

The Edges of Swirls

NORMAN MACLEAN

SOME TROUT LIKE SOME MEN are “traveling men,” but most trout pick a small area of the river, which varies in size to correspond to the size of the trout and his ability to wage war, and this station is his home, his feeding ground, his parade ground, and his castle, and he will fight if it is invaded and he is big enough to fight. Most of these stations are near where the obstruction bends the river, deepens the water, and spins it into swirls. The sunken rocks or undercuts in the bank are good hideouts, protecting the trout from the constant force of the river, the constant aggressiveness of other fish, and the sunlight. Trout, which in many ways are also like cattle, need shade. Moreover, the swirls further cool and aerate the water, and not only bring him food but circle back and give the fish a second chance to study what is on the menu.

In fact, the edge of a swirl seems better than out in “the big boil” itself, not only because the food goes by the fish slowly and twice but because the current is diminishing and he doesn’t have to work hard all the time to stay put as he has to in the boil itself or in the rapids. Every fisherman has his pet attachments, and if you should ask me what is the best of all possible places to fish for big trout, even though there may be no such place, I would answer, “On the edges of swirls.” Of course, if you should ask me where is the best place to live your life, I would make the same answer, “On the edges of swirls.”

For the sake of beauty in part we should be able to look underwater with our imaginations where our eyes cannot see. Swirls are not caused just by obstructions showing above the surface of the water such as log jams or cliffs, for instance, there is nothing showing above the surface to explain the beauty of the flashing swirls. What sets this water spinning as if by magic are unseen underwater rocks which

allow nothing straight to pass through them—they make beauty that on the surface makes beauty seem inexplicable, as I suppose most of us, when we were young, wished it were. But modern developments in photographic filters can reveal these underwater rocks, which in ways are just as beautiful as the swirls above them; in addition, these underwater rocks have great social and military value—they form castles and fortifications with turrets and moats everywhere and drawbridges nowhere. Behind these fortifications the trout can safely establish their “stations.”

As the swirls relax and you come near to “the tail of the hole,” you can look ahead and behind and see that the whole stretch of water is a composition not only of curves but of colors. As the rapids begin above at the head of the hole, the white waves are born out of blue-green water—blue is the all-present color uniting everything; it is present in the rapids as blue-green because the fast-moving water is not deep and picks up its colors from the shoreline and its evergreens which themselves have some blue in them; when the river swirls and bends and goes into deep blue, the blue is deep blue, almost black-blue, because the water is so deep it strains out the yellows and oranges of sunlight; and when in the tail of the hole the river quiets down again and becomes wide and shallow, the sunlight is not strained out before it reaches the bottom and so returns full of yellows and oranges as it was before the rapids began above. A stretch of fishing water, then, is a succession of blues to which the sky may be added. Blue is even in the black shadows.

For the fisherman, the tail of the hole, besides being about the only place he has to wade across, has a special appeal for him on quiet warm evenings when flies are hatching. The tails of holes are breeding grounds for insects, both aquatic and terrestrial. The terrestrials hatch in the grass and willows on the shoreline and the aquatic flies hatch in the quiet shallow water that is so quiet it won’t wash the eggs away and so shallow it won’t strain out the warmth of the

Excerpted from the afterword of the illustrated edition of A River Runs Through It by Norman Maclean, © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved.



"... if you should ask me where is the best place to live your life, I would... answer, 'On the edges of swirls.'"

sunlight, for eggs generally won't incubate in cold temperatures, as even hens know. The best time of day for fishing in this water is generally the late afternoon or evening when it is a culmination of the heat of the day and when the winds have gone down. Then little stuff from the shoreline swarms out over the water, and you have to be a dry-fly fisherman with little flies called "invisibles," but the trouble is that in the evening when the glare of sunlight is off the water the fish can see perfectly and recognize that the fisherman's fly is a fake. A dry-fly fisherman has to have a lot of character to be able to bear up under the deepest affront a trout can offer—this jumping right over the fly the fisherman has tied with his own hands to get to the real mosquito the fly was supposed to match.

Most important of all about these shallow, slow-moving waters with gravel bottoms is that they are the spawning grounds of the large family of fish to which the trout belong, the salmonids, the most famous member of which is the salmon itself. To them, the adventure to birth is much the same mystery as the adventure to death. Wordsworth, our great nature poet, speaks of our birth as "our life's Star" that "hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar." But even these lines of poetry seem less wondrous than the adventure to birth of the anadromous members of this family of fish, the salmon and the steelhead trout, the name for rainbow trout that have left fresh waters and gone to sea and then returned to spawn in the headwaters of the river in which they were born. Some cutthroat trout are also anadromous. They all come from afar—some of them cross the northern seas to the waters of Japan where they are caught and stamped with an identification tag and afterwards steer their way back to our coast and from there up the river in which they were born to some "tail of a hole" with shallow, slow-moving water and a gravel bottom. In the gravel the female digs ("cuts") a bed with her caudal fin, and deposits her adhesive eggs, and the quivering male, which has been swimming behind her and slightly to one side, moves up and fertilizes them. The shallow water lets the sunlight through and keeps the water warm enough for the eggs to incubate; the gravel keeps the bed open enough for the silt to be washed off the eggs which would otherwise suffocate.

Part of the mysterious power of birth is its pain, which also "cometh from afar." "Coming from afar" can be much farther than 3,500 miles back from Japanese seas; if the fish, after returning to our coast, start up the Yukon river it is another 2,000 miles to the headwaters of this great Alaskan river, and the way to birth is never far from death, no more than a week after spawning, and many die even before they can spawn, battered by dams, waterfalls, fish ladders, fish nets, rocks, and bears waiting on rocks to scoop them up

with a claw. My early home was on the river into which the Blackfoot flows and which in turn becomes a tributary of the Columbia, but I had never seen a salmon-run because of a big dam lower down our river which no fish could ascend, so I had never fished for salmon until the first summer I worked for the Forest Service—on the headwaters of the Selway river in what is still the almost inaccessible wilderness of northern Idaho. The Selway is ultimately a tributary of the Columbia and one of the great spawning-grounds of salmon and trout. The Ranger told me all I needed was a spear and gave me one and I walked down a high bank to the tail of a hole. From the top of the bank the shallow water looked as if it were inhabited by a single flat monster, something like a blue-black octopus without legs or an eye. When some slight invisible disturbance occurred under the water, the tremor spread slowly across the water, making a movement but as close to no-life as the spreading circles of a rock. It was something only possibly organic, but when it stirred, all the hole slowly rippled to its shoreline and became related and one piece of something or other. But even before I got down from the bank to the shoreline it could be counted and was over a hundred half-dead spawning salmon all pointing upstream.

I started at the bottom of the hole, and waded up through them, and nothing moved until I came so close to one that it had to move slightly to let me pass. It was more that they felt waves coming from me than that they saw me. The slight disturbance caused by the slight shifting of one fish to let me pass started a slowly spreading ripple that one by one made a hundred or more spawning salmon into one rippling octopus, again without legs or an eye. I was 15 years old and had never seen such lethargy before—the lethargy that comes in performing the ultimate destiny of one's species, swollen with sex and pain and blue-black bruises, nearing birth and death and beyond being aware of either.

Having never speared fish before, I was afraid I wouldn't know how, but spearing fish was not the problem. The problem was to find one that was fit to spear. Swollen with eggs and sex and sick with great blue bruises, they had followed sex to its ultimate conclusion. Nothing of any kind had prevented their distant coming, nothing except death—no 3,500 miles, no 2,000 miles more, no high dams, no fish ladders, no pain beyond endurance. Finally I found several salmon that did not look too damaged to be speared, but I did not try, and so came back to the Ranger Station without any, or any explanation, and the men at the Station did not ask. Sometimes they felt I was too young to be in the woods and to understand even an explanation of some of the things that happen, but later I came to feel that they themselves may not have had an explanation of certain things that go on regularly there.

