

COURTESY OF CLYDE ASPEVIG

Clyde Aspevig painted this scene for Opera Montana's production of *A River Runs Through It*. "The relationship we have with our rivers ultimately becomes the relationship we have with ourselves," Aspevig says. Opposite: In late May, Opera Montana director Susan Miller introduced a shorter, one-night-only adaptation of the opera to an audience at National Sawdust in Brooklyn, N.Y.

PAGE *to* STAGE

As *A River Runs Through It* is brought into opera form, we're reminded again of its vital role in defining Montana and the passion for its waterways

BY PATRICK SAUER

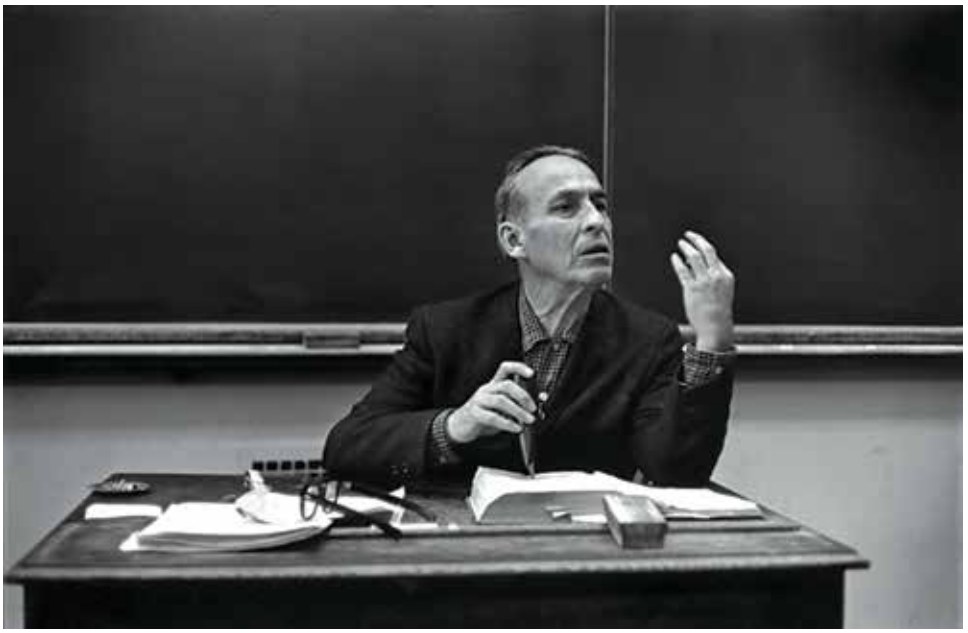


FRANK LUZI

"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."
Norman Maclean

Our story begins in late May, when the rivers of my life, the Stillwater and the Yellowstone, the Hudson and the East River, merged into one as Montana came ashore in New York City. In honor of the book's 50th anniversary, a truncated version of Opera Montana's adaptation of Norman Maclean's autobiographical novella *A River Runs Through It* took its first form at Brooklyn Sawdust, an avant-garde music joint known for stellar acoustics.

The opera, featuring music from composer Zach Redler and a libretto co-written by Matt Foss and Kelley Rourke, debuts on September 18 at the Ellen Theater in Bozeman. (Not so coincidentally, the same venue rolled out the red carpet for the September 1992 premiere of Robert Redford's film version.) After seven Bozeman performances, Opera Montana takes the show on the road to Missoula. The first weekend in October will feature a collaboration with the Missoula Symphony at the Dennison Theater.



COURTESY OF LESLIE STRAUSS TRAVIS

Norman Maclean teaches his popular Shakespeare course at the University of Chicago in 1970.

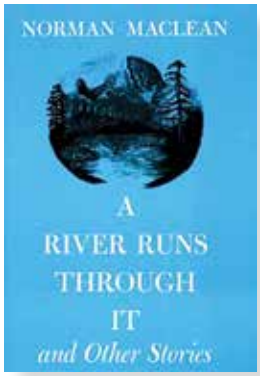
The fly fishing boom came thanks to a movie of only moderate financial success. *A River Runs Through It* earned $43 million, a respectable return on its $12 million budget, but good enough for only 38th place in 1992.

The two shows in the olden-days sawdust merchant featured a handful of numbers, by five singers with piano accompaniment, interspersed with narration from Norman's 83-year-old son, John. He let the assemblage know that, "Distinct from my father, I *am* an opera lover," and gave city folk a taste of Treasure State name-dropping: Wolf Creek, chokecherry jelly, diagonal casting (for fish, not the stage), and the Big Blackfoot, which gave life to his father's book.

Nobody, certainly not the then 70-year-old Norman Maclean himself, could have envisioned what was to come when he sat down in 1973 and began writing longhand. Rejected by multiple major publishers, the 104-page novella found a home at the University of Chicago Press, where Maclean had taught English for 45 years. The retired professor's literary debut has since sold 1.5 million copies and has never gone out of print. If anything, thanks to its multiple creative iterations, including the new opera, *A River Runs Through It* has grown in stature.

Back home, the impact of Maclean's masterpiece echoes far beyond elegiac words on a page. "My father's book changed the face of Montana," says Maclean. "I was lucky because, when the book came out, I was well into my own journalism career at the *Chicago Tribune*. The children of famous writers can get steamrolled by mass success. It ain't pretty."

The prose, however, is. We don't need to waste time recapping the plot. I do, however, want to go back to the American Bicentennial when, in the spring 1976 issue of *Fly Fisherman* magazine, Maclean's work received an absolute rave from the distinguished angling writer Nick Lyons. Closer to the home waters, the writer William Kittredge reviewed it for *The Missoulian*'s "Books for Montanans" column, closing it out with the prophetic, "People everywhere are going to like this book, and



people around here ought to love it." He was right.

Had *A River Runs Through It* remained on bookshelves, secure in its lofty place in the Montana literary canon, it wouldn't have played the same role in the tourism boom that fundamentally altered the state's economy. Everyone of a certain age knows who to thank—sincerely or snidely—for that. If the book was for literary outdoors folk, the movie was for everybody.

A state-funded 2024 study found that in 2024, 450,000 anglers spent $1.27 *billion*—70 percent of it by non-residents—on trips to the ole' fishing hole. It's staggering to consider the film's economic impact shadow it cast over the last 34 years.

"Oh I'd hear it: 'Your dad wrote the *goddamn* book that ruined Montana,' and well, that's an opinion and you're entitled to it," says Maclean with a laugh. "I did find it amusing in the 90s when I'd see people on the big rivers dressed exactly the way the movie characters from the 1920s did, with the matching hats, vests, and wicker creels. … But at least they were fly fishing. Now you mostly see people in boats with *bobbers*."

Montana blasphemy, that is. Or used to be. In the novella's opening paragraph, Norman notes that his father, a local minister, taught his two sons that Christ's disciples were fishermen, leading the boys to assume "all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman." (No bobbers needed to fish with dry flies.)

By September 1993, a *Missoulian* headline asked, "River of No Return?" For the first time, Montana fishing guides were



FRANK LUZI

The Brooklyn cast, from left to right: Patrick Bessenbacher (Paul), Trevor Marin (Norman), Christina Maria Castro (Jessie), Kate Morton (Heidi), and Brian Wallin (Neal). Narrator John Maclean is at right.

booked well past Labor Day, with the owner of Bozeman's Troutfitters shop saying they turned down 50 to 100 trips that month. It wasn't just at home either: Newspaper accounts noted Orvis sales were up 40 percent as fly fishing exploded all across the country, from California to New Jersey. (Yes, New Jersey.)

One thing lost in the dustbin of river-running history is the fly fishing boom came thanks to a movie of only moderate financial success. *A River Runs Through It* earned $43 million, a respectable return on its $12 million budget, but good enough for only 38th place, between *Encino Man* and something called *Passenger 57*, in the 1992 worldwide box office totals. However, thanks in no small part to the scenic cinematography, zealous home-viewing fans spread the word and the movie became an ubiquitous VHS, DVD, and cable television staple. It remains a streaming hit, readily available today for a mere $3.99.

While I personally find Maclean's work a burst of near perfection, there are lots of great novels set in Montana that rarely get mentioned outside of English departments and highbrow book clubs. Plenty of works going back to the earliest Native American mythology capture Montana's dark poetic rugged soul, but in terms of a singular state identity—just like the last shot of the movie—Norman Maclean stands alone.

Last May, on my 55th birthday and in preparation for Brooklyn Sawdust, I cracked the book open for the first time in decades. While (fingers crossed) I'm far from being too old to be much of the fisherman I never was, reading it now hit me with depths I never could've grasped in my 20s, when Brad Pitt had his Hollywood coming-out party, or in my 30s, when I was of a similar age as the real Paul Maclean when he was bludgeoned to death in a Chicago alley. Today, for better or worse, the understanding that there are more years behind than ahead has sunk in. It's why I now recognize and appreciate that Maclean's central theme is about the one thing that never ends: the passage of time. Which is why the operatic anniversary adaptation is exciting.

Prior to the performance, we had a backstage roundtable discussing how the show was evolving, with Brooklyn as a toe-dipping in the live musical waters. John Maclean loved kicking it off in Gotham: "Usually, before heading to New York City, shows open in the sticks, so the people behind it can see if they'll be critically tarred and feathered. Here we are doing the opposite. Bringing the sticks to Broadway is so pure Montana."

For the full autumn show, co-librettists Matt Foss and Kelley Rourke came up with a whole slew of new lyrics for songs in a mix of styles (ballads, duets, choruses and a honkytonk shit-kicker) composer Zach Redler set to music. They wrote original dialogue, expanded the women's roles (minor barfly character Rawhide gets her own aria) and set it to a rollicking 90-minute pace. Unlike book and film, this version takes place in real time, not from the vantage point of an elderly narrator looking back. This is no country opera for old men.

"One thing we talked about is the notion of time running out, and from growing up in a family of salt-water Gulf of Mexico fishermen, I know the expression 'wasting daylight,' so that was a natural phrase to thread throughout," said Rourke, a Louisiana native who lives in Brooklyn. "In writing for Rawhide, I came up with the fun idea of using catch-and-release, but for men."

Rourke, who properly castigated me for using "pole" instead of "rod" in a question about the theatrical fishing action, says yes, the fuller versions in Montana will include on-stage angling. Months out from the Bozeman show, they were still kicking around ideas: projections on the floor and backdrops to give the illusion of water, perhaps a trout's point of view, casting pantomimes, and a slew of the immersive magic tricks only live theater can perform. Redler was thrilled to be bringing the noise into the world, Norman Maclean style.

"Last January, we all went out to Montana for the libretto read. I had never fly fished, so we got a lesson in a gymnasium. It was awesome. It's all rhythm and feeling. I was making metronome markings for different types of casts, so you have the metaphor from the book, but we also have a literal metronome in the piece," says Redler, a former Brooklynite who now calls New Hampshire home. "When composing the score, I focused on how the music helps us follow all of the relationships. The tensions between love and loneliness, admiration and frustration, and with Paul in particular, helplessness. The music is at times soaring and romantic, at others stoic and meditative, but there are definitely tunes you can groove to."

Of the three, it's Matt Foss who has the most personal connection to Montana, having read *A River Runs Through It* alongside the state's trout streams. In 1998, he was a conservation biology student at Iowa's Northwestern College, starting both his first real job and first truly meaningful experience away from home. Foss worked in Montana with his favorite professor, researching fire ecology on an 18-month study aligned with the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. During the day, Foss was up in the Beartooths; days off he was hitting the rivers, and at night he lived bare bones in Red Lodge, sleeping on a cot next to a furnace, without a television. In his down time, he read. His professor gave him two books, the only two Norman Maclean ever wrote.

By the time his ecology gig came to an end, Foss had seen



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Big State. Big Idea.

the forest for the trees and went to graduate school to follow a passion burning hotter than lodgepole pines: the stage. He transitioned from science to Shakespeare, but never stayed away from Montana for long. In the 2000s, he spent summers driving country roads bringing The Bard to Billings, Birney and beyond. He ended up teaching in the theater department at the University of Toledo, but the idea of putting on an operatic version of the book, in Montana, stuck with him.

"There's a quote by the terrific writer Richard Ford, who lived in Montana part-time, that says, 'If loneliness is the disease, the story is the cure.' *A River Runs Through It* is that for me, keeping me tethered to the world, or at least like I have a puncher's chance of being understood," says Foss. "Seven years ago, as an adult, I was diagnosed as autistic, and I realized learning how to play imaginary people on stage with the traveling Shakespeare troupe was an experiment on learning to be a person off stage. I feel instantly at home in Montana, a place where sincerity and earnestness is seen as a currency, not a liability, some of the same themes in Maclean's indelible book."

The Brooklyn Sawdust show provided an exuberant evening, but as the lights faded and John's commanding voice read the last words of a man nearing the end, remembering his long dead brother, you could hear the proverbial fish jump. For a long dark Brooklyn moment, we were all haunted by waters. Whether or not the audience knew the passage, they got the point. It is among the greatest closers put to page, one of a number of unforgettable passages in what's become the state's holy scripture. (And not just for Presbyterians.) One that Foss, a couple of weeks after hearing the son read from his father, took even more to heart.

"I went to see my Dad in a South Dakota hospital, and we got terrible news. He has terminal brain cancer," he said. "His goal is to get to Montana and we have a plan to do that. I sent Dad a recording from Brooklyn. John's reading of those final words became even more powerful."

Foss's current situation reflects upon my own. The last time I'd seen the movie was in pandemic July of 2020, a few weeks after my father died of cancer in his Billings home, surrounded by family. An old friend was kind enough to loan us her empty Red Lodge condo for a six-week stay. It didn't have streaming, but it had a DVD player. I rented the movie from the town library by calling them up and reserving it Covid-style, meaning they put it in a bag on an outdoor shelf for pickup. The whole operation provided a light of Montana humanity in a dark time, a vibe captured in all versions of *A River Runs Through It*, one that endowed the novella's vital contributions to the state and all of the environmental efforts in its wake.

"The book and the movie enabled Blackfoot [River] conservation because both mythified the river," said Annick Smith, 90, the writer who will be hosting her sixth Norman





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Maclean Literary Festival in Missoula on March 12-13, 2027. The gathering will honor the book's 50th jubilee by highlighting Norman's beloved river. Smith continued, "The Blackfoot is under fire from a potential data center, a gravel pit-asphalt plant, and worst of all, an Australian-owned mining company. This Maclean Festival will be a celebration and a resistance, a call to protest and protect."

Smith first met Maclean as a University of Chicago humanities student back in 1957, later befriending him along with Kittredge, her romantic partner for more than 40 years. They all worked together on early screenplay drafts, which featured way more fishing. Eventually, it led to both Smith and Kittredge receiving co-producer credits on Redford's film following Maclean's 1990 death. (John feels it was smart on Redford's part to wait Norman out, as the butting of heads would have derailed the director's ultimately stunning vision.) Smith believes saving the waters is the best way to commemorate the book that made multiple Montana rivers world famous.

"Bill and I spent plenty of time with him at the Maclean family cabin at Seeley Lake. Norman sometimes lived up to the dour Scotsman stereotype, but mostly he was very funny, witty, prickly and opinionated. He could be severe and judgmental, but was a true intellectual—a Jeffersonian at heart—and always interesting to talk to on that level," said Smith. "One thing about Norman was always clear: His love for Montana ran deep. Here I am at 90, still fighting the fight to preserve the Big Blackfoot. He would be right alongside me."

On the book's golden anniversary, John Maclean wants to see his father's literary name permanently enshrined in the



CLAIRE KEESE

Schyler Vargas (left) as Norman Maclean and Michael Kuhn (right) as Paul Maclean rehearse their roles, outside and in costume, for the Montana production of *A River Runs Through It* for Opera Montana. The opera debuts on Sept. 18 at the Ellen Theater in Bozeman.

historical record book. Wild Montana is the lead conservation group on the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act, a piece of federal legislation that would protect it as a cold-water fishery for as long as the warming climate allows. Maclean let the state's current Republican Congressional delegation—two of whom are retiring—know that if it passes, they can name it the "A River Runs Through It Act."

I don't know much, but I know that should be a hell of a marker for a Montana politico.

"Passing the legislation would be the best way to honor Norman for his enormous contribution to Montana, a beloved work of literature people found, liked, and passed along though word of mouth. Late in life, Dad was blessed with the success he always wanted as an author," John Maclean says. "I re-read it for the Brooklyn narration and there were levels of depth I didn't even remember. I'm writing a book called *Fishing Into the Twilight* about what it's like to be out there when you're as old as I am. Some parts of fly fishing, like wading, fall by the wayside, but others, like the contemplative spiritual values, are even more present, as they are in *A River Runs Through It*. Conserving the Blackfoot in the name of Norman Maclean would be a major victory."

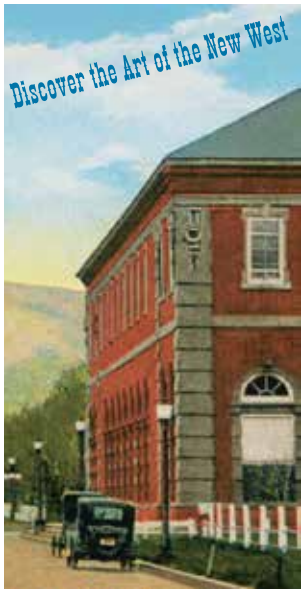
Near the end of the film, and thus the end of his life, the elderly Norman wends his way to one cast on a four-count rhythm with the hope that a fish will rise, a lifetime of fading memories in his head. As his mind's eye recalls watching Paul reel in one final brilliant catch, the screenplay narration captures the essence of *A River Runs Through It*, the inevitable losses over the passage of time: "I knew just as surely, and just as clearly, that life is not a work of art … and that the moment could not last."

Like water, life is haunting. Like rivers, the stories flow on forever.

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