

REVIEWS

The River Why? (1983)



David James Duncan

(1952-)

INTRODUCTION

David James Duncan is a major nature writer in the tradition of Thoreau and Wallace Stegner who now lives with his family in Lolo, Montana. He also wrote the baseball family novel, *The Brothers K* (1992), winner of a Best Books Award from the National Library Association and a Notable Book Award from *The New York Times*. He has won many other awards including Best American Spiritual Writing 6 times. His work is included in over 40 anthologies. *River Teeth* (1996) is a collection of short stories; *My Story as Told by Water* (2001) is a memoir; *God Laughs and Plays* (2006) is a collection of religious essays; *The Heart of the Matter* (2011), co-written with Rick Bass, and *Citizen's Dissent* (2011) co-written with Wendell Berry, are environmentalist books.

REVIEWS

“This is a veritable epic of flyfishing the waters of Oregon, done in a high-velocity, exuberant style, sprawling in scale, heedless of form. Gus (Augustine Hale-Orviston), narrator and protagonist, whose voice propels the freewheeling movement, comes by it naturally, being the son of celebrated flyrod fisherman Henning (called H2O by his son) and Ma Carolina, incomparable worm-bait fisherwoman and ebullient earth-mother—or better, mother of waters. Caught between those whirlwinds, Gus sets out in quest of the meaning-of-it-all. On his picaresque journey toward some elusive center in which to ground a fully human life, Gus encounters such colorful characters as the Indian wiseman Thomas Bigeater; Titus, a homespun hayseed philosopher with a dog named Descartes; a singing mouse; and—surprise! a magically lovely lady.

The feeling for and evocation of the imperiled natural world is moving, rhapsodic in its intensity; the writing--energetic, excessive, sometimes merely prolix--is literary in a distinctively American way. The profusion of literary references weighs heavy at times, however. The danger in such a rhapsody is that it may dissolve into a folksy sentimentality filled with endearing eccentrics and their loveable eccentricities,

but Duncan manages for the most part to avoid that quagmire. So amiable is the prevailing tone that the flowing narrative is able to absorb Koranic and Eastern mysticisms, Tao, Sufism, Zen, Meister Eckhart—the religions of the oneness and holiness of creating, the gospel of love—without turning into the kind of maudlin choral chanting that has so often disfigured faddish treatments of fusion of self and the world as a literary scene. First novelist Duncan’s voice is marked by sensibility and integrity, and if he can restrain his excesses, he will deserve close watching. Book and publisher were meant for each other; this unsolicited manuscript prompted Sierra Club Books to make its first venture into fiction.”

Publishers Weekly
22.12 (1982)

“There exists in this country a small but fanatical minority of people (I confess to being one of them) who, though otherwise reasonably mature citizens, derive the most ecstatic satisfaction from a strange and elaborate form of animal abuse: fly-fishing for trout. There is an even smaller subclass of that group that takes vicarious pleasure (presumably during winter or while trapped in a city until the next vacation) from reading about trout fishing. These folk can choose among a large canon of nonfiction fishing books, ranging from the instructional to the dithyrambic. A still smaller subclass is subject to monomania so extreme that its members will read and enjoy a particular novel purely because—whatever its other merits or lack of them—it incorporates mock-epical descriptions of various poor trout being conquered with rod and fly. *The River Why?*, David James Duncan’s first novel, is a book for those people.

Yet even for them it’s a meager catch. Clearly Mr. Duncan is knowledgeable and sensitive about the anadromous salmonoid fishes of the Oregon coastal rivers. His angling scenes are vivid enough. His title (the River Wye is a famous salmon stream rising in Wales) is wonderfully promising. Occasionally his humor rings sweetly. But these charms are lost in a book that is far too long, too fogbound in its pretentiousness, too riddled with maudlin anticlimaxes for the few honest joys it delivers.

Gus Orviston is the protagonist, son of an eminent, tweedy, fly-fishing father and a rough, worm-dunking mother, and the novel’s entire first quarter is devoted to cutesy family anecdotes involving the continuing argument over bait versus fly. Not many readers should be expected to care. Then at 19 Gus moves to his own riverside cabin. He fishes. He talks to his fly rod, which he calls Rodney. His pet steelhead named Alfred dies, and Gus is very sad. He meets and chases and wins a pretty girl. Many fine fish are landed, several eccentric characters are lightly sketched, some philosophic digressions are inserted clumsily along with an endless succession of flashy epigraphs (from such diverse sources as Hermann Broch, Jim Harrison and the Koran) that happen to mention fish or water. But no real drama ever intrudes. Instead we must settle for the story of a self-absorbed young man who after a series of bathetic adventures finally discovers—grand revelation!—that there is more to life than fishing.”

David Quammen
The New York Times Book Review (1982)

“There is a genre of fishing writing that transcends the predictable vignettes that begin with, ‘Me and Mike threw our hip boots in the trunk of the old Buick and headed out for Mud Lake.’ Instead, the growing collection of true angling literature fills a need for peaceful heart and mind as well as full creel. Among the best of these are Ernest Hemingway’s ‘The Big Two-Hearted River,’ Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*, excellent pieces by the late Arnold Gingrich, work by the contemporary novelist Jim Harrison, and, of course, the American masterpiece *Moby-Dick*—though Moby was mammal not fish—and other lesser-known pieces that surprise and delight us like the sudden strike of a steelhead taking a bucktail fly.

Now we have a beautiful fishing novel by a native Oregonian, David James Duncan, originally of Portland, but currently of the Oregon Coast, the setting for a remarkable piece of fiction that critics undoubtedly will acknowledge as one of the best books of the year. *The River Why?* is not only Duncan’s title and the name of his nameless river where he goes for fish and eventually limits out on spiritual enrichment, but a strong philosophical statement on the inexorable destruction of our natural environment and the accompanying desolation of man’s soul. So impressive is Duncan’s concern, so innovative and clever are his aesthetic comments, his humor and his human insights, that Sierra Club Books—which doesn’t publish novels—accepted the manuscript over the transom. It already has been accepted by the

Book-of-the-Month Club, and has gained national recognition, though official publication is scheduled for later this month.

The River Why? is how Duncan's protagonist, the young fisherman Gus Orviston, sees the river (its curves roughly spell the word 'why' when viewed from a mountaintop) from the vantage of his blissful solitude, fishing his days away in thoughtful reflection alongside a coastal stream. Orviston has no ambition but to fish. His father, the effete Henning Hale-Orviston, a stuffy fly-fishing purist, is locked in a life-long battle with his wife, Ma Orviston, a recalcitrant worm fisherman who has been reared in a roughshod family of Eastern Oregon ranchers. Through their union is born Gus, a fishing fanatic from birth, and Gus's younger brother, Bill Bob, a precocious eccentric who stands apart from the family obsession, viewing the world from a mind cluttered with suburban fantasy.

But to Gus, a high school flunker, lunker trout represent the highest pursuit, and his homework hours are filled with schemes of wangling more hours to fish, usually in the small streams that once rippled, last-gasping, in suburban Portland, Duncan remembers Blue Lake, Fairview Creek, Johnson Creek in East Multnomah County and other bodies of water threatened by pollution. Seeking the fisherman's nirvana, Gus flees to a rough cabin on The River Why, where he spends his days in relentless pursuit of sea-run cutthroat trout and steelhead, all the while reflecting on Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, the theme of which led to his parents' divisiveness, and which originally inspired Duncan, he admits, to begin this novel as a parody of Walton.

Along the River Why, Gus grows up, physically and philosophically. For an exchange of his skills in fishing, fly-tying and rod-making, Gus receives more than his share of love, wisdom and insights into human nature. A streamside philosopher introduces him to classical thought, a family of reclusive hippie candlemakers teaches him calmness of spirit, a family of dairy farmers adopts him and a young, blond wood sprite brings him love.

Meanwhile, Gus defends himself against the assaults of those who would change his way of life. He has a particularly humorous encounter with a bumbling outdoor editor for a major Portland newspaper, and he resists the overtures of exploiters who would tap his skills, ostensibly to make Gus a fortune. But Gus is wise to the world. One day, while drifting for sea-runs in his canoe, he hooks the body of a dead fisherman, and this experience, with his growing sensitivity to the plight of the fish he has been slaying indiscriminately, leads him into a near-religious experience.

He flashes back to a childhood encounter with an old Warm Springs' Indian, Thomas Bigeater, introduced to the youth by his mother during a visit to Celilo Falls in its waning, Indian-fishing days. Reflecting on a tribe of his own people once careless in their fishing ways—a carelessness that caused the Great Spirit to destroy the tribe with a 'river of fire'—Bigeater admonishes, 'Then it was the river of fire. Now it is the white man's dam. These are the Spirit Father's weapons. Always it is the same: It is the greedy, the cruel, the ungrateful that bring down suffering upon the people.'

Duncan is a beautiful writer, a masterful writer who lavishly quotes from the Bible, the Koran, from mythology, poetry and metaphysical philosophers. But he drops his quotations and allusions into the story with the smoothness of a fine old bamboo fly rod easing into a roll cast. Ironically, Duncan admits to owning a \$12 rod from Taiwan. Duncan, 30, who grew up in East County, started fishing at 5 (with worms). A graduate of Reynolds High School and Portland State University, he was married at 20 to his wife, Alice, also a writer, and they now have an 18-month-old son, Thomas, whom they call 'Doonie.' They live in a small house 'somewhere on the north coast.'

Faithful to his art, Duncan has supported himself as a writer by driving truck, mowing lawns, tending bar, working as a caretaker and living summers in small cabins in the boondocks, which, he admits, requires a 'patient wife.' Now working on another novel, Duncan has no desire to leave Oregon. At the coast he now fishes mostly in summer, content to pursue 'little trout.' He fishes frequently with close friend, Portland poet Henry Carlisle, who, with Carlisle's wife, poet Sandra McPherson, is quoted in the novel, and feels everyone should fish more. Not just to go fishing, but to experience the quietude of stream and lakeside, and to rejuvenate the soul.

Duncan is a lanky, longhaired man like Gus; he drew his characters from his imagination and Gus' philosophy from his extensive reading and his heart. 'Anything I could say would steal thunder from the story,' he says modestly, for he is a shy man, 'and I worked three years to say it as well as I can in the novel. I just like writing, fishing and hanging out with my kid. I always felt a little threatened by the suburban lifestyle.' As he wrote the novel, he spent a portion of the time alongside Johnson Creek, catching some elusive and hardy steelhead, and praying for the creek's recovery. Duncan's concern for the recovery of streams, which goes hand-in-hand with the recovery of the human spirit, surfaces throughout *The River Why?* It emerges in the midst of masterful writing, humor, parody and parable, all of which make the novel memorable, as it will surely be for years.

Consider how it can be: 'When I awoke, the first thing I saw was the morning star, blue-green and brilliant between black silhouettes of cedars. I felt very strange, but very good; I'd no desire to do anything but watch—no schedule to keep, no fish to catch. I scarcely recognized myself: the fanatical fisherman in me had died, and what remained was a stranger. I was someone I barely knew, lying on my side, watching a star.'

Paul Pinterich
"Fishing for recovery of the human spirit"
Northwest Magazine, The Oregonian
(6 February 1983) NW 14, 23

"This first novel by a young Oregon writer (and, fittingly, the first fiction work ever published by Sierra Club Books) relates the reclusive backwoods exploits of Gus Orviston, who flees the impassioned, rambunctious piscatorial debates of his outrageous (but lovable) parents, in pursuit of his own true love—fly-fishing. Alas, instead of trout [?], the Thoreau-like Gus reels in a mystical personal experience, which leaves his heart aghast... Eddy, an alluring and remote young fisherwoman...secures for him a deep insight into the mysterious machinations of nature (and, happily, marries him as well). While suffering the flaws of many first literary efforts (a slightly disjointed form and a too-earnest desire to be 'meaningful'), Duncan's ethereal narrative is sincere, cosmically evocative, and synchronous with the questioning mood of millions."

MAB
Booklist (1983)

"The native intelligence that author David James Duncan 'caught' while growing up in Oregon fills the pages of his first novel, *The River Why?*... As Duncan's fictional fisherman, Gus Orviston, travels up the rivers of self-discovery, it's clear that the native Oregonian has also caught another kind of intelligence from his 'long intimacy' with great books and ideas, some of which he encountered while a student in the University Scholars' Program at PSU [Portland State University]... *The River Why?* has resisted being pigeonholed as a fishing tale, environmental treatise, spiritual odyssey, coming-of-age chronicle, regional work, or any other genre. And yet the novel is all of these things. It is about growing up in Portland and fishing the rivers of Oregon; about the changing environment and enduring human qualities; about finding love and living with the question 'Why?' And it is funny....

Spawned by a 'raucous cowgirl' and an 'effete angler' who have taken predictable sides in the age-old bait-versus-fly controversy, Gus seems fated to a solitary streamside life. But once he has left home, settled into a coastal cabin, and immersed himself in his 'Ideal Schedule' (14 hours of fishing per day), Gus is awash.... Then the 'whys' start coming. Why fish? Why have friends? Why die? Why live? Why love? Gus finds many answers—in his offbeat neighbors, in a 'fishergirl' named Eddy, in a little brother wise beyond his years, in Indian legends and classical philosophy, and finally in an upstream quest that reveals the finer-than-monofilament line connecting all things.... Duncan is not Gus and...is not the product of creative writing classes. 'Anybody who talks to me for half an hour knows that I'm not Gus,' says Duncan... 'I don't know how to tie flies'....

Duncan watched his family's two 'country' homes get swallowed up in urban sprawl, and his fishing creeks with them... As an adult, Duncan saw the creeks deteriorate even more. 'I wrote *The River Why?* living on Johnson Creek (Portland), which is just a mess. The steelhead would come every winter and by midsummer the water levels were so low that all the fingerlings and smolts would just be dying like crazy

from all the detergent and chemicals in the water.’ He saw it but he couldn’t write about it. ‘It wasn’t inspirational, it was infuriating. I don’t like angry environmental tirades. They’re boring’.... He admits that a clearcut is ‘horrifying when you first see it’... The grandson of loggers is sympathetic to humans and their practical pursuits.... ‘I’m all for preservation...but a weakness of the environmentalists is that a lot of them are just not financially dependent on doing anything that is at least ostensibly destructive to the environment’.”

Cynthia D. Stowell
The Vanguard
Portland State University
(Summer 1984)

“His first book sang a sweet song. Now the novelist, hidden away in the Oregon coastal mist, wrestles with his doubts and struggles to find a new melody.... *The River Why?* became a relative success that brought Duncan both local and national acclaim. The book, a humorous coming-of-age story told in the suburbs of Portland and in the misty forests of the Oregon coast, used fishing as an allegory for everything from love to death and pretty much everything in between.... It’s an eclectic spiritual package—a mix of Eastern philosophy and Western cynicism [?]-that elevated *The River Why?* from mere wordplay to insight.... ‘I had this sensation when I wrote,’ he says. ‘It grabbed hold of me and made the second half of the book just hum’.... Duncan worked on the novel for four years while earning money driving a recycling truck and operating his own lawn-mowing service. He called himself the Lawn Ranger.... After the first book, publishers and agents kept Duncan’s phone ringing.”

Brent Walth
“An Elusive Muse”
Northwest Magazine, The Oregonian
(8 September 1985)

The River Why? is an inspirational comedy that does with trout fishing what Melville did with whaling. It serves a fish stew of quotations about fishing and water from poets and philosophers as epigraphs to chapters that feed themes in the main course, like the “Etymology” and the “Extracts” that introduce the story of Ishmael. *The River Why?* is itself a river in form and as a symbol, just as *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale* is a whale of a book. Trout are much smaller than whales of course, smaller also than the great marlin in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, yet David Duncan achieves a metaphysical scope comparable to these classics, though other features make it very different from Hemingway: its discursive voice, abundant humor, folk dialects, explicit meanings and baroque aesthetics. *The River Why?* is a philosophical novel full of traditional wisdom and fresh insights. Spiritually, tributaries flow into it from Walt Whitman, Thoreau, Taoism, Zen, American Indian mythology and other traditions, but the main current is Christianity—the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, Hawthorne, Eliot, Flannery O’Connor and Marilynne Robinson. Furthermore, like Faulkner and Hemingway, Duncan fuses Christianity with a pantheism that experiences divinity in the natural world.

As a wandering river *The River Why?* at times seems formless. Gradually it becomes as clear as stepping stones in a trout stream that the plot is essentially Boy retreats from civilization and ogles Nature Girl, loses Girl, finally catches Girl—or rather, she catches him—and they marry. And that works just fine—quite well in fact—it is a lot more plot than in *Walden*, the American prototype of withdrawal into Nature. The boy narrator Gus Orviston declares that “Native intelligence is what...Thoreau had by his pond.” One of his chapters has the same title as Thoreau’s “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” Gus often sounds like Thoreau: “Bourgeois trout are like bourgeois people”; “a human child at birth undergoes a ritual almost identical to that inflicted upon trophy trout at death”; “I wished I was an Indian”; “thoughts are like starlings (they usually come in flocks; they can sing, but would just as soon chatter; they can fly, but would just as soon walk...)” At the same time throughout *The River Why?* young Gus is implicitly contrasted to the older Thoreau in many ways: he is humble, neighborly, loving, funny, often childlike, yet also the greatest trout fisherman in the world and a very successful independent businessman who retreats into a real wilderness rather than to a village pond and does not go home for dinner.

This novel is unusually diverse in styles and tones, deepening like a river as it flows along. Some readers do not see deeper than shallows. The first quarter of the novel is folk comedy introducing the

Orviston family, affectionately satirical and partly dependent on dialect humor. Much literary humor in the 19th century was dialect humor, but most readers today lack the patience to decipher dialect. They read the river from speedboats. The Orvistons are so eccentric they are cartoons. They contradict the Cityslicks who stereotype suburbanites as conformists, but Gus's parents are rigid as asphalt rather than fluid and natural, despite being identified with water. Calling himself "Gus the Fish," he escapes their suburb like the trout he saves from the polluted creek he fished as a boy. His younger brother Bill Bob escapes into a headset. Duncan says in his acknowledgments that Bill Bob embodies the "amazingly suburban spirituality of my friends in the Bay Area." Gus must transcend contradictory traits inherited from his parents, who fight all time—"the effete angler and the raucous cowgirl." He decides that his father is wrong about everything important and "what I really hated was Ma's shoot-from-the-hip thinking style in *me*."

His father is the articulate but pretentious Henning Hale-Orviston, the son of English aristocrats and a famous fly-fisherman and author, though he "couldn't catch his ass in a fish hatchery." Gus calls his father H2O and his uncle calls him Ahab, always pursuing "his whale." Gus hates the name Augustine assigned to him by H2O, though it points to his spiritual nature and confessions. His mother Carolina Carper Orviston is a carper and the antagonistic opposite of H2O, a low-class former cowpoke from eastern Oregon who brawls, talks like a roughneck and fishes with *bait!* "Under the Orviston roof it's Ma who calls the shots." The offspring of two fanatical anglers, Gus became a prodigy known as a fishing genius. "And anyone who thinks I brag in stating that I understand fish thought is obviously ignorant of the way in which fish think. Believe me, it's nothing to brag about."

The River Why? is composed of "fish stories," a genre in the tradition of tall tales—pokerfaced humor—except that most of these stories are meant to be true. The funniest is worthy of Mark Twain, when Gus gets publicized by the sports fishing columnist for the local newspaper and claims to be Antoine Chapeau from "Palm Springs, California, where he used to manage a beauty salon.... Chapeau told us he learned to fish by studying books on mesmerism, Indian mythology, behavioral psychology, and by working with a flyrod out in the wastelands.... It is by craving water that one comes to understand it. Hence, to learn to fish, go to the desert and stay there.... Another interesting technique of Chapeau's is not for the modest!.... In the bushes he strips naked, then he moves back toward the water, puffing his cheeks and writhing his nude body in a fishlike manner; he pretends to swim up to the lure, grabs it, pretends to be hooked, struggles for awhile, then throws the landing net over his head and cries out in a loud voice so the fish can hear, "OH! WHAT HAS HAPPENED! OH! OH! I FEAR I AM CAUGHT!" This sophisticated psychological pantomime serves to condition the behavior of the spectator fish, so that when he...casts his lure back into the pool they mimic his every action to a 'T,' and a limit is soon lying on the bank!"

The wide spectrum of tones in this novel—comparable to Twain—is illustrated by juxtaposing the ridiculous with the sublime. The most powerful episode in *The River Why?* is "Nick the Convert," an allegory as good as Hawthorne. One of the kids Gus plays with is nicknamed Hemingway and this iconic name is repeated a lot leading up to the chapter about Nick, the name of Hemingway's young protagonist in a number of famous short stories, in particular the one about Nick as a wounded WWI veteran fishing for trout, "Big Two-Hearted River." This is an old Nick, a veteran of WWII. Tying flies for sale, Gus hires Nick the old fisherman as an assistant. Nick looks "as if he had an old dog that just died and his smile was to keep from crying." During the war he was confined on a minesweeper in the North Sea with a chaplain he grew to hate for his pious certainty: "he'd talk about Jesus, always calling him 'Fisher of Men'... Nick scorned Jesus and raged against God. Old Nick is one of the traditional names for Satan. Eventually their ship hit a drifting mine and blew up, killing most of the crew. In desperation, about to drown, Nick spoke the name of Jesus Christ. Then a fisherman threw him a line with a five-inch hook on the end—"by God I could see it!" Too weak to grab it, Nick saves himself in the only way possible—he impales his hand on "that blessed hook." He shows Gus the scar, "As if he'd been one-quarter crucified."

Gus's father is an agnostic, his Ma is profane and Gus refers to the Bible as "tall tales." Fishing is their religion. *The Complete Angler* "became our family bible," but Izaak Walton is a Deist with a mechanistic view of God and Gus "failed to see the least evidence of His existence." Here we have a continuation of the Transcendental revolution against the Rationalism of the 18th century represented by Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman and the 1960s counterculture. Gus's great-grandmother represents the continuation of the Christian tradition, telling him that "Jesus and the disciples are bait fishermen with invisible hooks." So

Gus reads the Bible, identifies with the fishermen who became disciples of Jesus and decides to become like a disciple and to worship by fishing. Yet he displays his own “polarized brain”—reason versus spirit—by imitating Benjamin Franklin’s schedule in a comically perverted version, like *Gatsby*: “experiment with caffeine, nicotine, to eliminate excess sleep”; “nonangling conversation: 0 hrs”... This materialistic selfish lifestyle alienates him from the spirit: “Had I believed in some Deity, even in a rivergod... I believed in nothing I couldn’t see except air and fish...”

Gus is transformed into “Gus the Fish” by confronting death, when he pulls a drowned fisherman like himself from the river. “He drifted vertically...an outlandish, waterlogged crucifix.... ‘Christ,’ I thought.” He has “the same astonished expression I’d seen on the faces of a million spent fish.” At first the experience only increases his materialistic Naturalism: “I was a nothing—a random configuration of molecules.” Then the fog clears: “That corpse was me.... The fanatical fisherman in me had died...the fog was gone!...the two fogs, inner and outer, had dispersed simultaneously.” He repents of “maiming and murdering trout like enemies in wartime... Christ, I was nothing but an aquatic logger...trout my trees.” However, “a moral condemnation of fish killing doesn’t get far before it runs smack up against Jesus himself, who fed fish to the multitudes... If Christ didn’t know then what a fish was for, who did?”

Exploring another trout stream in the Coast Range, Gus is baited by the sight of a girl in a tree like an apple in Eden. She gets naked and catches a fish by diving after it “and by the time she’d beached and killed it my bloodstream was pulsating with so many outrageous romantic goads that I had to turn away to stave off the head-staggers.” He sounds like Huck Finn “melting like butter in a frypan.” Her name is Eddy and his heart is awl. That his love for this girl is spiritual as well as physical is conveyed in a brilliant line: “I forgot I had a body the moment I saw hers.” From his intellectual friend Titus he acquires “a shaky belief in an imperceptible but seemingly inescapable essence called ‘soul’...” From him also Gus adopts a metaphor of himself as “the soul’s pole,” analogous to a fishing pole. If he is analogous to a typical flyrod, he feels fourteen feet tall. His pursuit of Eddy is another form of inspired fishing: “Fishermen should be the easiest of men to convince to commence the search for the soul, because *fishing is nothing but the pursuit of the elusive.*”

Love of an ideal, embodied in Eddy—the Jungian anima—inspires the psychological individuation process: “I was feeling things I’d never felt, and I knew—these things were of the soul.” He is also haunted by the conversion story of Nick. One night he cannot sleep and is moved to hike upstream in the dark along the River Road. “What in a scarred palm could cast such a spell? Who cast it? I didn’t know. But I felt that the one I called Nameless was trying to speak to me—had long been trying. And his ‘words’ were silent, spoken in a language of images: the drowned fisherman...the *why* in the river...Eddy in the alder, the scar in the palm—these were the signposts marking both my inner and outer journey. They were not much like the usual sacred signs—but fishing was hardly an orthodox faith.... And these things had been given as gifts...I had to follow the signs that I was given, as rivers follow valleys... I felt as though an oldest, greatest, longest-lost Friend had come to walk the road, unseen beside me....”

As though prompted by his Friend, he has a perception of symbolic parallels like those in *Walden*, asking why “leaf skin, salmon skin, palm-of-hand skin must be made scarlet in order to reach the ends they must reach...why they seem to be reached only by those who suffer, who know pain, and who learn in pain that it is this scarlet end and only this scarlet end that can free us from pain.” The most famous “scarlet end” is the crucifixion. “I still believed the one I’d called ‘Friend’ walked somewhere near me, but still caught nothing I could keep ahold of. I just walked... And in time a fisherman’s patience crept up from behind, tramped past the fatigue, gave me heart, led me forward....” In the red light of dawn “I could almost see the blood, streaming like groundwater under the pale earth of my flesh. I could almost see the scar.” It had “something to do with a Friend who by the way where was he? He’d been gone for hours. If he’d ever been there. Christ it was cold.” He hikes fifty miles, all the way up to the source of the River Why, in a grove with light filtering down “as if through stained glass.”

Duncan alternates this part of young Gus’s narrative with passages recounting the initiation of a young Tillamook Indian boy into manhood. “The Indians carved and painted heads and wings and bodies on boats to catch the fish; I wound feathers and thread into wings and heads and bodies on hooks to do the same.” His archetypal journey into the wilderness transcends time and space: “except for the logging roads

way up on the ridges, it could have been any century you'd care to name." However, "I was two hundred years late and the wrong color." He decides that "I would never make it to the real source of things unless or until Ol' Nameless chose to come and find me fishing.... It's a damned tough business sitting around trying to force yourself to force God to forcefeed you a revelation or vision or spiritual assistant or something." He has already been given Nick to be his assistant.

Now he understands the spiritual insight of the Indians, and of Jesus: "I'd been trying to make a church out of the source" of the river. But "*the source is everywhere.*" This corresponds to the famous definition of God by Saint Augustine, his namesake. Then he notices a raven watching him from its perch on a snag. "Raven is an Indian god." With his expanded consciousness, Gus now has an out-of-body experience, becoming the raven—flying, seeing the river anew from above—a god's eye view. He knows he has reached an ideal when he gets home to his cabin and finds Eddy waiting for him inside.

What follows is one of the best allegories in the book. Eddy hooks a big chinook salmon using only a three-pound leader, too weak to land the fish. Then she hands over the pole to Gus: "If the fish wants line, give it. Don't let it go slack, but don't *fight* the fish; just keep track of it.... I'll be back tomorrow, sunset. My last wish is this: *play the chinook!*" Gus can never land Eddy, she is like the chinook—which turns out to be a female—but to set his hook in *her*, he must "play the chinook" in two senses: He must yield to the strength of Nature in his relationship to her and he must become her in the empathic way he became the raven. In an analogy to *Moby-Dick* Gus says he is "linked to a leviathan." Ishmael becomes a whale-man, Gus becomes a *female* chinook: "My guide was a female." Chinook is the name of a fish, a tribe, and the Indian trading language throughout the Pacific Northwest. Playing the fish, Gus no longer feels alone and empty. "The faithful pulse of the salmon's tail [is] beating like the river's silver heart.... And from my depths came a wavelike rush of certainty: love *could* sustain the frailest of lines! As long as I loved I would not lose this salmon....with love alone coursing down the line it would have no desire to escape!" He plays the chinook all the way upstream to her spawning place, then he unhooks her. This parable is more complex than the one about capturing a bird by letting it go free.

This parable identifies the sacrifice of the female salmon, who dies after spawning, with that of Jesus on the cross: "The river shimmered...flowing from east to west like the horizontal bar of a cross; the line, too, shone pale in the light, reaching vertically from sky to water.... The moist sky...seemed to flow like a boundless river." The River Why is the spiritual River of Life flowing from God.... I felt overturned..." Spirit overturns reason. Gus bends over and enters the river, breaks the line and frees her "Bearing the hook, trailing the wisp of an unseen leader..." The image of the cross appears again on his long hike back to his cabin, evoking the westward historical progression of Christianity: "The road was white with frost: it shone like a strip of moon surface in the early light, running from east to west like the horizontal bar of a cross.... And then I felt it—a sharp pain in the heart, like a hook being set.... And then I saw it—the vertical bar—a line so subtle it must be made of nothing nameable. And it ran from my heart of earth and blood, through my head, to the sky; ran like a beam of watery light; ran from the changing, flowing forms of the world to a realm that light alone could enter. But my pain grew sharper: mad with joy, I sank to my knees on the white road....and I felt the hand, resting like sunlight on my head. And I knew that the line of light led not to a realm but to a Being, and that the light and the hook were his, and that they were made of love alone. My heart was pierced."

Other writers will admire Duncan's gift for language: "His little bald head was wobbling the way babies' heads do—like an earth gone off its axis"; "I heard the sounds a kid might make when travelling at the speed of light"; "Bill Bob hung in the air like a lump of wet Wonderbread, his mouth as inexorably closed as a bank vault on weekends"; "who jumps from topic to topic like a squirrel from branch to branch"; "tiptoeing over the last three syllables like he was barefoot and they were a clovered lawn full of honeybees"; "Ma ended one argument by punctuating [Pa] in the nose"; "Inside I was leaping like a trout in a mayfly hatch"; "I made myself look ignorant and trivial and small, like a little dog that turns belly-up to keep a big dog from chewing on it"; "Blind and sick with panic, I set my crummy bike pedals whirring like an egg beater"; "The man's pallid fingers were curled under, undulating like feeding slugs"; "Maggie came marching toward me looking a lot like Napoleon, which left me feeling something like Moscow"; "I tossed and writhed like a worm on a hook"; "a plan formed in my mind in somewhat the way scum forms in an abandoned cup of water"; "My brain began to lurch and flutter like a moth toward the flame that will cook

it”; “my heart was jumping rope with my intestines”; “I hid in my teacup”; “Eddy stood on tiptoe, her body taut as a drawn bow”; “she was naked as the sky”; “evidently it changed my appearance when my heart slithered out my mouth, rolled off the bed and landed with a squishy splat on the floor”; “I felt like I had a tail and it was wagging like crazy and I couldn’t make it stop.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

