

A River Runs Through It Study Guide

A River Runs Through It by Norman Maclean

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A River Runs Through It

A River Runs Through It Summary

A River Runs Through It and Other Stories is a collection of short stories based on the real life experiences of the author Norman Maclean. Each story contains colorful characters that seem larger than life, especially Paul, Norman's brother, who is the focus of the title story. Life is a learning experience and the author expresses this with these stories, sharing with the reader moments in his life in which he experienced almost an epiphany of self-awareness. A River Runs Through It and Other Stories is an emotional read that will remain in the reader's thoughts long after the final sentence is done.

Norman and Paul's father is a Presbyterian preacher who is as passionate about fly fishing as he is about religion. From a young age, Norman and Paul would go fishing with their father, suffering his sermons on the proper techniques of the sport. Paul took these lessons and became an expert fisherman, but Norman would always remain average. Despite his lack of skill, Norman admires Paul's skill and enjoys fishing with him as often as possible in their beloved Blackfoot River.

Norman and Paul, like most brothers, get along well but also are aware of each other's differences. They once were so aware of these differences that they got into a fistfight that ended when their mother, who attempted to break up the fight, was knocked to the ground. They would never fight again. However, the brother's would continue to wonder which one is tougher.

Norman, who is married now, goes to visit his brother in order to ask a favor. Norman's brother-in-law, Neal, is coming to town for a visit and Norman wants Paul to take him fishing. Neal is a difficult person to get along with and Norman does not like him, but his mother-in-law has asked that Norman attempt to help Neal. Neal is an alcoholic who is living his life adrift, with no direction. Norman's mother-in-law hopes that Norman and Paul can help Neal straighten out his life. Paul agrees to help. After this discussion, Norman and Paul go fishing. Paul catches a large fish and decides to move to another hole, pausing to watch his brother on the way. A couple comes up and admires Paul's technique, causing Norman a mixture of pride and annoyance.

That night Paul invites Norman to stay the night with him since it is late and it is a long drive back to Norman's home. Norman agrees. Paul, who likes to drink, goes out shortly before Norman goes to bed. In the middle of the night, Norman gets a phone call from the local police sergeant. Paul has gotten into a fight over a woman and caused some damage that he will have to pay for. Norman goes to the jail to pick him up. Paul appears to be humiliated by the situation, especially having to be rescued by his big brother. Norman does not say anything, he simply takes Paul and his girl home, puts them to bed, and leaves for his own home.



Neal arrives a few days later. Norman goes to the train station with his wife and her family to meet him. Neal is wearing a couple of sweaters that Norman finds pretentious while he is carrying the same suitcase he had with him when he left town. After the homecoming, Jessie pushes Norman to take Neal out. Norman and Neal go to a local bar where they run into a couple of local characters. Norman has a couple of drinks and is ready to leave. However, Neal decides to stay and share drinks with these local characters.

Paul drives down to go fishing with him, Norman, and Jessie's family the next morning. Paul rushes off to start fishing the moment they arrive at the river as though attempting to escape anything Norman might have to say about the trouble he got into the last time they were together. Jessie wants Norman to remain with Neal, but Neal is a bait fisherman and Norman wants to fly fish. Norman leaves Neal at a bend in the river and goes off to fish on his own. After losing a large fish, Norman is joined by Paul. Norman attempts to ask Paul if he needs help paying for the damage that resulted from his fight, but Paul brushes the subject off. Norman never attempts to talk to him about it again.

Paul and Norman go back to where they left the rest of their party because it is beginning to rain. When they reach the place where Norman left Neal, they find him gone. At the truck, Paul and Norman find Jessie and her mother nursing Neal who is fighting the effects of drinking too much the night before. Jessie is angry with Norman for not staying with her brother so she makes no effort to comfort him. The rain has gotten worse, so they decide to leave. Paul and Norman are forced to push the heavy truck to get it out of the mud, without Neal's help.

Norman is so frustrated with the situation that he decides to take a few days and go to the family cabin with Paul. Paul and Norman drive up together and go swimming immediately after they arrive. While they are hanging their swimsuits to dry, Neal drives up with a woman he picked up in a bar his first night in town called Old Rawhide. Neal and Old Rawhide, despite being obviously hung over, want to go fishing with Paul and Norman. Norman is annoyed, partly because he came up there to get away from Neal and partly because it is too hot to fish. However, Paul suggests they go ahead.

When they arrive at the river, Paul takes enough beer for both Neal and Old Rawhide, and Norman and himself out of the car. Paul puts the beer in the river to cool before he and Norman go off the fish, leaving Neal and Old Rawhide at the car. Paul has his usual success with the fishing, but Norman struggles, losing a fish when it manages to get itself tangled in a bush. Afterward, Norman and Paul walk back to where they left the beer only to find it is gone.

Norman and Paul continue back to where they left the car. On a small sandbar out in the middle of the river, they can see Neal and Old Rawhide. Both are naked and asleep in the sun. Norman and Paul move closer and discover that both are also terribly sunburned across their backs. Old Rawhide wakes and becomes angry because Norman and Paul were discussing her tattoo on her bottom. Old Rawhide wakes Neal and helps him back to the beach and into the car. Paul suggests that they drive Neal



back to his mother's house rather than try to take care of him themselves. The drive is long and hot, but Neal remains passed out the entire trip.

When they reach town, Norman pulls over and Paul kicks Old Rawhide out of the car. Old Rawhide is still naked and humiliated by their treatment of her, but does not fight back. Norman and Paul then take Neal home to his mother. Norman knows that Jessie and her family will be angry with him for her brother's condition and so does Paul. Paul helps Norman take Neal upstairs and then disappears so that Norman is not embarrassed to be yelled at in front of him. However, Jessie and her family do not become angry because it is obvious what has happened and that it is completely Neal's fault.

Norman and Paul decide to go stay the night with their parents rather than return to the cabin. Paul wants Norman to ask their father to fish with them the next day. When they arrive, their mother is clearly thrilled to see Paul. Their mother does not outright ignore Norman, but it is clear that Paul is her favorite as she goes out of the way to bring him what she believes is his favorite foods. Norman speaks with their father and convinces him to go fishing with them the next morning. Later, when Norman is on his way to bed, Paul apologizes to him about what happened with Neal.

The next morning the boys are up early to go fishing despite the fact that Paul was out late drinking with some of his childhood friends. They leave late because their father cannot find his gear, but are on the river before noon. Normally the men would go their separate ways, but Paul decides to fish with Norman. This is unusual behavior for Paul so Norman assumes he is doing it because he thinks Norman is upset about the situation with Neal. Norman is not, but he does not tell his brother because he likes to spend time with him. Not only this, but Norman ends up having a very good day. The fish are biting on a large fly that Norman has and Paul does not, causing Norman to catch many more fish than Paul.

Paul throws rocks into the river and ruins the hole, so they move to a new hole. The fish in this second hole are not biting on the same fly, so Paul begins to have more luck. Norman decides to quit and goes to sit with his father. While they sit, they talk about Paul and they watch him fish. Norman feels guilty because he knows his brother needs help. Paul drinks too much and he often gets into fights when he drinks. Norman wants to help him overcome this, but does not know how. In fact, Norman feels as though he does not know Paul well enough to even talk to him about it. However, Norman admires his brother, especially when he fishes.

Paul catches his limit and wades across the river to join his brother and father. They take a bunch of pictures with their catch spread out on the beach, clowning around and simply enjoying themselves. This is the last time Norman and Paul will fish together. The following May Norman gets a phone call in the middle of the night. Paul has been beaten to death and left in an alley. Norman tells his parents. Norman's mother never asks any questions about Paul's death, but his father often speaks of it with him. They both carry guilt for Paul's death, but neither knows how to deal with it or how they could have done anything different.



A River Runs Through It Analysis

Norman and his brother Paul grew up believing fly fishing was on par with religion. Norman endured a great number of lectures on the proper technique, but never became an expert at it. However, his brother Paul did become an expert, often out-fishing everyone. This ability reflects the relationship between these two brothers. Despite the fact that Norman is the older brother, Paul seems superior to him in the one thing that would win them their father's affection. Not only this, but Paul also garners all of their mother's attention, proving to be the favorite in her eyes as well. All of this leaves Norman on the peripheral of his family, never the center of attention, never the most loved. However, despite the fact that this could cause Norman to be bitter and angry, he seems to take it in stride and does not allow it to affect his relationship with his brother.

Norman cares about his brother and likes to spend time with him. Norman and Paul often go fishing together where Paul is often careful not to say anything about Norman's inferior fishing technique. However, Norman feels as though he does not know his brother very well. Norman wants to help Paul, aware that Paul drinks too much, causing him to often get into terrible fights. Norman struggles with how to help his brother, finding his concern brushed aside the one time he does try to approach the subject. Norman realizes that Paul does not want his help, but this does not stop him from continuing to try. Norman cares about Paul, touching on the theme of brotherly love.

In contrast, Norman is forced to try to help his brother-in-law, Neal. Neal is also a heavy drinker. However, Neal does not continue to hold down a full time job the same way Paul does, does not even attempt to hide his problem. Norman does not want to help Neal because he finds him unpleasant and unwilling to accept help. The two men, Paul and Neal, seem very different, but deep down they both suffer the same disease and could possibly come to the same conclusion.



Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'

Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim' Summary

Norman meets Jim Grierson one summer while logging in the woods on the Blackfoot River. Jim is a large man that is difficult to get along with. Norman dislikes him on sight and spends a great deal of time fearing he would not win should they get into a fistfight. However, by the end of the summer Norman finds himself agreeing to gyppoing with Jim the following summer. Norman is in graduate school and hopes that gyppoing with Jim will help him make more money than he would if he worked for wages. However, Norman quickly regrets this decision.

Jim is a big talker who brags about his winter job, pimping prostitutes. Jim makes a lot of money allowing these women to work for him, giving him time to sit at home and read everything he can get his hands on. Jim brags about this past time until Norman is bored to tears. Then Jim sets the rhythm of their sawing too fast and Norman struggles to keep up. However, Norman refuses to slow down or complain because he feels doing this will make Jim think he has one some unspoken war. Soon these two men are working together in absolute silence that is stressful and nerve wracking.

Norman comes to hate Jim. At the end of the day, he is sick with exhaustion. Norman will go to the river and bathe, making him feel almost human. However, then he will have to go back to camp and deal with Jim's behavior with the other men. Jim seems to enjoy causing trouble. Jim complains to the cooks so much about not having pie for breakfast that they soon are offered pie every morning. However, Jim never eats any of it. Jim also has an affair with a local woman who once was highly respected in the area and a family friend of Norman's. These things only serve to make Norman hate Jim all the more.

At the end of the season, Norman runs into Jim in town. Norman agrees to have a drink with Jim and ends up being forced to listen to him once again talk about his pimping opportunities. Jim then invites Norman to his home for dinner. Norman goes out of politeness and meets two ladies who are working for Jim. Both ladies seem nice, though a little over the top and clearly attempting to make Norman a paying customer. Over dinner, Jim brags about his girls, about logging, and the work he hopes to do the following summer. Jim never asks Norman to be his partner again and Norman never suggests it either.

Norman leaves for school a few days later. Jim insists on writing to him and must have contacted Norman's family for the correct address. All of Jim's letters are short and are filled with some sort of bragging. The final note Norman receives from Jim brags of his conquest of a large woman. Norman figures Jim has finally found someone who got the better of him.



Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim' Analysis

Norman is working in a logging camp in his early twenties in order to make money for school. One summer he meets a man who is loud and overbearing, whom Norman does not like at first. In fact, Norman finds himself trying to stay out of this man's way because he knows that he could not win in a fight with him. However, by the end of the summer he learns how good a logger this man is and decides to team up with him the next summer with hopes of making a great deal of money. Norman comes to regret this decision.

Norman works with this man in miserable conditions, finding him self-centered and determined to prove himself better than everyone else, Norman included. Norman keeps up with him, however, because he is determined to make sure Jim never wins over him. Even when Jim humiliates a family friend of Norman's and carries on his power struggle with the other men, Norman stays out of his way and continues to fight to stay in step with Jim.

When the season is over, Norman runs into Jim in town. Jim treats Norman as though they are friends and invites him to dinner. Norman goes out of a sense of politeness. Jim is the same person, lording his power over everyone around him. However, Jim seems to recognize in Norman someone who can keep up with him. Jim treats Norman like a friend, writing letters to him while he is at school. Norman finds these letters short and questionable, almost relieved when they stop coming.

Not only is this story tinged with nostalgia as the writer recalls a memorable time in his childhood, a theme of the book, but it also shows some personal growth in Norman. Norman has learned a great deal about human nature in his relationship with Jim. Norman has also proved to himself that he can keep up with someone like Jim without allowing Jim to feel as though he has won some undeclared war. It is a lesson that the reader suspects Norman takes with him into his adulthood, especially when the reader recalls Norman's ability to avoid competition with his brother over fly fishing.



USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky Summary

The summer Norman is seventeen he works for the United States Forest Service. Norman spends most of his days blasting a road that will never be used and his nights playing cribbage with the Ranger, Bill Bell. Norman greatly admires Bill because he is a packer. Packing is an art form that has become obsolete with the advent of roads and large trucks. Before this, however, it was necessary to carry large amounts of supplies on the backs of animals, mules and horses. In order to keep the animals from suffering injuries such as pressure wounds, it was necessary to pack the supplies in such a way that it would keep the packs steady and even on the animals' backs. Bill is an expert at this and Norman admires him for it.

Norman admires Bill so much that he wants to do something to impress him. Norman works hard, working with dynamite in order to blast rock. It is dangerous work and it causes Norman to spend a great deal of the summer with a terrible headache. This does not impress Bill any more than Norman's hard work fighting a fire earlier in the season. Bill is impressed by the crew's cook, however. Norman cannot figure out why Bill would like the cook so much because Norman finds the cook disagreeable and does not like him himself.

One day, Bill calls Norman back to the warehouse. Norman helps Bill pack some supplies. When the cook walks past Norman cannot help but mention how little he likes the cook. Norman goes so far as to say he would like to beat up the cook. Bill does not like this talk. Bill sends Norman up to be a lookout on one of the hills, watching for signs of fire. Norman feels as though Bill is punishing him for what he said about the cook.

Norman goes up to the lookout post angry with Bill and himself. Norman does little but what is required of him, disinterested in fixing up the tent or anything else. Norman spends several weeks up there, recalling the fire he helped fight at the beginning of the season. It was such a large fire that they had to recruit a large group of unemployed men from town. Every time it seemed they had the fire under control, it would jump their lines. Eventually those in charge began to suspect that the unemployed men were creating holes in the lines in order to help the fire jump the line and keep them employed a while longer. Norman and the redheaded boy on his crew were given the job of walking the line, looking for any inappropriate behavior. They never saw anything, but Norman became convinced if they had his partner, the redheaded boy, would have shot someone.

A snow storm comes after Norman has been on the mountain for two weeks. Norman knows the season is now over and there is no reason for him to remain up there, but he



stays an extra day. Norman spends that day fixing his tent. The next day Norman begins to walk down the mountain, pausing whenever necessary to repair the phone line where the storm pulled it down. At one point, Norman runs into a rattlesnake. Norman is surprised by this because rattlesnakes do not usually like the cold of the mountains. Norman manages to escape uninjured.

The night Norman returns to the base camp he has an argument with the cook. Norman attempts to be nice to the cook because he knows Bill likes him. However, when Norman invites the cook to join them in a card game, the cook is rude and refuses. Norman is offended until Bill explains that the cook is a card shark who does not like to play with the men he works with. Then Bill tells Norman about a plan he has been formulating. Bill wants the crew to stake the cook in a poker game with the card players in town so that the cook can win a lot of money and humiliate the players the way they usually do to Bill. Bill asks Norman to ask the other crew members to join the scam.

Norman has a hard time explaining the scheme to these men and gets them to join in because this type of working man is normally very frugal with their earnings since they have to last them a long time. It does not matter that most of them would have lost a large amount of money at the card tables in town on their own anyway. Norman tells them about the cook anyway and has the cook show them what he can do. The men are impressed enough that each one puts in some money to stake the cook, even Norman who gives twenty bucks.

Norman is anxious to get to town. Norman still wants to do something to impress Bill. Norman gets it into his head to walk the thirty miles into town in one day. Norman tells everyone he is going to leave early, but Bill talks him into staying until the morning the others plan to leave and then he can go on ahead. Norman agrees. Norman makes the trip alone, getting it into his head that he should not drink too much water because it might make him sick to his stomach. Instead, Norman fantasizes about drinking ice cream sodas.

Norman has forgotten how far the town is from the base camp and finds himself beyond exhaustion by the time he reaches town. Norman goes straight to a drug store and orders three ice cream sodas. Norman would have ordered a fourth, but the clerk sends him away. Norman then decides to go get something to eat. Norman goes to a Chinese restaurant. However, as soon as Norman arrives he begins to feel sick. Norman goes into the bathroom to clean up, hoping it will make him feel better. It does not, so Norman tells the waitress he needs his bill. While the waitress tries to figure out how much he owes since he did not order anything, Norman begins to feel worse. Finally the bill is settled. Norman pays it and then passes out.

A doctor is called who explains that Norman should not have had the ice cream sodas after walking such a long ways. The doctor then instructs the people in the restaurant to take Norman to a hotel and allow him to sleep it off. Norman wakes several hours later in a hotel that is more of a brothel. Norman lies in bed listening to a pimp and his girl argue in the next room. Norman goes back to sleep and wakes late the next morning. Norman feels better so he decides to go see if the crew has arrived yet.



Norman finds Bill Bell unloading the animals while the Canadian and the cook sit nearby watching. Norman helps Bill. Just as they are finishing up the rest of the crew arrives. Bill arranges for everyone to meet at the poker tables later that night. In the meantime, Norman moves to a better hotel and then goes to the bar where the poker tables are to check out the room. Norman has been given the assignment of grabbing the money at the first sign of trouble. Norman looks at the layout of the room and realizes that he will not make it out of the room without taking a beating. Norman decides to go have some dinner to give him time to figure out how to avoid the beating.

At the restaurant, there is a young waitress about Norman's age. The girl knows Bill's reputation and tells Norman that she knows where his dog is. The girl gives Norman a note for Bill in case she cannot get the dog to him before he returns to the base camp the next morning. The girl also gives Norman a sugar bag for him to put the money into at the game that night. Norman eats his dinner and then returns to the game room. Norman is late. The game has already begun.

The cook is a good player, true to his word, and is already far ahead. As Norman watches, the cook wins several more hands. Then one of the other players tries to deal the cook too many cards. When the player calls the cook out on this, the cook shows him that the extra card is actually in his hat. The cook put the card in the player's hat with a slight of hand trick. A fight breaks out. Norman manages to grab all the money but takes a blow to the head for his efforts. Norman falls to the floor and watches the fight from there. Bill is a large man and he manages to take on most of the fighters. The redhead and Mr. McBride also take on a few. Mr. McBride falls beside Norman and lies there for a time.

During the fight, Norman manages to get to his feet. Norman walks over to the cook, who is playing with the cards as though nothing has happened, and hits him on the head. The cook fell to the floor. Norman falls too, having used all his energy in that one attack. When the cook sees that Norman is done, he goes over and starts kicking him. Bill sees what is happening and comes over, knocking the cook out of the way. Bill then picks up Norman and Mr. McBride, carrying them out of the bar.

The crew gathers in an alley not too far away. The money is divided, and everyone ends up with their initial donation plus seven dollars. Everyone decides to go visit the brothels except for Norman who returns to his hotel to recover from his beating. The next morning, Norman goes to a restaurant for breakfast. After he has eaten, the young waitress from the night before tells him that one of his crew members is outside. Norman goes into the alley to find the cook nursing a broken nose. The cook tells him that he was with a prostitute when she and her pimp beat him up and robbed him. The cook has no money to get home. Norman gives him his winnings from the poker game the night before.

Norman goes to the stables to see Bill. Norman helps Bill finish his packing while he tells him about the cook. Bill says little about the situation. Bill does mention the pretty waitress who brought him his dog that morning. Bill suggests that Norman take the girl out for a date. Norman says maybe he will, next season. Bill then tells Norman that he is



welcome to work for him the following year. Norman agrees. However, Norman ends up taking a job with the maps department instead.

USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky Analysis

Touching on the theme of nostalgia, Norman begins this story by talking about how he never thought he would be the main character in a story. Norman feels that his life is normal, mundane, until the summer he spends with Bill Bell and the cook. Norman admires Bill Bell, feels he is an artist when it comes to packing animals. Norman wants Bill to be impressed by him as well. Norman works hard at everything Bill assigns him to no matter the danger to his safety and his health. Nothing seems to get Bill's attention, however.

Norman does not like the cook. Norman finds the cook disagreeable and does not understand why Bill would like him. When Norman says something against the cook, he finds himself banished. Norman is angry about this banishment, but still finds himself doing unnecessary work in order to get on Bill's good side. Once back at the camp, Norman learns why Bill likes the cook so much. The cook is a card shark. Bill is not a good card player, so it follows that he would admire someone who is. This information helps Norman feel a little more secure in his relationship with Bill, especially when Bill lets him in on a plan he is forming to cheat some card players in town.

Norman goes out of his way to impress Bill. Norman even walks thirty miles in one day to impress Bill, although in his own mind he fails when he becomes ill afterward. Norman's admiration of Bill is symbolic of the father-son relationship. Norman is only seventeen. Even though Norman has been working since he was fourteen and has a father of his own, he still needs the attention of a father figure like Bill, someone he admires. However, by the time Norman does get Bill's attention, his needs have changed.

Norman takes a beating in the scam to help Bill get over on the poker players in town. This gets Bill's attention. However, Norman realizes that it is the entire group that has succeeded in this scam, not just himself. Norman has learned the importance of working with a group and of not trying to stand out. Norman has matured. Perhaps that is why the following summer Norman decides to work with the mapping department rather than with Bill again, something he most likely would not have even considered before the poker scam.



Characters

Norman Maclean appears in A River Runs Through It

Norman Maclean is the writer of these stories as well as the main character. Norman is a man who grew up in Montana and has lived a life close to nature. In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman is approaching middle age and still finds fly fishing to be an enjoyable pastime with his brother, Paul. Norman and Paul spend a great deal of time fishing together even though their lives run in different directions. Norman admires Paul's expertise at fly fishing and finds himself often overshadowed by his brother's skills. Paul does not try to criticize Norman's shortcomings as a fisherman, however, which makes it difficult for Norman to discuss with Paul his behavior outside of the world of fishing. Norman knows his brother needs help as his drinking is beginning to interfere with the rest of his life, but Norman cannot speak to Paul about it because he feels that he does not know his brother well enough to criticize. When Paul dies because of a fight, Norman feels as though he let his brother down.

In *Logging and Pimping* and 'Your Pal, Jim', Norman is a young man in his early twenties spending the summer lumberjacking in order to make money to continue his education. Norman has agreed to team up with a lumberjack named Jim who works fast and has the potential of helping Norman earn a great deal of money. However, Norman quickly discovers that Jim is a competitive person who works at a pace much too fast for Norman to keep up with. Norman refuses to slow down, however, wanting to prove to himself and Jim that he can take whatever Jim dishes out. In the process, Norman learns a great deal about himself and human nature.

In *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*, Norman is a seventeen year old boy working his third summer for the Forest Service. Norman greatly admires the Ranger and wants to impress him, but finds that the Ranger admires the cook, a man Norman does not like. Norman goes out of his way to impress the Ranger but fails. When Norman finally stops trying to impress and begins to work with the crew, he achieves what he had wanted to do alone, impresses the Ranger. However, by this point Norman finally realizes that he does not want to impress the Ranger any longer. Norman achieves a great deal of character growth in this story.

Paul Maclean appears in A River Runs Through It

Paul Maclean appears in *A River Runs Through It*. Paul is Norman's brother. Paul is an expert fly fisherman who often manages to fish difficult waters with a great deal of success while everyone else struggles. Paul is also a reporter for a small newspaper, spending his days working and his nights drinking. Paul often finds himself getting into fist fights. Norman learns of this behavior one night while staying with Paul after a day of fishing. Norman wants to speak to Paul about this behavior and to perhaps help him to change his dangerous behavior, but cannot find a way to do so.



Norman feels as though he does not know his brother. Norman knows all about Paul's love of fly fishing and watches him fish often. However, Norman feels he does not know his brother outside of the river. Norman is afraid of overstepping boundaries by helping his brother in a way that he knows is necessary. Perhaps this is why Norman never does discuss Paul's drinking after one failed attempt. When Paul is found beaten to death in an alley, Norman feels as though it is his fault for not doing something to help his brother. Norman's parents never do anything to take this guilt from their surviving son, going so far as to imply that Norman's guilt is properly placed. However, from the way Norman writes about his brother, the reader is given the impression that not only does Norman know his brother well, that Paul would not have blamed Norman for his death.

The Reverend and Mrs. Maclean appears in A River Runs Through It

The Reverend and Mrs. Maclean are Paul and Norman's parents. The Reverend is a strict father who spent a great deal of time preaching to his children about not only religion but also fly fishing. Fly fishing is a passion of the Reverend's and he passed this on to his children. Paul became an expert fly fisherman, having great success throughout his fishing experience. Norman, however, found fly fishing to be a difficult pursuit and never became as proficient as his brother. In this way, Norman also felt inferior to his brother.

Mrs. Maclean is a typical reverend's wife, quiet and obedient. However, Mrs. Maclean does not hide the way she feels about her children. Mrs. Maclean admires Paul over Norman, treating him to special meals and giving him special attention even while Norman is sitting at the same table. Mrs. Maclean may not realize how her behavior affects her sons, but it is clear that she feels more affection for Paul. When Paul dies, Mrs. Maclean does nothing to help Norman forgive himself for what he sees as his letting Paul down. It is the relationship between these boys and their parents that shapes the men they are as adults, thus making the Reverend and Mrs. Maclean important characters within these stories.

Jessie appears in A River Runs Through It

Jessie is Norman's wife. Jessie only appears in A River Runs Through It, even though she is briefly mentioned in one of the other stories. Jessie has a brother, Neal, who is also an alcoholic, perhaps worse than Paul is, and causes Jessie a great deal of worry. Jessie puts pressure on Norman to help keep Neal out of trouble when he comes to Montana for a visit, causing some tension between Jessie and Norman. Norman wants to make his wife happy so he enlists his brother Paul in helping him by making him promise to take Neal fishing. However, this fishing trip does not end well and causes what Paul believes is added pressure between Jessie and Norman. In truth, however, Jessie recognizes the kind of man her brother is and comes to appreciate Norman's truthfulness in his relationship with Neal.



Neal appears in A River Runs Through It

Neal is Jessie's brother, Norman's brother in law. Neal is an unpleasant man who spends a great deal of his time drinking. Neal will drink any time of the day no matter what is going on around him. Neal crashes a fishing trip Norman takes with Paul, steals their beer, and ends up getting a terrible sunburn when he falls asleep naked in the middle of the river. Norman and Paul take Neal back to his mother's house knowing that Norman will be blamed for the entire situation. Norman accepts this blame and is surprised to find that his wife is not angry with him. Jessie knows what kind of a man her brother is and knows that Norman cannot be held responsible for his behavior. However, Paul assumes that Jessie is angry with Norman and treats him with kindness the next day, which turns out to be the last time the two brothers go fishing together.

Old Rawhide appears in A River Runs Through It

Old Rawhide is a drunk that Neal hooks up with when he comes to town. Old Rawhide is a horsewoman who has never been the type to be alone. Old Rawhide spends the winters living with one of two rodeo athletes, often starting the winter with one and ending it with the other. It is summer when Neal comes to town so Old Rawhide is alone, when not picking up men in the local bars. Old Rawhide attaches herself to Neal and becomes his drinking partner as well as his lover. Old Rawhide is with Neal the day he gets sunburned and is humiliated when Norman and Paul dump her off in the middle of the street, naked, when they reach town. It is because of this woman that Jessie sees the kind of man her brother is and does not get angry with Norman for her brother's sunburn.

Jim Grierson appears in Logging and Pimping and 'Your Friend, Jim'

Jim Grierson is a lumberjack that Norman meets while working during the summer. Norman finds Jim to be a bully, a large man that he would not like to get into a fight with. Despite this, Norman agrees to team up with Jim one summer in order to work per board cut rather than for a salary, hoping the two of them can make a lot of money. However, Jim immediately makes Norman regret his decision when he tries to prove his superiority by setting the sawing rhythm too fast, making Norman work harder than he would like. Jim also makes fun of Norman for wanting to clear the area around the trees before beginning. Jim and Norman soon find themselves so unhappy in the arrangement that they stop talking to each other. Norman believes he hates Jim and that Jim hates him. However, when the summer is over and Norman runs into Jim in town, Jim treats him as though they are great friends. Jim invites Norman to his home and then begins writing letters to him while Norman is away at school. Norman is puzzled by this behavior, but also finds it mildly amusing.



Bill Bell appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

Bill Bell is a Ranger for the Forest Service. Norman works for Bill Bell the summer he is seventeen and greatly admires Bill for his talents in packing horses. Norman wants desperately to impress Bill Bell, but finds that he has instead upset Bill by suggesting that he does not like the cook. Bill likes the cook a great deal and finds Norman's dislike of him offensive, so he sends him to work as a lookout on one of the hills surrounding their base camp. Later Norman decides to walk the thirty miles back to town in one day to impress Bill. However, Norman's attempt misfires when he becomes ill after achieving his accomplishment. At the same time, Bill, who is notoriously bad at cards, has decided that he wants to scam some local poker players. Bill enlists the help of everyone in the crew, including Norman, and arranges for the cook, who is a card shark, to play the local poker players in town. The game goes well, ending in an expected fight, and Bill manages to win the fight. Later Bill asks Norman to join him again the following year, and Norman accepts. However, Norman ends up doing something else the following year.

The Cook appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

The cook is a card shark who works as a cook with the Forest Service the year Norman is seventeen. Norman does not like the Cook because he goes out of his way to be rude and refuses to play cards with Norman. Norman later learns that the Cook refuses to play cards because he is a card shark and he does not want to cause bad blood with the men he works with. However, this does not stop Bill Bell, the Ranger, from talking the Cook into helping him scam the local poker players in town. Bill is bad at cards and always loses his paycheck to these card players so he is hoping the Cook can help him win some money back. The Cook agrees. However, after winning a great deal of money at the card table, the Cook is robbed by a prostitute and her pimp. Norman ends up having to help the Cook buy a ticket home.

Mr. Smith, Mr. McBride, the Redhead, and the Canadian appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

Mr. Smith, Mr. McBride, the redhead, and the Canadian are the other members of the Forest Service crew. Mr. Smith is an older man who takes Norman under his wing as though he were his child. Mr. McBride is a tough man who is a good street fighter, and the redhead, also an accomplished fighter, is Mr. McBride's son. The Canadian is a soldier who was injured when forced to breathe noxious gas and was sent to spend some time in the Forest Service in order to recover. These men all help in the scam against the card players, causing Norman to learn the importance of working as part of

a team rather than as an individual. It is this experience that helps Norman achieves some inner growth.



Objects/Places

Fly Fishing appears in A River Runs Through It

Fly fishing is a type of fishing in which the fisherman tricks the fish into believing the hook is a living fly. The hooks are often decorated in such a way to appear to the fish as a fly when this technique is used.

Bunyan Bug No. 2 Yellow Stone Fly appears in A River Runs Through It

The Bunyan Bug No. 2 Yellow Stone Fly is a large fly Norman has that was tied for him to look like a large stone fly. This is the fly that Norman uses the last time he fishes with his brother with which he finds some measure of success.

Love Tattoo appears in A River Runs Through It

When Paul and Norman go fishing with Neal and Old Rawhide, they find them sleeping naked in the sun. Old Rawhide has a tattoo on her bottom that spells out love.

Street Fighting appears in A River Runs Through It

Paul likes to drink and has a short temper. Paul often gets into fights, making him proficient in street fighting. However, it will be one such fight that will end Paul's life.

Blackfoot River appears in A River Runs Through It

The Blackfoot River is a river in Montana where Paul and Norman often fish.

Missoula, Montana appears in A River Runs Through It, Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal,

Missoula, Montana is a fairly large town in Montana where Paul and Norman were raised and where their parents continue to live.



Gyppo appears in Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'

Gyppo is a word that means to be paid by the number of board feet a sawyer is able to cut per day.

Logger's Boot appears in Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'

A logger's boot is a boot specially made for lumberjacks. The boot has a high heel and is made to walk over wood.

Cork appears in Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim'

Corks are the spikes on the bottom of a logger's boot that allows the lumberjack to find purchase while walking on or over a log.

Packing appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

Before roads and vehicles were used in distant areas watched over by the Forest Service, the service would use animals to move their supplies. In order to move a great deal of goods without injuring the animals, the packer had to be capable of packing the supplies carefully. Bill Bell was one such packer.

Cribbage appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

Cribbage is a card game that Norman often played with Bill Bell.

Chinese Restaurant appears in USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky

Norman faints in a Chinese restaurant after walking more than thirty miles in one day.



Themes

Brotherly Love

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman is concerned about his brother. Paul drinks a lot and when he does, he often gets into fights. One night when Norman spends the night in his brother's home after spending the day fishing with him, Norman gets a call from the police station asking him to come pick his brother up. Paul has once again gotten into a fight and has not been arrested, but faces the possibility of having to pay a great deal of money for damages done during the fight. This worries Norman, who knows that Paul does not have a great deal of money. Not only this, but Norman is worried that one of these fights that Paul often gets into will end badly. Norman tries to talk to Paul about this situation, but Paul does not respond.

Norman's wife, Jessie, has a brother who also has a drinking problem. Neal is a wanderer who cannot decide what he wants to do with his life. Neal likes to drink and drinks often, even when he supposed to be fishing with Norman and Paul. Jessie wants Norman to take care of her brother, but Norman finds it difficult to worry about a man he dislikes. Norman allows Neal to behave however he desires, watching as his mistakes are turned into excuse to coddle him by his mother and sisters.

Both Neal and Paul are men with drinking problems that cause them to behave in dangerous ways. Norman and Jessie both worry about their brothers and both want to find a way to help their brothers. Jessie does this by taking care of her brother and forcing her husband to watch over him. Norman, however, does not know how to help his brother and allows the subject to lay unspoken when his brother brushes it off. Paul does not want help and Norman recognizes this and stops trying. However, it does not end well for Paul who is eventually beaten to death, most likely after one of his drunken brawls. This end does not mean that Norman did not love his brother as much Jessie does hers. It just shows that people show affection in different ways. It is these situations that make brotherly love an important theme to the story, *A River Runs Through It*.

Friendship/Loyalty

The theme of friendship/loyalty appears in all three stories in this collection, but most clearly in the final story, *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*. This story is about Norman's experiences working with the Forest Service one summer when he was seventeen. Norman does not like the cook who works with his crew, but greatly admires the Ranger who he sees as an artist when it comes to packing the animals with supplies. Norman wants the Ranger to see him with admiration as well, so he spends a great deal of the summer trying to impress the Ranger. When Norman realizes that the Ranger likes the same cook that Norman despises, Norman becomes obsessed with



the idea of doing something highly impressive to get the Ranger's attention. Norman decides to walk thirty miles from Elk Summit to the nearest town in one day.

Norman achieves his desired goal, but becomes so ill afterward that he feels he cannot share his accomplishment with the Ranger. Norman feels he has failed at his mission. When the Ranger arrives in town, Norman agrees to go in on a plan to attempt to scam some card players using the cook, who turns out to be a card shark. Norman knows he will receive a terrible beating, but agrees to the scheme just the same. When Norman does get beaten, he finally wins the Ranger's admiration. However, it seems that Norman's desire for this admiration has died as he realizes that the Ranger is just another human being with the same frailties as everyone else.

Norman also learns the value of loyalty in this story. While trying to impress the Ranger, Norman acts alone, always intent on proving his worth alone. However, when Norman helps the Ranger scam the poker players, he learns how important it is to work as a team when he sees how his fellow crew members come to his rescue. Norman discovers that team work is more important than personal achievements. This is what makes friendship/loyalty an important theme to this story.

Nostalgia

All three of the stories in this collection are stories based on true events that happened in the life of the writer, Norman Maclean. The writer admits to writing these stories in order to put down on paper some of the stories he has told his children over the years and want them to have in order to share with their children. It is with a sense of nostalgia that Norman writes these stories, looking back on the past with the knowledge of an older, more mature man. Norman remembers his brother in *A River Runs Through It* with all the affection of an awe struck older brother and none of the anger or pain he must have felt shortly after his brother's death. This same nostalgia tinged with the passing of time comes through in the other two stories, removing any anger their might have been at one time and replaced with the humor of a man looking back on a more innocent time in his life.

Nostalgia is an important theme to these stories because the reader must remember how each of these events is touched with nostalgia, thus making them less sharp and more emotional than they might have been in reality. In addition, this nostalgia dulls the edges of reality and allows these stories to become more fiction than truth. Also the nostalgia also helps the reader understand some of the comments the writer makes in his narration that remind the reader that these are simply stories from the mind of a man who has seen a lot of life and wants to leave behind a legacy to his children and grandchildren.

Style

Point of View

All three short stories in this book are written in the first person point of view, giving the reader an intimate view into stories that are fictionalized versions of events that happened in the life of the writer, Norman Maclean. The first story, *A River Runs Through It*, is a story that illustrates the last few months of the life of the brother of the writer, Paul Maclean. Paul was a writer who was an excellent fly fisherman. The first point of view in this story not only provides an intimate view to this relationship, but it also helps build the emotion that the writer felt as he recalls his brother's final months. It is a story that on the surface seems to focus more on fly fishing than a relationship between brothers. However, the first person point of view allows the writer to offer commentary that alerts the reader that there is more to this story than a report on one of the writer's favorite hobbies.

The other two short stories included in this book are also written in the first person point of view. These stories cover summers the writer worked first as a lumberjack and then as a member of a small Forest Service crewmember. Once more, the first person point of view offers a closer look at these jobs than the reader might be offered through another point of view. Again, these stories appear to be about the work. However, the intimate point of view allows the reader to see beyond the surface story and see what lies below. These stories are about companionship and teamwork, about the relationships between men who work hard together. If not for the intimate point of view, this subtle, underlying story might be missed, causing the reader to miss the beauty of the stories as a whole.

Setting

All three short stories take place in Montana, the writer's home state. *A River Runs Through It* is set largely on or around the Blackfoot River where Norman and his brother, Paul, like to go fly fishing. The river takes on a life of its own through the writer's narration, sharing the world of the river with the reader as though it is a character separate from its role as setting. The river is alive with fish, flies, and wildlife, making it a multifaceted character that is both friend and foe to the human characters. Paul is an expert fisherman and seems to have tamed the river. However, toward the end of the novel Paul is nearly overwhelmed by the river's current as he attempts to wade through it, weighed down by fishing gear. At the same time, the river is a foe to Norman, foiling his attempts to become a better fisherman. Norman struggles to fish half as well as his brother. Toward the end of the story, however, Norman has an exceptionally good day, catching fish faster and better than his brother does.

In one of the other two stories, Norman is working as a lumberjack, working in the woods outside his hometown of Missoula, Montana. The setting in this story is simply a



backdrop to a story about a man learning about himself under the guidance of a man who is both someone to be admired and someone to be cautious of. The woods are only important so far as their role in Norman's job cutting down trees. However, in the third story the setting is once again almost a character in the novel. The third story is set in the countryside that straddles both Montana and Iowa in an area called Elk Summit. This setting becomes a character in the story when Norman decides to walk the thirty miles from the Forest Service camp to the nearest town. Norman makes the walk in one day, proving to himself and his boss that he can do it. However, the effort takes so much out of the young man that he finds himself fainting in a local restaurant, much to his embarrassment.

These settings work in these stories for several different reasons. In the first and third stories, the settings become a part of the story, almost a separate character, that enriches the narration in such a way that it would not be the powerful story it is without the setting. The story would not have the same impact on the reader if it did not take place in its specific location. The second story does not have such a strong connection to its setting. The second story could take place in any state in the country. However, it is important that the story takes place in the woods since the characters are lumberjacks. It is also important to the main character, Norman, that it takes place in Montana because this is his home, somewhere he cares deeply about. Therefore, despite having different impacts on the reader, all of these settings are important to the overall story and help provide the intended impact on the reader.

Language and Meaning

The language of these stories is simple English. The language is easy to understand and appropriate for readers of all ages. The stories include some words that the reader might not be familiar with, especially the second story in which the writer introduces several terms associated with lumberjacking. However, each of these foreign terms is explained within the narration, often incorporated into the narration in such a way that the reader is not distracted by the explanation.

The language of this novel works because it gets the information across to the reader that the writer intended to express without taking away the entertainment value of the narration. The novel is simple in its language, but not so simple as to make the intelligent reader feel spoken down to, or so difficult as to discourage the younger, more naive reader. It is because of this middle of the road language that the stories work and will appeal to readers of all ages.

Structure

The book is divided into three short stories, each completely self contained. The first story is about fly fishing and the relationship between two brothers. This story's plot is linear and has only one subplot, that of the main character, Norman's, relationship with his wife and her troubled brother. The second story is about Norman's experience



working with a difficult lumberjack the summer while he was in graduate school. This story is simple and follows a linear plot without any subplots. Third story is similar to the first as it is about a young man's relationship with a man he admires. Norman is working with the Forest Service and is going out of his way to impress his boss, the ranger, even though he does not consciously realize this is what he is doing. This story includes a subplot that explores the relationship of this young man in relation with the other men he works with that summer.

The structure is simple, as is the structure of each story. The stories move in a linear fashion, telling a simple story while exploring not only deep, complicated relationships between men and the world around them, but also simple things such as fly fishing and lumberjacking. The stories are written in such a simple way that the reader can almost miss the deeper meaning as the writer spends as much time exploring the importance of picking the right fly as he does the idea of finding a way to help a troubled brother. The structure of these stories works because of the simplicity of them as well as subtly used in the deeper, emotional aspects of the stories.



Quotes

"In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing."
A River Runs Through It, pg. 1

"Paul knew how I felt about my fishing and was careful not to seem superior by offering advice..." A River Runs Through It, pg. 30

"My brother was only five feet ten, but he had fished so many years his body had become partly shaped by his casting. He was thirty two now, at the height of his power, and he could put all his body and soul into a four-and-a-half-ounce magic totem pole. Long ago, he had gone far beyond my father's wrist casting, although his right wrist was always so important that it had become larger than his left."
A River Runs Through It, pg. 41

"Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as 'our brother's keepers', possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go." A River Runs Through It, pg. 55

"At that moment, the world was totally composed of the Elkhorn, a mythological Brown Trout, the weather and me, and all that existed of me were thoughts about the Elkhorn, the weather, and a mythological fish that may have been a fingerling of my imagination."
A River Runs Through It, pgs. 78-79

"This left me even more dismayed. I thought that I had fished the hole perfectly and just the way my brother had taught me, except he hadn't told me what to do when a fish goes up a tree."
A River Runs Through It, pg. 87

"Our customary roles had been reversed and I was the brother who was being taken fishing for the healing effects of cool waters." A River Runs Through It, pg. 151

"When I was young, a teacher had forbidden me to say 'more perfect' because she said if a thing is perfect it can't be more so. But by now I had seen enough of life to have regained my confidence in it." A River Runs Through It, pg. 170

"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." A River Runs Through It, pg. 202



"As to the big thing, sawing, it is something beautiful when you are working rhythmically together—at times, you forget what you are doing and get lost in abstractions of motion and power. But when sawing isn't rhythmical, even for a short time, it becomes a kind of mental illness—maybe even something more deeply disturbing than that." Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim', pg. 220

"You can be sure I ignored any shadow of suggestion that I work with him the coming summer, and he never openly made the suggestion. I had decided that I had only a part of my life to give to gypping and that I had already given generously." Logging and Pimping and 'Your Pal, Jim', pg. 238

"I was young and I thought I was tough and I knew it was beautiful and I was a little bit crazy but hadn't noticed it yet." USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky, pg. 241

"Anyway, as you possibly remember, there are these lines in front of the story:
And then he thinks he knows
The hills where his life rose...
These words are now part of the story."
USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky, pg. 422

Topics for Discussion

What is the point of *A River Runs Through It*? Is the story about fly fishing? If not, why does the writer spend so much time discussing fly fishing? What is the symbolism of fly fishing? What does this sport say about the relationship between Norman and Paul? What about Norman and Neal?

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman spends a great deal of time worrying about how to speak with his brother about his drinking, but spends almost no time worrying about Neal's problems. Why is this? Does Norman care more about his brother? Why mention Neal at all? How do the characters of Neal and Paul compare? How are they similar? How are they different?

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman and Paul have a highly religious, strict father. How does this affect Norman and Paul? Does Paul drink because of his father's behavior when they were children? If so, why doesn't Norman drink? What about their mother, who clearly prefers Paul over Norman? Does this behavior have anything to do with the way these two men grew up?

In *A River Runs Through It*, Norman seems to blame himself to a degree for his brother's death. Do you agree? How is Paul's death Norman's fault? How is it Paul's fault? Is there anyone else to blame in Paul's death?

In *Logging and Pimping* and 'Your Pal, Jim', Norman agrees to work with Jim for the summer but quickly regrets it. Why does Norman choose to work with Jim in the first place? What is Norman hoping to gain by working with Jim? Why does he not like Jim after work begins? Why does Jim behave the way he does? How does Jim affect Norman's life?

In *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*, Norman dislikes the cook. Why? How does this opinion shape Norman's summer? Is Norman's dislike of the cook reasonable? Why then does Norman end up helping the cook? Does the cook's card playing abilities have anything to do with Norman's feelings toward the cook, either in the beginning of the story or the end?

In *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*, why does Norman feel like he needs to prove something to the Ranger? Why does Norman feel as though the Ranger is punishing him when he sends him up to the lookout position? Why does Norman decide to walk back into town alone, in one day? What does he hope this will prove to the Ranger?

In *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky*, why does Norman agree to work with the Ranger the following year, but does not follow through? How have Norman's feelings toward the Ranger changed by the following summer? Why?