



In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival By Jerry O'Connell
 "I am haunted by waters."

There isn't a fly fisher worth his or her hackle who doesn't instantly recognize that phrase. And there isn't a passionate angler who doesn't feel those words resonate in his or her spine.

Norman Maclean (1902–1990), one of America's most enigmatic 20th-century authors, chose this to be the final sentence in his now-famous 1976 novella, *A River Runs Through It*. The power of those words continues to connect with a broadening audience of readers, as well as viewers of Robert Redford's cinematic rendition of the story. The movie brought the spotlight of public awareness to fly fishing, to Montana, and to the Big Blackfoot River, and in 2015 Maclean's ties to the communities in the Blackfoot River valley were formally recognized and honored. For four days this past July, much of the Maclean family, along with literary legends and fans from around the world, came to Seeley Lake, Montana, for the inaugural In the Footsteps of Norman Maclean Festival.

Maclean grew up in nearby Missoula, spent summers at the family cabin on Seeley Lake, and regularly fished the Big Blackfoot (now known simply as the Blackfoot). The festival focused on two key elements of his life, one literary and one piscatorial. Most of his adult life was split between winters as a professor at the University of Chicago and summers as a fly-fishing curmudgeon in Seeley Lake. Both facets were well represented by the speakers and the members of the various panels.

However, for many of the attendees, the real interest was in visiting the places where Maclean walked, fished, and drank his Ancient Age bourbon. The festival kicked off with an alfresco dinner at a local ranch on the banks of the Blackfoot, one of Maclean's old haunts, where he often sat on the porch of an old homesteader's cabin sipping whiskey with friends, and where he taught his grandsons to fish. During the next two days, bus tours gave guests the chance to visit locations on the Blackfoot that were featured in the story, including a final and most poignant stop near Belmont Creek, where Maclean; his brother, Paul; and their father, John, fished together for the last time. Soon after, in 1938, Paul was beaten to death and dumped in an alley. The importance of this spot is obvious—Maclean dedicated one-fifth of the book to those last hours together. There were more than a few damp eyes in the crowd as this passage was read: "The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs."

Despite this not being a fishing tour, at every stop the inevitable "I wish I'd brought my rod" was overheard more than once. The Blackfoot's clear waters, emerald pools, red rock cliffs, and occasional rising trout provided a perfect backdrop as passages from the book were read at each stop on the tour.

So, should the book or movie refresh your interest in this iconic region, put this biennial event on your 2017 calendar. You will not regret it.

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