Pages soaked in mystery

Rebecca McCarthy traces Norman Maclean’s poetic sensibilities from his University of Chicago classroom to *A River Runs Through It*.

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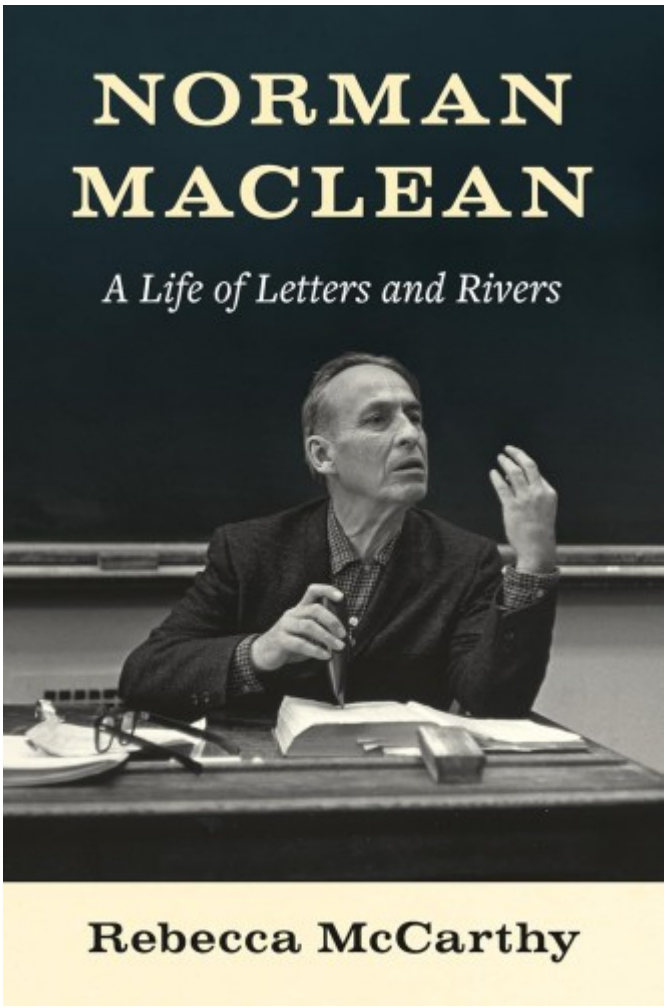
In Review



Norman Maclean

A Life of Letters and Rivers

By Rebecca McCarthy
University of Washington Press
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Norman Maclean was a man of western Montana and its Big Blackfoot River. He listened to stories from deep in its currents that no one else could hear. He was born in 1902, when firefighting was an act of primitive heroics and fly fishing was a spiritual art. He died in 1990 in a generation far removed from his youth, but one that, thanks to him, is still moved by the mysteries he explored. He wrote very little, but the little he wrote has ensured his stature as one of the literary masters of our age.

If readers know anything about him, it is his elegiac, autobiographical novella, *A River Runs Through It*, which has sold more than 2 million copies and was made into a movie by Robert Redford. It begins with this iconic statement: “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” Years ago, when I first read that line, I was hooked on Maclean.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, Maclean wrote about fishing and forest fires and much more. His oeuvre explores the mystical union of nature and tragedy, of holiness and suffering, each with its distinctive marks of beauty. “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,” he writes in *A River Runs Through It*. Maclean began his writing career as he approached retirement at age 70. Well into his 80s when he died, he left his second book, *Young Men and Fire*, to be completed by his editor.

We are indebted to Rebecca McCarthy, a longtime reporter at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, for producing the first biography of Maclean. McCarthy came to know Maclean in the early 1970s when visiting relatives who lived near the Maclean family cabin at Seeley Lake, Montana. She was a high school student; he was nearing retirement at the University of Chicago, where he had taught English for decades. He urged her to apply to Chicago, and when she enrolled he took her under his wing and assumed the role of grandfatherly friend, walking companion in Hyde Park, pizza partner, and mentor.

Her biography, then, comes in the shape of a memoir. While it is thoroughly researched, in many places it remembers its subject through the youthful eyes of a protégé. There is a quality of innocence about its point of view. Thanks to their intimate friendship, readers are granted an extraordinarily personal and up-close portrait of Maclean as friend, teacher, and writer.

By McCarthy's account, Maclean was a figure of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions, in equal parts overbearing and compassionate. In his mentorship of McCarthy, an aspiring poet, he could be controlling to the point of severity, but always for her own improvement. He was that way with all his students, and they responded by showering him with love and testimonies to his brilliance as a teacher. What he said to his protégé he said to all who enrolled in his classes: "I am determined you will perform with distinction."

Largely hidden from his students and colleagues, however, was a vulnerability borne of loss, depression, and terrible loneliness following the death of his wife in 1968. Thirty years earlier, his talented and troubled brother Paul had been brutally murdered. Paul's beauty—a Calvinist superlative—is symbolized in *A River Runs Through It* by his unsurpassed grace with a casting rod. His death is the shattering climax of the story. In real life, Norman shared his grief with no one, including McCarthy.

In the novella, the narrator (a version of Maclean) appears as a sensitive fisherman and lover of nature, a character type many know and appreciate from Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*. McCarthy's biography both honors that impression and dispels it.

It is partially dispelled by the facts of Maclean's life at the university. It's hard to imagine (at least it was for me) that this lyrical account of fly fishing on the Big Blackfoot River was written by one of the lions of the Chicago faculty. A dynamic lecturer, creative administrator, and confidante to university presidents, Maclean achieved his stature on the strength of personal brilliance. During his 40-year tenure at Chicago, he wrote exactly two scholarly articles, one on lyric poetry and the other on *King Lear*.

When he was 70, the dam broke, and he began to write what for decades he'd been meant to write. He wrote about the near-sacramental unity of natural beauty and human suffering. He wrote about western Montana and his dead brother. And in

writing about it, he revealed the grace and saving redemption of art. “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,” notes the narrator in *A River Runs Through It*. The fly caster drops the lure as silently as a single ash falling from a chimney. “One of life’s quiet excitements is to stand somewhat apart from yourself and watch yourself softly becoming the author of something beautiful, even if it is only a floating ash.” The narrator meets his father on the riverbank. His father is reading John 1 in Greek. He tells his son that water came first, but the words are underneath the water.

Maclean was flummoxed by the contradiction between the two sides of his life, Montana and Chicago. It’s a fair question: *Who the hell am I?* He insisted that the question is not the exclusive province of the young. “It should haunt old age,” he writes in *Young Men and Fire*, and when it no longer does, “you are dead.”

The wasted lives of the young haunted Maclean. His brother Paul was their father’s favorite: the golden boy whose presence created around him an aura of grace, who did all things well but drank too much, womanized, gambled, and brawled. At his father’s insistence, Norman persuaded Paul to come to Chicago, where he was killed in what was probably a gambling dispute. In *A River Runs Through It*, Maclean transfers his brother’s death from Chicago to Montana. When the narrator comforts his father by telling him we can love completely even when we don’t understand completely, the minister replies, “That I have known and preached.”

Maclean’s two additional projects also explore the loss of young men. For years he was preoccupied with the deaths of George Armstrong Custer and his men at the Little Bighorn River. But he could not find the key to their hubris, their cluelessness, and he eventually abandoned the project. He then turned his attention to the Mann Gulch fire of 1949, in which 13 smoke jumpers lost their lives within two hours of parachuting into the gulch. *Young Men and Fire* is a work of nonfiction, three times as long as Maclean’s novella. In researching it, he repeatedly returned to Montana, conferred with forestry officials, and tramped across the scarred and sacred terrain. He was trying to piece together the motives of the young men who, instead of taking refuge in a safe burn, bolted for the crest of the gulch and were incinerated.

Maclean’s quest was not merely a fact-finding mission to establish blame or cause and effect. He was searching for meaning where meaning is hard to find. His quest reminds me of Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, in which the writer

tries, unsuccessfully, to discover the *why* in the deaths of five travelers on a falling bridge.

Maclean eventually arrives at a Montanan version of tragedy that combines the inevitability of nature and the inexperience of the young, who, like his brother, can't grasp death's assault until it's upon them. They lack the time and distance to confront it properly and assess its meaning. The young firefighters couldn't see it coming, but they must have heard it. The sound of a fire is "the roar of an animal without the animal." It is the apocalyptic convergence of sky, youth, and death.

Reading *Young Men and Fire*, our thoughts may be drawn to the young people in Gaza, and everywhere else in a violent world, whose lives are disappearing so suddenly that an assessment of their meaning is left to us, their survivors. Often, we can only ask God to say their names. Maclean would agree that even the most modest act of remembering them can be redemptive. As death approaches the firefighters, he writes, "everything gets smaller, however, on its way to becoming eternal." The word with which he characterizes this event is *theological*, and its most telling participant is another young man, Jesus, who died in the fire of the cross.

McCarthy does a beautiful job tracing the development of Maclean's poetic sensibilities to his literary work in Chicago. She does not, however, choose to engage the effects of the writer's Calvinist upbringing or the para-theological language of his books. Fair enough. After all, this is a biography and not a work of literary or theological criticism.

Still, Maclean's pages are soaked in mysteries that move us all. It's why he is not solely a nature writer. A psalm-like river of time and memory runs through all his work and through each of us as well. The artist, like a preacher—or a fly fisherman—listens to the words in the water for what they say to us, then grieves our crucifixions by fire.