

nuance never sleeps

Roderick Haig-Brown - was on my list this year to read some of the dude's shit. Think I first learned about him through McGuane, who I generally like - his *Longest Silence* is a good read, with some wonderful insights (for example, his soliloquy about "smoothness" being the hallmark of a great fisherman), even if some of the language gets a little....aristocratic (please, people, no more *recondite*). His essay, "The Heart of the Game," in the collection *Hunter's Heart* is fantastic. McGuane wrote approvingly of Haig-Brown, and, though it didn't broach my consciousness, Haig-Brown's name probably also got into my brain by reading about steelhead - he's referenced in Milt Keiser's tome and in Bill Herzog's about fishing spoons. What attracted me to him was that, yeah, he was a fishing writer, who, as a tribe, generally write far too much about technique (and therefore bear the tainted air of veiled commercials - or not so veiled when one manufacturer name after another is spouted in succession) and not nearly enough about understanding, but McGuane suggested he bucked the trend, promising more about the meaning of fishing, the *Why*, and less of a how-to guide.

So a few months ago I plopped down a little dough and bought *A River Never Sleeps*, and at first I was a little disappointed - seemed just a bunch of fishing stories, albeit with clear, vivid, detailed descriptions not only of the fishing but also the theater around the fishing: the birds, the trees, the look and feel of the waterways. Kinda felt I'd wasted my dough, purchasing a book that would take precious space on the limited breadth of my bookshelf. But after reading through a few more times - I generally need to since I so rarely fully immerse myself in the writer's world, ideas, in the first go-around - I saw that I'd erred, with *A River Never Sleeps* deserving that precious shelf space.

Why? Many reasons. His language - it's so refreshingly direct, for example, when he writes that he *kills* the fish, not euphemistically "takes" 'em or "keeps" 'em or "removes" 'em - he doesn't pussyfoot around the final act in the story of line, lure, and gaff. He's honest. His accurate, detailed descriptions of the stages of life, whether of tree or fish, reveal the value of careful observation and engaged experience. His explanation of why sea-run cutthroat trout do what they do remains better than anything I've read in the scientific literature, no doubt because he considers science the "bare bones" that need to be fleshed out with experience to gain full understanding (p. 339-340). But more worthwhile than his honest language and keen observations is his all-seeing, nuanced, appreciative eye - he doesn't categorically dismiss or malign anything or anyone, and he recognizes the individuality, the uniqueness, of each thing, each life, without developing tunnel vision. Not once do you read the phrase *trash fish* in his book - while he *prefers* salmon and steelhead, he doesn't hate all other fishes, whether deep-water marine fishes or bony rough fishes, but finds them interesting and, by proxy, valuable. That's unlike many fly fisherman who've claimed him as their own and yet spit that phrase - *trash fish* - out anytime a sucker or mountain whitefish comes to hand. And the fly-guys ain't alone - the mainstream white-guy American fisherman frequently reviles anything not a game fish as a trash fish, and many in the environmental community have their own trash fish, too, though they euphemize 'em ("non-native," "invasive," "predator"). Sadly, all three will cruelly toss their fish of scorn on the bank to suffocate pointlessly. Similarly, though he *prefers* the fly rod, he again harbors no hate for other methods when they're more effective (for example, spinning/baitcasting rods and spoons for kings), nor against those who employ those methods. In contrast, he reveres them for their well-honed artistry, such as the English roach fisherman or the Washingtonian largemouth bass fisherman. He rues some Indians for killing a steelhead run but admires others for their grace and

craftmanship and intuition. That all-encompassing, nuanced perception extends beyond fishy stuff - he recognizes the devastation caused by clear-cut logging, but he's not immune to seeing that even in that ravaged landscape, new, wild life springs and can contribute to a beautiful scene, such as the luxurious salal bushes and booming riparian trees by Theimer Lake. He sees beauty in the graceful lines of Rock Island Dam, but he's not impaired from finding Grand Coulee Dam ugly and lamenting the loss of free-flowing river. Concurrently, he remains able to see the broad patterns across species and landscapes and time, such as his observation of the main role of rivers all along the Pacific Coast nurturing salmon (and salmon's main role of nurturing watersheds), and similar occurring throughout much of the temperate, coastal world. And of course - he's right.

Such an appropriate level of sensitivity - he rarely overgeneralizes, but he also rarely overspecifies. Result? He almost never mistakes assuming that what's right for one is right for another while maintaining context vital for understanding the specific. So many of us fishers and biologists would be better if we were more like him.

Naturally I don't agree with everything the dude writes - if I did, I'd be denying my own individuality, and his. His statement that the middle of the day is best for fishing - maybe that's true in the higher latitudes and thus shorter growing seasons of England and British Columbia, but the brown trout, lake trout, rainbows, kings, channel catfish, common carp, redbelt surfperch, largemouth and smallmouth and spotted bass, pikeminnow, suckers here in California - they'd all disagree damn near most of the year. Another - his statement that all fishermen desire nothing more than the biggest fish. That's true of most fishermen - but not me. I can appreciate the allure of a big fish, why the behemoths are so hungered for - they show up on a hook far less than smaller, younger fish just by dint of being rarer, older, and smarter. Certainly big fish have deeply affected me - a big-ass hen steelhead I caught just a week ago had me shaking, breathless. But that wasn't the best fish of the year I caught - instead, it was a little king salmon measuring a mere 25 inches. I caught lots of bigger fish - other kings, carp, leopard sharks, stripers, shit, even that hen steelie - but they weren't better. Why? Ironically, Haig-Brown answers that question and absolves himself when he discusses how the *experience* of fishing can satisfy, how the satisfaction can be maximized by a flawless cast, by wisdom that leads to acute concentration, by (as he alludes to) the surrounding setting of "...the color and movement of water and sky, by the sounds and scents and gentle stirrings that were all about me" (p. 202) - in other words, when one is fully engaged with the entirety of the experience in which the desired fish is the axis. No fish needs come to hand, though the experience is enhanced if one does. That applies to my little salmon: I fished a wild, abandoned river clothed with my loves the pines and firs, on a reach I'd studied intensely for kings; I followed my hard-won experience on other rivers by scaling down to a small, dark spinner when the morning sun started glinting through the dissipating clouds; my knowledge subconsciously focused me on the foamy edge of a slow, deep run; and my presentation, damn, so perfect, an on-point cast, a quick mend to sink the lure, and then the heavy thump of the spinner as it slowly backed toward that edge near the bottom, my rod tip following to keep the lure deep, the occasional tings of the blade hitting rocks vibrating up the line, through the rod, to my hand. I could *feel* a king in that edge, and when my lure reached it, the blade stopped and then that second-long heavy, bobbing weight that signals a king has gnawed - the truth of the feeling. I recognized she wasn't a snag, quickly hit her three times to sink the hook home, she magnificently ran in the typical upstream, blistering run, and several minutes later I tailed her with grace. A few shots, then she blasted out of my hand, showering me with a wall of water thrown back by her tall tail, as if in baptism. It was the perfect experience, and she, being the fruit of the perfect experience, was the most desired fish. In contrast, lucking into a monster salmon while clumsily casting for

steelhead at some litter-infested, advertised "hot spot" - that'd be one to appreciate, to learn from, but not to exult - it's cheap. In other words: the *how*, *when*, *why*, and *where* are as - or more - important than the *what* at the end of the line. An old story, but so many these days need to be reminded.

Finally, Haig-Brown's peace with the unknowns, the ineffable. He states that one could never know everything about a river, knowledge can never be complete, but unlike so many in my profession these days that would be disturbed by that, that "uncertainty," would consider it a failure, Haig-Brown sees it as a beacon, an allure, an inspiration. He's accepting of his death, and that the only things bad about death would be missing the people you love and not being able to experience the things you wanted to but never got around to. Refreshing, when these days so many seem to desire nothing more than recognition on silly social-media websites rather than love and full experience. And he never justifies why he fishes beyond that he enjoys it - and that may be his best point. As a human, an animal with fishing embedded in his genes for thousands and thousands of years, he doesn't need to, and so answers the *Why* of fishing: it's being at peace with being fully human.

And of course - he's right. Wish more of us fishers and fisheries biologists were more like him.

REFERENCES

Haig-Brown, R. L. 2014. A river never sleeps. United States, Skyhorse.