

Quotes from A River Runs Through It

1. In our family, there was no clear line between religion and flyfishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ's disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman. (1)

2. As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty. Unlike many Presbyterians, he often used the word "beautiful." (2)

3. My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy. (4)

4. Paul was too young to swing an axe or pull a saw all day, and besides he had decided this early that he had two major purposes in life: to fish and not to work, at least not allow work to interfere with fishing. In his teens, then, he got a summer job as a lifeguard at the municipal swimming pool, so in the early days he could look over girls in bathing suits and date them up for the late evenings. . . Early, then, he had come close to realizing life's purposes, which did not conflict in his mind from those given in answer to the first question in *the Westminster Catechism*. (6-7)
("Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.")

5. [Florence, Norman's mother-in-law] She knew how to clean fish when the men forgot to, and she knew how to cook them, and, most important, she knew always to peer into the fisherman's basket and exclaim "My, my!" so she knew all that any woman of her time knew about fishing, although it is also true that she knew absolutely nothing about fishing.
"I would like very much to think of Neal with him and you," she concluded, no doubt hoping that we would improve his morals even more than his casting. In our town, Paul and I were known as "the preacher's kids," and most mothers refrained from pointing us out to their children, but to this Scottish woman we were "the pastor's sons," and besides as fly fishermen we would be waist deep in cold water all day, where immorality is faced with some real but, as it turned out, not insurmountable problems.

"Poor boy," she said, adding as many Scottish *r*'s as she could to "poor." More than most mothers, Scottish mothers have had to accustom themselves to migration and sin, and to them all sons were prodigal and welcome home. Scotsmen, however, are much more reserved about welcoming returning male relatives, and do so largely under the powerful influence of their women.

"Sure I will," Paul said, "if Florence wants me to." And I knew that, having been given his word, I would never get another kick out of him." (11)

6. Even though Paul must have had three or four fish by now, I took my time walking down the trail, trying with each step to leave the world behind. Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart—I don't know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep. Many of us would probably be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to be better. (37)

7. Fishing is a world apart from all others, and inside it are special worlds of their own—one is fishing for big fish in small water where there is not enough world and water to accommodate a fish and a fisherman, and the willows on the side of the creek are all against the fisherman. (40)

8. I suppose he took my rod so I wouldn't think that the cast into the bushes could be done only by his rod. It was in this way that I came to know that my rod can be made to cast into bushes, but the truth is I have never mastered the cast, probably because I still flinch from the prospect of losing flies that I don't have to pay for.

I had no choice now but to cast into the willows if I wanted to know why fish were jumping in the water all around me except in this hole, and I still wanted to know, because it is not fly fishing if you are not looking for answers to questions. (42)

9. When we were silent we could hear the needles falling like dry leaves. Suddenly the needles stopped. "I should leave Montana," he [Paul] said. "I should go to the West Coast."

I had thought that, too, but I asked, "Why?"

"Here," he said, "I cover local sports and personal items and the police blotter. I don't have anything to do. Here I will never have anything to do."

"Except hunt and fish," I told him.

"And get into trouble," he added. (57)

10. As the heat mirages on the river in front of me danced with and through each other, I could feel patterns from my own life joining with them. It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.

The fisherman even has a phrase to describe what he does when he studies the pattern of a river. He says he is "reading the water," and perhaps to tell his stories he has to do much the same thing. Then one of his biggest problems is to decide where and at what time of day life lies ready to be taken as a joke. And to guess whether it is going to be a little or a big joke.

For all of us, though, it is much easier to read the waters of tragedy (63-64)

He knew I was being blamed for Neal, and he may well have thought my marriage was breaking up. He had heard me called a bastard, and he was out of the house when I and the three Scottish women publicly declared our love for each other, given the restrictions that Scots put on such public declarations. Actually, I was feeling lordly with love and several times broke into laughter that I can't explain otherwise, but he could have thought I was trying to be brave about having made a mess of my life. I don't really know what he thought, but he was as tender as I usually tried to be to him. (78)

"Help," he said, "is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly.

"So it is," he said, using an old homiletic transition, "that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed." (81)

They weren't the biggest or most spectacular fish I ever caught, but they were three fish I caught because my brother waded across the river to give the fly that would catch them and because they were the last fish I ever caught fishing with him. (94)

Then he told me, "In the part I was reading it says the Word was in the beginning, and that's right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water."

"That's because you are a preacher first and then a fisherman," I told him. "If you ask Paul, he will tell you the words are formed out of water."

"No," my father said, "you are not listening carefully. The water runs over the words. Paul will tell you the same thing." (95-96)

[In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1]

"He is beautiful," my father said. . .(100)

At the end of this day, then, I remember him both as a distant abstraction in artistry and as a closeup in water and laughter. (101)

A river, though, has so many things to say that it is hard to know what it says to each of us. As we were packing our tackle and fish in the car, Paul repeated, "Just give me three more years." At the time, I was surprised at the repetition, but later I realized that the river somewhere, sometime, must have told me, too, that he would receive no such gift. (102)

"If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman."

"You know more than that," my father said. "He was beautiful."

"Yes," I said, "he was beautiful. He should have been—you taught him." (103)

"After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it?

"Only then will you understand what happened and why." (104)

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. (104)
