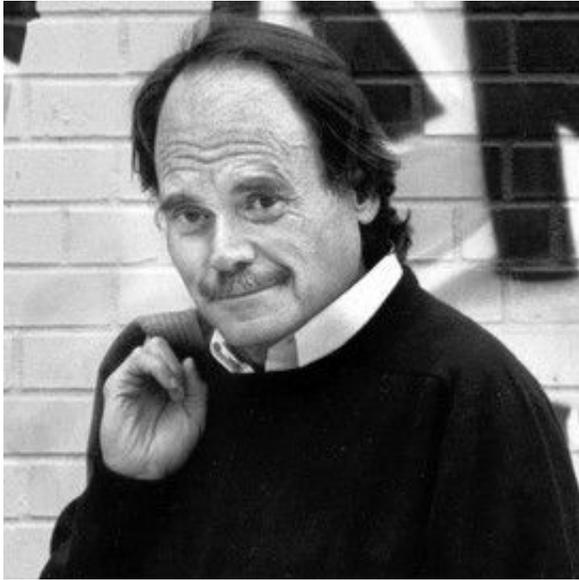


## Novelist Pete Dexter: Maclean put everything on the line with 'River'



22 HOURS AGO · BY [CORY WALSH](#)

Pete Dexter wasn't yet a published novelist when he first read "A River Runs Through It."

That was back in 1980, some eight years before he won the National Book Award.

"I was a newspaper columnist and I'd written some other magazine pieces, but I didn't really know anything," he said in a phone interview from his Washington home.

"That book is one of those things. You just get your eyes opened to what's possible," he said.

Norman Maclean's poetic 1976 novella about family and fly fishing struck him so much that he traveled to Seeley Lake to write a [profile](#) of Maclean for Esquire in 1981.

He spent about a week with the writer, then 79, at his family cabin, which will be host to the inaugural "In the Steps of Norman Maclean" festival, a literary shindig on his life and legacy.

Dexter will revisit western Montana as part of the festival next weekend, delivering a keynote speech.

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The book's classic status masks some of the risk involved in writing it, a point that perhaps only a fellow novelist would point out. Indeed, Dexter believes that Maclean took a "remarkable" chance with the book. It was his debut work of fiction, written in his 70s at the encouragement of his children.

Maclean had retired from a storied career as a literature professor at the University of Chicago, where his students included future Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens.

"He had the highest standards. Jesus. People still talk about him at the University of Chicago," Dexter said. "He's may be the most famous teacher they ever had, and one of the best."

Those high standards he imparted on others meant he risked his legacy by writing

himself, whether to his peers or only to himself.

"And it's not like you could separate who Norman is as a teacher from who he is as a writer," Dexter said.

"Once he steps into the arena, it's like everything is on the line," Dexter said. "And it's kind of a scary thing."

The deeply personal tale raised the stakes as well. Maclean used a small book to tell "the most important story of his life," Dexter said.

The semi-autobiographical story draws on his childhood in western Montana. Raised by Presbyterian minister, Maclean famously conflates fly fishing and religion, and ends the book with a meditative passage on the death of his hard-living brother Paul, who was killed outside a Helena bar.

In his Esquire profile, Dexter wrote, "It is about not understanding what you love, about not being able to help."

"He did it, and he did it in a way that it's naked. 'Here I am. Here my brother is, and here's our story,' " Dexter said.

It goes without saying that Dexter is a fan of the prose. (In Esquire, he used an unprintable word while comparing Maclean to Shakespeare.)

The polishing that went into it, he said, is beyond "any wild guess" we could proffer.

"More than whys or whatever else you can say about it, it is a beautiful book," Dexter said.

While it wasn't directly inspired by Maclean, he deeply admires it.

"It's one of those things, if you have certain moments when you're writing, you might know this, things get clear all of a sudden, and you see things you were missing before, and that's how it was with this book," he said.

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Dexter, just shy of 72, was a star columnist in Philadelphia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, well-known for riveting writing and drunken high jinks.

Later in 1981, after meeting Maclean, Dexter suffered a [legendary incident](#) that has parallels with Paul's death.

Dexter was severely beaten outside of a Philadelphia bar over a column he'd written. A confrontation with the brother of the column's subject led to a brawl, and his back and pelvis were broken.

While recuperating, he began working on fiction, "God's Pocket," named after a working-class Philly neighborhood, eventually published in 1983.

More books followed, including 1986's underrated Western classic "Deadwood." The funny, profane and sad novel is set in the South Dakota mining camp, including Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane among its characters. (HBO insists its television series didn't draw on the book, but Dexter begs to differ.)

His 1988 novel about the murder of two black girls by a Southern bigot, "Paris Trout," won the National Book Award.

Three of Dexter's novels have been adapted for film: "God's Pocket," a 2014 film with Christina Hendricks and one of the final performances by Philip Seymour Hoffman; "The Paperboy," a 2012 Florida crime drama starring Zach Efron, Matthew McConaughey and Nicole Kidman; and "Paris Trout," a 1991 film with Dennis Hopper.

Dexter is working on several novels concurrently, the follow-ups to 2009's 496-page semi-autobiographical "Spooner."

One is long for him, he said, even longer than "Spooner," and he said it feels as though it's halfway done.

He declined to discuss their contents, calling the process of writing a novel "amazingly complicated."

"If you knew when you started how far it was to the end, you probably wouldn't do it," he said.

His writing routine, which he changes every few months or so, currently involves writing until 4 or 5 in the morning.

He was hospitalized for an infection from a dog bite several years ago, and his energy hasn't been the same.

He's also going to dip back into column writing with the Daily Beast, which has been republishing gems from his journalism days, including the Maclean profile.

He plans on working with a partner, which will require going online for the first time.

(He writes on a computer, but keeps it unconnected. He's wary of computers after losing a long middle section of "Paris Trout," in which pages and pages were "replaced by a line of smiley faces," he said.)

Of starting out as a writer, he said, "It's important to get some words on the paper to find out what you have."

"It's tangent to being smart, but it doesn't depend on it," he said. It's not a skill you can predict, like whether an athletic person will be good at sports.

It's a matter of doing it over and over, which is hard. "There's no guarantees, at first especially," he said.

"You find somebody who'll tell you the truth and either you can do it or you can't," he said.

## **IF YOU GO**

**The inaugural "In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean" literary festival will take place Friday, July 10, through Monday, July 14, in Seeley Lake. Watch for more coverage in the Missoulian in advance of the festival.**

**Novelist Pete Dexter will participate in two festival events Saturday, July 11:**

- **A keynote speech at 10 a.m.**
- **A panel at 1:30 p.m.: "A River Runs Through It - 39 Years Later," with Dexter, Nick O'Connell ("At the Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers") and Alan Weltzien ("The Norman Maclean Reader")**

**For a complete schedule and information on registration and costs, go to [macleanfootsteps.com](http://macleanfootsteps.com).**