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David Thomas Sumner

Activism, Fly Fishing, and Fiction—A Conversation with David James Duncan



*David James Duncan grew up wandering the clear streams and fecund forests of western Oregon. In many ways, his deep love of rivers and landscapes unites his writing. Mr. Duncan's first book, *The River Why*, after being "rejected by all the same publishers as [Norman Maclean's] *A River Runs Through It*," was finally published by the Sierra Club and holds the distinction as the first work of fiction published by that press. Duncan feels a great bond with Maclean: "We hate some of the same editors," he jokes.*

*Duncan's other novel, *The Brothers K*, is about a northwestern family that is torn apart by religion and the sixties, but united by filial love and baseball. He has also published numerous articles and stories and two other books: *River Teeth: Stories and Writings*, a collection of fiction and nonfiction, and *My Story as Told by Water: Confessions, Druidic Rants, Reflections, Bird-Watching, Fishstalkings, Visions, Songs and Prayers Refracting Light*, from *Living Rivers, in the Age of the Industrial Dark*, a collection of nonfiction.*

*Duncan had not yet published *My Story as Told by Water* (August 1999) when this interview took place. He had been deeply involved in activist work to*

*David Thomas Sumner (Ph.D., University of Oregon) teaches in the English Department at Weber State University. His essays have appeared in *Ecocomposition* (SUNY Press, 2001) and *In Our Own Voice* (Allyn & Bacon, 1999). He is also contributing editor for *The Shape of Reason* (Allyn & Bacon, 2000). Sumner is currently working on a rhetorical study of American nature writing and its connection to environmental ethics.*

This interview is part of a series of conversations with contemporary western writers about the ethical and cultural implications of nature writing.

[Conversation with Barry Lopez](#)

[Conversation with David Quammen](#)

[Conversation with Stephen Trimble](#)

[Conversation with Terry Tempest Williams](#)

protect Montana's Blackfoot River and restore salmon and steelhead to the Snake River. In this interview, he laments that he is spending his time doing this "non profitable, anti-career, impractical, series of writings" because of a "gut" need to save Norman Maclean's river. Many of these writings found their way into My Story as Told by Water, and despite Duncan's angst, the collection has received critical acclaim. Jim Harrison calls it "the Desert Solitaire of rivers," and the book was nominated for a National Book Award in 2001 where the judges praised it as "an education." "Duncan's reflections" they write, "spill off the page with wit, wisdom, and occasional fury." Duncan currently lives, writes, and fishes in western Montana.

Read an [essay by David James Duncan](#) published in Weber Studies.

What brings you to Montana after having Oregon roots?

Well, my father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all Montanans. The Oregon roots for me felt pretty much pulled out as they clear-cut the Cascades and the Coast Range. I really like to fish, and in 1986, after living on the coast for five years and visiting the coast constantly for my anadromous fish fix, I caught a Coho—every fall when living on the coast we would kill a couple of salmon and have a big barbecue and pick some chanterelles and have a soufflé. I killed a Coho and found out it was one of seven spawning pairs in the river where I killed it. Kind of ruins the barbecue to know that you are committing species genocide.

So, I was pretty much ready to leave then. I hung on in Portland for awhile, but that was just an interim move. The whole time my wife Adrian and I were in Portland, we were looking around the West trying to find a new place. We looked hard in New Mexico. I looked in Bend and Corvallis. Bend strikes me as the northernmost city in the Bay area at this point, the way the community has gone. I don't have any great complaints about those places; we just happened to find a niche here that really suited us both. My wife's a ceramic artist and there is a strong group of women artists here, and of course there're writers up the wazoo. They tend to be a pretty damn friendly bunch. I've really enjoyed living here the last six years. I am writing a novel set in Portland, hoping that I will finally be able to leave for good. I've left Portland six times and moved back for various reasons.

I read your piece in Headwaters, and I know you were disappointed because they edited it down so small.

Yeah, the full piece is much longer. It is in that Nature Conservancy book *Off the Beaten Path*.

I will look it up. What I read in Headwaters, I really liked. An attack on cyanide heap-leach gold mining in parable form.

It actually gets pretty amusing when the parable starts. It's got this corporation coming in to claim the mineral deposits growing in this rancher's knees. And they also have the mineral rights to his children's knees. And so they come in and rip the minerals out of your knees, and they pay you a tiny compensation, like fifty bucks. (Laughter)

I was fighting for the life of Norman Maclean's river, the Big Blackfoot.

My first piece was a rage piece. Then I wrote an essay for *Sierra*, trying to do something that wasn't just a spiral downer, so to speak—not just depressing. It took some doing. When I wrote the piece for *Sierra*, I really didn't know how it was going to turn out.

I laughed out loud when they were lying on the trail and Kafka comes by.

The real life threat to the river feels so surreal. You know, it's hard to come up with a metaphor for how weird it feels when a corporation the size of Phelps-Dodge comes into your world and tells you that they're going to trash it for your betterment.

I didn't want to be doing this work, but I reached a point where I just couldn't sleep at night. I describe the process in the long essay in *Sierra*. (He opens the magazine). They really did a nice job. That's where you were today [the upper Blackfoot]. And nice illustrations—there is the mine proposal. And there is how they look after they work 'em for awhile. *Sierra* also let me talk about boycotting gold, which is something the *New York Times* wouldn't do.

You mentioned your involvement with the Snake River dams and what's going on in the campaign to remove them. Tell me a little about that.

Four dams on the lower Snake River were built to turn Lewiston, Idaho, into a "seaport." They were not built as hydroelectric dams—they generate very little hydro. What they do is allow the so-called "Port of Lewiston" to run wheat

barges—some of it's Montana wheat, some of it's Idaho wheat—from Lewiston down to Portland, where it is transferred on to ships. Almost all of it ends up in the Orient. It's a huge shipping route, something like 11,000 miles. Now, Idaho has tens of thousands of miles of perfect salmon and steelhead habitat. But the only way every one of those fish can reach Idaho is through this gauntlet of Snake River dams. So if you think about it, for the smolt to get to the ocean and then back again to spawn, the fish have to run a gauntlet of sixteen dams. I just ran the gauntlet myself with a fisheries biologist last month, and the degree to which those fish are dittled, sorted, counted, trashed—it's really shocking to me that there is still a salmon left in Idaho. Meanwhile, Idaho politicians are quoting biologists who have been hired by, for short hand I will just call them the "Dark Side," who are saying that the migration from Idaho to the Pacific has never been as safe as it is now. Yet 90 percent of the fish are gone. It's a total crock.

Responsible scientists agree that if the four dams stay, the salmon will go extinct. But if you just listen to them speak, you realize the Republican politicians of Idaho want the salmon gone. The Columbia is on the verge of becoming one of those rivers like the Colorado, which has been changed from a river into a series of slot machines. The fact that as recently as the 70's it supported a multimillion dollar sport fishing and commercial fishing industry doesn't interest people whose slot machines are working on different sorts of revenue like barging wheat, right alongside a railroad line, from Lewiston to the ocean. The railroads have already tested what it would cost for them to ship all the wheat, and they could take all these barges off the river tomorrow for an increase of pennies per bushel.

The politics are so ugly it's kind of hard to talk about it. Once again I'm in the position, as I was with this Blackfoot piece, of trying to write a piece for *Sierra* that's not just a spiral downer. To help me do that, I'm going to the west coast of Vancouver Island next week to fly-fish for Coho and Chinook and try to remember what a salmon culture is. I haven't caught a salmon since the one I described to you, and that was in '86. That was one of a dying species. I'm going to go and be in a place where they still come in vital numbers and be in rivers that have all the same problems as our lower forty-eight rivers, with one exception—no dams. I could tell you more about it if I wasn't being taped.

Well, we will get the taped part out of the way. Let's talk about the connection between the art of writing and writing—writing that you feel good about aesthetically and otherwise—and the writing that promotes values or issues you care about. Is there a difference in what you do when you concentrate on these dam removals, for instance, and the work that you do when you sit down and write a novel.

There is a difference. It's a very tough paradox The vocation I really felt called to was as a novelist; but the first novel that I was able to write was this sort of comic quest set on the Oregon coast. It had all to do with my love for rivers and for those coastal streams and fantastic runs of anadromous fish—*The River Why*.

By the way, that's one of a handful of books that I give away a lot.

Thanks. (Laughter). I feel gratitude for what those rivers taught me. I feel gratitude for what they've taught me to feel. The pulse of a Chinook salmon; the pulse of a Chinook's tail transmitted down the line into my hands, it's like a heart beat. To feel that in your hands teaches you something. I bonded with that experience when I was really young. I feel that the kind of writing that—well, I think a good example is Rick Bass. His first collection, *The Watch*, is one of the most admired collections of short stories to come out in awhile. And his falling in love with the Yaak has really cost him.

I remember a guy I met, way back in the late 70's or maybe 80. I think Reagan had just been elected. It must have been `80. He worked for the ONRC [Oregon Natural Resources Council]. I don't remember his name anymore. His whole love was biology, and all his training was in biology. I think he might have even had a Ph.D. And all of the sudden he realized that to study his science in a rigorous scientific manner had no meaning because the things he was studying were vanishing before his eyes. And the last thing this man wanted, this man whose gift was for nuance and extremely detailed observation, the last thing he wanted was to become an activist, but he felt he had no choice.

I have tried to limit the amount I give to activist writing because I feel a deep calling to be a novelist. I love writing novels. And in order, at least for me, to write a novel, I have to give myself to it completely. I can't be doing anything else. All the activist projects that I have taken on come at a price. And it kind of escalated. Because of the popularity of the *River Why*, and then a collection of stories I wrote, *River Teeth*, I became known as some kind of, I don't know what, Mr. River. And I have done a lot of public speaking and talked to a lot of fly fishing groups and conservation groups. For a long time I couldn't figure out how to say no to a good cause. But at this point I feel like the only interest, the only reason people had any interest in hearing me speak, was because of my fiction. At this point I feel that, if I'm still going to have a muse, I owe it to the muse to shut all these pulls off and try my damndest to write a couple of novels before I'm too old to remember how.

So fiction and activist writing tend to go in two different directions for you?

Yes, I feel that the two kinds of writing are pretty much opposed. Others may not feel that way; but for me, they feel diametrically opposed. I do the activist work when there is something bothering me so much that it burns. I mean, salmon don't have a voice. Salmon—the baby summer Chinook salmon that back all the way down the Columbia river system from Stanley, Idaho, to the ocean—they go backwards and let the river carry them. Right now it carries them into a series of eight turbines and 15 percent of them are killed in every turbine. It then carries them through warm water reservoirs that are teeming with walleye, small mouth bass, squawfish, all these species of fish that wouldn't even be there if it wasn't for this inane series of dams. I never even finished describing how it's a corporate welfare scam; how the electric rate-payers finance these Republican politicians that own the "Port of Lewiston." I always use quotes because it's really a trucking depot. The water there is only nine feet deep.

That these incredibly heroic, symbolic fish, the sacred fish of the Nez Perce people, the same Nez Perce who, when Lewis and Clark were starving on their return journey, gave them horses, fed them, saved their asses. Chief Joseph and his family and their tribe on their last flight came right through here [Lolo, Montana]. They probably came right through my yard, and made it as far as the Big Hole when his wife was murdered before dawn by General Howard's troops. That was our first thank you to the Nez Perce for helping Lewis and Clark. Then we gave them a reservation, and in a few years gold was discovered and, immediately, "bam!" (He hits the table.) it shrank to, you know, 20 percent of its former size. And now we are thanking them with the eight dams that completely remove this fish that is central to their belief system, to their life-ways, to everything they know and are and have been for 10,000 years, or however long they've been here.

At some point, it's just one of those things that goes all the way back to the founding fathers and the fact that we call ourselves a free people—you know, pursuit of happiness based on genocide and slavery. It eats right into those questions, and in the current corporate drive toward a global mono-culture I feel the same forces at work in a new form. So there's a constant pull between the urge to make art, to write literature that stands with the literature of all time, or the urge to write in defense of species and watersheds that make the history of the novel look like just a speck. The Columbia River has been here for a really long time. The novel is 500 years old. I think maybe the reason why I'm just kind of muttering on here is that you can tell it's not resolved in me. You can tell it's a tension that I feel painfully all the time.

When you say it cost Rick Bass, what do you mean?

Well, his love for the Yaak and the clear-cutting of the Yaak, bleeds just like blood throughout the pages; it's in all his books now. The ruin of your home infects your story telling. Here's that one woodland caribou again. (Laughter). And here's the last eight grizzlies or whatever it is, and here is Rick again, trying to tell a story but at the same time he is bleeding for his place which has received no protection; it's just dying. It's a sacrifice zone in the timber wars. Having lived in such a zone myself, and having fled for my life—there are so many of us whose hearts really go out to Rick. He lives in a really tough place.

I look at something like The River Why, for example, and I wouldn't consider that an activist novel, but I do think that to read it correctly you must come away from the reading with an understanding of an underlying environmental ethic. One of the things that seems to be resolved in that book is this tension between the protagonist's love of fishing and his love of the place. He realizes it's bigger than just catching fish all day and tying flies all night. And within that realization is an ethic that includes the more-than-human world. So my question is: Do you think that kind of work performs an activist purpose?

I think it is more effective. I think the novel is a greater form than activist writing, but the novel has its own rules; it has its own muse. And you can't make a novel into a political tract. Dickens wrote social novels and political novels. He made novels support the concerns; in some ways it seems a writer like Charles Dickens or maybe Mark Twain didn't have to divide their aesthetic standards from whatever their causes were. I mean, the things that Twain was able to do with slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, or almost all of Dickens's late novels have some kind of political ax they are grinding. But I think that in the twentieth century, literature has changed. When you are grinding an ax, people know, and you better be a damn good writer.

This tension seems to be really similar to what Stegner describes in his work.

Oh, there is no doubt about what it cost him.

But at the same time, just like in The River Why, in Stegner's work there is an ethic that can be translated into what is going on with the Western landscape and a type of environmental ethic.

It's a strange time for me to be talking about these things because I'm in the process of finishing the research and writing this *Sierra* salmon piece, and then I plan on retiring into my novel hole and not be seen or heard from for several years. I often say that I'll give myself to one cause a year, but what I'm finding is

that when I say one cause a year it dovetails and mushrooms. There are 30 different activist groups fighting for Snake River dam removal and the survival of Idaho salmon, and when they hear that a guy like me is in their corner, I get all these great invitations to do good things. But the muses are jealous. Yet what about salmon? They *were* my first muse! The champions of salmon recovery may come from the East coast, where they have really felt the cost of the complete loss of Atlantic salmon runs, and so much of the habitat still have rivers full of PCBs thanks to the incredible success of General Electric and so on. Maybe some of those people will see the West and the Columbia River as one of the last places where these huge trends can be reversed. The Columbia is not yet the Colorado, and it doesn't have to become the Colorado.

So you say it's not yet the Colorado, even with all the lower dams?

Yeah, the Columbia still supports amazing life. One of the lynchpins of any argument trying to help the salmon is the Hanford Reach. Thanks to the nuclear wastes that make it impossible to dam, the Hanford Reach is the one section of the lower river that is still wild and scenic. It has amazing wild life and amazing fish life. Despite incredible abuses by the Priest Rapids Dam, the Reach is the one place where the salmon runs are on the increase.

An amazing irony.

Yeah, its incredibly ironic. Like the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. It's a two mile strip full of about a billion land mines which is just teeming with wild life, and all the rest of Korea is completely denuded.

Do you think we are going to get out of this? You've got kids; I've got kids. Do you think our grandkids are going to be able to catch a salmon?

Yes. I also think that we don't have to worry about the rivers. What we have to worry about is humanity. It's ourselves that we're destroying. Nature takes care of itself. Nature could go all the way back to insects and reptiles and fungi and lichens and recreate itself; but I like human beings. We're interesting creatures, and we're the ones that are threatened.

Our reproductive systems are incredibly threatened right now. All this business with the decreasing testosterone levels in male mammals all over the globe. I can see that being a cause of great hope because when these entrenched white male CEO's and politicians discover that they aren't going to be able to reproduce, I think they'll really take that seriously—their infertility. And everything they're doing is creating their own sterility. Another pretty nice irony.

I guess I'm hopeful also because the rivers are so ancient, and because of the things they have already recovered from. You know about the Missoula floods? Really catastrophic events! At this point they are saying that humans are proving to be more catastrophic, at least to anadromous fish runs, than the Missoula floods. That's really something to think about when you consider what those floods did.

That was when there was the great glacial lake and the dam broke?

Yeah, multiple times. Giant walls of water and ice that flooded and scoured clean thousands of square miles of what is now Oregon and Washington, depositing tons of Montana debris up the Willamette as far as Corvallis and a hundred miles up the Dechutes. I mean, these walls of water carried where I live down to where you live in Eugene. That's amazing. And the devastation of wild life and fish life must have been incredible. But I guess the present time has outdone that.

What is the obligation of a writer to a culture?

To be a penultimate pessimist but an ultimate optimist. I feel there's a spark in our children that can't be killed, and I'm optimistic because of that. But I'm pessimistic about the ruin of their world.

To be more specific, you say you are going to hole up in your novel place and write.

Well, all things are negotiable. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. With the right kind of crisis, I'd be out of my hole in a second. I didn't know it, but the Blackfoot River for me was one of those crises. *The River Why* was rejected by all the same publishers as *A River Runs Through It*. So I feel this bond to Norman Maclean. We hate some of the same editors. (Laughter).

When I heard his river was going to eat it, I had just come here from 40 years in Oregon, watching all of my rivers eat it. So I just couldn't stand it. I gave six months of my life to this incredibly non-profitable, anti-career, impractical, series of writings. But I had to do it. I wrote because I love my kids. I wrote because I burned. I wouldn't want to expound a theory about what the writer owes. The writer owes the culture allegiance to those inner burnings, rather than some manifesto-like statement. Some things are just intolerable. Who knows what it will be. Maybe for some writers it will be that Ford's outselling Chevy and you've just gotta defend Chevys for a while, I don't know. My kids and I live in these watersheds.

What did you do this morning?

Well, I was feeling a little raggedy after grinding out a piece that I owe a newspaper about salmon. I had forgotten a deadline. I have to write tomorrow, all day. It's a newspaper, what the hell. (Laughter). So I went back in the creek and caught twelve trout in an hour, and some of them were big. It's just part of my almost daily information system.

I know what you mean.

Yeah, it's been feeding me my whole life. A few times it's gone dead. I remember one time that I was so full of despair that I caught a twenty-five pound Chinook on a fly and an incredibly light leader and then a thirty-five pound Chinook and was able to feel nothing because I'd been turned to cement by things going on around me. But that's rare and I don't think you can spend much time in the natural world without some kind of, I don't know if it's always a healing, but certain sensitivities. Epiphanies.

I have a lot of friends, eco-friends, who are good people but who give me a hard time about my fishing habit, telling me I am just torturing the fish. But I argue that there is a certain ethic found through that habit. How do you see it?

I wouldn't call it an ethic; I would call it a spiritual truth. It's sacrifice that feeds all of us. Fifty-five pounds of toxic waste generated by the construction of a television set. Something slightly lower, but near that, to build a nice computer monitor. You drive up to the PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] meeting and the grill of your car is covered with dead insects. You become a Jain where you only walk outside during the daylight so you don't crush insects, but you start to get sick and you've gotta take antibiotics and there is a holocaust that goes on inside you. You're killing these innocent organisms. I mean, there is no way to define anything as large and clumsy as a human being that doesn't involve an animal that is eating other animals the same as the rest of nature. We practice a beautiful traditional craft where you and I stand on land, and fifty feet away this creature from another realm is very quietly taking part in the food chain and through a work of deceit—a kind of low-level fiction—and through some incredible technology, we insinuate ourselves into that food chain, and we betray the sincerity of that creature. But in its struggle for life we feel its life in our hands. And that is important. Because we *do* hold other lives in our hands. Fly-fishing, in this sense, is an avenue to understanding gospel truth.