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# Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River

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George B. Handley. *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010.

*Reviewed by Dennis Cutchins*

Herman Melville begins *Moby Dick* by noting the way humans seem almost magnetically attracted to water. “There is magic in it,” he writes. “Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream.” George Handley would, no doubt, agree with this observation. His *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* is a gentle, slow, and deeply thoughtful book built on this special human relationship with water. Handley uses the Provo River as the locus for a series of contemplations on what it means to be a friend, father, husband, son, brother, grandson, and great-great-grandson in a particular landscape, as well as within a particular religion and community. But in the process of exploring this very specific river from its headwaters to its arrival at Utah Lake, Handley meanders through some unexpected tributaries. In the prologue to the book, Handley writes that “whenever I sat down to write about the watershed, I found myself increasingly unable to separate place from story, outdoor recreation from ecological and spiritual restoration, the present from the past, and, even against my will, the historical from the personal” (xv). The way those side channels become tangled is both the beauty and the strength of this book.

Many of us who have lived in a home with young children have shared a common experience. It usually begins as we walk into the kitchen to discover a child idly running water out of the tap for the simple joy of letting it pour through his or her fingers. The typical adult response to this scene is a mildly annoyed, “Quit wasting water.” But that command is usually met with a familiar question: “Where does water come from?” Or perhaps, “Why is water so important?” Handley’s book is a sustained and thorough answer to those innocent questions. And like most good answers, it brings up more questions. Some of the most touching of these

questions have to do with Handley's relationship with his older brother, who committed suicide when Handley was a teenager. Handley's exploration of the way this event changed his life, and continues to change it, is both tender and painfully honest. Handley predictably connects the untimely death of his brother to his relationships with his own family, but he also traces the way this death deepened his religious beliefs and informs his approach to the environment. Those turns are both unexpected and moving.

This book begins with a reverie on fly-fishing, and that is fitting. Norman Maclean established a precedent for using fly-fishing as a vehicle for discussing family relationships and untimely death, but Handley is, in some ways, after bigger fish. "Home waters" is a term used by those who fish, particularly those who fly-fish, to refer to those creeks and rivers that are known intimately. In home waters, a fisher knows every overhanging tree and bush, every turn of the stream, and every unseen boulder. But the idea of home waters paradoxically reminds us that however well we know a particular stretch of water, it will always retain the ability to surprise us. One of the things I cherish most about fly-fishing is the constant reminder it offers that I know far too little about the rivers I fish, or the fish I try to catch.

This is a sentiment with which Handley would agree. "Scarce beauty," he writes, "is a gift, not a right. It merits love, not lamentation; love enough to make recreation a re-creation, a way of becoming unfamiliar again with the world, of working to blur the horizon line between heaven and earth" (189). Handley explores what it means to come home, if you will tolerate the reference to a John Denver song, to a place you've never been before. As someone raised primarily in the eastern United States, Handley's move to Utah as an adult was a trip into the unknown. At the same time, his family roots, going back generations to some of the first Mormon pioneers, make him, simultaneously, deeply native. In his words, Utah is "native land but foreign, too" (201). "The upshot," he writes, "is that I can't walk a mile, buy milk at the local store, or sit at an elementary school play without seeing people I love, people I have known for decades, people I would trust with my children, enough to fill a room. It is a beautiful thing, really. But it isn't hard to understand why, if the community isn't careful, others might sense a conspiracy to lock them out" (44).

Handley's treatment of fly-fishing is also fitting in terms of his approach to ecology. Anyone who has spent much time fly-fishing in creeks and rivers knows that it is an inherently conservative sport. You

can't force fish to bite, and the fish in small creeks are notoriously skittish, frightened by the smallest movement or the least shadow. That's why I spend at least some part of any fly-fishing trip to a small stream literally on my hands and knees. Handley would not miss the religious symbolism of that. Central to this book is Handley's well-reasoned and firm stance as a Mormon and Christian ecologist. In that context he makes a convincing argument that "ecological restoration is neither technophilia nor antihuman escapism. It is repentance plain and simple" (xiii). Near the beginning of the book he states bluntly that his "hope is to tap the potential of Mormonism to inspire better stewardship in the interest of all communities in the West" (xiv).

Since I moved to Utah County fifteen years ago, I've seen orchards, farmlands, and wild space steadily replaced by condos, shopping centers, and high-end homes. Apparently Handley has seen the same thing. He laments that as Mormons in Utah, "in the mad rush to display all the material signs of having arrived, to show that we can run with the big dogs, we can run roughshod over our advantages" (42). Like a prophet in the literal wilderness, he warns, "It is delusional, really, to place all hope in some act of God to wipe our human stains clean as long as we are unwilling to repent. While beauty and bounty are our most ancient desires, sometimes the recompenses of our own pollution are what we deserve" (89).

But Handley is no ecological prophet of doom. Writing as a deeply devout and religious environmentalist, he counters the ideals of radical environmentalism—the kind that (many assume) would gladly see humans wiped off the face of the planet—by comparing them to radical millennialism. He writes, "The more extreme and sometimes more vocal folks—doomsday environmentalists and militant millennialists—seem to be offering the same package of despair" (122). Handley counters this despair with the plea for a religious and humane approach to the environment. "We don't need less humanity," he argues; "we need it more than ever" (133). To exemplify this believing environmentalism, Handley uses distinctly Mormon doctrines about the ultimate destiny of the Earth to tightly connect conservation and religion. The LDS way of seeing the world, he argues, represents "a philosophy of hope, hope that mundane, physical life, when properly cared for, might become the stuff of eternity" (121).

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, but like most reminiscences, *Home Waters* occasionally suffers from a little too much "navel-gazing." And like a lot of first books, sometimes it bites off more than it can chew. But

these relatively minor problems are a small price to pay for a book that consistently offers refreshing insights and new ways of thinking about the world. Handley does not write the boisterous and strident prose of Edward Abbey, but he is always readable and reasonable. Readers who cherish the works of Wallace Stegner, Terry Tempest Williams, or Wendell Berry will definitely enjoy *Home Waters* and are likely to find a new author to watch. And readers who want to know what a Mormon environmentalist looks like need look no further.

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