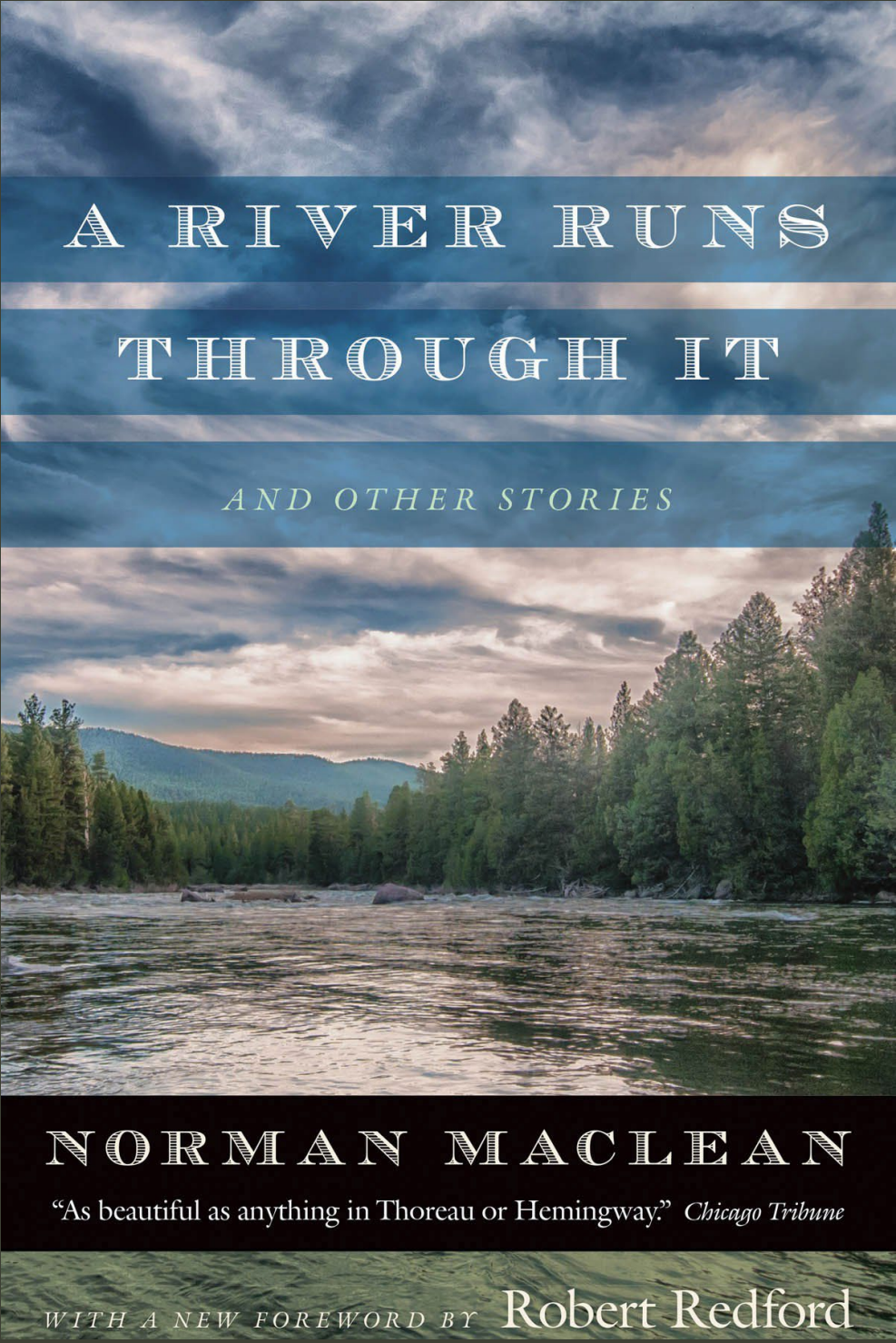




A RIVER RUNS

THROUGH IT

AND OTHER STORIES

NORMAN MACLEAN

"As beautiful as anything in Thoreau or Hemingway." Chicago Tribune

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY Robert Redford

DARTMOUTH

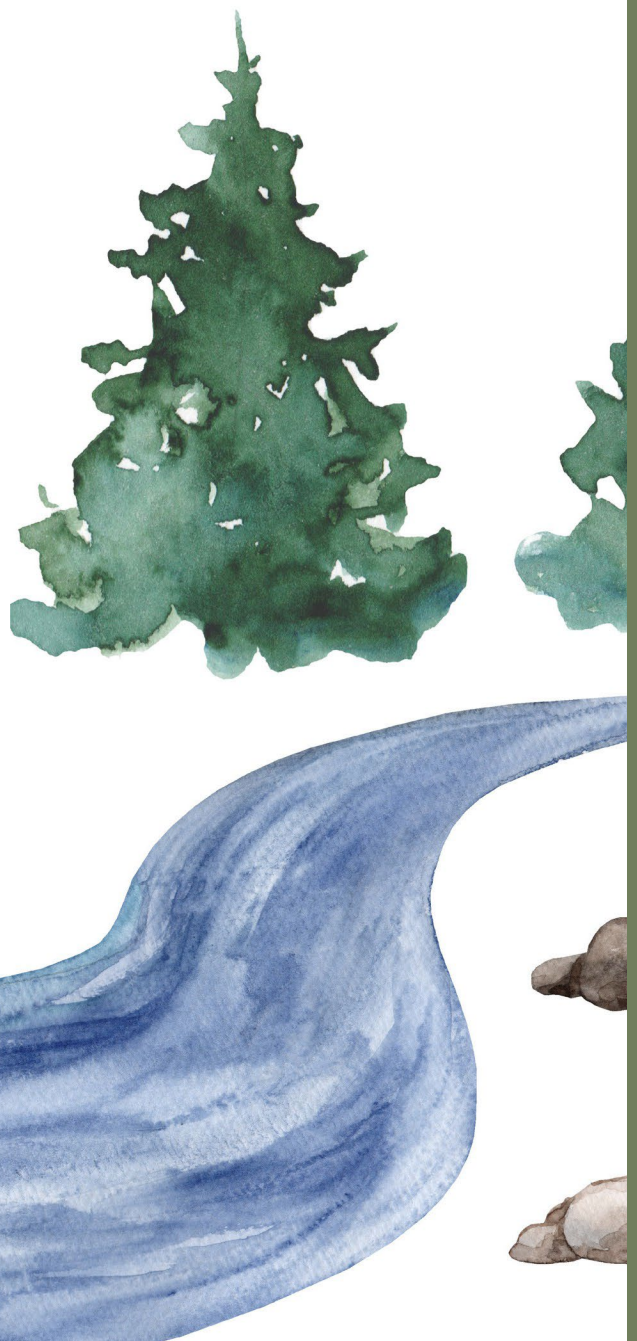
BOOK CLUB

A River Runs Through It and Other Stories

Norman Maclean, Class of 1924

A Discussion Guide for Book Club Leaders

The novella by Maclean '24 may be short, but it's layered. Beneath the fly-fishing scenes are questions about family, faith, work, and the limits of love and language. Use these questions as a menu, not a checklist—pick a handful that fit your group and let the conversation wander wherever the waters take you.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Family, Understanding, and the Dartmouth Community

1. Maclean writes, “It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us.” Do you agree that the people closest to us are often the hardest to understand? Why might that be true?
2. How do Norman and Paul show love for each other without ever saying it directly? What does the story suggest about families speaking their feelings aloud?
3. What do you make of the line that help “is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly?” Have you experienced that kind of help—whether you offered or refused—in your own life?
4. In interviews, Maclean shared that, as one of the few students from outside the northeast, he didn’t feel a connection with the Dartmouth community until later in life. How has the Dartmouth community evolved to welcome those previously on its outskirts, and what role do alumni play in that community-building?

Fly Fishing as Art, Faith, and Metaphor

5. The book opens with “In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” How does Maclean use precision and craft—casting a perfect line, tying a fly—as a parallel for a well-lived life?
6. “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” What do you think the famous closing line means?

Landscape, Time and Memory

8. A sense of place is important to many who have spent time in Hanover, NH, and in this story the mountains and rivers of Montana also play a central role in the story. How does setting shape this story, and how does your sense of place shape your life?
9. Maclean wrote this book in his seventies, looking back at events from his youth. How does the narrator’s retrospective voice affect how the story is told?
10. The story is as much an elegy as an adventure. What is Maclean mourning, and what does he seem to have made peace with by the end?

The Other Stories in the Collection

11. If your group read “Logging and Pimping and ‘Your Pal, Jim’” or “USFS 1919,” how do these stories about work and wilderness echo the themes of *A River Runs Through It*?
12. Across all three stories, Maclean writes about tough, physical work—logging, forest service life, fishing. What does he seem to believe about work as a way of understanding oneself?

Bonus Discussion: Book vs. the 1992 Film

Directed and narrated by Robert Redford, with Craig Sheffer as Norman and Brad Pitt as Paul. Use this section if your group has also watched the movie for your Book Club.

13. The film adds visual beauty and sweeping cinematography to the fishing scenes. Does seeing the rivers and fishing on screen change how you experience Maclean’s descriptions of them?
14. Redford’s narration relies heavily on Maclean’s language. How did Redford’s verbal delivery of Maclean’s words change your sense of the story’s tone?
15. The movie softens or omits some of the darker material from the book, including Paul’s gambling and the racial and social tensions of 1920s Montana. What is gained or lost by that softening?
16. Brad Pitt’s Paul is often described as more charismatic and glamorous on screen than on the page. How did the casting choice shape your emotional response to Paul’s fate?
17. The film was a commercial and critical success and introduced many readers to the book. Did watching the movie enhance your reading of the novella, or did you prefer the book on its own terms?



STARTING YOUR OWN BOOK CLUB

Build a Group

- Invite classmates and friends who share similar reading interests and availability.
- Decide how social or academic the group will be and determine where and how often you'll meet.
- Create an email chain or group chat to communicate with everyone at once.

Before the Meeting

- Select books that are easily accessible and are likely to be popular within the group's interests. The Dartmouth Book Club selects quarterly titles authored by Dartmouth alumni.
- Send 3–5 discussion questions ahead of time so people can jot down thoughts while reading, rather than trying to recall the book cold.
- Pick a comfortable, low-distraction space, and set a clear start and end time (90 minutes is usually good).
- Have a backup plan for members who didn't finish the book — a short summary or key passage to read aloud to level the playing field.

During the Discussion

- Spend the first few minutes socializing and getting food or drinks before getting started.
 - Open with a low-stakes question everyone can answer (What were your impressions of the book? Who loved it and who hated it?) before moving into deeper themes.
 - Ask open-ended questions and resist the urge to answer your own question first. Some silence is okay as people think about their answers.
 - Read a short passage aloud together at least once—it re-centers the group on the text itself.
 - Watch for one or two voices dominating; invite quieter members directly ("I'd love to hear what you thought").
 - It's fine to disagree about meaning—a good discussion doesn't need to end in consensus. It often doesn't, in fact!
 - Keep an eye on time so you can cover both the book's questions and, if planned, the movie comparison without rushing at the end.
 - End each meeting by choosing the next book and meeting date, so members feel ownership of the group's direction. The Dartmouth Book Club typically announces its next selection 1-2 months before the reading period starts.
 - If reading a Dartmouth Book Club selection, invite your members to join for the live virtual author talk before meeting to dive into the book as a group.
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