

SEELEY LAKE

Norman Maclean remembered at festival in Seeley Lake



13 HOURS AGO · BY [DILLON KATO](#)

John Maclean is always nervous when asked to talk about his family, unsure of what he has to add to the legacy of his father, Norman Maclean, author of “A River Runs Through It.”

“Well, you know, Robert Redford made our home movie,” he said Saturday.

Writers and literary fans of Maclean’s novels gathered in Seeley Lake over the weekend for the inaugural celebration of In

the Footsteps of Norman Maclean, a festival about the author and the impact of his work.

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock provided opening remarks at the Double Arrow Resort, and talked about how Maclean’s writing has become intertwined with the culture of the state. Maclean’s work also galvanized conservation efforts around the state, and in particular on the Blackfoot River.

“He helped identify or cement a sense of place,” the governor said.

When he was younger, Bullock was a river guide in the Gates of the Mountains Wilderness on the Missouri River near Mann Gulch, the setting for Maclean’s book “Young Men and Fire” about the 1949 wildfire in the area.

“That was the cathedral of my summer,” Bullock said. “I’ve walked in the footsteps of Norman Maclean.”

When “A River Runs Through It” was published, people all around the world were introduced to the majesty of Montana through Maclean’s writing, the governor said. That year, fly fishing in Montana grew 60 percent, and then another 60 percent the next year, Bullock said.

“They come to experience what we experience through his writing,” Bullock said.

Former Esquire magazine writer Pete Dexter, whose 1988 novel “Paris Trout” won the National Book Award, told of writing a profile of Norman Maclean for the magazine in 1981.

“I’ve got enormous affection for this book and for the guy,” Dexter said at Saturday’s

festival.

He said after he turned in his profile, his editor called Maclean to ask what he thought about it.

"What Norman said is he hated it," Dexter told the audience.

From that point on, Dexter said one of his goals as a writer was to "make Norman Maclean like me." The fact that Maclean had written his first novel and best-known book at the age of 70 was astounding, Dexter said.

" 'A River Runs Through It' is the event of a lifetime and I don't mean for the reader, I mean for the writer," he said.

During Noah Snyder's turn at the podium, he talked about growing up learning from his grandfather, whom he called "Moose," and who taught him and his brother to fish. It was only after he grew up that Snyder came to terms with his grandfather's literary celebrity status.

"When I ventured out into the rest of the world, I was surprised that the world already knew this man," he said.

John Maclean, who is also an author and wrote "Fire on the Mountain" in 1999, was one of the first speakers of the morning. Among the events he took part in over the course of the weekend was a dinner reception on the Blackfoot River on Friday, which was attended by about 120 people, Maclean said. Attendees had come from across the country, including Alabama, Texas, Arkansas and even from London, England.

"This is a pretty good crowd for a corner of Montana," he said.

He said the organizers have worked very hard to make this event a reality since they first talked to him about their plans about a year ago. It's important to bring together people who knew his dad personally to tell their stories before it's too late, Maclean said, adding that most of the talks over the weekend will be audio or video recorded for posterity.

"One of the things that should be done is the memories of people who knew him should be collected," he said.

Maclean showed a slideshow of images, starting with the life of his grandfather, the Rev. John Norman Maclean, telling how he came to live in Missoula and build a cabin on Seeley Lake.

"The worlds of religion and fishing were ever present at the lake," Maclean said.

He detailed his father's experiences at Seeley, showing pictures of some of the original fly fishing flies mentioned in the book, and recounting the hardships that befell the cabin, from nearly being destroyed in the Jocko Lakes fire in 2007 to the rising cost of Forest Service cabin leases that left the family with a bill for more than \$19,000 one year.

Maclean concluded with a photo looking out on the Blackfoot River.

“One thing the river teaches you is to be quiet,” he said.

Sunday focus on 'Young Men and Fire'

In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean continues on Sunday with a tour of the author's favorite fishing holes on the Blackfoot River, as well as discussions on the history and issues in “Young Men and Fire.” More information is available online at www.macleannotsteps.com.