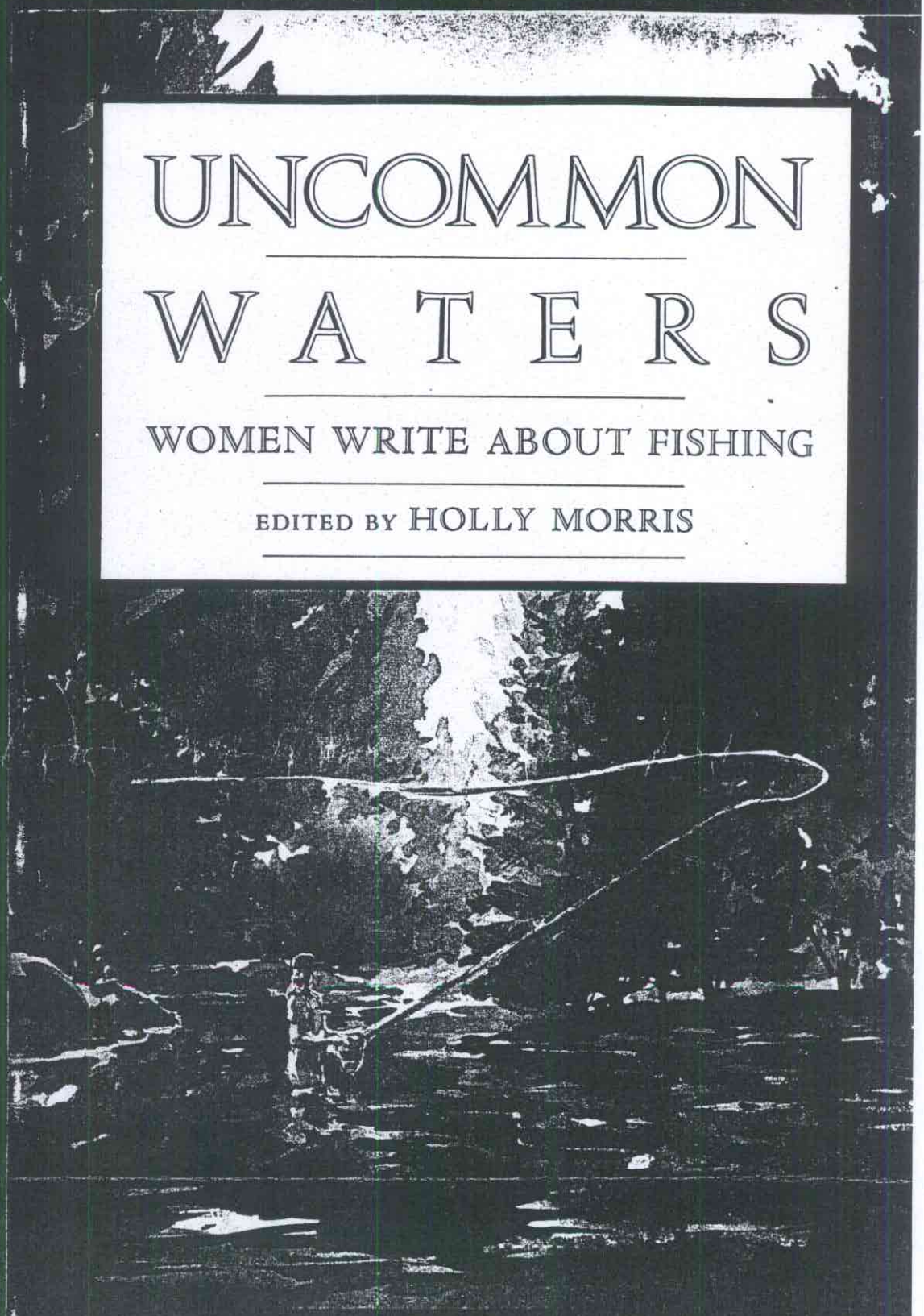
UNCOMMON WATERS

WOMEN WRITE ABOUT FISHING

EDITED BY HOLLY MORRIS



Preface by Margot Page, editor of *The American Fly Fisher*

Without a Backward Cast: Notes of an Angler

KATHARINE WEBER

TROUT ARE MYSTERIOUS. *They're quiet and graceful, the oak trees of the fish forest. Mackerel, on the other hand, are noisy fish, tough and clever. They fight like hell. I've had a one-pound mackerel bend a fishing rod practically under the boat in waters off the coast of Maine. Between the two lie bass, who are middle-of-the-road fish, noncontroversial. Sunfish one catches intentionally only if one is under the age of twelve; they're stupid and weak, a very lower-class fish. I have never met a sturgeon, but I have a hunch that they are downright intellectual (perhaps a bit dark and Russian, too). Salmon are without a doubt, the most intelligent of fish; they also have an excellent sense of humor.*

Why this excursion into fish personalities? Knowing what and who is on the other end of the line is as important as knowing the rules of the game. This is the heart of it, the essential lure: the one-to-one challenge between angler and fish.

The first time I ever held a fishing rod was at a stocked lake in Minnesota when I was seven years old. I don't think I cast the line or landed the fish, but the rod was put into my hands for a few minutes after a trout had been hooked, and I remember the thrill of the tension and pulse of the struggling fish. My family was not athletically inclined, and I think this was not so much a sporting occasion as it was a diversionary way of finding something to eat. I hung around the

table where the fish were being cleaned and was given a lump of quartz that I had spotted on a low shelf next to some discarded fishing nets. I treasured the snowy cluster of crystals, which seemed to me much purer and more desirable than the fish flesh it resembled.

The next time I fished was even less authentic. My grandmother paid three dollars at the World's Fair in New York for me to have the privilege of dangling a baited hook in front of some pathetic-looking trout that were milling around in a two-foot-deep plastic pond. I think I was entitled to fifteen minutes. (Three dollars for fifteen minutes' worth of opportunity to hook an anemic trout was absurdly steep, and this was 1964).

I hooked a fish and had absolutely no idea what to do next, but the fish, which had probably been through this several times that day, gave only a few feeble attempts at shaking the hook, and I finally hauled it out of the water, where it flopped in the air on the end of my line. The man who ran the concession offered to wrap it up so I could take it home, which I was very interested in doing, but my grandmother, conscious of ninety-degree August heat and an entire day still ahead of us at the fair, briskly declined and told me that I would rather put the dear, dear, cunning little fish back, wouldn't I? I looked back over my shoulder as I was led away for some nice Belgian waffles and saw my fish swimming again in the tepid water with the other fish, some of whom were swimming backwards and upside down.

At this point in my life, fishing held no real fascination for me. I was not to become a fisher for another ten years.

When I was twenty, I met Nick. After a few months it was clear that we would be married and spend the rest of our lives together. We went to Ireland for our honeymoon. We took along a spinning rod, just in case, and ended up spending almost every day of our two weeks wading in freezing rivers, casting for salmon. The underbrush grows very close to the water along the Ilen River, and most zealous back-casts ended up in a tangled line and a lost lure. The rivers were all flooded and swollen that autumn, and we never caught a thing. But I acquired a respect for the salmon of Ireland. One chilly afternoon we saw a couple of salmon just larking in a pool—our casts were probably a source of amusement for them—and one fish jumped clear out of the water, danced on his tail and nipped away. We were

enchanted. We spent more time sliding in cow dung across farmers' fields, finding a clear spot where one could cast with impunity, and we warmed up after cold mornings on the rivers at the West Cork Hotel in downtown Skibbereen, where the dinners (lunches to you) consisted of wondrous heaps of roast pork or mutton or beef and four or five kinds of potatoes, piled in mounds on your plate by red-faced young women too shy to look you in the eye. Eating was an exercise in excavation.

I think I had not been happier than during some of those moments standing in my new wellingtons in some marsh waiting for my turn to fish—to cast and cast and cast. That's mostly what fishing is. We cast our arms off, developed strategies, talked to the fish, lied about what we'd seen to other fishermen and planned out routes with the primitive map issued along with the fishing license by the wizened little man who perched behind an official litter of rubber stamps at the license office in Skib. We had one rod and one license between us.

You don't see many women fishing in Ireland, and the ones you do see are usually English or German. We saw one other couple fishing, and they had fixed up a strange rig with sand eels and several hooks, which seemed rather joyless to us. They caught many trout. We preferred our system. We caught nothing. But I developed a certain amount of skill in casting, although I still to this day, because of the undergrowth along the Ilen, tend to throw more of a side-arm than an overhead cast.

A year later, we moved into the eighteenth-century Connecticut farmhouse where we live today. One of the features that attracted us to this bit of countryside is the small lake on the adjoining property, which while not exactly teeming with fish does allow one frequent glimpses of ducks, geese and resident herons, depending on luck and time of day.

What one sees is, of course, one of the main attractions of fishing. Fishing takes you to some incredibly beautiful locations and then gives you the excuse to stand there all day and enjoy yourself. You would never fall asleep while fly casting; in fact, wading and casting are vigorous forms of exercise. It's also a game of skill, not a game of waiting, as polefishing must be. The rules of the game are that you are a person who can't see beneath the surface of the water

terribly well and you can't use any equipment that isn't sporting (no submachine guns, X-ray devices, drag nets, dynamite and—with a finer calibre of sportsmanship in mind—no multiple hooks and no unfair techniques such as jig-hooking, which is a nasty way of getting a hook into any part of a salmon, without the salmon's cooperation). The fish have their fish sensibilities and the advantage of home territory. The object of the game is for you to make the fish think that your lure or fly or bait is a delicious little morsel swimming free and clear, and if he goes for it you have to have the skill to outmaneuver and land him. The object of the game for the fish is not to be fooled. For him, it's a matter of life and death.

Three summers after Ireland, Nick and I felt ready to move on to more serious fishing. We learned of a fishing camp in northern New Brunswick, Canada, and decided to spend five days there in mid-July. To get to Jim Black's fishing camp, you fly to Presque Isle, Maine, where someone from the camp meets you, and you are then driven a couple of hours north. The Tobique River, a tributary of the Serpentine, flows past the camp, and most of the outlying wilderness is owned by big paper conglomerates; the only traffic is huge logging trucks that go by empty in the morning and come out of the woods in early evening piled high with tree-length logs.

We were in for a bit of culture shock. The Blacks' television set was on every hour of the day. Their daughter possibly never went outside the entire time we were there. (And we ended up spending ten days there.) At the edge of civilization, these people were closer to suburbia than we were, living just outside New Haven.

Our lodging consisted of a log cabin with a sagging double bed and a wood stove. It had the luxury of its own spring-fed sink and toilet. This meant that occasionally a tiny fish would find its way into the toilet bowl, which can be very disconcerting, for both you and the fish, first thing in the morning.

The first afternoon conditions were all wrong for catching a fish, but we were impatient and it was a good time for me to learn how to fly cast. Nick quickly recalled most of what his father had taught him about casting on a memorable father-son fishing trip to Lake Parmacheene in New Hampshire. And I was eager to move on from the known, safe waters of spinning into the more subtle, cerebral cur-

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rents of fly fishing. I was given some hip waders about four sizes too big, and with a slow leak in one knee. But with four layers of socks, there was so little room for water the leak never became more than a nuisance.

Careful not to wade any deeper than within a couple of inches of the tops of my waders, I slowly learned how to lay the fly down on the water. In fly casting, you pull out line from the reel with your left hand and hold it bunched in a loose loop, while with your right arm you whip the rod back and forth overhead, from eleven o'clock to two o'clock. As you whip the rod, you let it take more and more line, which you unreel and feed with your left hand, until you have thirty or forty feet of line in the air, in constant motion. With all this line whipping back and forth over your head, you are now ready to make a cast. You throw the line forward in a smooth, continuous sweep so that the line travels forward in a perfect horizontal unrolling, and with a little flick, the fly is laid down on the surface of the water without a splash. When an expert fly fisher casts, it's a beautiful thing to watch. It seems effortless and perfect, and it can be hard to believe that this process is human invention and not a natural occurrence.

Even on that bright afternoon, I felt the tension and alertness one feels in the presence of the possibility of a strike. We fished both dry and wet flies, the dry flies sitting on the surface of the water, the wet sinking an inch or so. One casts slightly upstream, floats the fly and then lifts it off the water with a quick, splashless flick before it reaches the end of the floating line and begins to drag. A dragging fly or needless flailing in the water discourages the salmon.

Salmon, we learned, don't strike at flies because of hunger, but out of irritation or sport. They don't eat at all in fresh water, and any salmon killed on a river will have a clean gullet. Apparently, Atlantic salmon gather under the ice in the Davis Straits and gorge themselves on shrimp and not much else, which would certainly account for the unique flesh of a salmon. When salmon return to their rivers, it is only to spawn. Salmon invariably find their way back to the river in which they themselves were spawned, and some guides swear that they even come back to the same rock pools in the river, year after year. Stocked salmon have a piece of back fin clipped off for identification. Their spawn, obviously, have complete fins. When Jim's wife

Nita landed a naturally spawned fish on our fourth day there, she looked at its back fin and declared, "This here is God's own fish," with evident satisfaction.

Our routine was to get up at five-thirty every morning, before sunrise, have a preliminary breakfast, and then fish from six until about nine-thirty, when the mist would have burned off completely and it would be too bright to fish. We would then go back to camp, have a more serious breakfast, usually with eggs from Nita's chickens, and then go back to bed. At one we would have lunch. In the afternoon we played cribbage, read, bicycled down the road to look at the same three pairs of handknit socks made by the church ladies and offered for sale in the only store in town, or visited with members of Nita's voluminous family, who were perpetually dropping in. My favorite was her toothless brother Murray, about whom it was darkly hinted that he tied salmon flies made from his own pubic hair.

One afternoon, after yet another fishless morning, Jim and Nita took us on a hike into an area with mountain streams. We hooked dozens of very small rainbow trout, on worms, feeling no guilt because Jim felt they were trapped in a pool created by a new beaver dam and that there were too many fish to survive. The trout were delicious pan-fried in bacon fat, eaten with fried eggs and bacon and toast.

One late morning, Jim poled our canoe over the rock pool we'd been fishing, and we could count seven fat salmon. We knew they were there. We fished with greater determination.

One afternoon we saw two baby bobcats tumbling together across the path in the woods.

Jim demonstrated excellent moose calls.

Our five days stretched into ten, and we never hooked any salmon.

We were back the following summer, in August this time. My mother, a bird-watcher, joined us. Jim had aged visibly, and Jim Jr. was our guide. On the third of our eight days there, we went trout fishing on the Serpentine, on a stretch accessible only after an hour of driving on dirt followed by a strenuous hour of climbing. Trout flies are smaller and lighter, and it was a windy day. I had cast a few times, standing in deep midstream. (Nick's Christmas present to me

had been chest waders with felt soles, and a fishing vest.) A gust of wind took my fly in mid-cast and carried it back into my left eye. I yelled for Nick with what must have been a terrible voice; he was at my side in seconds. He gently took my hand away from my eye and saw that the fly was just barely caught in the skin of my eyelid. He freed it, and then the two of us clung together shaking. We both knew that because I am blind in my right eye, that little trout fly had come very close to changing my life. My one piece of advice to all who would fish: wear sunglasses. We retrieved Nick's rod, which he had flung in the bushes on the bank, and waded upstream around a bend where Jim Jr. and my mother were waiting. They didn't hear my scream over the roaring current. We never told anyone about what had happened.

Two days later I killed my salmon. (I don't know why, but one says "killed" with salmon, just as one rides with the "hounds," never the "dogs.")

Choosing a fly at any given moment, is, I suppose, a science, but as with picking horses at the track, whimsy can be as successful as any more consistent method. I would generally change flies after a few casts; my selections were based on intuition and what I thought I might be in the mood for if I were a salmon. On that morning, the fog lifted early, and we were discouraged and ready to quit.

I felt as though the salmon had defeated us, as though it was Us and Them. When they refuse to engage, the relationship between we who fish and those who are fish remains entirely theoretical. What we want—and I include in that "we" anyone who has ever dangled a worm on a bent pin off the side of a bridge as well as aristocratic sportsmen flailing elite waters for thousands of dollars a day—is the one-to-one engagement. The I and Thou of it all.

That morning on the Tobique, I was restless and bored. It wasn't happening. I changed to a brown fairy, a handsome wet fly, for my last few casts of the morning. I knew the salmon were there. Coaxing one to strike had become an urgent, almost archaic wish to attract, to compel. I was sending signals to a distant planet.

Three casts later I felt that unmistakable surge of something alive on the line. Salmon, when hooked, have been known to try anything to get off the line: for every two fish hooked, only one is landed. The

reel was singing as the fish took off downstream. As soon as I felt a slack, I reeled in like crazy, keeping a tension without pulling in too sharply, which would break the line. Then the fish would run the line out again, and I could see that I was getting near the backing on the reel. There would be occasional pauses while he changed direction or rested, and I would reel it all back in. I felt the fish tiring. Way upstream, I thought I saw another salmon jumping clear of the water, but it was my fish trying to jump the hook. I tried to keep the line taut. Suddenly I felt a strange new tension on the line. The fish was rolling over and over on the line. "That dirty fish!" declared Nita, "You bring him in and tell him to stop those games."

I reeled the fish in closer, and Nita warned me that if he went near the rocks he might try to saw the line between two ledges. We could see the fish clearly for the first time; it was much bigger than I had realized. The fish went out for one more weak run, and then I reeled in as tightly as I dared; Jim Jr. made a deft pass with the net, and we had our fish. It weighed a little over ten pounds. I saw that I had hooked the fish, a female as it turned out, solidly in the lip. But there was only one turn left in the knot I had made to tie the brown fairy, and I had used five. Another few minutes and the fish would have been off the line with the fly. The fish could then have worked the fly out of its lip by scraping along the river bottom. Jim Jr. killed the fish with one blow with a rock. It was awful. Inert, solid, the salmon was transformed forever. But, still, I had earned it. We would eat it, smoked, and I would salt her sacs full of eggs, too, for delicious caviar. When a salmon dies, it's a death far more profound than the last fierce flappings of a mackerel in a bucket. I was both appalled and elated. Nita broke the spell when she pointed out the cuts in the tail and back fins, caused by the line when the fish had stood on its tail and rolled. Nita said, "You did real marvelous."

Fishing *is* marvelous: there is the challenge, the tuning of a skill, the aesthetic. But mainly there is the irresistible urge to tangle with the mysterious and unknown, to rely on intuition and hunches. You do it for those moments of casting your thoughts beneath the surface of the water to see if you can conjure up a fish.

When I was little, I thought there were actual fish in the sky after rain, and I would always strain my eyes to see them between a rain-

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bow's bars of color. The swimming spots in my eyes that resulted were, I convinced myself, what people meant by "rainbow trout."

My mind still makes that leap when I fish for rainbows—a particularly brilliant fish can make me believe again that water is not its only element.

ıer husband, Tom Rosenbauer,
: far from the Battenkill, in East

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twenty years, specializing in
ished in numerous magazines,

and has a weekly humor column in the *West Austin News*. She lives in Texas.

AILM TRAVLER lives in northern New Mexico where she writes, teaches and farms. She is the author of several essays on fools and clowns and a book on Native American sacred systems. She has also published poetry and recently completed a novel.

VIVA has been an actress, a model, a movie producer, a photographer, and has published two novels and written for numerous magazines and newspapers. She is currently a contributing editor to *New York Woman* magazine and a freelance writer and a painter. She has two daughters, Gaby and Alexandra, eight brothers and sisters, and twenty-two nieces and nephews. She lives in New York City.

KATHARINE WEBER, a writer and book critic, is at work on her first novel, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*. She lives in Connecticut with her family and spends summers in Ireland, where her two daughters enjoy fishing for mackerel from their dinghy.

CARLETTA WILSON's poems and fiction have appeared in a number of publications, most recently in *Poets. Painters. Composers.*, *Prism International* and *Exhibition*. A cassette of her poems, *In Here By Turns*, was released in 1988.

JOAN SALVATO WULFF has written a fly casting column for *Fly Rod & Reel* since 1981 and has written for many other outdoor publications. She is the author of *Joan Wulff's Fly Casting Techniques* and *Joan Wulff's Fly Fishing: Expert Advice from a Woman's Perspective* (Stackpole). She lives in Lew Beach, New York.