

Looking at the Classics: “Trout” by Ray Bergman

Buddy Randolph

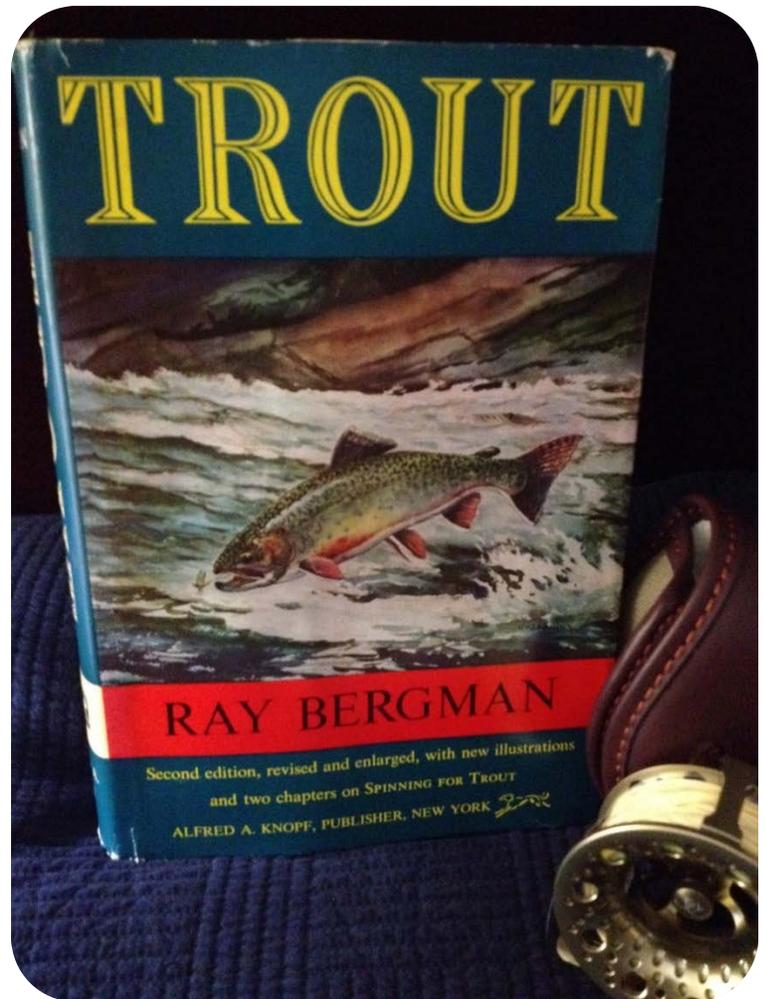
[This is one in a series of articles describing classic fly-fishing books and their authors, with “classic” meaning works that have been widely recognized as seminal to the sport for decades. Very little here is intended as a review, as these works have stood the test of time. Rather, they are showcases of the writers and their work, with a selectively detailed overview of the content. Hopefully this will be of interest to anyone who ever wondered, like I did, why these works are so highly regarded. Ideally, these articles will lead some to enjoy these historical works themselves. Please send any of your comments to buddyrandolph@comcast.net. –Buddy]

Finally, after years of hearing about this book, I enjoyed the privilege of seeing what the fuss was about for myself.

“Trout” by Ray Bergman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, second edition 1952, sixth printing 1968, hardback) was first published in 1938, was updated substantially for the Second Edition in 1952, updated as a Third Edition in 1968 and remained in print for many years after

that (currently available as reprints and in electronic formats). While other classic works on fly fishing sold a few thousand copies to elite men of leisure, Ray Bergman’s “Trout” made fly fishing accessible to everyone and, in all of its incarnations, sold over 250,000 copies. I selected the Second Edition from 1952 because it includes a couple of additional chapters on the new fishing method from Europe called “spinning.” I began reading this storied volume with relish and it did not disappoint.

Ray Bergman was born in 1891 in Nyack, New York. He opened a sporting goods store there in 1914 but went bankrupt in 1921, after which he joined the staff of a major sporting goods store called “William Mills and Sons” in New York City. He began freelance writing outdoor articles in the mid-20s and later joined the staff of Outdoor Life Magazine. While there he served in various capacities, including Fishing Editor, for 26 years. Ray operated a mail-order fly-fishing business for years and tied many of the flies he sold, estimating when he wrote “Trout” that he had tied “approximately two hundred thousand flies.” Ray Bergman passed away in 1967. (1)



“Trout” opens with what many consider to be the finest artistic depictions of classic flies ever published. Dr. Edgar Burke produced watercolor paintings of 676 wet flies, nymphs, streamers, steelhead flies, dry flies and spinning lures, plus one plate of fly-tying feathers. Perhaps equally noteworthy is that Ray Bergman tied all of the flies painted by Dr. Burke. I won’t delve deeply into this aspect of “Trout” here, except to say that I believe these color plates have inspired more online discussion than any other part of the book. If you have a strong interest in these color plates, I suggest that you research carefully which editions do them justice and purchase accordingly. My copy includes color reproductions (at least one printing apparently used black-and-white) but they are a bit fuzzy.

The text begins with Ray remembering his early days of fishing, telling often self-effacing accounts of fishless days and frustrations punctuated with moments of insight or help from more experienced anglers. As a youth he first developed an interest in fly fishing because late one season an older fly-fisher was able to catch more fish, and bigger ones, with fly tackle than Ray could catch with bait. He wished he could tell that gentleman how much he appreciated his help, and what an impact he’d had on his life, but regretfully he never knew the man’s name. I think many of us have felt that way about someone in our past.

The next seven chapters move rhythmically through tackle, methods and experiences using wet flies, nymphs, streamers and dry flies. Of course the tackle descriptions are dated but reading them is historically interesting, plus it really leads to appreciating what we often take for granted today. The methods are timeless; in an age when purists eschew everything but floating model insects fished upstream on zero-weights, Ray’s open-minded approach is like a breath of fresh air. He did what worked and moved fluidly from one method to another without hesitation, including switching to spinning tackle and even (very reluctantly) to bait. Fly-fishing was clearly his first choice, however, and his fly-fishing skills rendered other methods mostly unnecessary. Then come the real treats: the chapters for each type of fly called “experiences.” This is where Ray hit his stride as a storyteller, and it’s noteworthy that the “experience” chapters are much longer than the tackle and method chapters. In each chapter of experiences I believe he held back, sharing all he could within his publisher’s limits. His heart was in his stories, and he told about the good and bad times with equal intensity. I believe he saw difficult times on fishing trips as necessary passages to good times; perhaps as puzzles to be solved. Who wouldn’t want a fishing partner like that? The spinning tackle chapters are next, complete with their own stories. Then come three chapters on general observations about sunlight and shadow, water types and fish behavior that I found very insightful – this material is as helpful today as it was the day Ray wrote it. After dedicated chapters on Steelhead, Lake Trout and Grayling, the text ends with a chapter on tying flies. Afterwards, there’s an appendix of fly patterns keyed to the color plates.

I noted the best points as I read and ended up filling several pages. From those I selected just a few and then grouped them into four categories: Technical, History, Personal Insight, and Philosophy. Here are what I feel are some of the most engaging quotes and paraphrases from a most engaging book:

Technical:

- Flies of the same pattern look different due to how the light shines through the hackle; flies that look the same when viewed directly may look very different in translucence.
- Ray wondered what trout think fast-moving wet flies are: Minnows? Shrimp? Or maybe just something good to eat that's trying to escape. "*Often the best fly is one that does not seem to imitate anything in nature.*"
- "It may seem odd... that such slight differences... as changing speed... three or four movements a minute, or regulating the depth... a foot... would make the difference... but it is often on such trifles that our success depends."
- On one occasion Ray pointed out that he needed four different methods to catch fish in one day from "perhaps the most heavily populated trout stream in the country," showcasing the importance of knowing and trying many methods.
- On the controversial subject (then and now) of floating vs sinking leaders, Ray opined that it didn't matter very often, and not at all in the shade, although he used both floatant and "sinkant" when it did.
- Ray liked "...flies with small hooks and plenty of hackle to keep the hook above water," in order to hide the hook. Interestingly, Swisher and Richards believed strongly in the opposite approach as described in "Selective Trout," pioneering No-hackle flies that sit low in the water with fully-exposed hooks.
- "Trout are selective to color and shape in inverse ratio to the intensity of light." In other words, trout don't see well in bright light.
- Chapter XII, "Water Types and How to Fish Them," is chock-full of excellent tactics.

History:

- Ray mentioned the "new" Tellico Nymph pattern from East Tennessee.
- Silkworm "gut" from which pre-nylon leaders were made, was not intestines (as sheep intestines are used for "gut" strings for musical instruments), but rather the content of the worm's silk gland, withdrawn and hardened in air.
- What today we call "parachute" flies were originally called "Gyroflies." They were patented and for a time sold exclusively by Mills sporting goods, where Ray Bergman worked.
- Ray described a "new angle" to "Southern trout fishing." In 1950, he fished for stocked trout in Northern Arkansas below the Norfolk Dam, which had been completed six years before. He hoped that the water below Bull Shoals Dam

would one day be stocked with trout, also. [Personal note: I fished there last spring and I'm still hoping the same thing...]

- The last chapter, "On Tying Flies," is an interesting look at tying methods from over sixty years ago. It includes tying without a bobbin, and hand-waxing thread with melted paraffin.
- Ray made two references to Vince Marinaro, whose two published books I've recently read. First, he mentioned Marinaro's original dry flies that were uniquely tied with a thorax. Second, Ray quoted a letter from Vince about fly patterns and said Vince is "working on a book," which I'm thinking must have been "A Modern Dry-fly Code."

Personal Insight:

- Ray noted that it's fun to shop in a fly shop even if you don't need anything. Really?
- There's a hilarious account of a family trip to Yellowstone National Park. Ray wanted to fish a lot. Actually, he wanted to fish constantly, but he was forced to sight-see with friends and family. At one point he grumbled about looking at "...Old Faithful, Fishing Bridge, Yellowstone Lake, the Canyon, and several other nationally known wonders – or whatever you call them."

Philosophy:

- (Paraphrase) One of the most common reasons for angling failures: intolerance for things we can't control. Impatience makes us do things carelessly and, by so doing, we aggravate the condition that caused our irritation to start with. When losing patience, it's especially the time to exercise self-control.
- "Most of us spend too much time worrying about our tackle and too little time learning the intimate characteristics of the fish..."
- Ray observed, with several examples, how hardship outdoors makes the best memories.

Summarizing, "Trout" rests upon three pillars. First, Ray Bergman fished incessantly from childhood and often for trout. As a member of the Outdoor Life staff he said that he had travelled "more than one hundred thousand additional miles in the United States and Canada in quest of interesting fishing" just during the fourteen years preceding the second edition of "Trout," so he had no shortage of relevant experiences. Second, Ray kept detailed notes about his fishing, including weather, water conditions, flies, lures, bait (rarely, but he did what it took) and of course the fish he caught and missed. The third pillar, and I believe the most important, is that Ray Bergman was a masterful story teller. He was able to choose those stories that were the most exciting, and that also helped him to make specific points about tackle, technique or even just the importance of persistence. Ray then told those stories in a

way that leaves the reader feeling like he or she is there right now, finally picking the right fly or landing that big trout. Because of Ray Bergman's rare combination of experience, records and storytelling talent, it seems to me that "Trout" will probably always occupy a unique place in fishing literature.

Reference:

1. Talleur, Dick: "Ray Bergman: Designer of Timeless Trout Flies." Fly Tyer Magazine, issue unknown (sourced online)