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# On Fishing

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## On Fishing · *Jason Blake Keuter*

I FEEL INADEQUATE as an American writer because I don't think I could ever write about fishing. I didn't grow up fishing. My dad went fishing, but it seemed to me it was just an excuse to drink beer out of ear-shot from my screaming mother. I didn't go with him often because he usually went to some mudhole, filled more with rusting tin cans, Burger King wrappers, and empty beer bottles (all of which you could see through the slime and algae near the embankment) than fish.

Sometimes we'd go fishing on the Willamette River, and the current would move quickly. The sound of the current and the wind blowing was often loud enough that you had to yell over it to hear one another.

I remember one time I caught a lot of fish. One right after another. But my dad told me to throw them back. They were "garbage fish." They weren't edible. If you ate them, you would get sick.

I insisted they had to be of some use, but not because I believed that was necessarily true. I was just so excited to have caught some fish, but I knew I couldn't relive that excitement if I threw them away. No great fishing story ends with the words: "but they were garbage fish, so I threw them back, and my dad and I went home empty-handed." That's a disappointing story. The kind of story that you tell around a campfire if you're really sick of the cold, and you're trying to dampen everybody's spirits, so that they might change their minds about being outdoorsy and want to stay in a motel for the night.

Fishing is boring. Sure, it gives fathers and sons a chance to talk to each other and share jokes. Maybe the son will drink his first beer after the father opens it for him and hands it to him. As if to say, "this time it's all right." Fishing trips introduce sons to male comraderie, but I always felt this could better be achieved by going to the record store and having my dad buy me a record. We could talk on the way down, and he could keep a beer stuck between his legs as he steers the car through our city's streets, telling me stories about when he was a kid.

This interested me much more than the prospect of sitting on the bank of some roadside pond, waiting for a fish to come bubbling up to the surface next to the stagnant line of my fishing pole—a fish poisoned by whatever chemical compounds created by the mix of various types of garbage

thrown into the water by passing motorists.

Okay, so I've exaggerated a little bit. I never saw a fish just bubble up to the surface after hearing some sudden hissing sound and seeing noxious steam rise from the depths of the murky pond. That's just the beginning of my own "fishing story." I guess I am capable of writing a fishing story; I'm just not capable of writing a certain type of fishing story.

I don't even know what kind of fishing story I'm thinking about because I've never had the patience to finish any story in which fishing played an important part. I guess I'm thinking about the kind of fishing story I always quit reading as soon as I realize it's about fishing.

I've noticed that Hemingway's stories tend to involve a lot of fishing. There are those who might not think of fishing when they think of Hemingway, but I do. I can't help it.

I always imagine Hemingway drinking in the kind of bar where a swordfish would be displayed on the wall behind the bar, and I also imagine him getting along quite well with the bartender, perhaps even picking a fight with a regular customer who has grown sick of hearing Hemingway swap fishing stories with the bartender and one day asks them both to shut up.

My dad likes fishing. He also likes Hemingway, and he has tried to interest me in both subjects at different points in my life. At some point in our relationship, it became clear to him that I would not take an interest in fishing or Hemingway, and, gradually, he stopped introducing both of those topics into our conversations.

I have noticed, however, that the less my dad tried to encourage me to take an interest in Hemingway, the more he tried to get me to read Raymond Carver. I found myself in possession of three books by Raymond Carver, and I now realize that my dad gave all three of them to me. I have read parts of only one of them, *Fires*. As I scan the table of contents, I notice that Carver seems to share Hemingway's preoccupation with fishing and drinking.

The book opens with an essay titled "On Writing." Much to my surprise, the essay did not argue that all great literature must be about fishing and/or drinking because only in these activities do men reveal the true essence of their beings.

There are not a lot of fishing stories written by women. While strolling past a country store, one would never overhear an older woman saying to

a younger woman: “sit on down and let me tell you about how me and your mom used to get plastered and go fishing, just like our moms used to do with their sisters!”

Women don’t even tell knitting stories. When you get right down to it, women don’t brag as much as men; which means women don’t make things up as much as men. They may lie, but they don’t invent ridiculous, overly dramatic stories about flights from rabid bear herds or hammerhead shark attacks in city sewers.

The rest of Carver’s book is filled with such anecdotes, at least judging from the titles of his poems and short stories. The first poem is called “Drinking While Driving.” Presumably the author would be drinking while driving to some pond where he would throw his line in the water and drink some more until he eventually passed out.

Further down is a poem titled, simply enough, “Alcohol.” Later we get “Cheers,” which sounds like a toast to me (“May our fishing be bountiful!”), and then there’s a large number of poems not directly related to fishing and the drinking that inevitably accompanies it.

Soon, however, we resume with “Near Klamath,” which I know to be a river, so I feel a fishing trip coming on. Carver can’t hold off any longer, so we are finally stricken with “At Night the Salmon Move”— a direct reference to fish. Later we find a poem called “Torture,” which must be about a time when Carver found himself landlocked for two whole weeks. Then there’s “The Current,” another reference to water; “Hunter,” although not about fishing (actually I don’t know; I can’t bring myself to read it) it probably shares the same “alcoholic men bonding while they stalk their prey” theme prevalent in most fishing stories. Then there’s “Deschutes River,” “The Cabin” (a place where men drink and play cards while their fishing poles lean against the wall), and finally, “So Much Water Close to Home.” As if we needed Carver to tell us that his home was close to a lot of water.

Just by chance, I turned to an interview of Carver contained in *Fires* and immediately saw the following conversation:

Interviewer: Do you still hunt and fish?

Carver: Not so much any more. I still fish a little.

I have not been able to read Raymond Carver since. I have heard many people say that he was one of the great writers of our time. Not being a writer who writes about fish or fishing, Carver's reputation makes me feel alienated from current literary trends. I heard Louise Erdrich was very good too, and I was most disheartened to open her book *Love Medicine*, and find that the first chapter was called "The World's Greatest Fisherman."

At present, I am reading Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double*, and I am pleased to report that no fishing has taken place. I am almost finished with the book, and it seems to be building up to the kind of climax in which, if fishing were to be suddenly introduced, it would ruin the whole book.

It would be difficult to find much fishing going on in St. Petersburg anyway. Knowing St. Petersburg to be the setting of much of Dostoyevsky's work, I instinctively read his stories. I wouldn't be surprised, however, if a contemporary American writer, told to write a story set in St. Petersburg, would, at some point, have their main character, or some other character (it really doesn't matter), dig a fishing hole in the middle of some ice pond and reflect back on his life as a civil servant who was never understood by his materialistic and superficial co-workers.

Perhaps Americans think about fishing and hunting more than other people because we are a frontier country. Such subsistence activity was prevalent in our country only a short while ago, and, unlike the Europeans, we still haven't gotten over it.

There are people in the world who still hunt for a great deal of their food, but we don't. Fishing is recreation. At least it is for most of us. The people whom I have met and known that fish professionally, like people who work on fishing boats in Alaska, do not want to talk about fishing and the great outdoors. They prefer drinking beer and watching a real sport like football.

If fishing is thought of as idle recreation, then much of the mystique surrounding it disappears. Nintendo is recreation too, but I guess it's difficult to lament man's alienation from nature while playing Nintendo. The currents of our pastoral past may gracefully pass us by, rolling away within a latently turbulent stream as the cold wind of a coming storm chills our reddening cheeks, but on the video screen, our past blips out in a millisecond as the accompanying, computerized warrior music goes on, deadening us with its exhaustive, habitual, repetitive drone.

Now I am contributing to the problem. By speculating on why there's so much fishing in American literature, I'm probably encouraging somebody, somewhere (these things have a way of getting out of hand), to check into the tradition of fishing in American literature. This may be a good sign, however, because I've noticed that once people start studying things, those things are quickly on their way to extinction; or through the process of debate in the academic journals, they are contorted so far out of their original shape and meaning that the original issue becomes lost in a paper trail of short-lived canons, new canons that die faster, and eventually no canons or beliefs, just an infinite reservoir of new information wandering aimlessly upon the invisible ruins of our deconstructed past.

But perhaps the outlook isn't so bleak. The process of inquiry and argument will go on, and people will continue to search for topics that have yet to be covered within the parameters of topics that have pretty much been covered.

After the first study comparing fishing in the works of Twain, Faulkner, and Hemingway, a whole slew of arguments and counter-arguments will fill the academic journals. Someday, through some reasoning I will never comprehend, a history student, researching for his or her dissertation on the origins of the study of fishing in American academic literature, will find this essay and hold me directly responsible. Hopefully, the backlash against the study of fishing in American literature will not lead to a backlash against authors who, through shortsightedness, or perhaps bad judgment, chose to write about fishing at some point in their careers.

We can't discredit William Faulkner's work, for example, simply because he occasionally wrote about fishing. I think it would be more accurate to think of William Faulkner as a writer who made an occasional, incidental comment related to fishing in the midst of stories in which fishing was actually insignificant. I have found those elements of Faulkner's work having to do with "the anguish of the human heart" much more memorable than the fishing parts—so much so that I often have to be reminded that Faulkner wrote about fishing at all.

Mark Twain must have included fishing in some of his work as well, but, as is the case with Faulkner, I don't remember much about it because I found the other aspects of his work so much more fascinating. The fishing seems to fade into the background as more interesting dramas come to involve my imagination.

When reading Hemingway, on the other hand, I feel as if I am being made painfully aware of the fact that fishing is taking place, and I am supposed to deduce some great meaning from this significant fact. Melville, of course, presents an enormous problem, seeing as how his most famous work is about a man bent on catching an enormous whale, which, to me, is just another fish.

There are many great writers who did not bother with fishing. Charles Dickens, for example, even went so far as to include bodies of water in some of his work without resorting to having his characters go fishing. Perhaps Dickens is not the most inspiring example. He was, after all, highly contemptuous towards America.

Of course Melville was highly contemptuous of the British but only in regard to their attitude problems resulting from what he saw as their deluded sense of whaling prowess. Melville had the following to say about the tensions between American and English whalers on the high seas:

English whalers sometimes affect a kind of metropolitan superiority over the American whalers; regarding the long, lean Nantucker, with his nondescript provincialisms, as a sort of sea-peasant. But where this superiority in the English whalemen does really consist, it would be hard to say, seeing that the Yankees in one day, collectively, kill more whales than all the English, collectively, in ten years. (*Moby Dick*, p. 342)

I guess Dickens affected a metropolitan superiority over Americans because, being metropolitan, he didn't fish. Melville disregarded metropolitan superiority as being mere affectation because those who possessed it couldn't fish.

There are American writers who didn't, and don't, write about fishing. I am quite sure that James Baldwin doesn't mention fishing in any of his work, thus reading him is a great relief. I like reading Eudora Welty because of her disinterest in fishing. Nathaniel Hawthorne is another great writer who, in all of his work, neglected to explore the consequences of fishing. Tennessee Williams didn't seem to worry much about fishing nor did Richard Wright. Flannery O'Connor wrote many good stories, and

she too failed to address the great meaning that unravels in the course of a fishing trip.

There are many great works of fiction in which fishing is not a major theme, and if one reads biographies, history, or even literary criticism, one could read for days, sometimes even weeks, without ever seeing the word “fish.” One summer I read *Going To Meet the Man*, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *Another Country*, all by James Baldwin, and I didn’t think about fishing even once. I also read *Crime and Punishment*, and after reading the first few pages, I was confident that no fishing would take place at any point in the novel. I read two books by Dashiell Hammett, two U.S. history books, and bits and pieces of short story collections, and avoided even thinking about fishing. In fact, not once during the whole summer did the word “fish,” or the image of a fish, ever materialize in my mind.

I usually read with much trepidation, anticipating the sudden appearance of a fishing scene with great fear. For those of you who may share this feeling, but have so far been afraid to voice your opinions for fear that some literature teacher may accuse you of missing the point of some work because you thought the fishing scenes were tiresome, you are not alone. I suspect there are many people who abhor fishing as much as I do, but they have been silenced by those who are too narrow-minded to realize that the prevalence of fishing in American literature is a drawback, not an advantage. The simple language authors who write exclusively about fishing use is not a sign of literary innovation or some other high-minded achievement. It’s merely a reflection of the negative effects of fishing on men’s minds. Simply put, the author uses simple language because he has been made stupid by too many fishing trips.

Think of the movie *Jaws*. Robert Shaw psychotically pursues a shark much to the dismay of Roy Scheider, who believes the shark is too much for them to handle, and they need to radio in for help. The shark has done great damage to the boat, but Shaw doesn’t care. He’s going to get that fish if it kills him. As Roy Scheider is trying to contact the shore, Shaw destroys the radio with a club, thereby ensuring that Scheider, himself, and Richard Dreyfuss will have to kill the shark before it kills them.

Apparently they had it all worked out. They shot harpoons into the shark, and these harpoons were connected to barrels that would wear the shark out because it took so much strength and stamina to pull the barrels

underwater and swim around that way. Eventually, Ahab . . . I mean Shaw, gets munched by the shark in a gruesome and memorable scene.

Basically, *Jaws* is the tale of a bunch of grown adults who are outwitted by a big, dumb fish. The fact that Scheider kills the shark in the end doesn't contradict this conclusion. The likelihood that Scheider would actually hit the oxygen tank in the shark's mouth was minimal; it was just put in because it wrapped up themes that were at work in the movie. One could argue, I suppose, that the shark was as stupid as Scheider, Dreyfuss, and Shaw because he pursued them with the same self-destructive, maniacal vigor with which they pursued him, but this still makes Scheider, Shaw, and Dreyfuss as stupid, collectively, as a shark. I do not recall the shark dismissing any air of metropolitan superiority exuded by Scheider, Shaw, and Dreyfuss, but I don't recall them exuding much of anything except bumping provincialism.

The similarities to *Moby Dick* are, of course, obvious, and I can say this with total certainty even though I never finished *Moby Dick*. Shaw is driven by the memory of an incident during World War II in which the ship he was on sank. The people in the ship found themselves in the water with a bunch of sharks. There were many men overboard. The sharks circled them and started feeding inwards. Shaw was in the middle of all the men, and he watched as the sharks stripped away each circle of men, feeding their way to the middle, where Shaw presumably waited in sheer terror. Shaw was eventually rescued. From that point on, he had an obsessive need to kill sharks.

This all makes for good drama, and I must admit that *Jaws* is one of my favorite movies. It is also true, however, that I don't think of *Jaws* as a fishing story. It's too exciting. It's too engaging. It lacks the annoying serenity and knowledge that nothing dramatic is going to happen that one finds in most fishing stories. It doesn't resolve itself in an understatement that makes you set the book down and stare at the wall in front of you for forty-five minutes. In short, it's dramatic, filled with tension and suspense, and once you start watching it, you don't want to stop. It ends with a serious climax, a violent explosion takes place, resolving the almost unbearable tension created by the fact that a man's life was actually being threatened by a very menacing force.

Your run-of-the-mill fishing story contains no such drama, but then again, I may not be the best person to comment on such things because I

have read very few fishing stories. Perhaps fishing is not so common in American literature as I have been led to believe. The fact still remains, however, that American writers dwell on fishing much more than any other writers in the world.

I haven't mentioned how stupid fishers sound when they talk about what kind of hooks and bait they're going to use, or how stupid they look standing next to their mailbox because they think their copy of *Field and Stream* might arrive that day. Nor have I mentioned how bad they smell during and after their fishing trips. I have yet to relate how annoying it is to open a yogurt container, and find your dad's fishing worms crawling around in it. I have also neglected to make fun of men who wear those fishing caps, with every inch adorned by their favorite hooks, or how they sometimes get their fingers stuck on one of the hooks when they're trying to put their hats on.

I didn't go into detail about these things because I didn't want to write about fishing in the first place. I just did it because I was suddenly struck by the notion that for some reason, one had to write about fishing to be taken seriously. Well I simply don't care about fishing, so I won't write about it any more.

I started out innocently enough, discussing how I would avoid fishing in my writing, but now I find that I have dwelled on the subject for much too long, and I have taken all of my readers with me. To those who didn't have the sense to jump ship once they discovered this essay was about fishing, I would recommend doing so the next time you read a fishing story. You may find yourself following the writer into unknown waters, not knowing the whole time that the writer was more interested in personal vindication than he was in anything having to do with fish.

My dad fished, and it was a part of his life I didn't share in. I don't like talking about bait, and I hate drinking beer while sitting on an embankment, afraid to say anything for fear that someone will tell me to shut up because I'm scaring the fish.