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The Long Way Home: Trout Fishing in the Carters

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Trout Fishing in the Carters

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE I HAD TO STAND WITH MY REPORTER'S pad outside a burning building waiting for the fire marshal to confirm what I sensed in my gut—that the woman who had been ushered away screaming a half hour before was screaming because someone had died. I don't miss that work, but I still live my private life like an earnest newspaper reporter searching for the sources. I grill everyone (my family reports), even when no answers can be reconstructed.

I packed the book *Trout Fishing in America* by Richard Brautigan (Laurel, 1967) up onto the Carter Ridge last July 7. A writer whose name I can't remember listed this novel as one of the most important environmental books of all time. I would figure out why. My old friend Ellen agreed to start reading it out loud as we reclined inside my tent. Ellen and I had served together many years ago on our high school newspaper, *The Tower*, bonding amid the disarray of forgotten deadlines and lost stories.

Trout Fishing in America wanders on 112 cryptic pages through suburban landscapes of Brautigan's memory. Sometimes as Ellen (that night) and I (later) read, we felt as if we'd stepped back into our middle-class American childhoods. Other times it felt so alien that all we could do was dissolve in laughter because we were just baffled.

I was determined to learn. Knock on Wood, as Brautigan named an opening chapter.

"AS A CHILD WHEN DID I FIRST HEAR ABOUT TROUT FISHING IN America?" Brautigan wrote. "From whom? I guess it was a stepfather of mine. . . . When he could talk, he had a way of describing trout as if they were a precious and intelligent metal."

Trout and the freedom of trout fishing epitomize American summer life, I wanted to scribble on my reporter's pad.

Brautigan wrote, "Maybe trout steel. . . . Imagine Pittsburgh. . . . The Andrew Carnegie of trout!" Ellen and I laughed helplessly, even as we'd laughed over disasters on the high school paper. But writing well had



Leaves resemble trout in First Carter Lake. GEORGE BELLEROSE

remained important to both of us, as important as a beautiful rainbow trout was to Brautigan. (The Andrew Carnegie of ideas!)

“How beautiful the creek looked and the creek that came pouring down in a waterfall off the hill,” she read. “But as I got closer to the creek I could see that something was wrong. . . . There was a thing about its motion that was wrong. . . . The waterfall was just a flight of white wooden stairs leading up to a house in the trees.”

We laughed. “This must all come together to something important,” I said from my sleeping bag. I was back out there with my reporter’s pad. I felt that if a way to understand existed, I would identify it. “Then I knocked on the creek and heard the sound of wood,” Ellen read.

I wish I could call Brautigan (who died in 1984) and say, “I know this is a very elementary question, but what did you have in mind when you wrote this book?”

“I THINK MAYBE *TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA* IS ABOUT POLLUTION,” I tried the next day. “It might be about the destruction of waterways.” I pumped water from the stream through my very old filter while Ellen held the bottle at the edge of the tent platform.

Brautigan ended that chapter with a brief aside to the reader (“The reply of *Trout Fishing in America*”). He apologized for the weird image of a staircase taken for a stream. “There was nothing I could do,” he wrote. He said he’d once thought an old woman was a trout stream. “‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘I thought you were a trout stream.’

“‘I’m not,’ she said.”

The book is not about trout or trout fishing. It is not about pollution of waterways. It might be about the consumer values that swept the post–World War II suburbs. Then again, it might not. I was not going to find a source who could tell me definitively what *Trout Fishing in America* should mean for me.

Ellen and I climbed and scrambled over and between the rocks. She scrambled up a high ledge on North Carter. I crawled halfway up, then back down. Ellen took my big pack and pulled me up.

The next afternoon I hiked up the back of Mount Washington alone. Ellen was on her way home. I knew when we’d parted that our trip over the Carter Range and our foray into Brautigan had jabbed at her. “Could *Trout Fishing in America* mean, essentially, authenticity?” she wrote to me. She said she’d never have even opened the inscrutable Brautigan without my asking her to. And that in itself had gotten her thinking.

I laugh at myself. I had thought I could decipher, in five days on the trail, an enigmatic writer whose fans can’t even explain him. Maybe they’re all pretending they understand. No, maybe I’m learning that I do not have to understand. I do not have to decipher why the cliff becomes the memory cliff once I’m home, and why that memory cliff means more to my life than the real cliff had. Richard Brautigan’s trout stream felt more authentic in memory, when he encountered it as a wooden staircase. What that memory does is up to me.

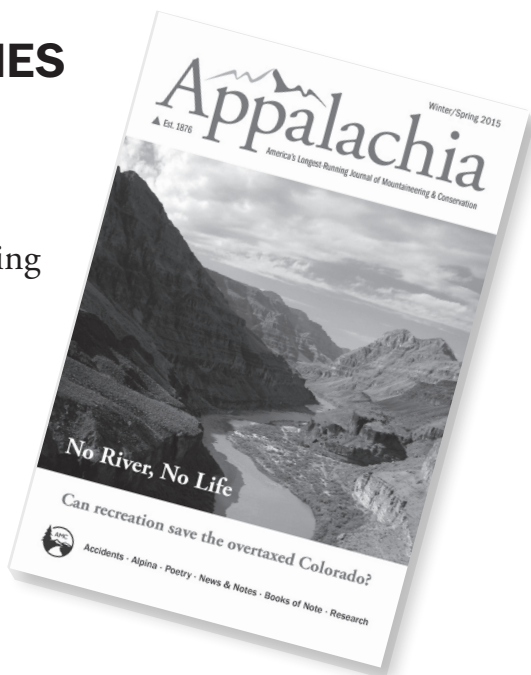
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

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