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A River Runs Through It, and Other Stories, Norman Maclean, 1976

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- Skills and guides - Library -



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Description :

(A River Runs Through It and Other Stories) is an exceptionally well written collection of 3 stories, the title story, (Logging, Pimping and Your Pal Jim), and (USFS 1919, The Ranger, The Cook and the Hole in the Sky). These represent some of the best historical autobiographical fiction I have ever read. This is one of the few books that I have read nearly annually for 25 years. These stories are exceptional.

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A River Runs Through It and Other Stories consists of two, 100 page novellas and a short story. Since the Title story was made into a movie with Brad Pitt and Robert Redford this book has had seen much press and many reprints. The "Other Stories" while receiving much less coverage are also exceptionally fine reading. *Logging, Pimping and Your Pal Jim*, and *USFS 1919, The Ranger, The Cook and the Hole in the Sky* are the "Other Stories". Both of these are done a disservice by lumping them into the "Other Stories" label. While *A River Runs Through It* is more finely crafted and more beautifully written than either of the "Others", *USFS 1919* is an excellent read and is a close second to *River* for my favorite of the 3 stories, and *Logging, Pimping* never fails to make me smile in its few short pages. I grew up in Montana, and all these stories take place before I was born, but still never fail to produce images that were part of my early years, fly fishing or woods tramping with family.

A River Runs Through It

A River Runs Through It is an artful and painful story of family, fishing, life and death. This story is probably familiar to many from either the book or the movie. I think it is a timeless classic as it probably and unfortunately represents some of the same issues and problems that modern families encounter and either fail to deal with or deal with painfully. Maclean somehow captured the best and worst in life in this story and presented it in a truly memorable and haunting way. This story is, essentially, written tragic art. Much like Maclean's fathers four-count rhythm for fly casting, this story has a rhythm and purpose that is difficult to express, but unmistakable in reading. As Maclean states:

As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man was by nature a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed a notion the he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed that God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterian's, he often used the word "beautiful."

If our father had his say, nobody who did not know how to fish would be allowed to disgrace a fish by catching him. So you too will have to approach the art Marine and Presbyterian style, and if you have never picked up fly rod before, you will soon find it factually and theologically true that man by nature is a damn mess.

Maclean's family, like all families, is a damn mess, and like a fly rod in the hands of a novice whose fly line seems to have a path of its own, matter not the directional intent, nothing can be done about the path of the lives in this story, no matter how strongly or how expertly the fly rod is cast. Maclean, his brother, brother-in-law, and even the heroines in this story, the women of these men, are locked into tradition, stubbornness and just plain life, and the course of events runs like the Big Blackfoot River...straight and fast. In this exchange between Maclean and his brother, Paul, the subject being both Paul and the then obliquely the brother-in-law, Neal, we see the complexities of knowing someone needs help and also knowing that it just cannot or will not be done.

There was some great hollow inside me to be filled and needed the answer to another question. Until I asked it, I had no idea what it would be. "Can I help you with money or anything?" I asked.

Alarmed by hearing myself, I tried to calm down quickly. Instead, having made a mistake, I made it worse. "I thought you might need some help because of the other night," I said.

Probably he took my reference to the other night as a reference to the Indian girl, so, to change the subject, I said, "I

thought maybe it cost you a lot to fix the front end of your car the night you chased the rabbit." Now I had made three mistakes.

He acted as if father had offered to help him to a bowl of oatmeal. He bowed his head in silence until he was sure I wouldn't say anything more. Then he said, "It's going to rain."

My brother asked, "Where's Neal?".....

Paul said, "Come on, let's go and find Neal." Then he added, "You shouldn't have left him behind."

"What?" I asked.

"You should try and help him," he replied.....

"How?, I asked.

"By taking him fishing with us."

"I've just told you," I said, "he doesn't like to fish."

"Maybe so," my brother replied. "But maybe what he likes is somebody trying to help him."

And this exchange really is the nexus of this story. While Neal is a "damn mess" Paul is really the one who needs help, but fishing could only do so much.

This artfully written story is in the words of Maclean's father "beautiful".

Logging, Pimping and Your Pal Jim

The next in this exceptional book is the short story *Logging, Pimping and Your Pal Jim*. This is a humorous short story, set in 1927/28 that has Maclean in the woods early in his life working as a gyppo logger with his partner, Jim. A gyppo logger is not paid a wage but paid based on the number of board feet cut, so harder work meant more pay. Jim, was a unique logger, cutting during the summer, and pimping during the rest of the year.

He explained that he made his living only partly by working. He worked just the summer, then the cultural side of him, as it were, took over. He holed up for the winter in some town that had a good Carnegie Public Library and the first thing he did was take out a library card. Then he went looking for a good whore, and so he spent the winter reading and pimping---or maybe this is stated in reverse order. He said that on the whole he preferred southern whores; southern whores, he said, were generally "more poetical," and later I think I came to know what he meant by this.

This is a short story in comparison to the other stories in *A River*. It is straightforward but has the same excellent imagery found in the other stories. I will quote a long bit that gives some flavor of Maclean's writing imagery, but really I just want to quote the last line. Maclean and Jim are just about to start their summer, as partners, in the woods:

But finally it was late June and there he was, sitting on a log across from me and looking as near like a million dollars as a lumberjack can look. He was dressed in all wool---in a rich Black Watch plaid shirt, gray, short-legged stag pants, and a beautiful new pair of logging boots with an inch or so of white sock showing at the top. The lumberjack and the cowboy followed many of the same basic economic and ecological patterns. They achieved a balance if they were broke at the end of the year. If they were lucky and hadn't been sick or anything like that, they had made enough to get drunk three or four times and to buy their clothes. Their clothes were very expensive; they claimed they were robbed up and down the line and probably were, but clothes that would stand their work and the weather had to be something special. Central to both the lumberjack's and the cowboy's outfit were the boots, which took several months of savings.

The pair that Jim had on were White Loggers made, as I remember, by a company in Spokane that kept your name and measurements. It was a great shoe.....in the Northwest most of the jacks I remember wore the Spokane shoe.

Jim's pair has a six-inch top, but there were models with much higher tops---Jim happened to belong to the school that wanted their ankles supported but no tie on their legs. The shoe was shaped to "walk" or "ride" logs. It had a high instep to fit the log, and with a high instep went a high heel, not nearly so high as a cowboy's but much sturdier because these were walking shoes; in fact, very fine walking shoes---the somewhat high heel threw you slightly forward of your normal stance and made you feel you were being helped ahead. Actually, this feeling was their trademark.

Jim was sitting with his right leg rocking on his left knee, and he gestured a good deal with his foot, racking the log I was sitting on for emphasis and leaving behind a gash in its side. The soles of these loggers' boots looked like World War I, with trenches and barbwire highly planned---everything planned, in this case, for riding logs and walking. Central to this grand design were the caulks, or "corks" as the jacks called them; they were long and sharp enough to hold a heavily barked log or, tougher still, to one that was dead and had no bark on it. But of course caulks would have ripped out at the edges of the shoe and made you stumble and trip at the toes, so the design started with a row of blunt, sturdy hobnails around the edges, and maybe four or five rows of them at the toes. Then inside came the battlefield of caulks, the real barbwire, with two rows of caulks coming down the side of the sole and one row on each side continuing into the instep to hold you when you jumped crosswise on a log. Actually it was a beautiful if somewhat primitive design and had many uses---for instance when a couple of jacks got into a fight and one went down the other was almost sure to kick and rake him with his boots. This treatment was known as "giving him the leather" and, when a jack got this treatment, he was out of business for a long time and was never very pretty again.

Without revealing the rest of this story Maclean and Jim work, and work hard through the summer. Their summer association would not be seen by modern day Human Resources Specialists as a grand example of teamwork, but the telling of this summer work is grand, and the followup to Jim's next pimping endeavor with his highly "poetical" women is especially well done. Jim's final letter to Maclean, short, but not exactly quotable in a family forum, makes for a great story ending and solidifies this story. I almost always read this story first when rereading this book.

USFS 1919, The Ranger, The Cook and the Hole in the Sky

The setting for this story is the Selway-Bitterroot mountains east of Hamilton Montana. For a modern day glimpse into this area please see Benjamin Long's *Backtracking* ([my review](#)). Long, while tracing parts of the Lewis and Clark trail, takes a backpacking trip into the same area of Maclean's story, over a half century later. Elk Summit, in the Selway-Bitterroots was in Maclean's time, and still is, a beautiful and wild place. In the early years of the 1900's the United States Forest Service was establishing trail, fire lookouts, and fighting fires aggressively in many parts of the newly established national forest system. Being part of these early crews of the USFS, in the magnificent Selway-Bitterroots is the setting for this story. Maclean is 17 years old and has worked in the forests for the past 3 summers. Like most of the early Forest Service workers he is a jack of all trades, firefighter, fire boss, trail builder,

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dynamite setter, wire stringer, and packer. Here is how Maclean describes the early USFS job qualifications:

Nowadays you can scarcely be a lookout without a uniform and a college degree, but in 1919 not a man in our outfit, least of all the ranger himself, had been to college. They still picked rangers for the Forest Service by picking the toughest guy in town. Ours, Bill Bell, was the toughest in the Bitterroot Valley, and we thought he was the best ranger in the Forest Service. We were strengthened in this belief by the rumor that Bill had killed a sheepherder. We were a little disappointed the he had been acquitted of the charges, but nobody held it against him, for we all knew that being acquitted of killing a sheepherder in Montana isn't the same as being innocent.

This story is a grand example of a young man growing up in the woods. It is humorous and irreverent. There are so many great passages in this story, particularly once Maclean gets into Hamilton at the end of the season....the walk, the ice cream sodas, the Chinese restaurant, the "hotel" the cards, the fight, the cook, are all just excellent reading, irreverent, but excellent. Here I will quote a passage from Maclean's descent from the fire lookout summit to the main camp before the trip to Hamilton. The phone wire has fallen in the snow storm and Maclean decides to restring the wire on his way down:

I chopped out the line that had got wound around the tree when it fell and I spliced the line and added a few feet to it and picked a new tree to hang it on.....I did not want to climb a dead tree while carrying that weight of line, but whenever I started to duck out like that the ranger was sure to be watching. So I put the wire over my climbing belt and the belt around the tree, and started up with my rear end sticking straight out to punch as much spur into that calcified tree as possible....Also going up with you are at least 250 yards of number nine wire, getting heavier and taughter every time you stick a half inch of spur into this totem pole of Carborundum. Below on the tree are the sharp stubs of branches you have chopped.

Less than half way up, the line had become so taut it would have pulled me out of the tree if I hadn't been strapped to it by the belt. The half inch of spur became less and less. Then I heard the splinter. Maybe I would have felt better if I had had no belt and the wire had just flipped me over the cliff into the gulch. Anyway, with my spurs torn out of the totem pole I came down about ten or twelve feet, and then my belt caught on something, and I dangled there and smelled smoke from the front of my shirt, my belly having passed over ten feet of snag ends of chopped branches. I worked the belt loose and fell ten or twelve feet more, and so on....when I finally reached ground I felt as if an Indian had started a fire by rubbing two sticks together, using me for one of the sticks.

I was afraid to look at my lower quarters to see what was still with me. Instead, I studied the snags of those branches to see which of my private parts were to hang there forever and slowly turn to stone. Finally, I could tell by the total distribution of pain that all of me was still on the same nervous system.

This 100 page novella is less tightly crafted than *A River Runs Through It* and it is a much less complex story, but it is a marvel of humor, imagery, and growing up.

Conclusions

USFS 1919 is an excellent novel with more straightforward style than *River* but Maclean does such an excellent job setting this one up that by the end of the book I think it is my favorite of the 3 stories....that is until I read *River* again, then I realize what a masterpiece that one is and *USFS 1919* again takes second place. Maclean, in the introduction to the books states that *Logging and Pimping* was the first of these fiction stories written, followed by *USFS 1919* then *River*. I think chronological progression, in this case, also represents artistic improvements in style, character development, and imagery, but from the first to the last page each story provides an exceptional look into the characters in these stories.

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Norman Maclean claimed these stories to be fiction. However they read like Montana history autobiographical stories. If fiction, they represented the first ever published by The University of Chicago Press. Maclean was over 70 years old when these stories were published and he states they grew out of stories he told his children as they were growing up. Much of the outline of the stories is probably based on his life, with much of the superb imagery coming from the retelling and remembrances of the time. Maclean states in the acknowledgments:

Children, much more than adults, like to know how things were before they were born, especially in parts of the world that now seem strange or have even disappeared but were once lived in by their parents, so I acquired the habit long ago of slipping in pictures of how men and horses did things in Western parts of the world where often the main thoroughfares were game trails. Moreover, it was always important to me to lead my children into real woods, not the woods of Little Red Riding Hood---to me, the constant wonder has been how strange reality has been.

Fiction, or semi-autobiographical they represent superb writing of earlier times, but not necessarily simpler times. This is a book that should be on every shelf for its beauty, its style and its poignant and topical issues.

My, 1976, 217 page softcover was published by The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. This book has been reissues several times in paper and soft covers. New and used copies are available on bookfinder from \$1 for paper and up to **\$6000** for signed special edition hard covers from Pennyroyal Press. Due to the popularity of the movie (I have never seen it) this book is probably found in most public libraries, and I would guess that anyone who checked it out, would soon buy a copy for themselves.....maybe not the Pennyroyal edition but at least one of the paper versions.

Footnote

I worked on this review for several weeks, writing, reworking the quoting, editing, rewriting. Though this is a book that I probably have read over 20 times, I found it very difficult to express the truly fine nature of Norman Maclean's writing captured in these 3 stories. Actually, I could probably have saved you the trouble of reading all of the above paragraphs and distilled the review into one sentence.....**This is the best book I have ever read, buy it....**yet that just seemed like cheating. Writing a review and trying to both excite a new reader but at the same time not reveal the whole story is a challenge...a challenge that is both fun and gives even greater depth to the book for me. I do hope everyone at least gives this book a try, I doubt it will disappoint.

Additional Reading

Young Men and Fire, Norman Maclean, 1992

Norman Maclean also wrote a documentary on the Mann Creek fire of 1949. In this fire the USFS dropped a team of 15 smokejumpers. The team was caught in a blowup and soon 13 of the team would perish in the fire. This fire and this tragedy are the subjects of this work. This book was published posthumously by The University of Chicago Press working from a manuscript. It is a lasting tribute to the lives of these smokejumpers and a scholarly look at the causes of this tragedy. It is well worth reading, particularly given the new understandings of fire in a forest ecosystem.

Post-scriptum :

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