



A River Runs Through It
by Norman Maclean
by Nicholas Dawidoff

from *Post Road 4*

Selected by Anthony Swofford, author of *Exit A* and *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*.

The best writing helps us discover new works or reunite with old favorites. Here Dawidoff reminds me that A River Runs Through It is the one book that consistently makes grown men cry. I always do. – AS.

A good writer can make anything important. I don't ever go fishing, but for the past twenty odd years, the one book I've reread every year is a book about fishing—Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*. Maclean calls his book fiction, but that's just the son of a Presbyterian minister confessing that he's recreated some dialogue. This is clearly Maclean's story of that father, and Maclean's ne'er-do-well brother Paul. They happen to be men who go on fishing trips, but anybody who reads the book can see that it could be anything: fishing is only what brings them together to experience the desperation people in families feel when they want to help each other

and can't. *A River Runs Through It* is a short book, but it has more to say about men in family than any piece of writing I know. Along the way there is affection, and booze, and women, and fist fighting, and humor, and meanness. There is anger, and loyalty, and one-up-manship, and frustration, and joy, and envy, and cruelty, and sex, and helplessness—a lot for 104 pages. But as dense as this book is with feeling, it always feels fresh to me. Since I've all but memorized *A River Runs Through It*, I don't really know how this can be. Probably it's that there is enough depth to this story that as I get older, it moves with me, each time providing me with something I'm now ready to see. I always think the whole thing is beautiful. I am making extravagant claims here without offering something from the text to show you what I mean. But I just can't. The book is larger than its length because uncommon care and intelligence have been taken with the construction. To extract a few sentences would undermine those proportions. Besides, I don't want to give away anything—especially the rhythm. This is a book that is often set on rivers, and it flows.

Nicholas Dawidoff is the author of *The Catcher Was a Spy: The Mysterious Life of Moe Berg* and *In the Country of Country: People and Places in American Music*. In April, the Library of America will publish *Baseball: A Literary Anthology*, which he edited. In May, Pantheon will publish *The Fly Swatter: How My Grandfather Made His Way in the World*. Nicholas is also a contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Magazine*.