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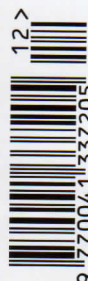
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## CHALK TALK

# The meaning of fishing

Why do we do it?  
asks **Simon Cooper**

**I** DON'T THINK I'M ALONE IN pondering why we fish. That said I must confess my metaphysical thought process is usually prompted by the two extremes, a truly great day or a truly appalling one, which are probably both imperfect moments at which to start the definitive self-discussion.

I've dedicated much brain-time (probably too much) in search of "the answer" but never really been satisfied with my conclusions. The great outdoors. Communing with nature. Man versus fish. Hunter-gatherer. The drug of the tug. Matching the hatch. The sublimity of the dry-fly take. An experience shared with others. A break from the everyday. The sheer beauty of fish.

Now these are all fine reasons to fish, but none seem to me, even in aggregate, reason enough for what we do for an entire lifetime. When strangers ask me why we fish I trot out the usual platitudes, which by the very nature of platitudes sound lame and insincere. I have, on occasions, tried some evangelical rhetoric but I suspect I go a little wide-eyed causing my audience to politely edge away prior to calling the men in white coats.

It would be handy if us believers could point in the direction of a single book, author or quotable extract to convert the unconverted, but is it out there? There is no shortage of material: staggeringly, Amazon lists more than 6,000 books relating to fly-fishing. And we've been scratching out the words in print since Dame Juliana Berners in the 15th century. Hemingway, I would hazard, is the closest we had to an international best-selling author of modern times, who was read by people for the book rather than the fishing content therein. Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* has been a cult classic since the day it was published; the 1992 film starring a young Brad Pitt is the best advert for fly-fishing I've ever seen. And John Gierach is undoubtedly the finest living proponent of our sport. He got me back into

it when the fleshpots of London captured my heart (and body) for a few years in my twenties.

But are any of the above the mother lode? I tend to doubt it but in, of all things, a political novel, I may have discovered it.

I'm a huge fan of books on politics. Not so much the dreary, much-hyped autobiographies, but rather novels or the rather more idiosyncratic that cover the contemporary political landscape. That scorching comet we call Brexit has been a heaven-sent gift for readers of my ilk. But you can only take so much of today. Sometimes it is better to reach back. And so it was that I googled "the best political book ever written". Up came *All the King's Men*.

In its most recent 2006 iteration it was a Hollywood film starring Sean Penn, Kate Winslet and Jude Law, but you are better to know it as the 1946 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Robert Penn Warren or the subsequent 1949 film. It is not exactly an uplifting tale: greed, corruption and human frailties all infected by political and sexual intrigue in the swamp state of Louisiana, USA during the Great Depression. The central character is Willie Stark, who starts out good but ends up bad, whose ascendancy to the governorship is narrated by Jack Burden, a reporter who becomes his right-hand man, a sort of Dominic Cummings crossed with Bernard Ingham-like figure.

*"...what you do which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people..."*

Long, cigar-smoke-filled car journeys are a theme of the book as Stark's small retinue, aka *All the King's Men*, criss-cross the state from one stump speech to another. And for Burden the deserted highways of night become his refuge when he drives alone escaping personal crises of fact, conscience and love. Of one such journey he writes,

"There is nothing more alone than being in a car at night in the rain. I was in the car. And I was glad of it. Between one point on the map and another point on the map, there was the being alone in the car in the rain. They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in the car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. It is a vacation from being you. There is only the flow of the motor under your foot spinning that frail thread of sound out of its metal guy like a spider, that filament, that nexus, which isn't really there, between the you which you have just left in one place and the you which you will be where you get to the other place."

Maybe, just maybe, Robert Penn Warren has hit in this, the essence of fishing. Swap the car, rain and night for fishing and I hope you see what I read: that phrase "a vacation from being you" seems so utterly true to what we do. **T&S**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of *Fishing Breaks* ([fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of the best-selling *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.