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# M Essays on the West

## A River Runs Through It

### A Review

*Ivan Doig*  
by Ivan Doig

Jesus, Ivan, I don't have any advice about movies or movie people. I don't get along with them.<sup>1</sup>

When *A River Runs Through It* finally was being filmed in Montana in 1991, I mentioned the doings to a college-friend-gone-Hollywood who had worked with several directors whose names come on the screen in two-story letters. "Robert Redford, no *legs* any more," intoned that movie person, which I managed to translate as "passé." A year later, my friend saw the actual movie at a preview, and I could tell from his reaction that something was really up with the Redford version of *A River*: he had liked the movie *so much*, he informed me, that he was going to *read* the *book*.

Book and movie: a ritual runs through them, or at least through the notion of turning the first into the second. Put starkly, it is that movie folk make their approach by righteously talking about art, while writers rightly want to talk about money. The disparity between what a successful movie can earn and what the author of

the story is paid can be astronomical. Norman Maclean, bless him, could get instantaneously sulphurous at a would-be moviemaker's offer of, say, \$2,500 for an option on his famous story of his family and his wayward brother, written in determined old age after he'd held it in his heart for forty years. Norman's favorite eruption about such movie "soft-talkers" was that they're a bunch "that eats what they find run over on the road."<sup>2</sup>

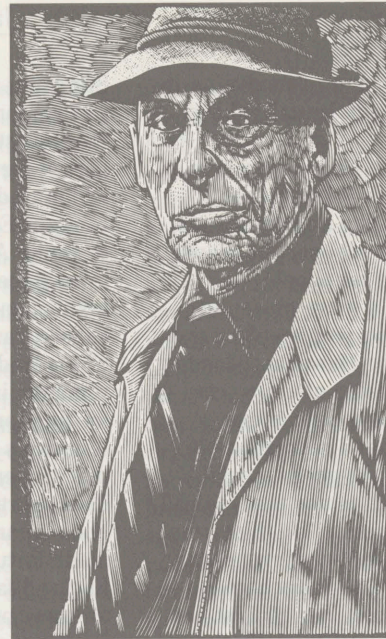
I did, though, see an interesting and good movie this summer on homesteading . . . It was set on the Musselshell . . . north of it . . . near your old home. It was very good, the country was even better than that, especially in winter. . . .<sup>3</sup>

By saying "No!" in thunder to the option smoothies, Norman ended up getting *A River Runs Through It* into respected and skilled hands. The homesteader movie he liked so much was of course *Heartland*, with the result that Annick Smith and Bill

Kittredge, two of the Montana talents involved in the making of it, wrote a script of *A River* and took Norman to Robert Redford's Sundance film workshop in Utah. To cut a lot of lore short, out of that eventuated the Redford movie with a script by Richard Friedenberg.

As a professional screenwriter, Friedenberg had this estimation when handed the Maclean book: it "was beautiful. It was profound. It was moving. And my heart sank: it was not a movie."<sup>4</sup>

My heart took its own turn at sinking when I read that. Then when I went to the movie, Friedenberg's "opening up" of the story by adding family background gave me pause—a lot of pauses, in fact, because after the captivating first scenes of the Maclean brothers as small boys, the movie did some slow embellishments on their growing-up that I thought never did attain the power Norman put into his words about their situations: "He is my brother. . . . It is a shame I do not understand him." Offsetting the cinematic domestic version of the Macleans, though, was the terrific fly casting. I am not much for what, in our family, we called fancy fishing; but dry-fly fishing is *A River's* "poetry under the prose,"



Wood engraving by Barry Moser, © Penny Royal Press

1. Norman Maclean in a letter to Ivan Doig, January 5, 1984.

2. Pete Dexter, "The Old Man and the River," *Esquire* (June 1981), 89.

3. Maclean to Doig, January 5, 1984.

4. "A River Runs Through Montana," *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, in Life section (October 25, 1992), F6.



A fly fisherman whips his line onto the surface of a northwestern Montana river.



Director Robert Redford (right) discusses a scene with Brad Pitt (left) and Craig Sheffer, who play brothers Paul and Norman Maclean respectively, in the film, *A River Runs Through It*.



Courtesy Columbia Pictures

in Norman's own term for what he sought to achieve in his writing, and he focused his story on it with ruthless brilliance—you would never know, for instance, that the Montana of 1937 in which the Maclean brothers go fly fishing whenever they feel like it was beset by the Depression. Norman himself recited with relish a disgruntled student's plot summary of *A River* as "they go fishing, they go fishing, then they get drunk, then they go fishing."<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, is there so much less fishing in the movie than in the book? The rationing of fishing scenes I think was one of several ways in which the Redford-Friedenberg team has been proven clever, which is meant as a compliment. Better to leave us wanting more of the curlicue beauty of fly casting than less. The winning of a wider audience by softening up the book's fishing intensity was ratified by Caryn James in her praising review in the *New York Times*: "Don't worry, [the fishing scenes] are not long or about bait."<sup>6</sup>

Norman Maclean died in 1990, the year before the filming was

begun, and so we can't know what he would have thought of the version that reached the screen. But before his health declined in his mid-eighties, Norman was vociferously known to have a set of insistences about any film adaptation of his story. He wanted the movie shot on the Big Blackfoot River, "our family river" as he called it in the book. Given the bald patches of clear-cutting on the ridges above today's Big Blackfoot, Redford's substitution of the gorgeously scenic Gallatin south of Bozeman is understandable (although I admit there is a corner of me that thinks it might be a good idea to show the actuality of a clear-cut on screen once in a while). A deeper concern was Norman's sensitivity about how the Maclean family would appear on the big screen. I have checked around with a number of other people who knew Norman, and the majority of us are convinced he would have been profane about the movie's portrayal of his brother Paul as, in the form of actor Brad Pitt, a dimpled scamp. This portrayal is a consequence of script-versus-book, where the cinematic decision was made to move the story back more than a decade to the Maclean brothers' (and the century's) late 'teens and mid-

twenties. The movie's Paul Maclean is a blazingly young man with a penchant for getting into trouble; the book's Paul Maclean is a man past thirty who knows his way around and still has a penchant for getting into trouble: there simply is a heftier moral weight to that second scenario. Take the movie audience's beguiled reaction to the Redford-Friedenberg-Pitt version, though, and again the alteration from the book has been proven commercially shrewd.<sup>7</sup>

But one character portrayed in the movie I'm quite sure is unnecessarily at odds with Norman's book. The character of Montana.

If you and your wife intend to be in Montana next summer again, let's try to get together for a day or two. It may be my last regular summer there. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Granted, there are as many Montanas as there are sets of eyes to lens it all. A cinematographer's or movie director's choice along the Montana spectrum probably inevitably will tend toward the pretty end. But take Norman Maclean's work at its words, and the question becomes not which river to film but how much river, nature, beauty-of-what-kind?

Walk your fingers through the 104 pages of *A River Runs Through It* and you'll find that at least sixty-four of them take place in a riverine setting or some other pertinent outdoors location—either along the Big Blackfoot or the Elkhorn, or in the comings and goings of the Maclean fishermen; and this doesn't even count the sense of the outdoors and nature found on other pages, such as the famous first paragraph locating it all "at the junction of great trout rivers." Take your stopwatch to the movie as I did—yes, we Scots truly can be ornery cusses—and you come up with something like thirty-six minutes of outdoors endeavors in a two-hour film.<sup>9</sup>

That's the quantity at variance with Norman's literary emphasis on omnipresent nature. As to quality, the Montana fashioned by the camera for *A River's* big-screen version is a Montana of picture-postcard beauty—not, as in Norman's pages, a beauty with power hidden dangerously in it. (The movie's longish scene of the teenage Maclean boys shooting the rapids perhaps bespoke them, but not necessarily Montana; there is big white water on rivers throughout America, including the falls of the Potomac in suburban Washington, D.C.) Think back to

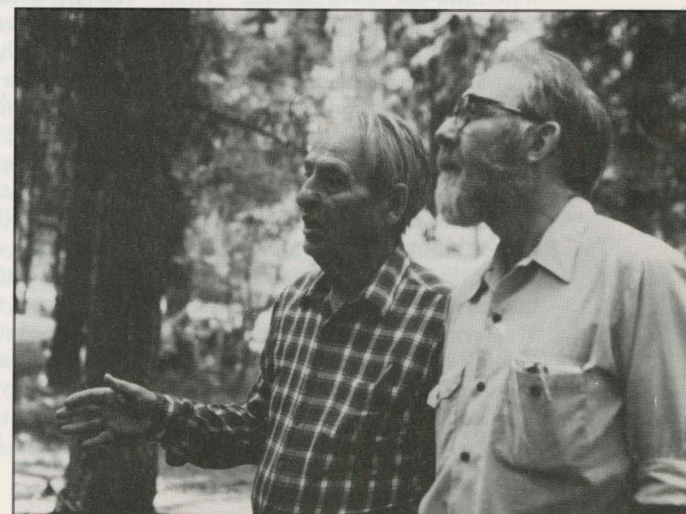
the scene early in the movie where the Presbyterian minister father is showing his sons where ancient rain spattered on mud before it became rocks "nearly half a billion years ago." It takes place along a winsome purling creek, whereas in the book this resonant scene occurs beside the "powerful" Big Blackfoot River, where glacial boulders have been left strewn by a "hydraulic monster of the hills." Not once but twice in his story, Norman muses on this gouged lower river valley on the Blackfoot where the vast glacial Lake Missoula burst through. Twice, too, he mentions the spot near the Blackfoot's headwaters where a thermometer registered the lowest temperature ever officially recorded in the continental United States. A comparable sense of this Montana, potent beyond its gorgeousness, cold and lonely and yet beloved, did not make it into the filmed version. Nowhere on screen are such possible touches as a summer storm abruptly overhead (pp. 46–47 of the book); the decomposing beaver which Norman has to fish around and which, with wonderful pungency, illustrates nature's cycle of death and renewal (p. 60); the startlement of a bear out of the brush (p. 55); the road out of a favorite fishing hole muddying up into world-class gumbo (p. 50); even a jackrabbit jumping on the road and zigzagging in the headlights (p. 14). Or nominate any outdoor moment of your own when Montana was a memorably

mixed blessing in its weather or season or terrain or wildlife, and chances are it's missing from the filmed version of *A River Runs Through It*.<sup>10</sup>

At one point in the movie, Norman and his father recite lines from Wordsworth to each other. But when I once asked Norman about his personal galaxy of writers, he first of all said Keats, then Robert Browning, and then Wordsworth. Those first two poets are a knottier proposition than the gloriously round-toned Wordsworth. Browning provided us with such deliberately uncomfortable passages as: "That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,/Or decomposes but to recompose,/Become my universe that feels and knows." Keats, who would be dead at twenty-five, gave us to know that dark accompanies bright: "Ay, in the very temple of delight/Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine." My belief is that the Norman Maclean who savored such poetry would have wanted on the screen, as in his book, a Montana of complicated grandeur that can be loved and feared at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

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Norman Maclean (left) and Ivan Doig share some observations at the Maclean family cabin at Seeley Lake, Montana, in summer 1985.



Carol Doig, photographer

5. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 28; Maclean spoke of the "poetry under the prose" at the Montana History Conference in Billings, October 1980; "they go fishing, they go fishing" is from the American Audio Prose Library audiocassette, "Norman Maclean Reading" (Columbia, Missouri: American Audio Prose Library, Inc., 1985).

6. Caryn James, "Redford Lands the Big One," *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure section (October 18, 1992), 13.

7. Maclean, *River*, 72.

8. Maclean in a letter to Doig, Christmas 1982.

9. Maclean, *River*, 1.

10. Maclean, *River*, 83–84, 12–13.

11. Maclean in conversation with Doig at Seeley Lake, Montana, July 8, 1985; Robert Browning, "Dramatis Personae"; John Keats, "Ode on Melancholy."