

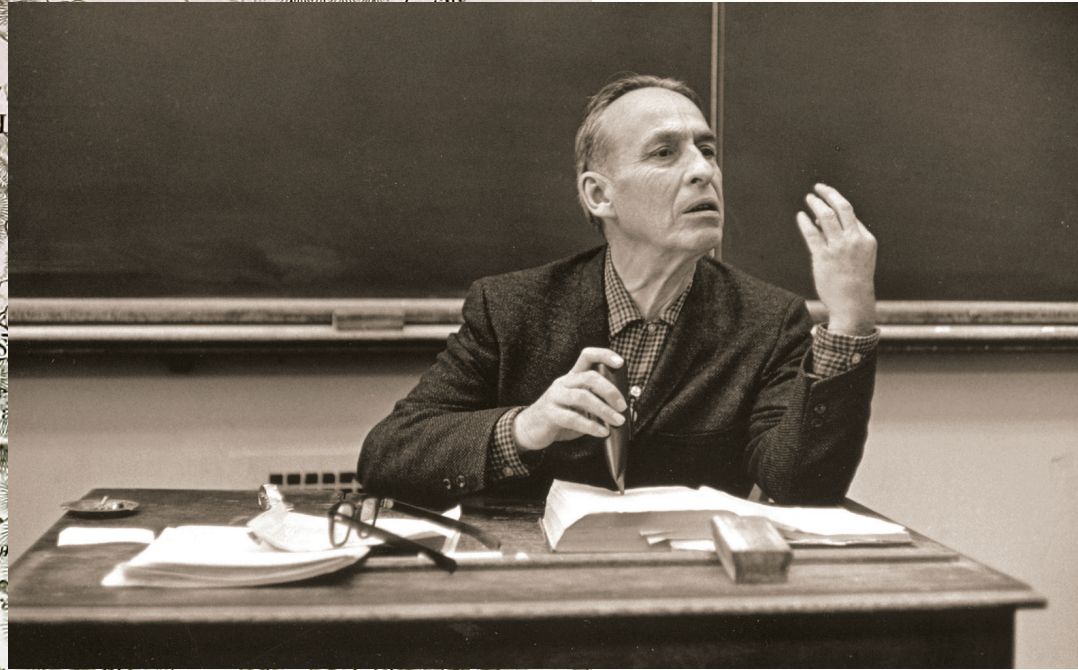


The Professor and the River

TRUE TALE BY EVERETT HEADLEY



Missoula, Montana, USA



Norman MacLean, 1970



Tucked away in the southern portion of Montana’s Rattlesnake Mountains flows what might be its most celebrated river, the Blackfoot. Made famous by Norman Maclean’s short work, *A River Runs Through It*, this water is respectable in its own right. Crystalline water engulfs black-speckled granite boulders as it drains westward to the Clark Fork River (more properly known as Clark’s Fork of the Columbia River). Dramatically colored silver and red rainbow trout rise to the dry fly and floaters absorb matchless landscapes of white topped peaks. But the Blackfoot’s debut to the world would not be induced from a record catch, but by an enrapturing narrative of a family’s connection to it, and the emotions associated with navigating loss and life.

Norman Maclean was born in the winter of 1902 to the Reverend John and Clara Maclean. Paul would be the next and final addition to the family, four years later. The Macleans’ Scottish forebears had first immigrated to Nova Scotia in 1821 and then to Iowa. The move to Missoula, Montana came in 1905 when Reverend Maclean accepted the call to pastor the First Presbyterian Church. For sixteen years he faithfully preached and cared for his flock. His friend A.J. Gibson was a well-known architect and devout Presbyterian, whose attention to detail in designing buildings brought him praise. Gibson drafted and built the church Maclean came to lead and it still stands on Fifth Street, with a granite monument in front of the aging red-bricked structure, honoring both men’s dedication. Reverend Maclean educated his sons at home, primarily



The Blackfoot River. Late 19TH-century lantern slide photograph by Morton J. Elrod from the collection at University of Montana Mansfield Library.



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through reading and writing. It wasn't until Norman was eleven, when an incident with a truant officer occurred, that he attended the local public school. The elder Maclean continued to instruct them on what would be all their legacies: fly fishing. During a radio interview, the author recalled watching his father: "We couldn't hardly keep our eyes off him when he fished, he was so beautiful and became a master of it, really." This is even more impressive when it is likely Reverend Maclean was the first generation of fly fisherman in his lineage. Trips to the water would always include a Greek New Testament and during duck season, a gun. The marriage of Creator and creation was primal in the Reverend's mind, and he would pass this on with quiet conversations sitting along the bank of the Blackfoot.

Norman acknowledged his brother Paul's superior ability in his writings. Incorporating humility into the famous book, he recounts his having lost the rhythm to present a fly upon returning from Dartmouth College. However, during the same time Paul continued to cast and develop his skill into something more. John N. Maclean, Norman's son, recounts in his family chronicle, *Home Waters*, Paul thought "there was nobody as good as Norman at landing a fish," but that he could use some courage in pursuing larger fish in difficult waters. Norman had a methodical and precise approach to fishing and selecting fishing holes, reflecting his personality. However, "once he had a fish on, Norman almost never lost it."

Norman Maclean was just fifteen when the United States entered World War I. He began working with the United States Forest Service as a logger, work that would be a lifelong influence in his work ethic and pen. Packing fire equipment by mule through roadless forests required grit and fortitude.

The third story in *River*, "The Ranger, the Cook, and the Hole in the Sky," reflected his own times in the service. Writing as a stockkeeper with endless days of experience, Maclean describes dealing with a difficult animal: "You can't imagine what a Christianizing effect it has even on a mule to stand for a couple of hours in the hot sun minus a foot." Descriptive titles like *Logging and Pimping* and *Young Men and Fire* have an appealing subtlety that offers evidence Norman wrote from his memories.

Montana and the Blackfoot river would not be enough for the young Maclean. He would attend Dartmouth College on the other side of the continent in New Hampshire. There he would study classical literature, continuing to develop

his literary credentials. As the co-editor of the college's humor magazine, the *Darhmouth Jack-O-Lantern*, he would become close friends with Theodor Giesel, better known by his pen name, Dr. Seuss. After his graduation



he remained at the college as an English teacher and was joined by Paul. Montana's rough ways followed them both to the more civilized locale, and Norman was called upon to help "sheriff" his brother. This was a short-lived reunion as Norman returned to Montana and his work in forestry in 1926. An anchor is inserted into the essence of someone who has tasted the openness and freedom of the west, and it ceaselessly draws them back. Montana would always be the waypoint Norman's compass would favor.

It was near Helena, a small mining town that had somehow struggled to endure the decline of gold and grow into the state capital, that Miss Jessie Burns would capture Norman's affections during a winter party. While riding home with another couple, the early car's radiator froze. Norman added more water, but it froze, forcing him to make the dangerous trek back into town. (Modern wisdom says that remaining with your vehicle during a winter event is your best chance for survival.) Upon returning from his



Montana fly-fishing in 1944, photograph by Kenneth D. Swan from the collection at University of Montana Mansfield Library.

trek, he would be met by the car “puttering” toward him. As his son recalls, “Norman felt foolish, but Jessie remembered him as the hero. Their marriage in 1931 would thrive until her death from cancer 37 years later.”

As a professor, Norman Maclean found his calling. In his first year of teaching, he won distinction for his approach to educating. Oftentimes his classes would be filled beyond their registered students. A small part of his notoriety could be attributed to his Montana origins. He would go on to pursue a doctorate in Shakespeare and the British romantics, but it would take him twelve years to complete. His academic career covered more than four decades, but in that time, he would only publish thrice, opting instead to focus on his students. It was only following his retirement that he would pick up his pen and write.

Norman would call it “a love poem to my family.” *A River Runs Through It* is a collection of stories, with the most well-known recounting his familial history in western Montana. It is a slightly fictionalized account of the emotional extremes he felt with his family, primarily his brother. Norman focuses on the thread that united them, fly fishing, to put his memories to paper. First lessons on proper casting form, coming of age recklessness, and the exhilaration of finding love are themes that leave everyone touched. He makes it seem as though Missoula is idyllic and without imperfection and we accommodate such a sentiment by suspending our disbelief. I can attest to the veracity of the following famous Norman Maclean quote: “The world is full of bastards, the number increasing rapidly the further one gets from Missoula, Montana.” Adolescent memories are recalled, without attention to the undeniable hardships of growing up in the west.

It is only the tragedy of Paul’s murder which leaves the story broken. Unwanted or unneeded help fails to prevent a great loss for the Maclean family. Throughout his life, Norman held a deep sadness for the death of his brother while grasping for answers. It was this impassioned turmoil that spurred him to write *River*. Its end with Paul’s murder is left a mystery with a few poetic words describing


the ferocity with which he fought off his attackers, and the reflection on Paul’s beautiful and short life. In reality, the truth was not far off, and officially Paul Maclean’s murder remains open in Chicago. Norman would accompany his brother home to be buried in Missoula. His parents would shortly follow and rest alongside their son.

His autobiographical narrative was recommended for the Pulitzer Prize, however that year no award was given.

The assumption is that politics surely interfered with this recognition. Norman viewed this rejection as “par for the course,” as his previous attempts to be published had also been met with resistance, something he never forgot. After the book’s success, the same publishing houses that had previously scorned him were then begging for future printings of his work. He rebuffed everyone. He reveled in his position and newfound ability to “tell them where to go.”

Throughout the remainder of his life, the Blackfoot river played a devotional role. He would return to it and the memories that remained as the water constantly renewed itself. It would become part of the family heritage as much as any adopted son, although it would likely be unrecognizable. The acrobatic rainbows have declined and an exponential demand on the resource by anglers and floaters has begun to threaten its existence. The screenplay that Norman helped to develop for the movie would relaunch the fly-fishing

industry around the country. Missoula would be firmly and forever centered as the capital of the fly-fishing world. But all that love and notoriety has had a cost.

Norman Maclean would pass on to the great waters in the sky at the age of 87 in Chicago, but he would forever remain in Montana. Per his final wishes, his ashes were scattered in the mountains of his home state. The greatest fly-fishing destinations now include waters he first fished. Discussions on what to read, watch, or experience for new fisherman quickly point to *A River Runs Through It*. His words will continue to inspire new anglers, writers, loggers, and lovers of the west as they read what it was once like and wish they too could have lived it. 

“The world is full of bastards, the number increasing rapidly the further one gets from Missoula, Montana.”

NORMAN MACLEAN

