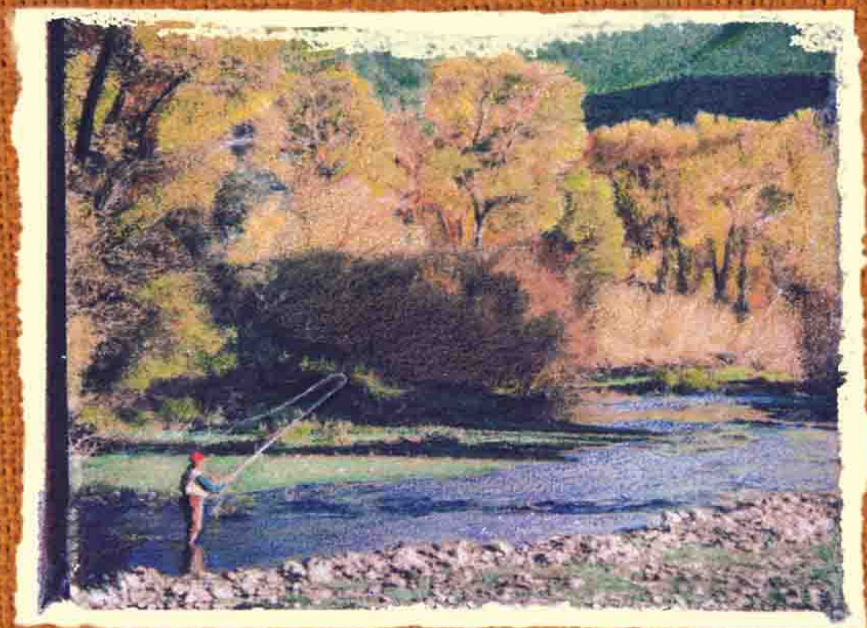


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HOWELL RAINES



FLY FISHING



THROUGH THE



MIDLIFE CRISIS

"A SWEET NARRATIVE OF FRIENDSHIP, FATHERS AND SONS, AGING,  
AND, OF COURSE, FISHING." —WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD



FLY  
FISHING  
THROUGH  
THE  
MIDLIFE  
CRISIS

HOWELL RAINES



HARPER PERENNIAL

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my  
brother, Jerry W. Raines,  
who was born knowing  
where fish live and what they want.

## Epigraph

How can one age the heart?  
What wound, what memory will ever teach it wisdom?

—Gian Carlo Menotti

Then there was an old man,  
Kind and wise with age,  
And he read me just like a book  
And he never missed a page.  
And I loved him like my father  
And I loved him like my friend  
And I knew his time would shortly come  
But I did not know just when.

In my hour of darkness  
In my time of need,  
Oh Lord, give me wisdom,  
Oh Lord, give me speed.

—Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris

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# 1

## How It Starts: The Song of Rapid Anne

Like many Southerners, I was ruined for church by early exposure to preachers. So when I need to hear the sigh of the Eternal, I find myself drawn to a deep hollow between Fork Mountain and Double Top Mountain on the eastern flank of the Blue Ridge. This is where the Rapidan River plunges through a hemlock forest and through gray boulders that jut from the ferny earth like the aboriginal bones of old Virginia. This is a place of enlightenment for me, the spot where I received the blessing of my middle years. Here, after three decades of catching fish, I began learning *to fish*.

At this point it is necessary to introduce Mr. Richard C. Blalock, a man given to pronouncements. There are two reasons for this trait. As a former officer of the Foreign Service of the United States, he is a natural-born pontificator. Also, Dick Blalock serves as the fly-fishing guru for a handful of people around Washington, and some of us provoke his speechifying for our own enjoyment.

I'll try to give you a sample of the conversation in Dick's loose-jointed old Chevy as it grinds along the road that the Marines scraped across the mountains in 1929 so that Herbert Hoover could reach the Rapidan. In those days, the stream was reserved for his exclusive use. President Hoover liked to fish. He also needed a place where he would not be bothered by the little people while he planned the Great Depression. I find it impossible to visit the Rapidan without a haunted feeling in regard to Herbert Hoover, but more on that later. First, the fish and the river, according to the teachings of Dick Blalock.

“This species of brook trout has never been stocked in this stream. They go back to the Ice Age. That means they have been here in this form, just as we see them today, for ten thousand years. They are survivors.” That is what Dick always says to newcomers by way of inspiring respect for the Rapidan and its tenacious little genetic warriors.

“They are the most beautiful fish that God ever put on this earth. When

they are in their spawning colors, they are just breathtaking,” he adds for those who need prompting to adore the lush greens and pinks, the unmitigated reds of *Salvelinus fontinalis*—“the little salmon of the waterfall.”

Then he enunciates Blalock’s Rapidan Paradox. “These brook trout will strike any fly you present, provided you don’t get close enough to present it.” This means the fish are predatory, but skittish. More to the point, pursuing them prepares us to receive the central teaching of Blalock’s Way. To achieve mastery is to rise above the need to catch fish.

This part did not come easily for me. I was born in the heart of Dixie and raised in the Redneck Way of Fishing, which holds that the only good trip is one ending in many dead fish. These fish might then be eaten, frozen, given to neighbors or used for fertilizer. But fishing that failed to produce an abundance of corpses could no more be successful than a football season in which the University of Alabama failed to win a national championship.

Of course, not even Bear Bryant won every year. Similarly, the greatest fishermen get skunked. So it is inevitable that the Redneck Way, which is built around the ideas of lust and conquest, will lead to failure. In that way, it resembles our physical lives. In the days of youth, when the blood is hot and the sap is high and the road goes on forever, it is easy enough to slip the doomy embrace of frustration. But time, as a British poet once said, is a rider that breaks us all, especially if our only pleasure—in football, fishing or love—comes from keeping score.

By the time I reached my late thirties, my passion for fishing brought with it an inexpressible burden of anxiety. As Saturday approached or, worse, a vacation, the questions would whirl through my brain. *How many* would I catch? *How big* would they be? Would my trip be *wonderful*? Would I be a *success*? I had reached the destination of all who follow the Redneck Way. I had made my hobby into work.

Then one day in the summer of 1981 I found myself at the L. L. Bean store in Freeport, Maine. I was a correspondent at the White House in those days, and my work—which consisted of reporting on President Reagan’s success in making life harder for citizens who were not born rich, white and healthy—saddened me. In fact, hanging around the Reagan crowd made me yearn for connection with something noble and uplifting. I bought a fly rod.

I do not know if you are familiar with the modern fly rod, but it is one of the glories of industry. The maker starts with a toothpick of steel called a mandrel. Around this mandrel are laid miles of thread spun from graphite.

The mandrel is slipped out, and this long taper is then painted with epoxy, producing a deep, mirrored finish of the sort one saw on the German automobiles of thirty years ago.

The result is a piece of magic, an elegant thing, willowy and alive—a wand that when held in the hand communicates with the heart. And the more I waved such a wand over the next few years, the more the scales of my old fish-killing heart fell away. At last I stood on the threshold of being what I had tried so hard, yet so blindly, to be since that sublime spring day in 1950 when my father and mother helped me catch twenty crappies from the Tennessee River. In the ensuing decades, I had killed hundreds of fish—bass, crappies, blue-gills, shellcrackers, pike, king mackerels, red snappers, black snappers, redbird, bluefish, pompanos, amberjacks, jack crevasses, barracudas. I had been blooded in the Redneck Way by those who understood fishing as a sport and a competition. Now I was about to meet a man who understood it as an art, a pastime, a way of living easefully in the world of nature. One day my telephone rang and it was Dick Blalock.

I like to say I got my guru from the U.S. government. He was fifty-five years old when I first saw him and already a walking medical disaster. Dick played football for a season at the University of Oklahoma, but in the ensuing years he had open heart surgery and gained weight. The big event in his medical history—and his angling history, for that matter—was a liver parasite contracted in North Yemen, where he was working as a Foreign Service officer. The government pressed him to take medical retirement and a pension when he was thirty-seven.

“So I decided that if they were so determined to pay me not to work, I’d take advantage of the opportunity and go fishing for a while,” Dick told me on the day we met. “That was over seventeen years ago.”

“So, how’s it been?” I said.

“Terrific,” he said. “I’d recommend it to anyone.”

As Dick Blalock spoke these words, we were rolling through northern Maryland on the enticing roads that Robert E. Lee followed to his mistake at Gettysburg. Dick had spotted an article I had written for the sports section of *The New York Times* on bass fishing in the Potomac, and he called out of the blue to say maybe it was time I tried my hand on trout. He suggested the limestone creeks of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, holy territory for fly fishers since before the Civil War.

It was a day I will not forget. At the Letort Spring Run, we watched huge