remembrance of Norman Maclean I did at Elliott Bay Book Store, 1 Dec. '92

Now, for somebody else's words, although they're still my vocal cords:

Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn't. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. 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.

I am haunted by waters.

NORMAN

change tapes

Those of course are the opening lines of A River Runs through It, and ~~this~~ my remembering of Norman Maclean begins, as a lot of literary goings-on in the West do, with Bill Kittredge.

~~Bill Kittredge.~~ In early 1979, Bill began saying to his fellow faculty members at the University of Montana that they ought to hold a big ~~confer~~ CONFERENCE invite every Montana-connected writer they could get, do a lot of reading, lot of talking. Naturally a committee ~~was got~~ got set up--Kittredge a member--and in high academic fashion the committee began trying to come up with a focus and a name for the conference. After an hour or so of the other committee members proposing names like Trans-Mississippi Modes of Thought Kittredge, who hadn't said a word yet, looked up at the rest of them and rumbled: "WHO OWNS THE WEST?"

The "Who Owns the West" conference was held in Missoula in early May of 1979, and sure enough, everybody who was thought to be anybody was there. Richard Hugo and Madeline DeFrees did a poetry reading; ANOTHER ~~anoth~~ set of readings paired Jim Welch and Norman Maclean; I read from my manuscript of Winter Brothers; Dorothy Johnson and A.B. Guthrie read together. It was a giddy four days and nights, and while there were a lot of serious sessions about the economic colonial status of Montana and other parts of the West, there were a pair of wonderful one-liners that stick in my memory.

The first was Dorothy Johnson's--the author of The Hanging Tree, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, A Man Called Horse--a longtime Montana writing figure. As she and Bud Guthrie got together to do their evening of readings, they represented about a century of writing books and they both looked it, and Dorothy had a shaking affliction besides. She said something about her shaking making it hard to handle her pages to read from, and her old friend Guthrie said, "Oh hell, Dorothy, you're just shaking because I slept with you last night." Dorothy got in the spirit and said, "Oh no you didn't, Bud Guthrie." Guthrie says, "You mean you don't even remember?" And Dorothy says, "Even if you had, it wouldn't be worth remembering."

The other great line, considerably more elevated, was Norman's. As with much else in life, Norman had his own notion of how to participate in the conference. Bill Kittredge had explained to Norman that by the rules of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, participants could be paid a certain amount if they both gave a reading and were on discussion panels. Fine, fine, said Norman in agreeing to come, and then when the time came for Kittredge to put together the actual schedule, Norman announced that no way IN HELL was he going to be on any panel. (He was pretty smart about that, actually--I remember finding myself on panels about topics I'd barely even heard of.)

Anyway, the conference went its way while Norman went his. He was at every session--every panel--in the audience, dressed in a brown suit coat and old-fashioned wide-legged pants of a different brown, the only one of us always wearing a tie. After a couple of days of this, Norman and Kittredge crossed paths and Norman said, "Bill, I was wondering, is there something else I could do since I'm here anyway, talk to some group in town or something?" Kittredge looked at him and said, "You could be on a panel." Norman said,"NO, no, no--no panels for me!" and conference life went on as it had been. But then came the night for Norman to do his reading.

Maybe he didn't do panels, but he knew how to do podiums. After the mike was adjusted for him, he looked down through his typed remarks for a moment, then he looked out at us in the audience and in one quick complete motion of one hand put his glasses on--the lifetime-learned gesture of a professor. He read what he regarded as his blueprint for A River Runs through It--that the story is built atop a manual of fly fishing, from the basic 4-count rhythm early on, to the climax of his brother Paul fishing superbly as Norman and their father watch.

Then he read a couple of sections of "A River," saying that they illustrated such things as the use of incident, and the interplay of beauty, darkness and everyday reality. And then the line, the memorable moment of all the readings at that conference. Norman was concluding with a summary of the story told in "A River Runs through It," and he said that after Paul's ~~murder~~ DEATH, almost at the end of the book, Norman and his family were left knowing, for certain, only that Paul "was beautiful, and dead, and we had not helped."

That, then, was Norman from the audience--at least, the intrigued audience I was. Now, to try speak of Norman as someone I knew, I have to begin by saying he was not an easy friend--but those can be a particularly interesting kind.

I met Norman there in Missoula as he was traipsing across campus to one of those panels he wouldn't deign to be on. Went over to him--he was 76 then but his health was still good, he looked more like 65; looked like an elongated version of the Indian on the nickel, with that long, lined face--and introduced myself and brought greetings from Archie Satterfield, who was then the book review editor at the P-I and had written one of the first praising reviews of A River Runs through It. I mentioned

to Norman that Archie and I had just had a "to hell with the East Coast anyway" lunch together, after we'd both been turned down for Guggenheim writing fellowships. Instantaneously, Norman was madder at the Guggenheim selection committee than even Archie and I were. There in the middle of the University of Montana campus, Norman cussed a blue streak about them not giving "you young fellows" any support for our writing; all the resentment he felt--at Knopf and other Eastern publishers for turning down his book because "it had trees in it," and at a few persnickety reviewers back there--all that resentment abruptly was flowing east, on our behalf.

My wife

Carol's introduction to Norman was classier, more classic, that evening. There was a big party at the house of Jim and Lois Welch, and at one point of the festivities Carol angled into the kitchen for a scotch and water--she's always claimed she was fetching it for me. In any case, she reached for the scotch jug at the same instant as Norman Maclean. Apparently Norman thought well of her instincts, and they got to talking, and Carol said how much she and I had liked Norman's instructive presentation, particularly his remarks about how he structured the storyline of A River Runs through It. Norman said he didn't think any reader would realize all of what he was trying to do in that story, so,

he said, "I write notes to my wife." He paused and then said: "She's been dead for many years, but I write her the notes because only she would understand them." (For any of you who are devotees of the book, I think that chimes powerfully with my own favorite paragraph of A River Runs through It, where Norman and his wife are making up after a fight and say to each other at the same time, "Let's never get out of touch with each other"--the next line, "And we never have, although her death has come between us."

Two other remarks ~~which, between us, Carol and I remember~~ from that first Missoula meeting with Norman I think bear repeating, because they are Norman about Norman. He said that even though he was long since retired from the University of Chicago, he figured he was a lifelong, incurable teacher; that even in the instant when another fisherman fishes past him in a stream, he thinks to himself: C minus. And the other self-description was maybe the best definition of Norman I've ever come across. He told us that his father had wanted to bring him up as a tough guy, while his mother wanted to bring him up as a flower girl--the result was, he said, he grew up to be a tough flower girl.

After that Missoula gathering, Norman and I wrote to each other every so often, and we kept telling each other we ought to get together in Montana again sometime. A ritual ran through this--every year when Norman was starting to think about leaving Chicago for his summer in Montana, he'd say Carol and I ought to come up and see him at his cabin on Seeley Lake, that this was probably the last summer that he was going to be able to come out to the cabin. This is from Norman's letter at Christmastime, 1982:

"My children are demanding that I cease driving out there and back alone, but I don't tell them that's almost the least of my worries. I am a chronic heart patient and I will be 80 next week and Montana is getting just too big and cold and lonely for me. After Labor Day when everybody clears out, I could die any day and not be found until it thaws next spring. But I'll die too if I leave Montana, and no longer be cold and lonely. That's the way I have always liked it, cold and lonely, but I can't take it any more."

Other letters from Norman, in the early '80s, were never dull. I wrote him from Alaska, when I was writing The Sea Runners, and he said it was okay that I was writing something not about Montana, that it was a good idea to be a writer bigger than Montana, but not to get too far from Montana in my writing, either. Norman's final word: "God gave you great gifts, and you properly have taken them seriously--but don't go spraying them all over the landscape."

The time a wanna-be moviemaker was after me about This House of Sky, and for the fun of it I asked Norman how he dealt with those types: (early 1984) "Jesus, Ivan, I don't have any advice about movies or movie people. I don't get along with them. Their basic problem is that they can't believe there are people who mean what they say."

And the time when this came steaming out of a letter from Norman:

"Today I mailed under separate cover the two "Rivers" you sent me to inscribe. The one for you was a great pleasure, but I must admit that the one I inscribed for your friend is the first book of mine I have ever inscribed for a resident of Great Falls and probably the last. My brother-in-law had a ranch in Wolf Creek...and the Great Falls sports who infest the country several hundred miles on each side of Great Falls used to leave his gates open and his cattle were always getting out--so he put locks on his gates and a sign saying fishermen would be welcome to a key if they would only come to his house and sign up. But the bastards never did--

they just brought wire-snips with them... If I didn't think you were such a great writer I would never have inscribed one of my books for an "outdoor editor" from Great Falls.

~~And--one last seismograph report from corresponding with Norman--~~ in June of 1984, when I was about to go to Bozeman to receive an honorary degree from Montana State University, here came the letter from Norman congratulating me on that ceremony amid the mountains where the Macleans and the Doigs both had their beginnings in Montana: "You will look ~~beautiful, with the Spanish Peaks for a background.~~"

It was the summer of 1985 before Carol and I managed to visit Norman at his Seeley Lake cabin. Norman was still vigorous enough at 82--he'd just been up doing something on his roof, as we pulled in. I've never been a summer cabin person myself, but the place showed a lot of care and craft put into it since Norman and his father built it themselves, 63 years before. We Doigs did think it was a little fancy that the outhouse had handcrafted seat covers that slid sideways. It was close to noon when we got there--close enough for Norman to pretty promptly offer us his noontime ritual drink, a Bloody Mary.

We negotiated vodka and tonics out of him instead--Norman in great good spirits said he figured they drink something like that in Seattle--and off he went into the kitchen to fix the drinks. Here I can let you in on the dark unmentioned secret of Norman Maclean. Norman hummed. We could hear him there in the other room, a contented hum coming from where the glasses were, then another register of hum from where the ice was--a lot of humming, all of it loud and tuneless. A mischievous suspicion rose in me, and I later asked Norman's old fishing buddy, George Croonenbergs, about it: did Norman <u>hum</u> when he <u>fished</u>? Yeah, George said--it got pretty monotonous.

Of that day with Norman, there in the cabin and at lunch in town, some moments stick out, in memory. Norman's outrage at the logging he could see in the mountains across Seeley Lake. Some pointed kidding between the two of us--Norman had obviously keeping count and knew that I was already working on my fifth book, and ribbed me that I had to watch out or I'd be prolific. I told him back that I supposed you could settle for a book or two if you had a professor's pension to live on, but those of us who were professional writers had to keep at it to earn our living.

At some point of that day, Norman remarked to us--doubtless in the context of movie negotiations for A River Runs through It, which he was getting more interested in having happen--that he knew he was regarded as difficult in such dealings, but he did it deliberately: he figured it was the one power he had left, in old age.

Norman Maclean died two years ago, and in the kind of irony that a good Calvinist might expect of the world, he's having his enormous season of success posthumously. The Robert Redford movie is a hit, A River Runs through It has been on the paperback bestseller list in two different editions--$9.95 and $4.99--and his second book, Young Men and Fire, is on the hardback bestseller list, and down at the smaller potatoes end, even the recording I did of "A River" is on the audio cassette bestseller list nationally.

Quite a legacy of popular success, for a guy who thought he liked it "cold and lonely." But there was his self-description as "a tough flower girl" too, wasn't there. Where I think all of Norman comes together is where it really counts for a writer, in the leavetaking he gave us in the last words of A River Runs through It:

PLAY TAPE