

A River Runs Through It

by Norman MacLean

(Published in 1976)

Approved for use in all levels of English I

Summary of the Work:

Norman Maclean taught English at the University of Chicago for 43 years. He completed this novella three years after his retirement from teaching. This is a semi-autobiographical recount of his youth in Montana. Norman focuses on a summer in the early 1900's. He has completed college and is back from Chicago living with his parents in Montana. On the outside it appears to be a story of Norman's family: his father, a Presbyterian minister, a talented brother, Norman's mother, and Norman's wife. The setting for the story focuses on Missoula, Helena, and Wolf Creek, Montana. The underlying theme is the struggle to rescue a loved one from self-destruction. Norman's brother, Paul, is talented especially in the art of fly fishing, but he has a tragic flaw. Paul struggles with alcohol and a streak of fierce independence. It is this wall of independence that Norman struggles with throughout his novella. Sprinkled throughout the story are various accounts of fly fishing the Big Blackfoot River, Norman's favorite fishing hole.

Rationale:

The novel deals with tragedy as well as triumph. Paul, Norman's brother is triumphant in his mastering of fly fishing. The tragedy lies within Norman's inability to save Paul from himself. There are themes of choice, point of view, and the power of love. As Proulx writes in her foreword to this new edition, "In 1990 Norman Maclean died in body, but for hundreds of thousands of readers he will live as long as fish swim and books are made."

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

"The title novella is the prize. . . . Something unique and marvelous: a story that is at once an evocation of nature's miracles and realities and a probing of human mysteries. Wise, witty, wonderful, Maclean spins his tales, casts his flies, fishes the rivers and the woods for what he remembers from his youth in the Rockies."—*Publishers Weekly*

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

- Oscar nominated for best screen play writing.

Readability:

- Lexile Score:
- Readability Level: 6.1

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: [\(link\)](#)

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption: 1995

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

The novella's setting and fishing will appeal to Montana readers. The struggles that occur within familial situations are ones to which students will easily relate. In the end Norman realize that you can truly love someone, but still not understand them.

Connection to the Curriculum:

A novel dealing with tragedy, father-son relationships and coming of age. *A River Runs Through It* is appropriate for freshman English. With an emphasis on character development *A River Runs Through It* ties in nicely with the Helena School District #1 curriculum.

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

Movie is an Academy Award winner.