

BLACKFOOT

# RIVER LORE

## Book, movie, stories mythologize Blackfoot River



23 HOURS AGO • [BRETT FRENCH](#)  
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**CLEARWATER JUNCTION** — After stepping atop a loose rock lying along the banks of the Blackfoot River and stumbling, Kristin Fisher couldn't help but think of her father.

"To this day he has never learned to swim, yet he fished this river extensively," she said. "Mom must have wondered if he would ever come back. He'd be gone all day, and she was home with three kids."

Fisher was one of about 30 people touring the river on Sunday as part of a Seeley Lake [literary festival](#) honoring author Norman Maclean. The event was organized by Alpine Artisans, Inc. Maclean's novella, "A River Runs Through It," discusses the art and mechanics of fly-fishing, the beauty of the Blackfoot River and the tragic death of his younger brother, Paul.

Thanks to Maclean and filmmaker Robert Redford, perhaps no other Montana river is as embedded in the public's consciousness as the Blackfoot.

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### Touring

Jerry O'Connell, who lives along the Blackfoot River and has been a fan of the book since the 1980s, guided the busload of tourists to three different spots that received prominent mention in Maclean's book. O'Connell has been giving the tours for the past five years.

The tour started at Russell Gates fishing access site, the location of "the infamous hooker scene." In the book, Maclean and his brother return to find Maclean's brother-in-law sleeping face down, naked and sunburned on an island next to a prostitute named Rawhide. The two had passed out after drinking much of a bottle of whiskey and all of the group's beer.

O'Connell noted that, "On all of these locations there is a heavy dose of approximation." Even Maclean had a hard time remembering some spots, O'Connell

said, since decades had passed between the events and when the 70-year-old author crafted them into the novella that some scholars compare to a poem for its lyrical quality.

The draw of the book, its storied river and its Montana setting prompted Alana Seaman to include the four-day literary festival in her dissertation for Clemson University on the connection between literature and tourism. British travel writer Michael Kerr flew in to cover the event for a feature article. And Gov. Steve Bullock kicked off the festival on Saturday with a speech noting that following the release of the movie based on Maclean's book, fly-fishing in Montana increased by 60 percent two years in a row.

The story "galvanized" a deep connection to the river and Montana's wild places, he said, adding that Maclean forever helped to cement the power of Montana as a wild place in readers' psyche.

One Canadian visitor that Seaman met on the previous day's fishing-hole tour told her he had driven 14 hours just to find out where Norman Maclean had fished so he could bring his girlfriend back in two weeks to wet a line in the same places.

O'Connell is no different in his dedication to the book and place. His wife had one of the last lines of the novel inscribed in his wedding band. He met a Swedish angler on Facebook who had the book's very last line, "I am haunted by waters," tattooed in 4-inch-tall Gothic letters across his torso.

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## Ancient view

Although Maclean's book may draw people from around the world to the Blackfoot River and its peaceful pools and ragged cliffs, O'Connell attempts to impart a larger sense of the place in his talks.

Geologically, the Blackfoot River valley was carved by an incredible event, he noted. As Maclean writes, "The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time." His reference is to [Glacial Lake Missoula](#), which about 12,000 years ago covered much of Western Montana's valleys — including the Blackfoot — in an estimated 2,000 feet of water. When the glaciers damming the Clark Fork River and creating the lake broke loose, the massive waterway — which was the size of lakes Erie and Ontario combined — blasted a biblical flood across Washington and into the Pacific Ocean in roughly three days. During that time, the water carved the Columbia, Clark Fork and Blackfoot river gorges.

"In the process it made a mess out of this place," O'Connell said. "Icebergs came charging down this valley. Some made it to the ocean. Some got stuck and you can still see their footprints in the valley where they shed boulders from all kinds of rocks from Canada and all around."

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## Historical perspective

Western explorer Meriwether Lewis also journeyed along the Blackfoot River valley on his way back from the Pacific Ocean. Lewis and his crew were guided by Salish Indians.

“They were following a historic route known as the road to the buffalo,” O’Connell said. But the valley was guarded by what he referred to as “the bad-asses of the Northern Great Plains — the Blackfeet.” And when the Salish saw remnants of a Blackfeet war party, they vamoosed, leaving Lewis and his men to their own devices.

“There are still sections of the old trail that you can see, and travois marks, going across my property,” O’Connell said.

Lewis also took note of the irregular country, a relic of the glacial age’s deposition of huge mounds of gravel, when he referred to one area as the “field of bumps,” O’Connell noted. Later, Lewis crossed out that entry and renamed it “the prairie of knobs.”

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## Local history

Just as intriguing as the ancient and aged tales are O’Connell’s stories about some of the more recent characters of the valley and unusual incidents. For example, a 13-year-old Prince William — the future king of England — once spent time at a nearby guest ranch to escape the paparazzi during his mother and father’s notorious divorce. O’Connell said there’s a photo of the young prince, hanging in one of the ranch’s buildings, showing him suspended from a nail in a tree by his T-shirt collar while being doused with a garden hose — the punishment for not cleaning his cabin.

Or the cantankerous landowner who disliked trespassers so much that he once chained and padlocked the axle of an unwelcome visitor’s truck and even blew up a culvert to prevent another person from leaving. At age 93, the curmudgeon died and was buried with his twin Colt .45 pistols clutched in his hands, arms folded across his chest, a bottle of whiskey near his body, O’Connell said.

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## Last trip

The River Bend Day Use Area, downstream from O’Connell’s home, is where he believes one of the longest sections of “A River Runs Through It” takes place — when Maclean goes fishing with his father and brother, Paul, for the last time.

“Obviously it was a big day, because it takes up 34 pages in a book that’s only about 160-some pages,” he said. “It really is a remarkable stretch of water.”

Maclean describes it this way: “On the Big Blackfoot River above the mouth of Belmont Creek the banks are fringed by large Ponderosa pines. In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the

trees took the river in their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us.”

Two springs ago, O’Connell was fishing with his wife in a pool just below the access site when he hooked a 14-inch rainbow trout. He was just reaching down to grab the fish when out of the depths of the pool surged a bull trout that latched on to the rainbow. He called to his wife to shoot a photo of the incredible struggle at the end of his fly line when a 27-inch bull trout rocketed up to grab on to the other bull trout and rainbow. Mouth agape, O’Connell watched as the tussling trout disappeared into the deep water.

Cranking on his reel he was able to recover one of the fish — the 27-inch bull trout — which somehow in the midst of the fray had become hooked by O’Connell’s tiny Hare’s Ear Nymph fly. O’Connell noted that he has a photo and a witness to back up his incredible story.

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### Book collection

Before traveling to Seeley Lake from her Ellensburg, Wash., home to attend the literary festival, Kristin Fisher read “A River Runs Through It” again. Her father left her with a few parting comments, noting that he had fished all of the same holes Norman Maclean mentions in his book.

Fisher wasn’t interested in fishing the Blackfoot River, it was enough for her just to see the locations O’Connell pointed out, to smell the vanilla tang of ponderosa pines and hear the water chatter.

“A River Runs Through It” was the first book of Fisher’s Montana literary collection. It grew to include other notable Montana authors like Ivan Doig and James Welch. They are her anchors to a special place. Fisher grew up in Missoula. Now her family lives in Washington. Yet they all agree they are still firmly rooted in their home state.

“I haven’t lived here since I was 13, but we’re Montanans,” she said. “This is it for us.”