

*Downstream from Trout Fishing in America* (revised) by Keith Abbott  
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Keith Abbott knew Richard Brautigan for eighteen years between their initial meeting in 1966 and Brautigan's death in 1984. They were introduced by Price Dunn, the model for Lee Mellon in Brautigan's 1964 novel *A Confederate General from Big Sur*. In 1989 Abbott published the first edition of *Downstream from Trout Fishing in America* with Capra Press. Astrophil Press has published a revised and expanded version. In addition to simple factual corrections and some tweaked prose, the new addition contains material that Abbott felt he had to leave out of the 1989 Capra Press edition, e.g. the material published in Abbott's 1993 chapbook *Skin and Bone* recounting a purgatorial weekend (including both sudden illness and extreme hangover) spent with Brautigan and Thomas McGuane. The updated edition also incorporates material from "In the Riffles with Richard: A Profile of Richard Brautigan," originally published in *California Fly Fisher* (March/April 1998), and it closes with a beautiful a selection of fourteen photos by Erik Weber, whose photographs were used for many of Brautigan's book covers.

I have a serious problem with *Downstream*: every time I sat down to write this review, I reread the book usually from cover to cover. *Downstream* is a beautiful, heartbreaking book about fame in relationship to innocence, talent, style, and alcohol. The main advantages of fame are that people who don't know you say they like you; some people who don't like you pretend to know and like you; and people buy your books even if they don't like them. For these reasons, it is hard to imagine turning down fame. It is easy to see why a young writer would be infatuated with the idea of fame, and *Downstream* connects the dots between the Sirens' song and jagged pieces of lumber on the shore.

The book begins with the news that Brautigan was found dead in his Bolinas home, several weeks after he shot himself. From that awful center, Abbott narrates waves that role across the country. Just after he heard the news about Brautigan, Abbott was warned by editor Jack Shoemaker that certain journalists were making ghoulish use of the event by springing the information on unwary friends of Brautigan, thus to get the best quotation: "In North Beach, I ran into Tony Dingman. A close friend of Brautigan over the years, Tony was in shock and had little information to add. As we went around North Beach, those who had seen Brautigan recently could only repeat that he had been holed up in Bolinas for most of the summer, seeing few visitors" (7). Communing in shock, Brautigan's friends, Abbott reports, felt terrible guilt but also recognized that "the literary celebrity of the hippie era," as a local newspaper would put it, had worked hard to push people away (7). Things that seem simple and spontaneous sometimes turn out to be anything but, and Abbott makes a number of very smart connections between Brautigan's apparently sudden doom and his apparently simple way of writing. For better and worse, both were the results of literary obsession.

Shared memories are a kind of common land we can visit, fenceless and gateless. Abbott compares driving around with Brautigan to "traveling inside one of his novels," beautifully

marrying his personal experience to the larger demands of biographical reflection. “With friends Richard talked just as he wrote. Outrageous metaphors and looney-tune takes were commonplace; one-liners, bizarre fantasies, and lightning asides darted out of him one after another,” Abbott writes (22). Brautigan liked to rework the quotidian world into a kind of improvisational stage, though “willfulness played a part in these routines, too. Although he was open to inspired changes, he liked,” Abbott writes, “to control the guidelines for these games” (23). “He often dictated what the shared reality was to be for the day” (23). One morning, passing a hamburger stand, Brautigan only had to utter “Ah – the smell of grease on the winter wind” and follow up with, “Li Po, I believe,” and Abbott, wise pupil, understood immediately that the game for the day was to make fake Chinese poems (23). An implicit rule—one must always end the poem “with fictitious attributions and the pompous phrase, ‘I believe’” (23). Fun. Try this at home.

Part of Abbott’s motivation in writing *Downstream* was to address the imbalances in our recollection of the particular writer, but it was also to learn the hard lessons about fame, which threatens to fossilize a being in a given moment and in a given role—whether or not that role is healthy. Young writers who intend to become famous should study the ways in which, as Abbott writes, “[s]udden fame creates a vacuum around a person,” such that “much gets siphoned out of a person’s life as other things rush in” (47). When fame “befalls” a friend, “things most familiar are hidden from the public while traits quite strange to your experience are so blown-up, they seem to become that friend”(47). Abbott deftly weaves in testimony from Ken Kesey on the “addictive” (48) qualities of fame, and after pointing out that Brautigan’s books really have no heroes, Abbott comments on the general vulnerability of writers compared to other kinds of celebrities: “For a writer, the intoxication of this moment seems even more exhilarating and disorienting” than one would suppose they do for an actor, since “a product—a book or play or movie—stands between himself and his public” (48). It is both “a risk and a rush” to step out from behind this shield. Abbott quotes at length Bobbie Louise Hawkins, his colleague at Naropa University, as she remembers Brautigan’s first trip to the East coast. According to Hawkins, Brautigan joined an actual parade in Cambridge in which people carried a giant papier-mâché trout and a banner reading “Trout Fishing in America” in honor of “some school in Cambridge named for the book” (49). Hawkins contends, “I don’t think he had any awareness of how damaging celebrity might be.”

Brautigan would, however, soon be subject to “scorn and condescension among the literary establishment,” and “parodies of his fiction were performed by Walker Percy in *The New York Times* and by Garrison Keillor in *The New Yorker*” (57). Those who wished to attack the hippie culture to which Brautigan was attached had no interest in recognizing the traditional literary qualities that gave his writing, even at its most surreal, its tensile strength. In one of the few positive *NYT* reviews Brautigan ever received, Tom McGuane commented on the relative importance of craftsmanship over whimsy and eccentricity in the work: “For what is important is that Brautigan’s outlandish gift is based in traditional narrative virtues. His dialogue is supernaturally exact; his descriptive concision is the perfect carrier for his extraordinary comic perceptions” (58).

The childish pleasures that are lovingly and fastidiously shaped in Brautigan’s published work take us part of the way toward a meaningful life, but the writer’s inability to cope with fame and

with the fossilization of partial virtues ultimately spirals into an awful story, one that turns sadder by the page. Spontaneity and innocence start as the way to freedom but become, it almost seems, a form of doom. Forced innocence becomes a trap, a mode of dualistic rationalization, Abbott contends: “In later years, he loved to talk about how the Japanese got drunk, and how their behavior was forgiven the next day because the offended recognized that the offenders were drunk. This was a child’s view of Japanese manners, but it offered him some solace while his own pride and alcoholism sent him further and further away from society” (66).

Brautigan’s latter years were colored by increasing depression, alienation, and alcoholism, and Abbott pieces together various contributing causes of his final end, including one of the worst childhood’s one can imagine. Others who have had that kind of childhood have coped, and Abbott will not surrender ground to inevitability, but Brautigan’s story is a warning that “growing up” has not had a very important place within the hierarchy of values for countercultural enthusiasts.

Abbott’s book is a profoundly honest reflection, but be warned: when you start reading it, you will keep re-reading it, which means there are many other tasks you’ll never get to. In the meantime, you will have spent time with a gifted storyteller with an indisputably significant subject matter.