

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE HANDLEY

Question:

What inspired you to write this book?

Answer:

I always wanted to live somewhere where I felt a deep and intimate connection to the landscape and to the local history, and moving here in 1998 presented me an ideal opportunity because I was born in Utah and had early childhood memories on the Upper Provo River. I went flyfishing on the Provo River every single week during the entirety of my first year here in Utah. It was an emotional and spiritual experience of a very rare sort for me to see the beauty of the water in all the seasons.

In the subsequent years, I began to keep a nature journal that detailed all of my outings anywhere in or around the entire Provo River watershed. I wanted to know all of it. I started thinking that maybe I could write a simple book about the river, but I began reading about Utah history and learning about my own family history in this valley. I discovered that one of my ancestors, James Stratton, was one of the first to irrigate the Provo. And as I learned about the early conflicts between Mormons and Ute Indians and about the environmental history of the area, it was not looking like such a simple book after all. I tried to think deeply and carefully about the relevance of Mormon theology to environmental stewardship, so the book quickly became a massive challenge since it became clear to me that understanding a watershed is no easy matter, with so many interrelated factors clamoring for my attention.

Most of the time I told myself that writing this book could wait because I had an academic career to worry about, church callings to fulfill, and a family to raise, but it kept bothering me that I wasn't writing it or that I wasn't writing as ambitiously as I should.

I needed to find a method for integrating every tributary that was adding up to the phenomenon I was experiencing whenever I was on the river—writing the book became that method. I am, of course, very much inspired by a great many important environmental thinkers and theologians, and I have always wanted to believe that Mormonism and Mormon experience have something vital to contribute to the conversation.

Question:

Fishing and hiking play recurring roles in the book. Do you have any favorite spots and hikes you would recommend local residents don't miss?

Answer:

I am always amazed at how little people know about the mountains and rivers that surround us right here. We are lovers of canyons, to be sure—Rock Canyon, Hobble Creek Canyon, American Fork Canyon—but the upper mountains behind us are spectacular even if more demanding to reach. Every great hike requires effort, so there is a price to pay, but Provo Peak, Y Mountain, and the areas up above Rock Canyon cresting over into South Fork are pretty amazing.

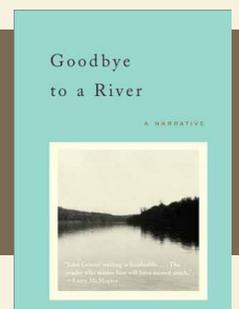
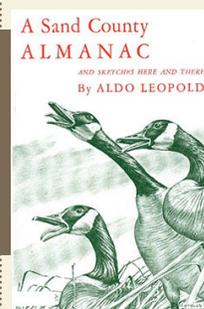
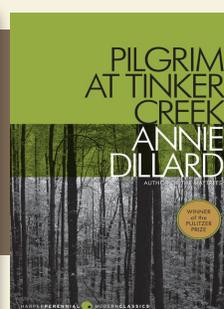
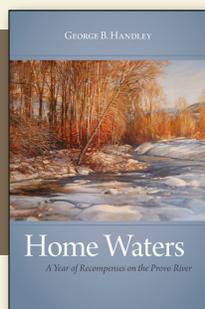
Question:

The term *recompenses* appears in the title and throughout the work. Can you explain a little about that concept?

Answer:

The word comes from the Old Testament, from Isaiah primarily, and it means both blessing and punishment. It conveys the hope that the land will be fruitful and that we can survive and even thrive in our mortal condition in a landscape that at first seemed indifferent to our presence. And yet it also conveys the warning that if we don't live in balance, if we don't respect the creation and the Creator, we will find ourselves banished and the land will justifiably return to a wilderness.

But for me personally, it also has something to do with why I love nature. I suffered the loss of a brother to suicide when he and I were young, and as I explored the watershed—fishing, hiking, snowshoeing—I found myself receiving *recompenses* for my losses, I guess what we also sometimes call tender mercies. These feelings of blessedness are not replacements for our losses but are in a way dependent on them—in its root meaning the word “blessed” actually implies bloodshed.



OREM PUBLIC LIBRARY AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Experiences in nature do provide a ballast, a balance for us in an otherwise imbalanced mortal experience. I don't think I would love nature as much as I do if I hadn't suffered in my life, so even though nature doesn't bring the dead back to us, it somehow feels to me that it brings us back into a strange and comforting presence. It is odd, really, that we would want to love nature since nature is precisely the reason the dead are taken from us. We are all biological and so we all must die, but surrounded by the physical world, we somehow feel we are more than just biology. That to me is a precious recompense for my mortality.

Question:

What books influenced you in the writing of this work?

Answer:

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* was an important influence, as was John Graves's *Goodbye to a River*. I am also fond, of course, of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* and of a marvelous book called *Reading the Mountains of Home*, by a great literary critic, John Elder. I found myself reading and rereading Graves's book and trying to hear the music of his remarkable prose. I feel the same way about the prose of Marilynne Robinson and the poetry and prose of Derek Walcott.

I wanted to honor the landscape with the best language I could muster, and I knew I was going to need a lot of help. Sometimes I would read these or other writers even just for a few minutes before writing, as a way to tune in, in a way. It is true as well that Wallace Stegner was never far from my thoughts as I wrote. I had the privilege of meeting him once when I was in college shortly before he died. There are certain readers you imagine for yourself to help you rise to the occasion of writing, and he was always one of them for me.



George Handley is the author of *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*. He is a professor of Humanities at Brigham Young University.