

# Tickling A Trout



*by Joseph Bruchac*

1 Potash isn't a big mountain. But the way it rises vertically, like a granite plug pushed up from the earth, makes it dramatically evident from the road as you drive from the town of Hadley toward Lake George. The view from the top makes the steep half hour scramble up its side more than worthwhile.

2 That summer day, as a locust in a nearby maple droned a whining song sharp enough to cut through stone, nine of us gathered at the base of the mountain to do just that. My wife and our two small sons, my sister Marge, my sister Mary Ann and her family started onto the trail by the cold water brook that flows along the mountain slope. But I stopped. My eyes had caught the flash of a square tail in the ripple just before it disappeared from sight. Whenever I glimpse a fish that way, I remember when Grampa Jesse showed me how to tickle a trout.



3 Though he didn't talk about it, Grampa Jesse was Abenaki Indian. He never said anything he taught me when I was a child had to do with that heritage. It was for me to figure out later in life when I would try to raise my own children the way he and Grama Bowman brought me up—never hitting me, giving me the freedom of the woods and the streams, showing me more by example than by telling me what to do and what not to do.

4 I was in the sixth grade. Aside from getting high grades and being the first one with the answers, I wasn't doing that well. I was one of the smallest kids in my class. I had glasses. I was from the outlying countryside beyond the town of Saratoga Springs where I went to School Number 2—and thus, by definition, a “hick,” far from being “cool,” a new term just creeping into our vocabularies. I also read too many books, was not good at sports, and told my teacher whenever anyone picked on me. Thus, I was a brain, a nerd, and a squealer all in one neat package. I felt cursed.

5 When that summer came, fishing season came with it. It both excited and worried me. My dad, with whom I spent very little time, was a taxidermist and an outdoorsman of the first rank. When he went fishing, he always caught his limit; when he hunted, he always got his deer. Sooner or later, I knew, he would take me trout fishing. Sure enough, on a glorious day in late June, he did just that. As always, my sister Mary Ann went along. Dad brought three spinning rods to fish with. One was his own, one was Mary Ann's, and one was for me to use. At the lake Mary Ann was the first to cast her spinner into the water from the dock. After years of practice, she was an ace with a spinning rod. She caught a trout on her first cast. I tried throwing out my line,



the unfamiliar rod as awkward as a club in my hand. The line whirled and tangled. A backlash. My father said something under his breath and grabbed the pole from me.

6 "I'll cast it for you. You can just reel it in. You can do that, can't you?"

7 I nodded. If I'd tried to say anything, I would have burst into tears.

8 When I got home late that afternoon, my father dropped us off in front of my grandparents' general store. I handed Grama a string of ten fat brook trout.

9 "You did so well, Sonny," she said.

10 "No, I didn't." I said. "I only caught one little trout, and Dad said it was too small. Mary Ann caught all these." And then I started to cry. I buried my head against my grandmother's shoulder and sobbed. Why was it that I couldn't ever do anything right?

11 My grandfather's leathery hand was patting my shoulder, but he didn't say anything then or at dinner. He waited until the next morning.

12 "Come on," he said. We climbed into the old square blue Plymouth and drove up 9N, turned onto Porter Corners Road, and up on the mountain where he parked the car near the South Branch. Then and there, he showed me how to tickle a trout, how to coax it into your hands and lift it out of the water. It wasn't easy, and I was soon soaking wet, but I kept trying until I finally succeeded, until a seven inch brook trout was gently moving in my hands.

13 "What do I do now?" I said.

14 "Did you ask it to trust you?" Grampa asked.

15 I nodded. Grampa nodded back. I carefully lowered my hands and let the trout go.

16 It was an unusually hot, dry summer that year. By late August, Bell Brook, the little stream behind my grandparents' old house was going dry in places, leaving trout stranded in the shrinking pools. I walked the creek with a bucket, rescuing trout to carry them further upstream where the water still flowed.

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17 "There's a trout there," I said. Everyone looked, a little too late.

18 "No, there's not," said my sister Mary Ann. Only three words, but they invoked the old rivalry that had been set up in our childhood.

19 My two sons looked up at me. I didn't want to argue, but there had been a trout. I answered in as neutral a tone as I could. "There is," I said. "It's a brook trout, about a fourteen incher. It's under that flat rock there."

20 Mary Ann laughed. "There's not a fourteen inch trout there," she said. "You don't know that."

21 I sat down, took off my T-shirt, my shoes and socks. Then I waded in and walked slowly to that flat rock. Moving in my hands with the flow of the current, a finger's width at a time, I slid my palms up under the stone, along the gravelly bottom until I felt the fanning movement of the trout's fins and then the silk smoothness of its belly. It wasn't just the slow movement of my hands that was important. Grampa Jesse had



told me that. It was what I had in my mind, what I was thinking that counted. No hurry about it, no greed, no anger, just being calm. Asking the fish to trust you, asking it to give itself to you in a way that was as much a song as it was a wish. I slid my hands out from beneath the stone and lifted them from the water. The big hook-jawed male trout lay quietly in my hands, even though its bright pattern of spots, its glistening sides, were exposed to the air. I held it up so that everyone on the bank, some of them openmouthed, could see.

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"You're right," I said. "It's not a fourteen incher. More like eighteen." Then I lowered it into the stream, tipped my hands and watched it laze back under the sheltering stone.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**QUIZ**  
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*Directions: Circle the best answer.*

- 1.** How are Joseph's father and grandfather alike?
  - a.** They liked Mary Ann more than Joseph.
  - b.** They spent a lot of time outdoors.
  - c.** They passed on their Indian heritage to Joseph.
  - d.** They spent a lot of time with Joseph when he was a child.
  
- 2.** A theme of this memoir is
  - a.** don't brag about your accomplishments.
  - b.** only catch enough fish for eating.
  - c.** treat all living creatures with respect.
  - d.** siblings always fight.
  
- 3.** Why does the author include the flashback?
  - a.** It tells how Joseph learned to tickle a trout.
  - b.** It explains why Joseph had a hard time in sixth grade.
  - c.** It describes Joseph's relationship with his grandfather.
  - d.** All of the above
  
- 4.** The word heritage in paragraph 3 means
  - a.** money that is inherited.
  - b.** the expectations of your parents.
  - c.** time period.
  - d.** the traditions and values of a group of people.
  
- 5.** Why did the narrator rescue trout from dry streams in his youth?
  - a.** He needed to practice his tickling.
  - b.** He respected all creatures and wanted to help them.
  - c.** He wanted more trout upstream for his sister and father to catch.
  - d.** He liked trout.