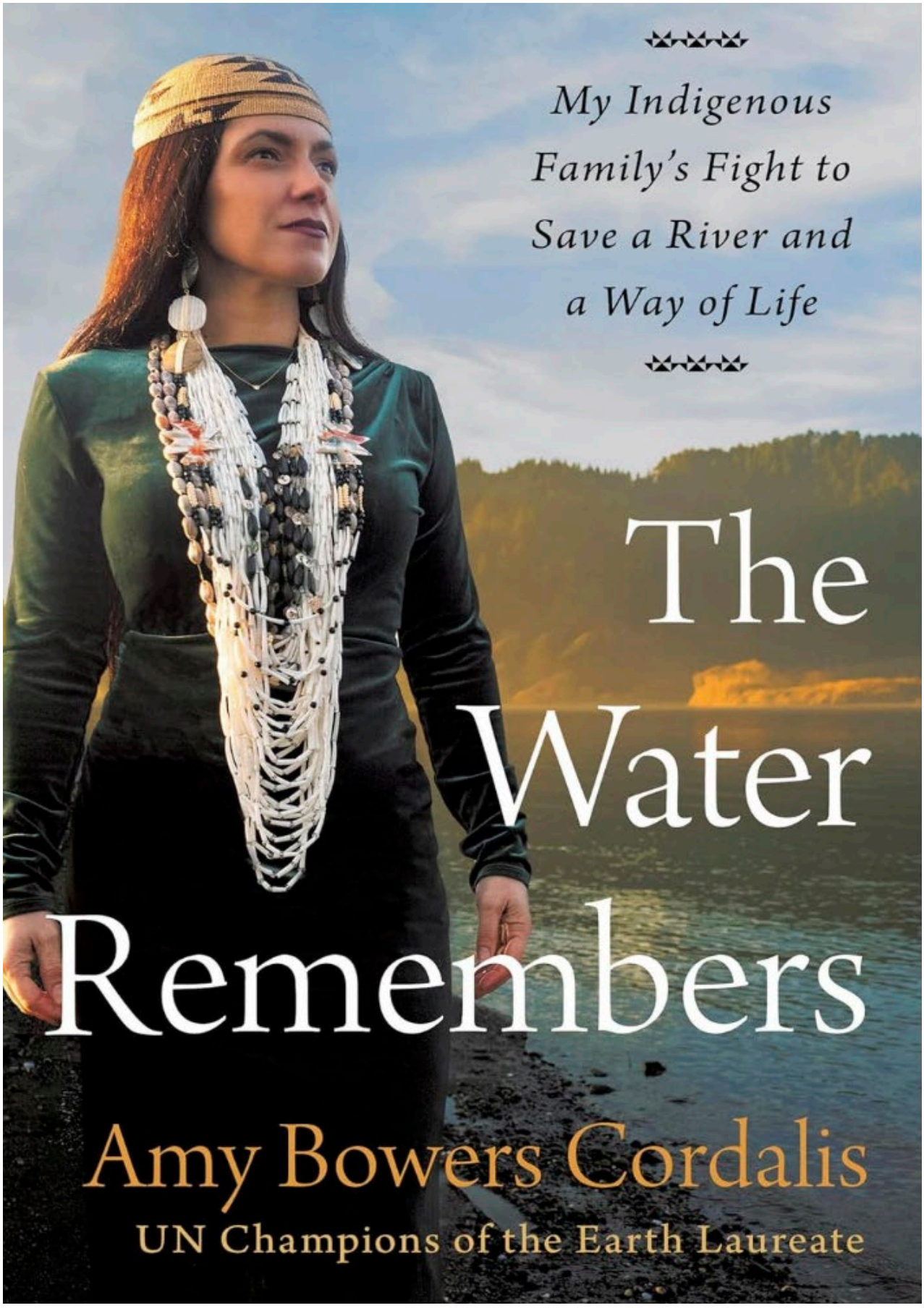
My Indigenous Family's Fight to Save a River and a Way of Life
The Water Remembers
Amy Bowers Cordalis
UN Champions of the Earth Laureate

BOOK REVIEW

The Water Remembers:

My Indigenous Family's Fight to Save a River and a Way of Life

By Amy Bowers Cordalis

Little, Brown, and Company, October, 2025, 288 pages

By Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Amy Bowers Cordalis's *The Water Remembers: My Indigenous Family's Fight to Save a River and a Way of Life* offers an important intervention into Indigenous environmental literature. On the surface, this is a story about generations of the author's family's struggle to reclaim a traditional Yurok lifeway that depends on salmon and a healthy Klamath River habitat, and the legal path that inevitably followed. But there is a subtext that tells a deeper story about how restoring that lifeway was an act of healing through Yurok medicine.

Cordalis frames the Klamath River not simply as a site of environmental conflict. Instead, she presents it as a living entity within a broader network of relationships. These include fish, plants, and human communities. This relational ontology aligns with what scholars in Indigenous studies have described as more-than-human kinship systems. In these systems, responsibility and reciprocity structure interactions with the natural world. Within this framework, the degradation of the river is not only an ecological harm. It is also a disruption of interdependent systems that sustain Yurok life, including the availability and vitality of plant medicines.

Although *The Water Remembers* foregrounds salmon as a central relative, the text also gestures toward the critical role of riparian and forest plant communities in Yurok subsistence and healing practices. Cordalis highlights this through her focus on the Yurok's World Renewal Ceremony. She connects the ceremony, seasonal cycles, and river health. The ceremony aims to keep humans in balance with the natural world. This highlights how altered water flows and destabilized ecosystems—such as the 2002 Klamath River fish kill—affect everything. The consequences of imbalance arguably extend beyond fisheries, impacting the growth, harvesting, and efficacy of medicinal plants. This interconnection underscores a key insight of the book: environmental damage operates across multiple registers simultaneously ecological, cultural, and physiological.

Cordalis's narrative reflects a Yurok understanding of medicine not as a discrete domain but as embedded within everyday relationships to place. Plants in this understanding of the world are not abstract resources but beings with whom one enters

reciprocal relations, governed by protocols of respect and responsibility. The disruption of these relationships through colonial interventions—such as damming, water diversion, and land dispossession—emerges as a central concern.

Cordalis implicitly critiques the reduction of rivers to units of resource management, showing how such frameworks erase Indigenous lifeways that depend on the integrity of entire ecosystems. In this sense, the book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that links environmental justice to Indigenous sovereignty, emphasizing that the restoration of ecological systems must include the restoration of Indigenous governance and knowledge practices.

Importantly, the book positions contemporary legal and political strategies as extensions of these relational responsibilities.

Cordalis's work as an attorney is not presented as separate from Yurok knowledge systems but as another mode of fulfilling obligations to the river and its associated life forms. The successful removal of dams on the Klamath River can therefore be read not only as an environmental victory but as a form of cultural restoration achieved through the upholding of responsibilities to the World Renewal Ceremony. Improved river health holds implications for the resurgence of plant communities and, by extension, the revitalization of Yurok healing practices.

A key element of the Yurok-led dam removal on the Klamath was planting native plants and trees. The tribe also removed invasive species across more than 2,000 acres of exposed reservoir bottom. Now, in place of dried-up, toxic mudflats, wildflowers, native grasses, shrubs, and trees bloom. This fosters biodiversity and restores the riparian ecosystem.

At the same time, Cordalis avoids romanticizing this restoration. She is clear that ecological recovery is uneven and ongoing. She also stresses that the impacts of colonialism cannot be fully undone. This realism is important for academic audiences, as it resists narratives of closure that often accompany environmental success stories. Instead, The Water Remembers emphasizes process—an ongoing commitment to care, stewardship, and adaptation.

From a methodological standpoint, the book's blending of memoir, legal analysis, and cultural narrative may challenge conventional academic expectations of genre. However, this hybridity can be understood as a strength, reflecting Indigenous storytelling practices that do not separate the personal from the political or the ecological from the spiritual. For readers of the *Fourth World Journal*, this approach offers a valuable example of how Indigenous-authored texts can expand the boundaries of scholarly discourse.

The Water Remembers is a major contribution to Indigenous environmental knowledge, illustrating a holistic Yurok approach to medicine. While centered on the Klamath River and salmon, it also highlights the revival of plant-based practices and the relations that support them.

Cordalis prompts scholars to see restoration as a deeply cultural endeavor rooted in Indigenous bonds with nature.

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Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) is a Native American studies scholar and journalist, focusing on environmental justice, Indigenous knowledge, and identity. She is a lecturer in American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos and co-founder of the Indigenous Climate and Environmental Collaborative at CSUSM, advising researchers, conservation, and other organizations on Indigenous engagement and policy-based protocols. Her book *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*, was released in 2019. Her most recent book is *Who Gets to be Indian: Ethnic Fraud and Other Difficult Conversations about Native American Identity*, published by Beacon Press in 2025.