A River Runs Through It

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NORMAN MACLEAN

Norman Maclean was the son of a Presbyterian minister who had immigrated to America with his wife from Nova Scotia. The family, which also included Norman's brother Paul Davidson, moved to Missoula, Montana when Norman was a child. During World War I, Maclean, who was too young to fight, worked in logging camps in a national forest. He attended Dartmouth College and then the University of Chicago, where he received a doctorate in English and became a professor of poetry and Shakespeare. In 1931, he married Jessie Burns, and they had two children. He died in Chicago in 1990.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the first half of the twentieth century, Montana was even more pristine and untrammeled than it is today. Throughout *A River Runs Through It*, Norman contrasts this primeval, natural quality of the area to its more industrialized, modern status today, as national culture has become increasingly standardized and much of Montana has become known even to outsiders. In the summer of 1937, when much of the book takes place, towns like Wolf Creek and even cities like Missoula were small, tightly-knit places where most people knew everyone else, and even native Montanans like Neal were considered suspicious for having left for the West Coast. Some of the United States government's shameful history of oppressing Native Americans is alluded to in the novella as well—we learn that Paul's girlfriend, for instance, is barred from living in town as a member of the Cheyenne tribe, and instead has to live on the outskirts or else on a reservation.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

For its full-bodied depictions of nature and American geography, Norman Maclean's work has been compared to that of author Henry David Thoreau, though in a Western rather than Northeastern American setting. There are also resonances between *A River Runs Through It* and the writings of John Muir, an early naturalist and environmental writer in the latter half of the nineteenth century, who is considered a major force in establishing and preserving the national park system in America. In other ways, however, *A River Runs Through It*—with its authoritative, somewhat somber, but still reverential prose—recalls the "original" book that Norman's father returns to again and again: the Bible.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A River Runs Through It*
- **When Written:** 1972-1976
- **Where Written:** Chicago
- **When Published:** 1976
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novella, Autobiographical Fiction
- **Setting:** Montana
- **Climax:** Norman and his father watch Paul catch a huge fish on the Blackfoot River near Missoula, the last time they'll see him fish before Paul's death.
- **Antagonist:** Neal, Norman's brother-in-law, comes in from California for a visit one summer and is exasperatingly ignorant about the codes of fly-fishing, constantly getting into trouble that will then be blamed on Norman.
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Flying High. Following the publication of *A River Runs Through It*, and especially the movie version starring Brad Pitt, there was a substantial uptick in fly-fishing throughout Montana.

Late Bloomer? Norman Maclean didn't begin writing fiction until he was 70 years old—before that, he had published a *Theory of Lyric Poetry*, as well as a nonfiction book on military history.

PLOT SUMMARY

A River Runs Through It begins with the narrator, Norman Maclean, describing what it was like to grow up in Missoula, Montana, as the son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister who holds two things sacred: God and fly-fishing. Norman and his brother, Paul, spend much of their time out of school in church services and studying the **Bible**. But their father also introduces them to the complex, intricate art of fishing, in which one must learn to read the **river** and attempt to listen to its words. Their family is close-knit, and somewhat suspicious of the outside world. Norman and Paul only fight once, and when their mother tries to separate them, she falls down, and the two are chastened into never fighting again. Paul, though, retains a fighting streak. From a young age, he is incredibly stubborn, and enjoys betting on anything—as he gets older, he begins to gamble. Norman spends his teenage summers working for the United States Forest Service, while Paul is a lifeguard, giving him time to fish in the evenings. Paul has come to be the expert fisherman among the two, and his greatest goal is to not let work interfere with his fishing. He becomes a newspaper

reporter in Helena, the capital of Montana.

In the summer of 1937, when the bulk of the novella takes place, Paul is living in Helena, while Norman lives with his wife Jessie's family in Wolf Creek. Norman's mother-in-law, Florence, has just told Norman that Jessie's brother Neal will be arriving shortly from the West Coast, and she'd love for him to fish with Norman and Paul. Norman runs into Paul outside a bar, though it's not yet noon. Neither Norman nor Paul like Neal, whom they consider an outsider and a failed Montanan, but they love Florence, so they agree to fish on the Elkhorn with Neal. The two brothers go fishing together the next morning. On the way Paul tells Norman about getting into a car crash (probably while drunk) and of the fine he'll have to pay—he tells it as a joke, but Norman isn't sure how seriously to take it. Still, Paul regains the upper hand when they're fishing, as Norman admires his technique of "shadow casting." Norman stays with Paul for the night, but Paul goes out on the town, and Norman later gets a call in the middle of the night to come down to the jail. Paul had gotten into a fight with a man who had insulted the girl he was with, a part-Native American woman whom Norman calls "Mo-nah-se-tah." Norman drives them home, and then drives back to Wolf Creek himself, trying to figure out how he might be able to help Paul.

A few days later Neal arrives on the train wearing two sweaters and carrying a monogrammed suitcase—certainly not a regular sight in Wolf Creek, Montana. As soon as he can, Neal tries to sneak off to a bar, and Norman goes with him, since Jessie has asked him to keep an eye on her brother. There they meet Long Bow, a regular at the bar, and Old Rawhide, the town whore. Neal slowly starts sidling up to Old Rawhide, at which point Norman says he'll make it an early night. The next morning Paul is at their door bright and early for the fishing trip. Florence is slightly embarrassed that Neal is still in bed, having had a late night—though Paul says he didn't go to bed at all. The three men pile into the truck with Jessie's other brother Ken, Jessie, and Florence, to go down to the Elkhorn. Once again, Jessie admonishes Norman to keep an eye on Neal, but as soon as they go downstream together, Neal says he's going to stay at a certain bend, and soon nods off. Enraptured by the day, Norman soon forgets about Neal, and joins Paul in fishing. Finally, as storm clouds are approaching, he thinks to go back to look for Neal. He searches for him along the river with rain pelting down, but doesn't find him. When he and Paul get back to the truck, Neal is safe and dry inside, while the women are angry with Norman for having abandoned Neal.

Realizing that Jessie is unhappy with him, Norman suggests that he go away for a few days, and spend some time fishing with Paul. Jessie agrees. Norman drives up to Helena, but when the brothers drive to their regular summer cabin and its nearby river, it turns out that Neal and Old Rawhide have followed them, and Neal claims that now he wants to fish with the brothers right now. It's midday and too hot for good fishing, and Neal has forgotten his rod, but Paul has no patience for such lack of care, so he makes them get into the car anyway. Neal and Old Rawhide have brought liquor and are increasingly tipsy. Norman and Paul leave them, bury some beers in the cold river for afterward, and find their own fishing holes, where they fish as long as they can until the heat grows unbearable. But on their way back, the beers aren't there. The brothers are almost back to the car when they catch sight of two naked, red bodies lying on a sandbar: Neal and Old Rawhide have drunk all their liquor, all the beers, and are fast asleep, with horrific sunburns developing. Norman and Paul drive them back to town in silence, drop off Old Rawhide, and return home, where Paul leaves Norman to face the women (Jessie, Florence, and Ken's wife Dorothy). They immediately get Neal into bed, and Norman and Jessie, though they begin to fight, are soon reconciled. The other women repeat that they love Norman as well.

Feeling absolved, Norman, following Jessie's suggestion, goes back to Helena to finish his fishing trip with Paul. Paul suggests they stop by their parents' home and invite their father along. They do so, and their parents seem thrilled to see them—especially Paul—but are upset when Paul slips out after dinner to the bars. Still, the next morning, he is ready to fish before Norman or his father. The three of them fish a number of holes together. At first, Norman is more successful than his brother, and this gives him a burst of pride and joy, but Paul soon regains the upper hand. After a while, Norman decides he's finished, and sits by his father, who's reading the Bible. They both watch Paul try to reach his limit, admiring his skill and artistry.

The present-day Norman who is narrating this story, long after the event, notes that he often thinks about this fishing trip, since it was the last time he would fish with Paul. Not long afterward, Paul would be beaten to death and left outside an alley. Norman and his father ask each other over and over again if there was anything they could have done, but never reach an answer. All they can truly understand is that Paul was an incredible fisherman and artist. As an old man, Norman continues to fly-fish, reveling in the beauty and rhythm of the sport, but he continues to be haunted by his past.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Norman Maclean – The narrator of the novella, Norman lives in Wolf Creek, Montana with his wife, Jessie, and her family. Norman is fiercely loyal to, but also competitive with, his brother Paul, and with Paul remains close to his parents in Missoula. We don't learn anything about Norman's profession—instead, he is portrayed as a product of his father's lessons involving both **Scripture** and fly-fishing. More

competent than Paul at life in general, Norman nevertheless seems to lack his brother's unique spark and charm. But he is an acute observer both of human character—even if he struggles to understand his brother—and of the natural world that surrounds him. Norman's guilt for not being able to help Paul colors much of the narration, as this feeling of responsibility mingles with a desire to honor Paul's memory by writing down his stories.

Paul Maclean – Norman's younger brother and a newspaper reporter in Helena, the capital city of Montana. Paul has always had a stubborn streak, from his boyhood refusal to eat oatmeal to his adult reluctance to accept anyone's help. Paul has an obvious drinking problem, which, coupled with a penchant for gambling and an eagerness to join in fights, has brought him in and out of jail a number of times. But in Norman's portrayal, Paul's most striking characteristic is his gift for fly-fishing. His love for the sport conquers his other weaknesses—Paul is never late for fishing even after spending entire nights on the town. Paul is described as an artist when fly-fishing. Yet as an artist, a kind of genius, Paul remains in many ways impenetrable for the rest of his family to comprehend, much less help.

Norman's father – A Presbyterian minister of Scottish background, who is fiercely proud of that past. "Father" educates Norman and Paul in both religion and fly-fishing—indeed, for him, the two are inseparable. He sees both as revealing God's grace and mysterious workings in the world. He loves both his sons, but may have a softer spot for Paul. Along with Norman, he worries about Paul and wonders how to help him. Norman often notes how his father is one of the few men he knows to use the word "beautiful" casually, and this description underlines his father's general attitude of wonder towards the world, even as that view is tempered by pain and confusion.

Norman's mother – The sole woman in the Maclean household, she also dotes on Paul, though she grows distraught and silent when he fails to give up his late nights out. Norman's mother is not permitted to enter what is still a "man's world" of fly-fishing—her role still conforms to traditional gender norms—but she has a quieter appreciation and understanding for the art of fly-fishing as seen from the homestead.

Jessie – Norman's wife, from Wolf Creek, Montana. Jessie worries over her brother Neal in much the same way that Norman worries about Paul. It's ironic, then, that this shared quality threatens to cause major problems in their marriage. Though we don't see much of Jessie in the novella, she seems to have a strong personality and high expectations for Norman's behavior in her family. Still, Jessie serves as a source of love and strength for Norman that he draws upon in his other struggles.

Neal – Jessie's brother and Norman's brother-in-law, who is originally from Wolf Creek but now lives on the West Coast. Neal has returned for a visit to Montana in the summer of 1937. Neal is very much out of place in Montana culture, wearing preppy sweaters, unable to control his liquor consumption, and only interested in fly-fishing insofar as it will help him prove popular among the women of the town. Jessie is clearly worried about Neal, and asks Norman to take him under his wing—but for various reasons, some within and some out of his control, Norman largely fails. Like Paul, Neal seems to be struggling to find his place, but in the context of Norman and Paul's relationship, Neal is more of a drag than a productive foil.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ken – Jessie and Neal's brother and the only man in their family who remained in Wolf Creek. Ken has various connections to locals, which allows the family to fish in private waters not accessible to others.

Dorothy – Ken's wife and a nurse. She feels a certain kinship with Norman, since they both have married into the family.

Florence – The mother of Jessie, Neal, and Ken. She is of Scottish heritage like the Maclean patriarch, and both Norman and Paul adore her, though Norman can be somewhat afraid of her, especially when she grows protective about Neal.

Old Rawhide – The town whore, who spends most of her time in Black Jack's Bar when she is not living for a time with one suitor or another. She and Neal have a brief affair and she joins a disastrous fishing trip with him, Norman, and Paul.

Long Bow – Another character at Black Jack's, whose nickname refers to his tendency to "pull the long bow," or make up fantastical stories about his hunting and fishing—though Norman has witnessed first-hand Long Bow's impressive marksmanship.

Police sergeants – Norman interacts with two police sergeants in the novella, both relating to Paul. The first has a conversation with Norman after Paul is arrested for getting into a bar fight, and the second one shares the news of Paul's death with Norman.

Mo-nah-se-tah – Norman's nickname for the part-Native American woman that Paul sometimes goes out with, also called simply "Paul's girl." Her mother is Cheyenne, and she can be fierce and feisty, often eager for Paul to get into a fight to defend her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILIAL AND BROTHERLY LOVE

Families are the main social structures in *A River Runs Through It*: apart from a few minor characters, all the people we meet belong to Norman's family or to Jessie's. Norman and Paul have even been taught to trust people less and less the further they get from their family home of Missoula, Montana. Steeped in the Biblical tradition, Norman's family treats Paul as a kind of "prodigal son," one who may stray far from correct morals, but who is always welcomed back joyfully into the family mode. Norman's love for Paul, while part of this framework, is also mixed with a competitive spirit, as is normal for brothers near in age. His love also coexists with his struggle to understand his brother—as Norman's father says, it is a tragic irony that those to whom we are closest, and love the most, are those that we understand the least. While Norman's book seems to be an attempt to reach that kind of understanding, what the book itself portrays is the painfulness of not being able to understand those one loves.

In other cases, love proves a source of strength: after feeling beaten down by his inability to help Neal or Paul, Norman is rejuvenated by the love of Jessie and his female in-laws—a kind of love that is portrayed as purer but also less complex than the love between Norman and Paul. In general, the love of a family proves stronger than grief, envy, and even lack of understanding in the novel, though it doesn't prevent—and perhaps even exacerbates—the pain that comes from loss.

HELP AND HELPLESSNESS

Norman Maclean, the novella's protagonist, emphasizes from the start the self-sufficiency of his ancestors, Scottish Presbyterians who dissented from official church doctrine and had, by the turn of the twentieth century, journeyed from Europe to America and Canada and all the way to the rugged small towns of Montana. While the book does idealize self-sufficiency, it also questions its possibility, suggesting that characters are always interrelated—even if they may refuse or shrug off any help that is offered. Norman's brother Paul, for instance, grows embarrassed when Norman tries to question his independence, asking if he needs money or another kind of "help." Paul seems to be ashamed of asking for help, even when it is sorely needed. It's also unclear to what extent Paul even wants to be helped. Indeed, Norman struggles to determine whether and how he can guide Paul out of his alcoholism and into a more stable lifestyle. Like Norman with Paul, Norman's wife Jessie seems to struggle in much the same way with her disastrous brother Neal. The couple's altruism actually begins to push them apart, as Jessie grows frustrated with Norman for not being able to help Neal, and Norman grows frustrated with himself for his inability to help Paul.

While fly-fishing, however, it is Paul who seems to hold greater control over situations, and his role and Norman's are reversed. At these moments, Paul is able to guide his brother and allow him to relinquish his sense of worry and responsibility for a time. These moments even permit Norman to question whether Paul really needs his help at all. Nevertheless, after Paul's death, Norman and his father are both haunted for the rest of their lives by a sense that they could have helped Paul—even if their attempts, while he was alive, never really worked. Reliance on another is never simple in the novella. It may be unwanted, but Paul's death shows that it may well be necessary. And yet even so, the novella leaves us with the recognition that attempts to help may be doomed to failure, although this failure will perhaps inevitably be accompanied by regret.

SKILL AND ART

A River Runs Through It is full of lushly described scenes of fly-fishing in Montana—in Maclean's hands, the effort to figure out which fish are biting and how to best angle oneself in relation to them becomes almost a minor epic. Some might distinguish between a technical skill that involves separate, learnable tasks, and a kind of artistic genius that simply cannot be learned, but the novella collapses this distinction—for Maclean, technical skill is not in opposition to sublime artistic genius, but rather a necessary aspect of art.

Thanks to Maclean's descriptions, the reader gains an amateur knowledge of the vocabulary and technique of fly-fishing. The four-count rhythm is one well-tested skill revealed to us as essential to the task—a task that is alternately described as an art or as a skill. Sometimes, this craft is a matter of expertise developed over time, but in other cases it is a matter of individual creativity, even genius. Paul's "shadow casting," for instance, a wrist-based technique that makes the fish believe there are flies flitting over the water, is an idiosyncratic technique rather than a standard rule of fly-fishing. Paul's seemingly natural gift for fly-fishing is a source of admiration for Norman and their father. It almost compensates for Paul's weaknesses in other aspects of life, though the tragedy is that fly-fishing is the only way Paul can ever truly feel at home and in control. By describing fly-fishing as an art developed through skill, the book elevates the sport to the level of more classical arts like painting, sculpture, and poetry. In the novel, fly-fishing becomes an art particular to the American West, one whose secrets may be shared with the readers, but which remains in the possession of a lucky few (as Neal's disastrous attempts to join in make clear).

ETERNAL NATURE VS. HUMAN FRAILTY

While fly-fishing takes place in nature, the novel draws a clear line between the human skill and creativity that makes the craft an art, and the

natural world in which people engage in that art. Nature is sublime and awe-inspiring in *A River Runs Through It*—it makes the characters feel small in comparison, but it is also a source of stability and relief. Influenced by his father's preaching and the **Bible**, Norman compares the space of nature to God's work throughout the book. At many points, the continuity and eternity of the natural world is contrasted to fleeting human affairs—whatever happens to humanity, however we might suffer, the **rivers** of Montana will continue on. But this point is not an occasion for fear or sadness at human insignificance. Instead, what Maclean emphasizes is the awe that comes from understanding nature's almighty power. And those who are unable to grasp this power are depicted unsympathetically: when Neal and the prostitute, Old Rawhide, get drunk and fall asleep on the riverbed instead of fly-fishing with Paul and Norman, they are rightfully punished through a painful sunburn. A character like Neal is portrayed as arrogant in his desire to use Montana's gifts for his own, selfish benefit, rather than acknowledging and admiring nature's power. This idea of "punishment" also links to an environmental message, which acknowledges that while nature will always continue on, uncaring of human affairs, humans can still corrupt and destroy nature through greed and ignorance.

Even characters who acknowledge nature's power cannot escape their own human frailty. Paul is more adept than anyone at remaining attuned to nature and respecting Montana's might. But he is killed unceremoniously, almost trivially, with his body dumped on the ground. His death reminds the other characters that human life can be easily extinguished, in contrast to the mighty rivers that Paul knew and loved, which cannot so quickly be stamped out.

GRACE, DISGRACE, AND DIVINE WILL

The sect of Christianity followed by Maclean's father, a "Scot and a Presbyterian," teaches that humans are a species fallen from an original state of grace. In this religious framework, which is threaded throughout the book, it is believed that only God can restore grace to people. Though human beings can develop specific skills, even reaching the realm of art, it may be impossible for them to ever truly recover grace while still alive on earth. Throughout the book, Maclean portrays characters as alternately touched by grace and condemned to the opposite: disgrace. Such disgrace is sometimes linked to shame, as in the naked bodies of Neal and the Old Rawhide discovered by Paul and Norman. Like Adam and Eve, the original subjects of the fall from divine grace, this couple now must be ashamed of their nakedness as tied to their sins.

While disgrace in the book stems from human activity, grace is another thing entirely: it comes not from the human but from the divine. Norman and Paul's father holds the most radical version of this belief. For him, even fly-fishing can only succeed with God's grace. This sentiment is somewhat at odds with Norman's and Paul's confidence that fly-fishing is a matter of skill and art, as detailed above. Yet both sons internalize their father's belief to a certain extent, in their understanding of fly-fishing as something as holy as church, and as something beyond human comprehension. Ultimately, the notion of divine grace helps both Norman and his father grapple with Paul's death by fitting it into the concept of divine will. Even if they cannot fully accept that God is behind Paul's death, it can be comforting for them to hand over responsibility to God and thus transform a sense of helplessness into understanding. Despite this, however, Norman is never entirely sure whether Paul is touched by divine grace, or whether his death shows that God chose not to bestow grace upon him—a possibility that Norman finds excruciating.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RIVERS

The Elkhorn and Blackfoot rivers are not only where Norman, Paul, and their father fish, but these bodies of water structure their sense of place and lend Norman, in particular, a way of thinking about life's metaphorical course. Norman often marvels at the geological origin of these rivers, how they were formed with the release of a massive glacial dam that used to spread over the entire Pacific Northwest, cutting their way through mountains as the glaciers receded and left their imprint on the lines in the surrounding mountains today. Rivers are far more ancient, and more lasting, than any human's life. But Norman is able to find resonance between their sharp turns, deposits, and quiet pools and the similarly variegated paths of a human life. In terms of Paul's life, in particular, rivers symbolize both life's discernible patterns and the inherent mysteriousness of these patterns. The meaning of these patterns is not always readily apparent, and indeed, may not be discernible at all by a human mind. Norman can only wonder at and respect these patterns rather than seeking to reveal their inner workings.

SCRIPTURE

Raised by a Presbyterian minister, Norman is steeped in the Christian tradition, and is particularly familiar with the Bible thanks to years of catechism and religious study. His father often reads the New Testament, and seems to continue to wrestle with what it says even after a lifetime devoted to its meaning. Scripture comes to represent, more broadly, the meaning-making act of narration, of setting

down words on the page. It is Norman's father who suggests that Norman write stories so as to understand his past and those he loves. For Norman, even his beloved **rivers** are a kind of narrative: under a river's rocks, he says, are words. As particular words that (the Macleans believe) reach us from an all-powerful God, Scripture connects words to truth and meaning. "In the beginning was the Word," Norman's father quotes from the New Testament: Norman's desire to use narrative in order to describe and attempt to understand his brother is anchored in a specifically religious intellectual heritage.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Chicago Press edition of *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* published in 2001.

Part 1 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker), Norman's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novella, Norman sets the scene by describing the two pillars of his father's life: faith and fly-fishing. Although his father is a preacher, his faith is in some ways unorthodox. He, like other Presbyterians, believes that humans are lowly beings, disgraced ever since Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. However, Norman's father is not as a result fundamentally pessimistic. He is not, for instance, wary of using the term "beautiful" like others of his faith who remain acutely aware of humans' sorry position. Instead, the preacher takes a more optimistic view of the world, one that still retains an awe in the face of God's creation, but that suggests that people can access some of this divine beauty—though only, of course, through God's grace and will. Norman suggests that the way people can pick up on such beauty is through formal techniques—that is, helpful techniques or tools that one can learn and then draw upon, as one uses language. Indeed, these techniques are described alternately with musical and mathematical language. Much of the rest of the book will show a fascination with the technical aspects of fly-fishing, which, for Norman's father, are closely tied to his faith in God.

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.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker), Norman's father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Again, for Norman's father, faith and fly-fishing are not two separate pursuits but are united, for him, through a belief in God's plan for humankind and for the universe. Norman's father is not as pessimistic as other Presbyterians, since he believes that regular people can access beauty on earth even though they are condemned to be sinful, but he still believes that everything worth achieving can never come easily.

In some ways, this belief of Norman's father is not that different from lessons that most parents share with their children about working hard and struggling in order to achieve success. What is different here is that Norman's father is not as concerned with individual mastery as he is with pursuing what is good in itself. In addition, the skill that comes from becoming a great fly-fisher, for instance, is not simply a matter of repetitive tasks and practice, but is rather raised to the plane of art. Indeed, for Norman's father, art is not something that comes from one's own technical mastery; instead it is something given by God's grace through difficult striving, and therefore one should be grateful for it rather than proud of it.

Part 2 Quotes

Rhythm was just as important as color and just as complicated. It was one rhythm superimposed upon another, our father's four-count rhythm of the line and wrist being still the base rhythm. But superimposed upon it was the piston two count of his arm and the long overriding four count of the completed figure eight of his reversed loop.
The canyon was glorified by rhythms and colors.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker), Norman's father, Paul Maclean

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Norman and Paul have gone fishing together on the Blackfoot River, and Norman, after going off by himself for a time, has paused to watch his brother fish. The process that Norman describes is called "shadow casting," a technique coined by Paul in which the fisherman manages the rod in such a way that the bait flits over the surface of the river, and its shadow attracts the fish to the surface. Soon, another couple will approach the brothers and marvel at Paul's skill.

The boys' father has taught them both certain techniques, including the four-count rhythm, but Norman remarks that Paul's skill has gone far beyond that baseline. As they watch Paul, the three observers are impressed not just by his ability to catch fish but by his very demeanor, by the beauty of his strokes. The language that Norman uses to describe the scene underlines the complexity of the task and the power that arises from the same. That the canyon is described as "glorified" reminds us that the way Norman understands fishing stems from his father's sense of a divine plan and of the connection between human skill and God's grace.

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 brothers' 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.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker), Paul Maclean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

Norman is driving home from Helena, where he had gone to pick up Paul at the jail after a late night of drinking and fighting, and as the sun rises he considers his relationship to his brother. Norman is the older brother and has always been the more responsible one, while Paul, even though he is now grown, continues to get into trouble. Norman refers to the notion of "my brother's keeper," which comes from the Book of Genesis in the Bible: after Cain murders his brother Abel, God asks Cain where his brother is, and he responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?". Norman is familiar with this tradition because of his religious upbringing, and this context helps us understand Norman's feeling of guilt. However, his guilt coexists with a sense of helplessness and futility. Throughout the book, Normanand his parents struggle with how to "help" Paul: their desire never goes away, even as they doubt that help is even possible, or that Paul would accept it if it was.

Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart—I don't know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep. Many of us would probably be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Norman has left Neal (his brother-in-law) out of sight and gone off to fish on his own. He knows this is a bad idea—Jessie has already warned him not to leave her brother behind—but Norman is impatient to get to the river. Neal has already done much to ruin a potentially idyllic day spent fly-fishing, and Norman muses over why he (and other fishermen) need things to be so idyllic, so perfect. Norman tends to think of fly-fishing as a refuge from life, a place where technical skill is the only goal to be sought after, but

his experience with Neal reminds him that fly-fishing can be just as wrapped up in the petty trials and annoyances of daily life as anything else: it is not a world apart, but part of this world. In general, Norman realizes, people try to forge a perfect world out of their own partial and limited views of it, rather than accepting the world as it is, and understanding that it is greater than them.

The cast is so soft and slow that it can be followed like an ash settling from a fireplace 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.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Norman has, by this point, mostly forgotten about Neal, though it has crossed his mind where Paul might be, since Norman has only been able to catch small trout and imagines that his brother knows where the real catches are to be found. In general, Norman tends to treat fishing with the strategic, rational perspective that is typical of his outlook on the world. He tries to reason his way into succeeding at fly-fishing, even as he also accepts that Paul—who seems to "feel" his way into catching fish, rather than overthinking anything—is much more successful with an entirely opposite strategy.

Here, Norman briefly departs from his usual strategy and embraces the pure thrill of fly-fishing. At this moment, it becomes less important whether or not Norman will catch as many fish as his brother. Instead, he simply appreciates the beauty of the cast, describing it as a kind of gentle ash settling over the river. By distancing himself from this process—standing "apart from" himself—Norman implies that there is something inevitably graceful and even divine about this movement. The artistry of fly-fishing, he grasps, is on a broader plane than his own individual technical skill.

Poets talk about "spots of time," but it is really fishermen who experience eternity compressed into a moment. No one can tell what a spot of time is until suddenly the whole world is a fish and the fish is gone.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Norman has just completed an epic battle with a massive fish, tearing through bushes and splashing across the river in order to try to hang onto it. The fish, however, has won, and Norman emerges empty-handed. However, the battle and loss give Norman an opportunity to reflect on the strange ways in which time and space get warped in the process of fishing. First, nothing else becomes as important as the fish, which one concentrates on single-mindedly. When the fish disappears, then, a huge void opens up in its place. Norman feels as though he has grasped at something bigger than himself, even glimpsed it for a moment, but now it has escaped him, and he is left only with the memory of it and the chance to meditate upon it.

I asked, "Do you think you should help him?"
"Yes," he said, "I thought we were going to."
"How?" I asked.
"By taking him fishing with us."
"I've just told you," I said, "he doesn't like to fish."
"Maybe so," my brother replied. "But maybe what he likes is somebody trying to help him."

Related Characters: Paul Maclean, Norman Maclean (speaker), Neal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Norman had left Neal while he went off to fish, and now when he and Paul return to the bend of the river where Neal had stopped to rest, he's no longer there. Norman has been focusing lately on trying to help his own brother, so Neal doesn't figure highly among the important people in his life. Besides, Norman is skeptical that there's anything he could do to help, especially since Neal doesn't even like to fish.

Paul's suggestion is astounding to Norman. Paul always seems to deflect offers of help from his brother and his parents, if not actively discourage them. There is a chance that he is suggesting, if only indirectly, that he does

appreciate Norman attempting to help him, even if he can't find a way to thank Norman directly. But it's also possible that Paul considers himself self-sufficient, not in need of anyone to lend him a hand. If there's anything Paul does believe in, it's in the power of fly-fishing, so perhaps he is suggesting to Norman that taking Neal fishing is more productive than Norman believes it to be. The fact that Norman cannot know precisely which of these possibilities is true only underlines one tragic element of the book: the fact that familial and brotherly love often can coexist with the failure to truly know the person loved.

> On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.
> Even the anatomy of a river was laid bare. Not far downstream was a dry channel where the river had run once, and part of the way to come to know a thing is through its death. But years ago I had known the river when it flowed through this now dry channel, so I could enliven its stony remains with the waters of memory.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

Norman and Paul have gone fishing again, this time, reluctantly, with both Neal and Neal's new "girlfriend" Old Rawhide. It is so hot that they cannot hope for the fishing to be very good. Norman's tone in this passage is dream-like, almost mystical, as he personifies the river and the heat mirages "dancing" with each other. In a way, Norman's description bears witness to his deep knowledge of this area of Montana. His memory is what breathes life into places that are now entirely different from what they once were. Yet at the same time, Norman stresses here that natural phenomena like rivers, like the weather, do not need him or his observations in order to exist. He is merely passing through, while the nature around him is unending.

> It was here, while waiting for my brother, that I started this story, although, of course, at the time I did not know that stories of life are often more like rivers than books. But I knew a story had begun, perhaps long ago near the sound of water. And I sensed that ahead I would meet something that would never erode so there would be a sharp turn, deep circles, a deposit, and quietness.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker), Paul Maclean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

It is sometimes difficult to remember that the Norman telling the story is distinct from the character Norman: the narrator is telling a remembered tale from many decades in the past. Here Norman-as-narrator muses explicitly on the ways that stories are begun, made, and told. He connects the narrative arc of a story to the path of a river, with its "turns" in action and "deep circles" where it becomes unclear where the action is leading, or why the story is being told. The "quietness" that lies ahead is one of many instances when the book foreshadows the tragedy that is to come. This passage suggests that when Norman began his story, he considered fly-fishing and rivers as one thing and storytelling as another: only over time has he come to realize how much they have in common, and especially how stories, like rivers, elude the human desire to master paths and systems beyond one's own control.

Part 3 Quotes

> "Help," he said, "is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly."
> "So it is," he said, using an old homiletic transition, "that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don't know what part to give or maybe we don't like to give any part of ourselves. Then, more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed."

Related Characters: Norman's father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Home for the night with his parents and Norman, Paul brightly declares after dinner that he's going to grab a drink with a friend. This disappoints his parents, who were delighted to have him back and who recognize that Paul hasn't changed. Here, Norman and his father are discussing what will happen to Paul, something we have heard from Norman's perspective before. His father attempts to broach the problem through his own tools: "homiletic" means "of a homily" or sermon, which Norman's father prepares for his congregation each Sunday. There are several layers of irony in what he preaches. First, he says that help is often futile, even within the context of a sermon that is supposed to help people act and live out their lives. In addition, though, Norman's father seems to suggest that the desire to give help is a positive good, even if it cannot work: he implies that he and Norman should not stop trying to be there for Paul in whatever way they can, even if on some level they know they are doomed to failure.

Then he told me, "In the part I was reading it says the Word was in the beginning, and that's right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water."
"That's because you are a preacher first and then a fisherman," I told him. "If you ask Paul, he will tell you that the words are formed out of water."
"No," my father said, "you are not listening carefully. The water runs over the words. Paul will tell you the same thing."

Related Characters: Norman's father, Norman Maclean (speaker), Paul Maclean

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Norman has gone fishing with Paul and his father, and Norman has stopped to sit beside his father, who is reading the Bible on the bank of the river.This passage is abstract and in some ways seems inscrutable, but its meaning relies on what "words" and "water" are made to stand in for—"words" for the will of God, written into Scripture, and "water" for rivers, fishing, and nature in general. Norman proposes that a preacher will always put God's will and writing first, while a fisherman will privilege the medium for his craft. But his father suggests that God's will underlies everything, including nature: even the "water runs over the words." The words of Norman's father underline his conviction that there is no contradiction between praising God and enjoying a small human activity like fly-fishing, as long as one keeps in mind that people are largely left out of this divine union. His father also seems convinced that Paul, for all his troublemaking, shares a sense of the divine source of fly-fishing.

"After you have finished your true stories sometime, why don't you make up a story and the people that go with it? Only then will you understand what happened and why. It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

Related Characters: Norman's father (speaker), Paul Maclean, Norman Maclean

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

We have already learned that the book we are reading can be traced to an earlier fly-fishing expedition, mentioned by Norman at another point in the book. But this is the first time that a character explicitly suggests what Norman will go on to write. This conversation between Norman and his father takes place at an unspecified time after Paul's death. After discussing his death once, they never speak of it again, but Norman implicitly connects this conversation to the story of Paul's life and death.

Throughout the book, Norman and his father have struggled, both out loud in conversations as well as on their own, to come to terms with Paul's actions and with the extent to which they can help him or not. Now, they must also ask themselves if they could have done something differently—if their love for Paul and desire to help him was simply not enough, or if nothing more could have been done. According to the family's belief system, nothing is meaningless, but it is almost too painful for Norman and his father to try to believe that God could have wanted Paul to die. Instead, Norman's father suggests that understanding often lies beyond our grasp. In this passage, he proposes that perhaps the only way of understanding the past is by creating a story out of it: imposing a narrative arc in a way that might be artificial, but ultimately can be revelatory, or

at least restorative.

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.

Related Characters: Norman Maclean (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

This, the book's last paragraph, broadens the perspective out from Norman's own family to a vast geological scale, before returning at the last sentence to his particular, individual story. Norman's words reveal an awe in the eternal workings of nature, workings that, he has been taught, are enacted through divine grace and divine will. He refers to the "world's great flood," another Genesis story about Noah's ark (though a similar story is present in nearly all the world's great religions). The tone of the passage is rhetorically powerful, recalling the intonations of Norman's father when he takes on the mode of the preacher at a sermon.

But Norman's final words on the vast natural forces are also directly tied to his own, small story. In some ways, nature's greatness throws into harsh relief the fragility and fleeting quality of human life, even as it is also a cause for awe and respect. Norman continues to grapple with what it all means—not just his brother's untimely death, but also the relationship between puny human existence and eternal nature and divine life in general. The book ends without a happy ending or easy solution to these questions: Norman will continue to "haunted" by them. Without claiming to answer the unanswerable, the book instead takes refuge in the rhetorical and stylistic force of its prose as the best way to ask, rather than answer, such questions.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

The narrator, Norman Maclean, relates that in his Presbyterian family in western Montana, fly-fishing and religion were considered of one piece. Norman's father would tell him and his brother, Paul, all about the fishermen who were Christ's disciples.

Already Maclean brings up several themes that will feature in the novella, such as divine grace and nature's power, through the lens of his father, for whom these ideas were naturally related.

On Sundays, the young Norman and Paul have to spend the entire day in Sunday school, at services, and studying the catechism. Their father says that the most important part of the catechism is the first question, the question of what the chief end of man is: the answer is to glorify God. Their father often energizes himself by reciting his next sermon to them.

What could be a bleak remembrance of long hours spent at church becomes more inviting through the appealing character of Norman's father, who seems to gain joy and strength from being focused not on himself but on the glory of God.

Their father was never an incredibly talented fisherman, but he is graceful. As a Scot and Presbyterian, Norman notes, his father believes that man has fallen from an original state of grace into sin. Only by getting in tune with God's rhythms, including the four-count rhythm of fly-fishing, can one regain beauty. Their father uses the word "beautiful" often.

For Norman and his father, grace is tied both to the all-powerful divine and to human beauty and virtue. Norman's claim that his father has "grace" is based on a combination of his father's piety, his rhythmic casting, and his appreciation of natural beauty.

Norman's father's rod—he disdains anyone who calls it a pole—is made of split bamboo wrapped in delicate thread. For him, the art of fishing is sacred, rather than fun: it reflects man's fallen nature in his inability to control the delicate rod. For Norman, it's counterintuitive that artistry is needed to simply pick up a rod with line on it and throw it across the river.

Norman's father will transmit to his sons this elevated sense of fly-fishing, not as a sport or distraction from life but as a part of life—even a spiritual metaphor for it. Norman concedes that it's difficult for an outsider to see how simply throwing a line could be so complex.

As easy as the task seems, "unredeemed man" will always lean too far back with the rod, often getting it stuck behind a bush. Man's natural instinct is also to flick the rod back and forth so that the fly falls out of the air into the water, instead of attempting to create a circular movement between line and fly and transparent leader (the line directly connected to the fly). As soon as the forward movement of these three elements begins, it has to be reversed so that the fish only sees the life-like fly.

Just as humans are naturally weak and unable to access divine knowledge except through grace, so they also fail to reach perfection in the most essential activity involved in fly-fishing. Norman shows how it is necessary to go against one's "natural instinct" in order to achieve true skill, which already is linked here to the art of fly-fishing.

In fly-fishing, the four-count rhythm means that first, the line, leader, and fly lift off the water. They are then thrown into the air, and there needs to be one beat to allow the fly and leader to get behind the line. At the fourth beat, one must powerfully throw the line into the rod and coast to a landing.

Here, a musical analogy helps us understand the close relationship between fly-fishing and art in the novel: it is not a haphazard or random activity but rather a series of rhythms learned over time.

Norman's father is always particular about these things, among others—he believes that eternal salvation is tied to grace and to art, though none of these things are easy. He teaches his two sons how to cast by using their mother's piano metronome. Paul, who is three years younger than Norman, is already ahead of his brother in fishing-related matters. He reads the old book *The Compleat Angler* and tells Norman that the author didn't even know how to spell "complete." Paul says that he would have liked to place fishing bets with this author.

For Norman's father, the musical rhythm of fly-fishing links it not only to art—an analogy further underlined by the possibility of improving one's fishing ability through a piano metronome—but also to a higher power. Even as a young child, we see that Paul is obsessed with all things fishing. This obsession initially seems innocent enough, even when it is a small boy already wanting to cast bets.

Despite their difference in age, Norman knows even as a young man that Paul will be an expert fly-fisherman. Paul always loves to bet on himself, an interest that Norman never shared. Paul never seems like Norman's "kid brother," but rather an artistic master. Paul never wants help or advice, and ultimately, Norman (speaking from the present) says, he couldn't help Paul at all.

Norman suggests here that he and Paul were already largely themselves from a very young age. This continuity in terms of identity makes us wonder if Paul really could *be helped—rather than assuming that Norman simply couldn't help him—since Paul's character always held the seeds of what he would become.*

The brothers already have different personalities before Norman starts working for the U.S. Forest Service at the age of fifteen, and begins to spend summers away from fishing. Paul had decided that fishing was the main thing worth doing in life, so his summer job is a lifeguard at the pool. He chooses this job so he can find girls for dates during the day and then fish in the early evenings. Paul's chosen profession would be a reporter on a Montana paper.

Norman is portrayed as the responsible older brother here, although through his summers away he begins to depart from the carefully constructed moral framework of his father, one that Paul continues to cling to. Paul's profession reflects his toughness but also his close ties to the local life of Montana.

The Maclean family is very close-knit. Norman and Paul are taught that outside the sacred walls of church and family, the world is full of "bastards"—more of them the further one gets from Missoula, Montana.

As much as the Macleans love each other, this love is clearly limited and exclusive when it comes to the outside world—as the world doesn't hold the same values Norman's father does.

Norman and Paul also have in common a certain toughness—Norman's from working at the Forest Service, and Paul from pure internal stubbornness. At one point, as a boy, Paul wins a battle of wills with his father about eating oatmeal in the morning.

While Norman and Paul both share their father's stubbornness, Paul's is much stronger and more obstinate, foreshadowing his later reluctance to admit weakness or accept help.

Norman and Paul share a street fighting theory: if it seems like a fight is brewing, it's important to be the first one to throw a punch, so that you're one punch ahead from the start. The problem, Norman notes, is that sometimes you'll preemptively hit someone who then makes it his stated goal to kill you.

The characteristics that will be seen as negative later in Paul's life are initially shown to be values Normans shares with him. Early on, they serve to bring the brothers together while distancing them from the outside world.

The only time Norman and Paul ever fight, they don't see their mother, a petite woman, come between them to try to stop them—until she is suddenly on the floor. Each of the brothers shouts that it was the other one who knocked her down. Meanwhile she staggers around without her glasses on, claiming that she just slipped and fell.

Norman relates this story almost humorously, as an example both of his and Paul's supposed "toughness" and of their love for their mother—but when considering Paul's later penchant for violence, the scene is more ominous.

PART 2

Norman transitions in his memories to the summer of 1937, when his father had retired and was living with their mother in Missoula, while Paul was a reporter in the capital of Helena, and Norman was living with his wife's family in Wolf Creek, 40 miles away.

Both Norman and Paul have stayed relatively close to home, never straying from their Montanan upbringing, though Norman has stepped further outside the family by marrying.

One day in this summer of 1937, Norman goes to see Paul, following his mother-in-law Florence's request that the two take her son Neal fishing when he comes to town. Norman isn't sure what Paul will think, but he knows that Paul loves Norman's wife and mother-in-law—though Paul still can't see why Norman wanted to get married in the first place.

Paul has chosen a lifestyle that allows him the ultimate freedom, while Norman now feels obligated to follow his mother-in-law's wishes. Nevertheless, Paul has apparently been willing to broaden his familial love to Norman's new family.

Norman finds Paul outside a Montana club at 10:30 in the morning, looking like he's about to get a drink. Norman shares the news: his brother-in-law Neal is coming from the West Coast and wants to fish with them. Paul says a West Coaster fishes with worms and he can't condone that. He says that even though the brother-in-law may be from Montana originally, everyone from the West Coast moved there to become accountants, businessmen, or gamblers—since they couldn't make it as fly-fishermen.

This is our first inkling that Paul's issues may include alcoholism—as well as betting, gambling, and being eager for a fight, as we've already seen. Though Paul has accepted Norman's new family, he still is suspicious and scornful of those outside the Montana fold—"outsiders," for him, is a term that can be defined by an ignorance of fly-fishing.

Paul and his editor begin drinking early each morning so that they won't feel badly about anyone they criticize in the small-town paper. When Paul asks Norman to get a drink with him, Norman apologetically says that it's too early in the morning for him to drink. He decides to quickly say something else, so he tells Paul that Florence had wanted Paul to fish with Neal.

Norman is acutely self-conscious about Paul's feelings—knowing Paul's pride and stubbornness, Norman doesn't want Paul to feel as if he's being judged or condemned. Instead, Norman turns to fly-fishing, where Paul is the undeniable master, in order to ask him a favor.

Paul loves Florence, partly because she, also a Scot, looks like his father, with blue eyes and sandy hair. Florence had said that Paul was the best fisherman anywhere, though Norman says the extent to which Florence knew about fishing was that she could exclaim at the amount caught in the fisherman's basket every time. Florence most likely was hoping that Paul and Norman, the "preacher's kids," would improve Neal's morals, though most people in town knew not to hold Paul up on a pedestal.

Paul and Norman are both fiercely loyal to their kind and suspicious of outsiders, who may not share the same ethical code as the two of them and their father. Of course, Paul's morals are concerned more with how to behave while fishing and maintain one's toughness rather than with a more compassionate ethical code. For the townspeople, Paul is verging on disgrace.

Paul agrees to fish with Neal, since Florence wants him to. Then Norman buys them both a drink. Norman says that Neal will arrive the day after tomorrow, and the following day they'll fish on the Elkhorn, a small **stream**. Usually the two are scornful of those who fish in small streams, but the Elkhorn has special Brown Trout and other unique features.

Norman cedes for a moment to Paul's way of doing things, out of sensitivity as well as gratefulness. We also learn here that fly-fishing has its own geographical hierarchy, depending on difficulty, skill, and the diversity of a river's offerings.

Paul proposes that beforehand, he and Norman take the day off to fish the "big **river**," which they both know refers to the powerful Big Blackfoot with its many powerful fish. Its headwaters are on the Continental Divide, near a mine where the lowest temperature in the continental United States was officially recorded at 69.7 degrees below zero. Much of the Blackfoot was created instantly, when an enormous glacial lake (covering today's Montana and Idaho) broke its ice dam—the biggest flood in history that has geological proof behind it. The Blackfoot is a difficult place for trout to live, since the water is so swift and powerful, but it's the river the brothers know best, having fished it since the beginning of the 20th century.

Unlike the Elkhorn, the Blackfoot is treated with due respect by the brothers. In the historical and nature-related details that Norman shares, there is a consistent tone of awe. This area exudes a kind of sublime beauty and strength that exceeds human grasp, whether in the unimaginably cold temperatures of the Continental Divide mine, or the flood of biblical proportions that took place on such a massive scale—having fished the river since the dawn of the century can't compare to such ancient vastness.

The next morning Paul picks up Norman at Wolf Creek. Once they pass the Continental Divide, Paul starts telling one of his stories about his antics, though he talks about them in a removed way, as if reporting on them. In this story, he fished alone until evening; when he was returning home to Helena, feeling lonely, a jackrabbit started following his tail lights on the road. The way Paul tells it, the story is poetic and subtle—it ends with Paul looking back at the rabbit, whose eyes are shining, and then failing to see a turn in the road and crashing.

While Norman and Paul continue to share the bond of family and fly-fishing, they now live in separate places, and drives like these are some of the few times that they can speak one-on-one. Paul's choice of a conversation reflects their different lifestyles as well as Norman's difficulty in understanding his brother's actions. It also highlights Paul's natural skill as a writer and storyteller—another kind of artistry, but one that he clearly prioritizes below fly-fishing.

Paul doesn't mention that he always starts drinking when he's done fishing (though never during). Norman is left wondering whether he's been told a funny story or a sobering tale about a serious car crash that ended up costing his brother hundreds of dollars.

Norman knows about his brother's drinking, but is too afraid of judging or alienating him to ask if Paul needs help, or even to ask Paul to elaborate.

Above the old Clearwater bridge by a canyon the Blackfoot **River** is louder than anywhere, roaring and intimidating small fishermen and small fish. The brothers begin to fish on the same side. Norman doesn't love this area, since cliffs and trees block his possible span and force a "roll cast," in which the fisherman attempts to get distance without extending line behind him. Norman starts by winding his rod slowly so that a long part of the line stays in the water. He then has to use all his power to shoot this line out over the water. It looks like a rattlesnake striking when done well.

The Blackfoot's size and strength makes it suitable only for those fly-fishermen who won't be intimidated by the river, but will still treat it with the proper attention and respect. Norman is less comfortable than Paul is in this kind of terrain, which forces him to practice a certain skill particular to fly-fishing in problematic areas blocked by elements of nature: the roll cast.

Paul watches Norman and is careful not to seem superior, but suggests that the fish are out a bit farther, on a diagonal. They both act as if Paul hadn't said anything, but Norman obeys the directions, and finds that more fish are biting.

Just as Norman is wary of condemning his brother for drinking, so Paul is sensitive to Norman's feeling of inferiority in fishing. Neither has been able to move past a wounded pride about personal areas of weakness.

Norman sees a large black shape rising and sinking in the foamy mid-current, which usually is too strong for most fish. He thinks to himself that this fish will now be further downstream than where he saw it, and he wonders where he can cast from. He crawls up onto a rock slick with water, and asks himself where he'll land such a big fish if he hooks it—a question he says all fishermen should ask themselves.

The "large black shape" takes on almost mythical proportions, as a creature of brute strength that can navigate the complex, powerful currents of the Blackfoot. Norman asks himself questions that seem as much about philosophy as about fishing strategy.

For Norman, during fly-fishing there are no thoughts that don't have to do with the task at hand. Hope and Fear characterize these thoughts, and are in constant tension. One Fear, he says, is that there are rocks all downstream, so Norman can't land the fish right away, before getting to a sandbar. Another Fear counters that the fish will escape if he tries to fight it downriver, so he should try to land it closer. The two Fears argue back and forth.

While Norman claims that his thoughts while fly-fishing have nothing to do with anything else, it's clear in these passages that fly-fishing is deeply relevant to broader questions, and issues as large as hope and fear. For this family, such emotions are embodied by and developed through the art of fly-fishing.

Norman moves to wondering what the fish is thinking. He can't be convinced that a fish feels nothing but hunger and fear. He imagines that the fish has caught sight of the two brothers and is saying to himself that it's lucky it's Norman and not the other brother who's about to fish here.

Norman's personification of the fish is both a humorous interlude and an acknowledgement that there is much about nature that he cannot know, and that eludes human comprehension in general.

Norman casts his rod and immediately catches the fish and lands it on the sandbar. The fish jerks back and forth until Norman slices its head off with his knife. The fish is too large for the basket and, with its crustacean-like black spots, looks oceanic. When Paul sees it, he tips his hat to Norman in respect.

Norman's thoughts about the fish are seen to be a necessary prelude to his conquest, though the sight of the fish in the basket reminds Norman of the eternal world of nature, where he and Paul are merely fleeting outsiders.

Norman watches Paul jump into the river and swim out to a cliff, where he climbs up and steadies himself to cast. Water is sliding off him and seems to make a kind of halo, flickering with the vapor rising from the **river**. Paul casts hard upstream and then pivots gracefully downstream, circling several times in an elegant motion that he calls "shadow casting." He thinks fish see the shadows of the fly over the water and immediately hit it when the fly touches. Norman notes that shadow casting never worked for him—he's not sure if he believes in it, but perhaps he just didn't have the arm and wrist strength of his brother.

Paul takes on an angelic nature here, reflecting his and father's understanding of fly-fishing as an art closely connected to the divine. Paul's "graceful" actions similarly link his skill to a higher goodness, and in turn, his skill in fly-fishing is described not as an element of a competitive sport or hobby but rather as a true art, with techniques that have something of the genius and the unknowable.

Paul is relatively short, but has developed muscles specifically for fly-fishing: his right wrist and arm are far bigger than his left. Norman watches the multiple rhythms: their father's four-count, Paul's piston two-count, and the arcing four-count of his loop. A couple emerges from the woods, and they both exclaim at Paul's skill. When Norman starts to move to the next hole, the woman, who's wearing bib overalls, asks if he's not going to stay to see the big fish. Norman answers that he'll see them later—Paul is his brother.

Norman traces the musical rhythms of Paul's movements, taught by their father but mastered and even further developed by Paul. Even strangers, as Norman notes, can easily become enraptured by Paul's art, seeing something beautiful in his fly-fishing, just as the boys' father had taught them to see beauty in the sport.

It's late when Paul and Norman head back towards Helena, so Paul suggests that Norman stay with him for the night. Paul says that he'll have to leave Norman for a few hours that night, though. Around two in the morning, Norman gets a call from a desk sergeant who tells him to come into the county jail—Paul has been arrested. Norman doesn't have to pay bail, since Paul covers the police beat and has friends around, but the sergeant says that Paul will have to come back. He beat someone up and broke some dishes and a table at a bar, and he's going to be sued. The sergeant says that Paul has been drinking too much lately, and he's been brought in often. Norman doesn't want to hear much more: perhaps one problem, he now thinks, is that he never was too interested in hearing such details about Paul.

Once back in Helena, the brothers' positions are switched once again, and Norman becomes the more mature, knowledgeable one who must get his brother out of trouble. We've already seen elements of Paul's stubborn personality as a child, and as an adult, this obstinacy—as well as his sense of honor versus disgrace—has led to a more dangerous belligerence. Norman plays the role of dutiful brother who acts out of a sense of love and helpfulness, but he admits that he prefers not to deal with Paul's issues head-on, as that would mean acknowledging their gravity.

The sergeant says that Paul is behind in the big poker game at Hot Springs, where things can get more serious than mere fist fighting. Though somewhat confused, Norman gathers that Paul had gone with the half-Indian girl he's been seeing to Weiss's restaurant, where they have booths with curtains that can be drawn for couples. A man had stuck his head into the curtain and yelled, "Wahoo," a racial slur, and Paul knocked him over the table. The man had said it was just a joke. The sergeant agrees with Norman that it's not funny, but it'll still cost Paul a good deal.

Montana may be a place that Norman and Paul fiercely love, but at this time it is also home to rabid racism and white fear of "mixing" between whites and Native Americans—those who, of course, occupied Montana far earlier than any European pioneers. Still, Paul's refusal to be disgraced, or to let another be disgraced, leads him to violence, and he doesn't seem to be able to learn from it.

Norman confesses that he's not sure what to do, and the sergeant tells him that he also has a troublemaking younger brother. Norman asks what he does to help him, and the sergeant says he takes him fishing. Norman asks about what happens when that doesn't work. The sergeant is silent, and then tells Norman to go see his brother.

Maclean portrays fly-fishing as a generally Montanan response to troubles of the mind or body, and a way for people to offer help to those who don't seem to want it. Norman is starting to doubt this solution, though he doesn't press the sergeant for another.

Norman's mind flashes back to the woman wearing overalls who had admired Paul's shadow-casting. Then he enters the room, where Paul is standing by the barred window. The Half-Indian girl is sitting at his feet. She is one of Norman's favorite women because of her glistening black hair. One of her great-grandmothers had been a Cheyenne tribe member back when the Cheyenne defeated General Custer with the Sioux, and cut off the testicles of the Seventh Cavalry after the defeat.

Norman's flashback further underscores the contrast between Paul as a radiant, angelic master of the river, and his position now, in a dingy jail cell where he has to be fished out himself. Paul's "girl" seems to possess some of the same strident, devil-may-care characteristics Paul does, though it's also possible that Norman, entranced, exoticizes details of the past.

Paul's girl enjoys getting into trouble, walking arm in arm with Paul and Norman on Last Chance Gulch on a Saturday night so that people would be forced off the sidewalk into the street. She loves having a man get into a fight over her, but Norman says that she makes up for it by being such a beautiful dancer. Norman calls her Mo-nah-se-tah, which is the name of the Cheyenne chief's beautiful daughter.

Mo-nah-se-tah, rather than try to mitigate the discrimination she faces as a Native American, prefers to provoke others into performing their prejudice outright. Norman seems to admire the woman's spirit, though he continues to exoticize her.

Now Mo-nah-se-tah doesn't look as beguiling as usual—she struggles to get up, but her legs buckle and her stockings slip down. She and Paul both smell like alcohol. Norman carries Paul's girl out the door as Paul follows. The sergeant suggests, as they leave, that they all go fishing.

Again, the dignity and nobility of Paul as a fly-fisherman—and of Mo-nah-se-tah in her usual beguiling appearance—are exchanged for a more dismal state of affairs. The sergeant's suggestion seems heartfelt, if comical, but hardly a long-term solution.

Since the Indians not on reservations have to live on the outskirts of town, by the slaughterhouse or dump, Norman doesn't take Paul's girl home but rather puts her to sleep in the guest bed in Paul's apartment. She says to him that Paul should have killed the man who insulted her. Norman says maybe he did.

The fact that Native Americans are relegated to the outskirts of town underlines the prejudice and disgrace that Paul's girl faces daily. Still, Norman isn't sure how to deal with Paul's actual response in lashing out against it.

It's dawn when Norman drives the 40 miles from Helena to Wolf Creek. He tries to figure out what might help him reach out to Paul. He thinks of other troublemakers in his father's family, from Scotland to Fairbanks, Alaska, whom he's heard about from his aunts, who still adore their big, funny brothers. Every Christmas until they die, these uncles scrawl notes to their sisters saying they'll return to the States soon.

Norman is closely attached to his family history, which for him represents a certain toughness and strength of spirit that he, Paul, and their father continue to exhibit. Here, Norman wonders if Paul's actions can simply be explained as the male side of the family's usual "troublemaking."

Norman notes that at sunrise, everything is "luminous but not clear"—it is the time when it seems it may be possible to help someone, even if it seems unlikely. As Norman drives into a canyon, he reminds himself that Paul isn't like other people in his family: he is an artist, and would never run away to Alaska.

By "luminous but not clear," Norman suggests that nature's cycles can promote a certain wonder and way of thinking even if they cannot provide answers to human questions.

Still, Norman is aware that there exist others with brothers they want to help even if they don't understand them—all of whom possess the futile but tenacious instinct of being "our brothers' keepers."

This phrase stems from the Bible's Old Testament, and the story of Cain and Abel—where one brother denied responsibility for the other's death.

Norman arrives home and goes to sleep. He's woken up by his wife Jessie, who reminds him that they have to meet Neal at the train station. Norman is relieved to remember that his wife's family has someone to worry about themselves—it even seems funny to him. He jokes to Jessie that it will be a "pleasure" to meet Neal. She says she knows Norman doesn't like Neal. Norman agrees, and she says he's funny.

In the light of Norman's own family issues, those of his wife Jessie seem relatively unimportant and benign (from his perspective). Perhaps it is this contrast that puts Norman into such a good mood, teasing and joking with Jessie before the arrival of another prodigal son (and brother).

Neal descends from the train wearing white flannels and a red, white, and blue V-neck sweater over a turtleneck sweater—the only passenger to ever arrive at Wolf Creek, Montana looking like that, Norman thinks. He recognizes his family and says, "Oh," ignoring Norman. Neal turns his head and waits to be kissed. His suitcase is his mother's, embroidered with her maiden initials. When Florence sees it, she cries.

From the moment we see Neal, we're witnesses to Norman's disdain of his brother-in-law. Neal lacks the rugged, self-assured attitude of a true Montanan, and instead sticks out as an imposer, one that, for Norman, has certain effeminate qualities—making him scorn Neal even more.

That night Neal tries to sneak out of the house, but Florence and Jessie see him. Norman, to avoid being asked to do so, volunteers to accompany Neal to Black Jack's Bar. The bar is a freight car with its wheels removed, and a mountain goat painted on its side. The bar itself is an unevenly split log, while the stools are grocery crates. Inside is a regular named Long Bow—in this area, "to pull the long bow" means to tell tall tales about one's own hunting and shooting. However, Norman once saw him shoot five aspirin tablets that his friend had thrown into the air.

Neal seems not much more pleased than Norman to be in town, and in the thrall of his female relatives. Black Jack's Bar is pure local Montana culture, and Norman is totally at home here. Part of living in a small town involves participating in local legends, and Long Bow's skill at shooting is another kind of "artistry" that, like Paul's fly casting, reflects the locals' rugged way of life.

On the other end of the bar is a woman known as Old Rawhide, the town prostitute. She had been elected town beauty queen of Wolf Creek a decade earlier after riding a horse bareback around the town's 111 inhabitants. Wolf Creek is tiny, but has two regional celebrities, a steer wrestler and a roper, who each win hundreds of dollars at county fairs over the summer (though this doesn't count their hospital expenses). Old Rawhide splits her winters living with one or the other, never lasting long at either. In the summers she lives at Black Jack's and picks up stray fishermen.

Again, Norman adds some local color to his descriptions, as well as another bar regular. Both entertainment and livelihoods in Wolf Creek seem to revolve around a certain relationship to the natural and animal world—especially in the ability to master it, as wrestlers and ropers attempt to. Old Rawhide will play a larger role in the story later on, but here we have an initial sense of her character.

Neal and Norman sit next to Long Bow, and after a few drinks Neal begins out-lying Long Bow with his own outrageous tall tales. Norman notices that Neal's strategy with women is to first ignore Old Rawhide as an initial ploy, and Norman realizes it's a good one. Neal is talking about tracking an otter up to freezing-cold Rogers Pass, making it up as he goes along. Finally Old Rawhide, who's sick of being ignored, asks "Buster," as she calls Neal, why otters are at the top of the Continental Divide, when they only occupy creeks and mud slides. Neal stops and suggests they have another drink—one for Old Rawhide, too. Shortly after, Norman rises from his crate, and Old Rawhide slides closer to Neal. Norman reminds him that they're going fishing the next morning, but Neal doesn't seem to be listening.

Though Neal may have been shy and polite around his female relatives, here he takes on a different persona, embracing the opportunity to manufacture exciting, exotic tales about, again, mastering the wilderness. Old Rawhide, whom Neal is attempting to seduce, sees right through his tales, as any local who understands wildlife naturally would, but this doesn't seem to dissuade Neal from his tricks—and it doesn't seem to bother Old Rawhide either. Norman's reminder underlines where his own priorities lie, and foreshadow an uncomfortable next morning.

The next day Paul is there early: he and Norman never go against the rule by which they were raised: to never be late for church, work, or fishing. Florence nervously tells Paul that Neal was home late and isn't up yet. Paul says to get him—he didn't even go to bed himself. Paul and Florence stare at each other: as Norman puts it, no Scottish mother likes to have a lazy son in bed, and no Scot fisherman likes to wait around for a male relative with a hangover. Florence gently wakes up Neal.

Paul may not have given up his late nights and drinking, but to him, fly-fishing continues to be sacred. Paul too can now find a reason to be scornful of Neal, who is already interrupting their fishing plans. Norman will often relate the character of Florence and the other women as peculiar to Scots, reflecting the importance he places on family history.

The group loads the truck of Ken, Jessie's other brother, and the six of them pile in. They follow the pothole-ridden road (making Neal even more uncomfortable) until the moment when the Elkhorn **River** empties into the Missouri. But Ken, who lives in Wolf Creek, is an expert with his hands and deftly manages the terrain. His wife Dorothy is a registered nurse, and she, Florence, and Jessie (essentially Wolf Creek's medical center) bend over Neal, who is lying on a mattress in the back of the truck.

Norman doesn't fail to relate how Neal is entirely unprepared to go fishing—another example, for Norman, of Neal's effeminate, "weak" nature. We've already seen how much Paul and Norman value toughness—part of the reason they're both reluctant to accept help—so Neal's over-eagerness to have others attend to him is especially unappealing to them.

Since Ken knows everyone in town, they're able to enter the private land of a man named Jim McGregor and fish on his part of the **river**. The ranch road grows more and more rugged until it only consists of two ruts. As soon as it reaches the riverside, Paul jumps out; he's ready with his leader and flies before Norman has even moved. Jessie warns Norman not to abandon Neal. Paul calls over his shoulder that he'll start upstream, and they'll meet in the middle.

Norman's brief comment about Jim McGregor reveals the ironic fact that, despite nature's power and ultimate ambivalence about human affairs, people still can "own" things like rivers. From the start Norman is yoked to Neal by his wife's orders, and already he seems to be behind Paul, who waits for no one. It's assumed that none of the women will fish—they wait in the truck for the men.

Norman notes that Paul might have caught so many fish partly because he spends more time in the water—he's quicker than anyone to reach the **river**, change flies, tie knots, etc. Norman also imagines that Paul doesn't want to give Norman a chance to talk to him about the other night.

Paul's hastiness to get out onto the river is part of his general efficiency and adoration of fly-fishing, but it seems to Norman that his quickness is also due to Paul's reluctance to linger for any lectures or attempts to "help" him.

Ken says he'll fish the beaver dams upstream. Jessie pinches Norman on the arm and repeats to him that she shouldn't leave her brother. Norman and Neal walk down a trail. Once they're out of sight, Neal says he's not feeling well, and will stop there to fish the meadow. Though he'll only be a few hundred yards away from Norman, Norman knows it's a bad idea, since Neal can't be seen from the bend in the **river**—but he's impatient to fish, so he agrees.

Jessie's insistence seems to suggest that it will be more difficult than it appears for Norman to keep his eye on Neal. Neal, of course, knows how to be manipulative, and Norman—probably unwilling to let Paul get too far ahead of him—acts a bit irrationally and fails to "see after" Neal as Jessie had asked him to.

Norman walks slowly down the trail, trying, as he says, to leave the world behind. He notes that fishermen have the tendency to want the world to be perfect: perhaps they'd fish better if they didn't spend so much time waiting for perfection.

Again, fly-fishing gives Norman the opportunity for more profound contemplation. Here, fishing is tied to the human weakness of desiring perfection without also working towards it.

Norman wonders if he should speak to Paul about the other night, or at least offer to help him with money. He follows these questions until his conscience ebbs away, though without coming up with any answers. At one point he turns back to check on Neal, who has left the meadow and is nodding off on a rock, his neck nearly sunburnt. Norman says this still water isn't good for fishing. Neal points to all the fish he sees, and Norman, without looking, says they're "squaw fish" and "suckers." Norman is exasperated that Neal can be a native of Montana without knowing what a sucker is. Norman asks Neal again if he wants to fish with him and Paul, and Neal says no.

The question of help and helplessness, a major theme in the book, is never satisfactorily resolved—here Norman only follows his questions about Paul up to a certain extent, and then discards them as too knotty. Hypocritically, Norman doesn't feel the same sensitivity about helping Neal, who for him is only exasperating rather than tragic. Neal is even more frustrating to the brothers when he claims more knowledge than he actually has.

Norman knows he won't catch fish if he keeps fooling around, so he leaves Neal behind and quickly reaches a hole packed with fish. At first, when a fish strikes he sets the hook too quickly, so that it can't get embedded in the fish's mouth—instead, he knows, he has to jerk the line as the fish strikes. He's too used to the fast waters of the Blackfoot, so his timing is off.

Norman has spent a good chunk of text describing the rhythms, often musical in nature, that are important both for success in fly-fishing and for gaining a greater sense of aesthetic harmony and pleasure within nature.

After Norman fixes his timing, he soon grows tired of the small, easy-to-catch fish. Norman wonders what Paul is doing, since he can't ben wasting his time on 10-inch Brook Trout. He notes that fishing is its own world, but it also includes multiple worlds: one involves fishing for big fish in a small area where the willows on the riverside complicate things for the fisherman. This area, where Norman now is heading, holds "Brown monsters" from the Mississippi **River**.

Part of fly-fishing as an art involves difficulty and complexity—it's not simply about catching the most fish that one can. Norman creates a kind of taxonomy of (trout) fly-fishing techniques and aspects, including geographical considerations and specific kinds of fish that haunt different areas of the river.

Norman changes his leader and fly, and waxes his line so that it's sure to float. He arranges the trout he has caught in the basket, and then closes the lid on that "world" of small fish. He catches sight of a large storm cloud in the distance, and many fish begin to jump—a sign that the weather is changing.

Norman is acutely sensitive to how the fish are acting. Through time and experience, he's come to learn that fish can have a much better sense of their environment and the weather than humans do.

For Norman right now, the Elkhorn **River**, mythical Brown Trout, and the weather are all that exist in the world. The Elkhorn marks the edge between the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains: black mountains that turn brown and yellow with the prairie grasses, just as the trout has a black back and brown and yellow sides. Their ugliness makes them somewhat beautiful, Norman thinks.

Norman is absorbed in his world of fly-fishing in the same way one can be absorbed in a novel, a play, or a song. Through his absorption, he becomes increasingly aware of the resonances between the natural beauty of the mountains, and the beauty (or "ugly beauty") of the fish.

Norman wanders upstream until he reaches a hole where not a single fish is jumping: he assumes that there must be one massive fish there who is scaring the others away. Norman steps to shore and casts from the lower end of the hole. Nothing moves, and he begins to wonder if the hole is entirely empty—if not, it means the big fish has to be out of open water, under the willow bushes (a difficult place to cast).

Part of Norman's fishing strategy involves deducing a reason or cause from a set of information, here concerning the kinds of fish that may be lurking underwater. In addition to a work of art, here fly-fishing becomes akin to a game of strategy, something enthralling in its own way.

One summer, Paul had been watching Norman fish in open water and, frustrated, said that you can't catch trout in a bathtub—you can't be afraid to lose a fly by casting into the willow bushes. Their friend George would always tie more flies for them, Paul had said: a mark of a good day's fishing is leaving a few flies hanging on the bushes. Still, Norman doesn't like the prospect of losing flies, even if they're free.

Little as he may like to admit it, Norman draws on Paul's expertise and artistic genius in his own fly-fishing. Norman's continued reluctance to possibly lose flies distinguishes him from his brother's more excitable, risk-taking personality, in both fly-fishing and in life.

Norman wants to know why fish are jumping everywhere but in this hole. Fly-fishing means looking for answers to questions, he notes. He practices a few casts into the bushes, then walks up to the thick osiers (willows) upstream. He doesn't make a powerful first cast, but lets the fly float until suddenly checking it, so the fly drops straight down. He notes that a quiet excitement in life is watching yourself as if from afar, creating something beautiful.

Again, Norman treats fishing in this hole as a game or strategy. It has something to do with artistry, but Norman's strategy also might distinguish him from the way his brother fishes. Paul seems to use not his intellect but his spirit—not attempting to deduce positions but rather inhabiting the same "world" as the fish.

The leader settles on a branch. Norman isn't sure if he drops the fly into the water, or if the fish leaps out of the water to take the fly, but suddenly the fish has struck. Norman notes that when a big fish strikes, the fisherman's arm, shoulder, or brain weighs the fish as if on the scale, so that he won't be disappointed when he lands it: Norman guesses that it weighs seven or eight pounds. The Brown trout thrashes through the bush, weaving it into a basket with the line. Suddenly, it's gone—for all Norman knows, it may have disappeared into thin air. He wades into the bush to see the knots of fishing tackle, all that's left.

Norman attempts to describe in detail what most likely takes place in only an instant. The settling of the fly, the strike, and the "weighing" are part of the same continuous movement. In what could only be another instant, the fish disappears, and the way Norman describes it, there is something mystical and unexplainable about this disappearance, which reminds him of his own weakness and incapability.

Norman notes that while poets talk about "spots of time," fishermen are the ones who really experience eternity compressed into a moment: he'll remember the fish forever, he says. He hears a voice saying that the fish was a big one. Norman turns to Paul and says, looking down, that he missed him. Paul says that no one can catch such a big fish in the bush. Norman thinks he's just trying to comfort him, and asks how Paul caught his fish.

Being reminded of his own lack of power is certainly frustrating, but for Norman it is awe-inducing rather than tragic. Of course, Norman then returns to more petty, human-level concerns when he realizes that Paul has been watching all along, and the two continue their dance of sensitivity, reassurance, and competition.

Paul says it was in shallow, open water without bushes, since Browns usually feed along the **river**'s edge where grasshoppers and mice fall in. Norman is dismayed: he thought he had fished the hole just how Paul had taught him. The problem with learning from a master, Norman thinks, is that you only pick up some of what he teaches.

Norman had recalled what Paul said about fishing in open water, but this kind of rote learning, he realizes, cannot hope to reach the level of artistic genius—whereas Paul has an intuitive sense of how the fish are behaving and how best to attract them.

Suddenly, without knowing why, Norman asks if he can help Paul with money or anything, because of the other night. Then, nervous at Paul's silence, he says that maybe Paul needs help fixing the car from the night he chased the rabbit. Paul simply bows his head and remains silent, until he says it's going to rain.

Once again, the brothers' positions are quickly inverted, but Norman's offer of help (which he hadn't consciously decided to give) seems to backfire, as Paul reacts almost as if embarrassed for Norman, quietly waiting for him to stop.

Then Paul asks where Neal is. Norman is caught off guard, and has to think about it. Paul says Norman will be in trouble, and Norman, thinking about the Scots waiting for him, says he knows. Norman says he's done, though he hasn't reached his limit. Paul tries to convince him to continue, but Norman says he's through—this day won't let him do what he really wants to do, whether it's catch a Brown or say something helpful to his brother.

Norman began the day noting how fishermen are always in search of an elusive perfection. Now he seems to give up on that perfection, both in fishing and in life and family—its usual parallel in the book. Norman again refers to the national past of his wife's family (blood that he shares), here in fearing the spirited anger of the Scottish women.

Paul tells Norman they should find Neal, and says he shouldn't have left him behind. Norman should try to help him, Paul suggests. Norman sputters that Neal doesn't like him, Montana, or fishing, and that he doesn't like Neal, and he didn't leave him. He feels his excitement from fishing turn to anger at Neal. Paul suggests they help Neal by taking him fishing with them. Norman says Neal doesn't like fishing, but Paul says he might like someone trying to help him. Norman repeats that he doesn't understand Paul, who always turned aside any offer of help himself.

In response to Paul's suggestion that he help Neal, Norman is incredulous, modulating between anger and defensiveness. Paul seems to have the same faith in fishing's ability to help and to heal that the sergeant at the jail had—but ironically, they've gotten into trouble precisely by taking Neal fishing for the first time. Norman grows more skeptical that he can help either Paul or Neal.

Norman and Paul start upstream as the black cloud descends over the canyon. Present-day Norman, now thinking back to that day in 1937, imagines it was like this in 1949, when a giant fire from Mann Gulch swept over the divide, and sixteen Forest Service firemen were killed. Suddenly, the storm rides over them. They look for Neal all over the meadow, then realize he must be safe and dry—at the truck.

The fish were right about the rain, it seems. As usual, Norman is enchanted by the scenery around him. Maclean would actually go on to write another book about this forest fire, which was tragic and destructive but also a reminder of nature's ultimate power over humans.

Paul and Norman trek back to the truck, soaking wet. Norman pokes his head through the canvas into the back of the truck. The women are holding carving knives—they've been making sandwiches—and point them at Norman. Jessie accuses him of having left Neal. Florence says the "poor boy" was exposed to the sun for too long. Norman looks scornfully at Neal's pale face, shielded by his mother from reality.

"Scorn" continues to be Norman's de facto way of dealing with and treating Neal, who he sees as babied by his female relatives, while Norman is out in the cold and rain, being "tough" as he has always claimed to be. He still doesn't accept that Neal may need "help" as well.

Norman feels better having Paul beside him, and hopes that one day he can help Paul as much as he's trying to help Norman. The women make Paul a sandwich but refuse to give one to Norman. The water leaking through the canvas of the truck turns to vapor, and Norman can smell the vapor of alcohol rising from Neal's body. He feels that he is half in a sweat bath and half in a cold river. He says silently to Jessie that he did not leave her brother—Neal left him.

Again, Norman is entirely absorbed in his attempts to help his brother—even if the attempts keep failing—to the exclusion of caring about his brother-in-law. Norman's description of the truck in the rain reflects how unpleasantly he has come to feel about the trip in general, as he feels unjustly blamed for Neal's weaknesses.

On the way home, the truck gets stuck in the muddy ruts of the road. Ken drives the truck and Paul and Norman push. Norman suggests to Ken that Neal get out and help, but Ken says he needs weight in the back of the truck or the wheels will spin out. Weak with hunger, Norman keeps pushing with Paul until they arrive, and Paul leaves for Helena.

While Paul seems to have accepted Neal's frustrating, spineless ways, Norman continues to fume at Neal's inability or unwillingness to "be a man," a Montana necessity of self-sufficiency (even if that philosophy hasn't turned out so well for Paul).

Norman falls asleep. When he wakes up he realizes that he'll need to get out of his wife's way for a few days if she's to forgive him. He calls Paul to ask if he wants to meet at Seeley Lake, by the Blackfoot Canyon, where they have a cabin. Norman asks Jessie if it wouldn't be a good idea for him and Paul to get away briefly. She looks sidelong at him and says yes.

Norman's frustrations with Neal are growing more serious, now threatening even his relationship with his wife. Jessie is clearly as concerned about Neal as Norman is about Paul, though Norman can't seem to see this connection.

Two days later, as Norman and Paul are driving west, Paul begins to tell Norman about a new girl he's picked up. Norman wonders if he should listen to this story as literature, or perhaps as an impersonal news story. The girl will only let him have sex with her in the boys' locker room at the high school gymnasium, Paul says. Norman is wondering if Paul is trying to say he's in trouble with a woman, or if he's just concerned about keeping Norman informed even after Norman has settled into marriage.

Again, Norman lacks the tools to interpret Paul's stories and understand how to react to them. Paul suggested earlier that it's a good idea for Norman to try to help Neal, and yet Norman can't fully believe that Paul's story is a cry for help on his own behalf. Perhaps neither Norman nor Paul wants to believe that Paul is in any kind of trouble.

Norman thinks about how hot it is, and how the fish will probably be all lying on the bottom. Soon he and Paul reach the tamarack trees where their cabin is located, and they hear a car turn off the road behind them. They look around and see someone fall out the side of the car, which has no doors: on the car's floorboards are a coffee can, a bottle of liquor, and strawberry soda. It's Old Rawhide who has fallen out of the car, and Neal is nodding in the back seat.

In the middle of their idyll, the brothers are suddenly faced with a newly unwelcome situation—two unwanted companions who have infringed on the sacred time and space of fly-fishing. Neal continues to do the exactly the worst, most disgraceful things possible according to the brothers' philosophy.

Old Rawhide walks right up to Norman and says she's brought "Buster" to go fishing with them—she calls all men "Buster" except Norman, whom she calls "you." Norman thinks he'll never be able to convince Paul that he didn't rope him into this on purpose. Buster has no money left, Old Rawhide says. Paul tells Norman to help him, but in response to Norman's question, Old Rawhide says they don't need money—they just want to go fishing. Norman peeks into the driver's seat and asks Neal if he wants to go fishing, even though it's so hot. Neal repeats that he wants to fish with Norman and Paul, and Paul says, "Let's go."

Once again, Paul asks Norman to help Neal, which seems to suggest that Paul wouldn't be adverse to being helped himself, even though he's been unable to respond to Norman's explicit attempts. It seems that Neal has brought Old Rawhide with him in order to submit them both to the guidance of Paul and Norman. Paul, in turn, will never refuse someone who wants to fly-fish, even if Neal is hardly serious in his desire.

They all pile into Paul's car, and Norman notices they don't have a fishing rod. He doesn't dare tell Paul to stop for a minute for Norman to check to see if they'd left the rods in their car—for Paul there is no mercy for fishermen who leave their gear behind. Norman leans back in the car and wonders why his two ways of trying to help people are always offering them money or taking them fishing.

Many people in the novella—Norman, Paul and the desk sergeant at the jail—are confident in the saving power of fishing. Norman is growing more skeptical of this power, however, though his own descriptions of fly-fishing still exude a sense of joy and bliss.

Norman suggests to Paul that they turn away from the canyon, where the water is too rough for Neal, to another bend in the **river** with pine trees beside it, giving them a shady place to park the car. Norman approaches the fishing hole, recalling one time when he had seen a bear clamber up the mountain on the other side like a bolt of lightning.

For Norman, particular places are an opportunity to reflect on nature's autonomous, wonder-inducing qualities, and also to recall former moments at which eternal, self-sustaining nature intersected with his temporal, human experience.

Norman peers into the back of the car, where Neal and Old Rawhide look like they're asleep. Neal rises up slowly and stiffly, and looking out to the **river**, asks if it's possible to wade out to the sand bar. Norman says he probably can, so Neal says he'll fish there. Old Rawhide wakes up and hands Paul the liquor bottle. Paul gives it directly to Neal, as neither he nor Norman will drink before the fishing is over.

Although Neal had said specifically that he wanted to fish with the brothers, he fails to treat fly-fishing with the kind of sacred dignity that Norman and Paul give to it—for Paul, this significance even supersedes his alcohol addiction.

Norman notes that in Montana beer doesn't count as drinking—Paul counts out eight bottles, and tells Neal where they'll bury them so that they'll keep cold. Now, looking back, Norman as narrator recalls wistfully how delicious those beers stashed in the river would be—beers made in the next town over rather than in Milwaukee or St. Louis.

As an old man looking back on this moment, Norman speaks with bittersweet nostalgia of days when, as he sees it, there was a closer connection to nature, and a closer connection between humans inhabiting that nature.

As Paul and Norman wander downstream, Paul remarks that Neal will one day realize he doesn't like Montana and will leave. Norman says Neal just likes to tell women he likes to fish. They sit on a log and Paul suddenly says maybe he should go to the West Coast, where he'll be able to do more than just cover the local sports and the police blotter and spend his time getting into trouble. Norman suggests that Paul can cover more important beats in California, and even have his own column. After a pause, Paul stands and picks up his rod, saying that he'll never leave Montana—he likes the trouble.

Norman and Paul, steadfast Montanans both, find Neal difficult to understand, as someone born in Montana who is nevertheless a total outsider. Treating fly-fishing as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, is to them the height of disgrace. Paul and Norman's conversation then paints an optimistic picture of what a solution to Paul's troubles might be, and how Paul might be able to help himself—but Paul immediately discards it.

The brothers begin fishing, but it's too hot for the fishing to be any good. For Norman, it seems that all of life has migrated from water to land, except that he himself hardly feels alive. Norman tries to fish around big rocks where fish could be found in the shade, but he only finds shadows. Then he wonders if the grasshoppers will be out in the sun and drag the fish into the open—he fastens on a fly that looks like a grasshopper, but still has no luck.

As usual, Norman attempts to use rational, deductive reasoning to determine where best to fish, though he doesn't have much luck with it. In a somewhat delirious state from the sun and the heat, Norman feels like a part of the natural landscape, but in this case that means feeling still and hardly alive.

Norman recalls fishing's "curiosity theory," which says that fish will sometimes strike at things just to see what they are, not because they look tasty. He ties on a fly covered with deer hair and feathers. He recalls one time when he was fishing and saw a strange creature trying to swim across the Blackfoot **River**—a bobcat—and thinks that this fly looks just like the wet bobcat. Slowly, a sign of life appears from below and begins to circle the "Bobcat Special," sinking and then bobbing back up. The fish finally catches sight of Norman and darts out of sight—the only time the "curiosity theory" has nearly worked.

Norman often tries to think his way in to the minds of fish, personifying them as possessing their own characteristics and curiosities. The jumpy, humorous, somewhat irrational nature of his thoughts here can probably be traced to the effect of the boiling-hot sun beating down on him. Once again, Norman's more pedestrian "theories" work less well than Paul's more natural artistry.

Norman wants to quit but doesn't want to tell Paul he didn't catch anything, so he decides to try one more hole. He walks down the bank and suddenly smells something awful—a dead beaver. Here the fish are jumping, since the dead animal has drawn a swarm of bees over the ground and water. Norman knows that he has the right flies, "generals," that can imitate insects well. Paul tends to disdain special flies as unnecessary equipment, but Norman quickly draws out a fly that is meant to imitate a bee. His friend George makes flies by filling a tank with water and studying the insect from below, where it looks utterly different—so this fly doesn't look much like a bee from the fisherman's perspective.

Norman intrudes here on a scene of natural and environmental regeneration, as certain living things feed off the death of another. As usual, Norman places possibly too much confidence in the tricks of the trade of fly-fishing—here, his friend George's strategy in constructing flies that would look correct to the fish underwater. Norman is skillful enough at fly-fishing to know how to adapt his actions to the moment and to the fishes' behavior, though again, he might overestimate his knowledge.

Norman immediately catches three fish, and spends a little more time to catch a fourth so that he'll have an even number. Now Norman doesn't feel ashamed to walk back upstream and rest in the shade. He knows he'll have to wait awhile, since Paul won't be satisfied with just three or four. Norman sits and stares at the **river** until it seems that he, the watcher, joins with the river so that there's only one of them left—it's the river, Norman thinks.

Norman feels vindicated as his theory and strategy seems to have worked. But his competitive spirit ebbs away for the moment, as Norman grows comfortable enough with the river even to feel himself "becoming" it—a sense in which human frailty can be overcome by and united to eternal nature.

Downstream there is a dry channel where the **river** had once run. Norman notes that one can come to know something in part through its death, especially since he had once known the river when it did flow through this channel. It has a pattern in death, of sharp angles that aren't exactly straight or smooth. Norman also feels himself becoming the river by knowing how it was made, rushing from glaciers and turning around at big rocks or trees, before picking up sand and rocks and settling to quieter points, then starting again.

In "becoming" the river, Norman does not merely feel himself traversing its current path, but also gains a sense of its former patterns and earlier lives, ones that may not move "straight or smooth"—that is, they may not have a clear meaning for him, or for humanity in general.

Norman notes that fishermen often think of the **river** as having been made with fishermen in mind, and speak of the "head of the hole" at fast rapids, the "pool" of the turn in the river and the "tail of the hole" at the shallow water where they can wade across and try the other side. Watching the heat mirages, Norman feels that his own life patterns are like the river's. Now, looking back, he notes that he started this story here, though not yet aware that life stories are more like rivers than books. He had sensed that ahead there lay a sharp turn, circles, and quietness.

Norman contrasts the fisherman's confidence in naming, labeling, and organizing the river to the river's ability to exceed and overflow such categorizations. Still, he makes this contrast even while stressing that in some ways, the river is a metaphor for life—or perhaps life is a metaphor for the jagged, curving patterns of the river.

Norman shares the fisherman's phrase to describe the study of a **river**'s patterns: "reading the water." He suggests that telling stories involves the same. The problem is to guess when life should be treated as a joke, as it is easier to read the "waters of tragedy."

Here Norman (the character) sets the stage for how Maclean (the author) will go about telling his story, weaving his own patterns, both comic and tragic.

Suddenly Norman hears Paul's voice, asking if he did well. Paul has caught about ten or twelve, and he suggests they go get the beer. The reality of the day, of the beaver, of Old Rawhide and Neal, rushes back to Norman. Paul and Norman are both so thirsty that they find it difficult to swallow. Paul wades into the river where he'd buried the beer. He says he can't find the bottles, and Norman, unbelieving, looks himself. They're gone. Paul exclaims that they couldn't have drunk eight bottles of beer, plus the liquor.

From philosophical, even spiritual musings, Norman is yanked back into mundane reality both by his brother's competitive spirit and by his recollection of the "thorn in his side"—that is, Neal and Old Rawhide. Yet another beloved aspect of their fly-fishing excursions—the beers at the end of the day—is ruined by the two of them.

As they trudge up the trail, Norman apologizes, saying he wishes he could have stayed away from Neal, but Paul says he couldn't have. With a sudden burst of energy the brothers roar and race through the **river** to the shore, propelled by frustration at the thieves. They catch sight of the car, but neither of them can see Neal or Old Rawhide. Then Paul asks what's on the sandbar. Remembering his previous memory, Norman suggests that it's bears. Paul says it's not, since it's two red figures. In fact, it's two bare red bodies. Paul and Norman both curse.

Norman feels torn between his brother and his wife's family, both of whom compel some sense of responsibility on his part. In the midst of what must be an idyllic yet powerful scene of nature, the sight of the couple's bare bodies cannot be anything less than jarring—the beautiful natural space interrupted by the bodies of Neal and Old Rawhide, "fallen" like Adam and Eve into disgrace.

The bodies are about to blister and run a fever. Looking back as a narrator, though, Norman remarks that the days are gone when you could sleep naked next to a girl in the middle of a Montana **river**. Paul and Norman wade out to wake the pair up, though Paul pauses to take another look, so that, as he says, he'll always remember. Norman will never again fish in this hole, which he will always think about as a wild game sanctuary.

Again, Norman as an older narrator is more nostalgic and wistful and less prone to condemn than he was as a younger man. For the younger Norman, this fishing hole is now marred by the disgrace of Neal and Old Rawhide, and by the unsavory nature of the image now seared into his memory.

Norman knows that when the two wake up they will be blind and furious, so he tiptoes around them warily. Even the hairs on their head are fried. Norman points to a tattoo on Old Rawhide's backside, which Paul says is LO on one cheek and VE on the other. Suddenly, Old Rawhide jumps straight up, red and white with a blue-black tattoo. She looks around wildly and then throws on a few pieces of clothing. Then she saunters back, and asks why the brothers have come back. Norman points to Neal, who groans.

For Norman, Neal and Old Rawhide have taken on the characteristics of beasts rather than humans, and will be unable to recover their reason even upon awakening. Old Rawhide's tattoo, in all its absurdity, is another example of the disgrace into which the couple has fallen, though Rawhide doesn't seem to feel any shame at all.

Paul separates Neal's clothes from Old Rawhide's. Norman says Neal won't be able to stand the touch of his clothes, so Paul says they'll take him home naked. At that, Neal exclaims that he doesn't want to go home. Norman says that three women will take care of him there, but Neal says he doesn't want to see the women. Old Rawhide grabs hold of Neal's arm and leads him slowly across the river. Norman puts her and Neal into the backseat and covers them with a light blanket so as not to get arrested for indecent exposure. But they wriggle out of it, so they drive to Wolf Creek with the pair entirely exposed, Neal mumbling about not wanting to go home. Finally Paul grabs Neal's arm and says there's no other place he can go. Paul gets into an argument with Old Rawhide about whether she was going to stay and take care of Buster, but they mainly just curse at each other.

Neal is acting like a petulant child in this passage, whining and complaining, fearing women's retribution—which makes him even more worthy of scorn and disgrace in the eyes of the "manly," tough brothers. Norman's attitude in this scene seems to be one of anger and despair, and contrasts slightly with the tone of Norman-as-narrator, for whom the event has a comical side rather than one of divine disgrace. Still, at the moment, Paul and Norman both find it difficult to see past the fact that the couple entirely ruined their fishing trip and flouted all the carefully laid-out rules of fly-fishing.

They drive towards the log dance hall, a regular locale for fighting. Norman stops the car in front, and Old Rawhide grabs the rest of her clothes and jumps out, yelling to Paul that he's a bastard. Paul jumps out to follow her and finally kicks her in the backside. Norman thinks Paul doesn't really care about her: for them both, the bastard is the one in the back seat, who ruined their summer fishing, violated everything their father had taught them about fishing, and had drunk their beer in the middle of the **river**. Paul and Norman watch Old Rawhide race down the road. Then Paul says Norman's in trouble, and they continue home.

Old Rawhide acts as little more than an object and an outlet for Paul and Norman's frustrations—yet we are also reminded that this is a mostly true story, and so this scene is another sign of Paul's violent tendencies. Paul had seemed more charitable towards Neal than Norman had in the past, but now they are united in their scorn for Norman's brother-in-law.

As they arrive, Neal tries frantically to get into his clothes, though he keeps stumbling out of his pants. He looks like a shipwrecked person found on an island. As they go inside, Florence asks what they've done with her boy. Jessie appears and tells Norman he's a bastard. Norman tells her to get out of the way and let them bring Neal to bed. Jessie, Florence, and Dorothy instantly kick in to nursing mode, until Neal is laid out like a red carcass on white sheets. Paul manages to sneak out the door to go to Black Jack's, but Norman is held up by Florence, who asks him how Neal has gotten to be burned from head to foot.

The homecoming scene depicts Neal as just as ridiculous and absurd a figure as always, hopping around half-clothed and sunburnt, deserving of scorn (for the brothers at least) rather than the heartfelt worry with which Florence greets the three of them—although it's certainly understandable for a mother to be concerned about her son when he's in such a state. At this point, Paul has done what he sees as his duty, and he leaves Norman to face his new family.

Norman knows he can't lie: part of Scottish faith means a complete foreknowledge of sin. He says that Neal didn't feel like fishing with them, and when they got back he was asleep in the sand. Florence understands he won't say anything further, and just says that she loves him. Dorothy pokes her head out of the bedroom and says that Neal will be fine—it's a second-degree burn, so won't be more than blisters and fever. She suggests that Norman and Paul head out, as they're probably not wanted there.

Again referring to his and his wife's Scottish heritage, Norman uses this family history to account for his strategy in responding to Florence. Surprisingly, Florence turns to love rather than judgment and anger, and Dorothy's reassurances are just as compassionate. It seems that Norman may have underestimated his wife's family.

Before Norman closes the door, Jessie tells him to wait. She says he doesn't like Neal, does he—and Norman asks why he can't love her without liking Neal too. Norman asks Jessie not to keep testing his love for her. She says he doesn't seem to understand that she's trying to help a family member, and isn't able to, but Norman says he should understand that. Jessie suggests that Norman and Paul finish their Blackfoot fishing trip, but she tells him never to lose touch with her.

At first, Jessie seems more hostile to Norman than either Florence or Dorothy, but we come to see that Jessie and Norman are more alike than not in struggling to determine how best to help those that they love. Although these attempts have threatened to pull the husband and wife apart, they're now reconciled through understanding their common goals.

Jessie steps backward, then asks why Neal is so burnt. He repeats what he'd said to Florence. Then Jessie asks if he'd happened to see the whore running through town carrying her clothes just before they arrived—he says he did, at a distance. She asks if he'll try to help Neal with her, should he come back next summer. After a long pause, Norman says he will. Jessie says he won't come back; she asks why people who want help do better, or no worse, without it. Norman thinks he sees tears in her eyes, but he's wrong: he'll never see her cry, and Neal will never return. They vow never to get back out of touch with each other. Looking back, Norman as narrator says they never have, even though now Jessie has died.

More is said here than what Jessie and Norman explicitly articulate. Jessie understands that Norman won't relate everything that happened, so as to avoid further disgracing Neal. The tragic element of this passage stems from the fact that both Norman and Jessie, at least on some level, understand that they had one opportunity to help Neal, and they've missed it. For his part, Norman may well wonder if the same is true for Paul. They are at least partly redeemed, however, in their renewed love for and loyalty to each other.

PART 3

Norman goes to Black Jack's to have a few drinks with Paul, who insists on paying. Paul says they should go back to the Blackfoot that night, and insists on driving by way of Missoula so that they can stay a night at their parents' home—now it's Paul who is trying to help Norman by taking him fishing. Paul hadn't heard Norman's reconciliation with the three Scottish women, and perhaps thinks Norman is trying to be brave. Paul suggests that they stop and call their mother to tell her their plans. Paul ends up making all the arrangements for what will be his and Norman's last fishing trip together.

Once again the brothers' roles are reversed, as Paul, who could never think of yoking himself to another person in marriage, can only imagine what kinds of judgments Norman has had to deal with at his wife's family's home. Norman has foreshadowed tragedy earlier in the novella, but here especially, there are no surprises, and we are meant to read the rest of the scene with the knowledge that Paul will not return to fly-fishing.

They arrive late to Missoula, where their mother is thrilled to see them, especially Paul. She butters all his rolls with his favorite chokecherry jelly—she's forgotten that this was actually Norman's favorite, but they never have the heart to correct her. Their father is in retirement now, and loves hearing about Paul's real-world reporter stories. After dinner, Norman says that they'd love to have their father fish with them tomorrow; Paul agrees. Their father looks as if his congregation had asked him back for another farewell sermon.

Paul's mother treats him like the prodigal son in the Bible, who left home and spent all his father's money, but was welcomed back all the same with joy and forgiveness. Coupled with these feelings is a respect for Paul as someone in touch with the "real world." Norman's father is especially moved by his sons' desire to fish with him, and the novella comes full circle as the father returns as a major character once more.

As Norman helps their mother with the dishes, Paul says he's going to run to town to see some old friends. It's now quiet in the house—they all thought Paul, so recently out from prison, might stay home tonight. Norman's mother stays silent, only saying "goodnight" before going upstairs to bed.

Though the dinner is a touching scene of family reunion, this resolution does not last for long, as Paul, so tough in some ways, seems weak in others—like his inability to resist certain temptations. Like Norman, Paul's mother fears to address Paul's issues.

Norman isn't sure how much his father knows about Paul, but assumes some things have reached him from the congregation. Now (after Paul leaves) his father asks if Norman knows what Paul has gotten into lately. Norman shakes his head. His father remarks that Norman has changed the spelling of their last name from Maclean to MacLean. Norman says he's simply given up, since everyone else spells it that way, but his father murmurs that it's a terrible thing, since it suggests that they're Scottish Lowlanders and not Islanders.

This initial conversation is oblique—it seems like there is some important meaning behind Norman's father's more-or-less innocuous comments about his strong pride in their family heritage. The changing of Norman's name, however, represents on a deeper level the father's belief that Norman has escaped his paternal guidance and is growing detached from his heritage.

As Norman's father goes to the door, he turns and says that he is too old to help anyone, and Norman is too young. He says help is giving part of yourself to another who needs it and accepts it. It's rare to be able to help anyone, he says, since we don't like or know how to give part of ourselves, or the part we have to give isn't what's needed. Norman says that help doesn't have to be that big. His father asks if Norman's mother helps Paul by buttering his rolls, and Norman says she might. When his father asks if *he* helps Paul, Norman says he tries to, but he doesn't understand him, or know if he needs help. His father remarks that he should have had a sermon on this: when one is willing to help but doesn't know if anything is needed.

Just before Norman's father goes to bed, he begins to speak more explicitly about his worries regarding Paul, worries that align to a great extent with what Norman has been pondering over the course of the novella. Norman initially seems to want to comfort his father, reassuring him that help doesn't need to be overwhelming, but that it can also mean small acts of kindness. However, Norman then confesses his own uncertainty about the nature, extent, or even necessity of his attempts to help Paul.

Norman waits a long time before falling asleep. Before getting up, he hears Paul open and shut his door. He remembers that Paul is never late for work or fishing. The next morning Norman descends to breakfast, where the family is waiting for him. His mother says that Paul has made breakfast for him. When Norman looks at his brother, he can see the blood vessels in Paul's eyes.

On the surface, Paul sometimes seems able to balance his wilder ways with his duties as a son, brother, and fly-fisherman. It is only by paying close attention and looking into his brother's blood-shot eyes that Norman sees that Paul may be flailing, even if he doesn't know it or doesn't want to stop.

Their father can't find his fishing tackle at first, so they leave later than they expected to. They then spend more time hunting for a hole that won't require their father to wade. Paul and Father argue about the right place, but finally they agree on a certain hole down a side road. The road leads them down to a grassy, boulder-covered flat, perhaps the end of the ice age lake before the glacial dam broke. On the mountains above them are horizontal scars left by receding icebergs.

Although the brothers' father slows them down, their love for him is such that this doesn't bother them nearly as much as Neal's laziness, for instance. Once again, Norman calls attention to the ancient, massive glacial events that have marked the natural terrain of Montana today, on a scale practically inconceivable for humans.

They catch sight of the **river** down a steep bank, next to red and green Precambrian rocks. Norman and his father recall how they picked such rocks to build their fireplace. His father remembers how some had raindrops on them. He loves to think about the ancient rain splattering onto mud before hardening into rocks—nearly a billion years ago, Norman says. His father pauses, having given up on the literal belief in God's six-day creation of the world, but he corrects Norman by saying *half* a billion years ago—his kind of compromise between science and religion.

The aesthetic beauty of the event that Norman's father so loves to remember is due both to its age—that it took place so long ago as to render human thought and life miniscule—but also to the particular image of a regular, unexceptional rainy day in the ancient world, not too different from what humans experience all the time. This interplay between eternity and the normal everyday is awe-inducing for him.

Father says he'll head down to the open water, while Norman and Paul stay by these big rocks. Paul suggests that they fish together. This is unusual, so Norman knows Paul is still trying to take care of him. Paul says he will take the opposite side, which is better for roll-casting, as roll-casting isn't Norman's forte. Norman again feels touched by Paul's thoughtfulness.

As Paul and Norman are both competitive and of different skill levels, it usually makes more sense for them to fish separately. That they will fish together helps to secure this moment in Norman's memory as special and particular, colored by the brotherly love between them.

As Norman wades into the water, big flies slam into his face. They are stupid and swollen, perfect prey for fish. He knows he'll have to find a fly that looks just like them. Paul carries only several flies with him in his hat-band; he's always chiding Norman for carrying too many. But Norman is confident that he'll need one of his special flies that Paul doesn't have. He opens his box to see a Bunyan Bug No. 2 Yellow Stone Fly, with a cork body and stiff horsehair.

Norman immediately moves into strategy mode, now shifting from being "touched" by Paul's thoughtfulness to regaining a competitive spirit with his brother. To someone who doesn't fly-fish, Norman's description of the fly means little, which further calls attention to the affectionate way he describes it.

Norman takes the fly out and feels content: he feels loved by the women in his life, Neal seems a distant memory, his father and brother are fishing with him, and he might even catch more fish than Paul. He casts the Stone Fly out, and a fish that seems like a speedboat roars up to snatch it, before heading for deep water. Norman can't release line fast enough to follow it, so he forces it up into the air as in a rodeo. It's a large Rainbow trout. Suddenly it tears itself loose from the fly, leaving Norman empty-handed.

Having set this day up as the last day that he would fish with his brother, Norman goes on to paint an idyllic picture of it, one affected both by recent events and by the state of the fishing-hole at this moment. Yet Norman's first cast is a failure, reminding him to feel humble in the face of the river's mysteries and to respect its depths.

Norman has learned his lesson from this one cast, and for the rest of the day he is careful to let out enough line, even all the way across the **river**. Norman recalls a teacher who had told him it didn't make sense to say "more perfect"—but twenty minutes earlier he'd felt perfect, and now he feels justified in feeling "more perfect" each time he snags a Rainbow.

Having learned from his initial mistake, Norman approximates what his father might call a state of grace, something exceeding full human comprehension, or what Norman describes in another way as "more perfect."

After Norman catches his sixth Rainbow, he hears a massive splash to his left. He can't think of anything that big that swims in the Blackfoot. He thinks it's a beaver, but as another big splash falls in front of him, Norman realizes that Paul is raining down rocks on his side of the **river**, annoyed that Norman is catching so many more fish. Norman looks up to see Paul shaking his fist at him; he feels even more perfect.

Engrossed in his rhythm of fly-fishing, Norman initially can't understand human activity as anything other than a particular aspect of nature. Paul may have just acted tenderly towards his brother, but his own sense of competition has also kicked in now.

One more hole lies between the brothers and their father. Paul yells across the river to ask what the fish are biting on, and Norman says yellow stone flies—he asks if Paul wants one, but he yells back no. Norman, now that he's gotten ahead of his brother, starts to think about character: how Paul never looks to anyone but himself to get him out of trouble, and how this could be dangerous—but that Paul almost always is a winner. Norman decides that there's never one way to respond to a character or event; perhaps the only way is to see how fish are responding on any given day.

Although Paul and Norman are fishing the same hole, they have two separate strategies, and two separate skill sets. For Norman, Paul's own unique way of fly-fishing says something more profound about what he is like as a person, and how he refuses to accept help, even (or especially) from his brother. Norman is frustrated by this self-sufficiency in some areas, even though he admires it in Paul's fly-fishing.

Now Norman is no longer getting strikes, and his Bunyan Bug fly no longer seems so appealing. He looks across at Paul, who now is fishing over the water he'd just finished. This is rare enough that Norman stops to watch. Paul immediately starts catching large fish in a row—10 by the time he returns to the other hole. Paul calls across to ask Norman if he has the No. 2 Yellow Hackle. Norman doesn't, but Paul doesn't hear him over the roar of the **river**. When Paul reaches him, he gives Norman his fly and says the fish are feeding on drowned yellow stone flies. Norman asks how he figured that out. Paul says that thinking means noticing something that allows you to see what you weren't noticing before—which then allows you to see what isn't visible.

While Norman can grow jealous of his brother's talent, he also has enough respect for it to be content with merely observing Paul in action, and attempting to determine how he works on a river. Paul, in turn, can afford to be magnanimous now that he's found the key to fishing this hole: finding a fly that imitates the "drowned yellow stone flies" the fish are feeding on. Paul's response to Norman is philosophical rather than practical. It makes a kind of logical, or perhaps artistic sense, but one that isn't immediately clear.

Norman tells Paul to say what he means. Paul says that he first noticed on this hole that Norman was no longer catching anything here. Then he noticed that the upper hole was in sunshine and this one was in shadow, meaning that if there were flies here they had to come from the sunlit hole, which was hot enough for them to hatch. Since he couldn't see them dead in the water, he knew they had to be a few inches under. Paul tells Norman to wade out and try where he had fished. After multiple casts, Norman sees a small ring rise to the surface, meaning either a small fish on the surface or a big one further underwater. Paul wades out and says he's going to fish the rest of the hole.

Norman, for one, doesn't have the desire or patience to work out what Paul means, so Paul turns to the pragmatic in describing how he went about discovering where the fish were feeding. His explanation has much in common with the way Norman tends to describe his strategy. Significantly, though, this is not the way Paul initially chooses to talk about how he fishes—instead it is a translation from another kind of logic.

Norman catches two more, even though he's on Paul's side of the river: with ten, he quits, since the last three were the finest he ever caught—not in size but rather because Paul had waded out to give him the fly he used to catch these fish, and also because these were the last fish he ever caught fishing with Paul.

Instead of growing frustrated that Paul had solved the puzzle of this fishing hole, Norman feels both respectful of and touched by his brother, who has regained the upper hand in their relationship, at least in the here and now.

Norman says he's going to sit by his father and wait for Paul. He's certain that his father is reading the **New Testament** in Greek on the bank, in the peace that he's found in old age. Norman contrasts the deep, profound voices of the **river** in the cliff's shadows to the chattering, friendly sounds of the river in the sun. He sees his father high on the bank in the sunlight, reading. He tells Norman that he caught four or five fish, and that they're beautiful—he's the only man Norman ever knew who used the word "beautiful" so naturally. When he asks Norman about the fish he caught, Norman answers that they're beautiful too.

Norman also has a clear sense of respect for his father's peace of mind, finding in it the kind of grace that his father himself always stressed. Within Norman's thoughts, this grace is linked to the diverse voices that make up the space between the cliffs and the river. Norman even takes on his father's language at this moment, showing how he has internalized his father's connections between nature and divine grace.

Norman's father says that in the part of the **Bible** he was reading it says the Word was in the beginning. He used to think the water was first, but he realizes that if you listen to the **river**, there are words beneath the water. Norman says this is because he's a preacher: Paul would say that words are made from water. But his father says that the water runs over the words, and Paul would say the same thing. He asks where Paul is, and Norman tells him he'll be there soon.

Initially, Norman objects to the relationship his father makes between words and water, wanting to preserve a respect for nature's inherent difference to human words. For Norman's father, however, it is not so much human words but divine ones—God's creative will—that are behind both nature and all human activity.

Paul appears on the **river** and holds up two fingers, meaning he has two fish left to reach his limit. Norman and his father get up, and Father throws a rock over to Paul's side of the river, so that Paul almost loses his fish. Paul laughs and shakes his fist at him. Paul wades downstream and becomes a shadowy figure with a wand, circling faster and higher and longer, making one last cast for one last fish.

In the midst of their discussion, in which Paul is never far from either of their minds, Paul's own glee and contentment interrupt them, and both Norman and his father catch some of Paul's contagious energy as they admire his magnificent but controlled rhythms.

Norman's father, looking out at Paul, says there must be a big one where he's casting, just around a rock iceberg that splits the powerful current. Norman agrees that a small fish couldn't live there. Paul's body pivots, his arm is raised high, and his wand bends: suddenly everything springs, and then Paul remains uncannily still with the wand pointed at ten o'clock, the fly now swept into water. The wand seizes as the fish bites, and tries to jump out of Paul's hand, as he frantically throws out more line. To Norman, everything seems electrically charged but also unconnected between the wand's convulsions and the fish's sparks. Slowly Norman begins to see the relationship between the convulsions and sparks.

Norman and his father keep up a running commentary, a kind of constant footnoting to explain and describe to each other what Paul seems to be doing instinctively, even unconsciously. These passages take on a miniature narrative arc—at the moment of highest tension, Paul is poised with his "magician's wand" bent, and then the rest of the story unfolds smoothly and naturally from there. Norman attempts to understand Paul's casting as a kind of natural energy, movements connected in subtle ways.

To Norman, the performance looks like children playing. Norman and his father reassure each other that Paul will get the fish. Paul works the fish into shallow water, and then is pulled out into the current himself. Norman curses, amazed, then feels guilty for swearing in front of his father, who says nothing. Paul works the fish back to shore again, but the fish pulls him out, until finally Paul raises the rod high and skids the fish across the rocks to a sandbar, where the fish begins to gasp. Paul leans down to it, then stands up, faces Norman and his father, and raises his arms as a victor, with a giant creature dangling from his hand. Norman tells his father that that's Paul's limit. Father replies that Paul is beautiful.

Though the climactic moment has passed, Paul's battle with the fish faces a few more hurdles before he finally, definitively triumphs. Norman and his father are confident in Paul's ability, but they still watch the process as anxious observers of a competition whose result is far from certain. There is a playfulness to Paul's strategy here, as seen by his victor's cheer at the end, but there is also, as Norman's father points out, a beauty in the unadulterated joy Paul takes in the process.

That would be the last fish Norman and his father ever saw Paul catch. When they would talk about it later, they thought it was fitting that they only ever saw the artistry of the fisherman, rather than the fish. Now, they watch Paul decide not to wade across the powerful **river**, but instead swim across, his cigarettes and matches in his hat. Norman and his father look at each other and laugh, as Paul charges up the bank streaming with water and showing them his basket.

Norman and his father decide that for them, fly-fishing is less about the result—the number of fish caught—than about appreciation of nature and the artistic process involved—a process Paul has mastered with his general melding of the playful, the humorous, and the serious, which we see again as he charges across the river and up the bank.

They all empty their baskets and take photographs of their fish, but the photos turn out overexposed and amateurish. There is one picture, however, that remains fixed in Norman's mind: Paul is smiling, flies whizzing around his hatband, water streaming down his face. Norman remembers him from this day both as an artistic abstraction and a descriptive close-up from this picture.

Here Norman recalls another kind of memory, a moment frozen in time that Norman believes says something meaningful about Paul as a person, as both maddeningly particular in his weaknesses and yet somehow transcending these weaknesses through his artistry.

Norman's father, who is shy in praise, tells Paul that he is a fine fisherman. Paul replies that he'll need three more years to be able to think like a fish. Norman thinks about Paul's strategy and says he already knows how to think like a dead stone fly.

Another way that Norman thinks about Paul's artistic genius is Paul's ability to think his way into the consciousness of others, even into non-human consciousnesses.

The three of them sit on the riverbank and try to listen to what the **river** is saying, as the late afternoon sun casts shadows from the Ponderosa pines onto them. Though they know how to listen, a river has too many things to say, so it is difficult to know exactly what it's saying to each of them.

Norman has adopted and internalized his father's belief that a river contains and runs over words—that is, that a river holds many meanings (rather than one single truth), making it both profound and complex.

As they pack up, Paul repeats that he just needs three more years. Later Norman realizes that the river must have told both him and Paul that he would not have such a gift.

Here the river seems both to foreshadow and foretell Paul's fate, though it does so by speaking to both brothers at once. It's been implied throughout that Paul's fate was unavoidable, and here Norman suggests that it was even prophesied as well—if one could only interpret the words of the river.

The next May, the police sergeant awakens Norman before dawn. Silently, they drive together down the Continental Divide and the Blackfoot to tell his parents that Paul had been beaten to death and his body dumped in an alley. Norman's mother returns to her bedroom. She never asks Norman any questions about Paul—Paul, whom she most loved and least understood, perhaps knowing, says Norman, that it was enough for her to have loved him.

This abrupt transition clashes jarringly with the previous lyrical scenes of natural beauty and harmony. This an intentional juxtaposition, as it both reflects Norman's rude awakening to reality, and allows more powerful, joyful images of Paul to linger in the reader's mind (as well as in Norman's).

After Norman tells his father the news, his father asks for more information. Norman says that nearly all the bones in Paul's right hand were broken. After Paul's death, Norman's father begins to have trouble walking, and shuffles from place to place. Sometimes, grasping for more to hold onto, he asks Norman if he's really told him everything there is to know about Paul's death. Norman says it's possible to love completely without understanding completely.

Norman's extra piece of information is significant—a broken right hand would mean Paul would never be able to fish again, even if he had lived, and it also suggests that Paul fought back fiercely against his attacker. Norman's father is physically, viscerally affected by Paul's death, and initially it seems that Norman is the one to comfort him by assuring him that his love was stronger than misunderstanding.

Once Norman's father asks if Norman thinks he (the father) could have helped Paul. Norman responds, "Do you think I could have helped him?" They both stand waiting, in silence. Later, Norman's father asks if he thinks it was just a fight, unconnected to Paul's past. The police don't know, Norman says, and neither does he: all he really knows is that Paul was a fine fisherman. He also knows that Paul was beautiful, his father says, and Norman agrees. They look at each other, and never again talk about Paul's death.

Though Norman initially reassured his father, they now face each other, both seeking the answers to unanswerable questions, and realizing in each other the ultimate insufficiency of their knowledge and understanding. They begin to come to terms with this lack of understanding, even as their guilt for being unable to help Paul continues.

Once, though, Norman's father asks some questions that make Norman wonder if he eve really understood his father, whom he felt closer to than anyone. Norman's father says that Norman likes to tell true stories, but he suggests that once Norman finishes these, why doesn't he make up a story with its own characters—because only then will he understand what happened in the past and why. He says that those we live with and love, those whom we should know, are actually the ones who escape our understanding.

Norman had long presumed that it was impossible to understand his brother, but now he comes to realize how difficult it is to fully understand anyone, even those whom one loves and therefore, in theory, should *understand—a paradox that is echoed in his father's own words. His father seems to suggest that it is only through words and stories that one can hope to surmount this lack of understanding.*

Now, the older Norman, who has been narrating, reflects that nearly all those he loved and did not understand as a young man are dead, though he still reaches out to them. Though he is too old to be a good fisherman anymore, he usually fishes the waters alone, in the cool summer evenings. Again, all of existence merges into the sounds of the Blackfoot **River**, along with the four-count rhythm of fishing and the hope of catching a fish.

Though Norman is now narrating the story at a long stretch of time from the events of 1937, it is clear that he has never stopped grappling with the unanswerable and unanswered questions of his younger self. The only solace he finds is in the eternal patterns and rhythms that he approaches in fishing.

Norman ends with a meditation on the ancient history of the **river**, a glacial flood among rocks spattered by eternal raindrops, rocks that conceal words underneath. He ends by saying that he is haunted by waters.

The book ends with no real resolution to Norman's pain and confusion, but rather with a deferment of this human lack of understanding to a larger, more ancient scale. Norman's problems feel huge and inexplicable, but then he is reminded of the vastness and eternity of nature and the divine, and achieves some kind of peace in his own smallness. And yet even this peace found through nature reminds him of Paul, and so Norman remains "haunted."

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