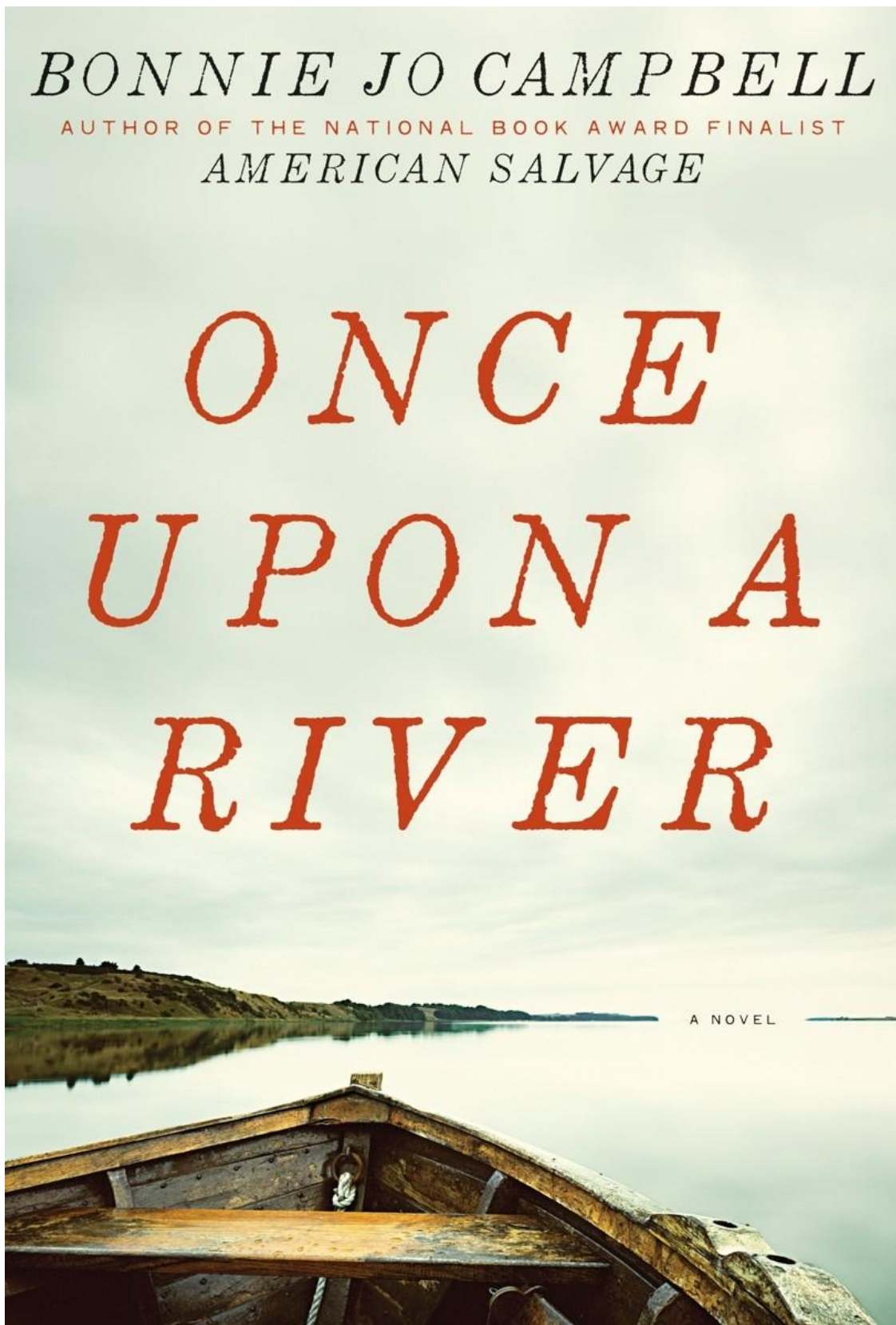


## About the book



***Bonnie Jo Campbell has created an unforgettable heroine in sixteen-year-old Margo Crane, a beauty whose unflinching gaze and uncanny ability with a rifle have not made her life any easier.***

***After the violent death of her father, in which she is complicit, Margo takes to the Stark River in her boat, with only a few supplies and a biography of Annie Oakley, in search of her vanished mother. But the river, Margo's childhood paradise, is a dangerous place for a young woman traveling alone, and she must be strong to survive, using her knowledge of the natural world and her ability to look unsparingly into the hearts of those around her.***

***Her river odyssey through rural Michigan becomes a defining journey, one that leads her beyond self-preservation and to the decision of what price she is willing to pay for her choices.***

## **About the Author** ([bonniejocampbell.com](http://bonniejocampbell.com))

Bonnie Jo Campbell grew up on a small Michigan farm with her mother and four siblings in a house her grandfather Herlihy built in the shape of an H. She learned to castrate small pigs, milk Jersey cows, and, when she was snowed in with chocolate, butter, and vanilla, to make remarkable chocolate candy. When she left home for the University of Chicago to study philosophy, her mother rented out her room. She has since hitchhiked across the U.S. and Canada, scaled the Swiss alps on her bicycle, and traveled with the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus selling snow cones. As president of Goulash Tours Inc., she has organized and led adventure tours in Russia and the Baltics, and all the way south to Romania and Bulgaria.

## **Awards**

Short fiction award, Associated Writing Programs, 1998, for *Women and Other Animals*; Pushcart Prize, 2000, for "The Smallest Man in the World"; World's Best Short Short Story contest, Southeast Florida Review, 2003, for "Sleep-over"; Reynolds Price Short Story Award, 2007, for "Boar Taint"; National Book Award finalist, 2009, for *American Salvage: Stories*; Gilmore Emerging Artist Grant, Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo; Eudora Welty Prize for short fiction, Southern Review, 2009, for "The Inventor, 1972."

## **Career Information**

Teacher of mathematics and creative writing. Goulash Tours, Inc., Kalamazoo, MI, president, 1988-94. Bowling

Green State University, Bowling Green, OH, visiting assistant professor, 1999-2000; Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, visiting writer, winter 2002; Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI, visiting assistant professor, 2005-06; Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR, low-residency M.F.A. program, faculty, 2008--. Has also worked concessions for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

## Writings

- *Women and Other Animals* (short stories), University of Massachusetts Press (Amherst, MA), 1999. (Editor, with Larry Smith)
- *Our Working Lives: Short Stories of People and Work*, Bottom Dog Press (Huron, OH), 2000.
- [\*Q Road\* \(novel\)](#), Scribner (New York, NY), 2002.
- [\*American Salvage: Stories\*](#), Wayne State University Press (Detroit, MI), 2009.
- [\*Once Upon a River\*](#) (novel), W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2011.

Also author of the poetry chapbook *Love Letters to Sons of Bitches*. Contributor to books, including *In the Middle of the Middle West: Literary Nonfiction from the Heartland*, edited by Becky Bradway, Indiana University Press, 2003; *Howl: A Collection of the Best Contemporary Dog Wit*, Random House Digital, Inc., 2007; and *New Stories from the Midwest*, edited by Jason Lee Brown and Jay Prefontaine, Ohio University Press, 2011.

Contributor of short stories and essays to periodicals, including *Story*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Southern Review*, and *Utne Reader*. Newsletter editor, *Letter Parade*, 1985--.

Author of the blog *Once Upon a River*.

## **Sidelights** (Books & Authors)

Bonnie Jo Campbell has trained donkeys and arranged bike tours to Russia and Eastern Europe. Her short story collection *Women and Other Animals* was called a "bold and eloquent debut collection" by a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who said that Campbell's heroines are "determined, eccentric, painfully and beautifully human."

The stories feature women from rural Michigan who eat, smoke, and drink too much and work in dead-end jobs. Janet Kaye wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that "the men they know are predators: absent, indifferent or casually brutal." Kaye called the stories "hard-hitting ... [and] bitter but sweetened with humor." In "Gorilla Girl" a teen is able to vent her ferocity by playing a gorilla in a sideshow. A young man is seduced by the alcoholic mother of the young woman he worships in "The Perfect Lawn." In "Eating Aunt Victoria," an obese woman hides her food from the adult children of her dead lesbian lover. "Bringing Home the Bones" is the story of a Holocaust survivor who burns herself while canning vegetables, loses her leg, and then renews her relationship with her daughters.

Greg Tate wrote in *Village Voice* that Campbell "doesn't condescend to her hard-luck characters, but she confuses

compassion with solemnity. There's nary a joke cracked in the whole book--little of the humor that can, at once, lay pain bare and act as its balm. "Booklist reviewer Donna Seaman called Campbell "a poet of survival, lust, and freedom, and the call of her powerful stories resonates long after their pages have been turned."

Campbell next edited *Our Working Lives: Short Stories of People and Work* with Larry Smith, followed by her first novel, *Q Road*. It tells of the eccentric individuals living on the titular road, known locally as "Queer Road," in the rural town of Greenland, Michigan. Though *Q Road* is told from multiple perspectives, at the center of the novel is discontented teen Rachel Crane, who has recently married her family's fifty-year-old landlord, George Harland. The Michigan farmland becomes a stage for individual, social, and environmental dramas.

Comparing Campbell's endeavor in *Q Road* to Tom Wolfe's in *Bonfire of the Vanities*, poet and Chicago Tribune contributor Lucia Perillo remarked: "Campbell bites off a smaller chunk than Wolfe, but she chews it no less thoughtfully, and in the end the meal is a satisfying one for readers interested in the quirks of rural life." A Publishers Weekly reviewer found some of Campbell's devices to be heavy handed, but nevertheless concluded that *Q Road* is a "thoughtful, well-paced, deeply moral (though not moralizing) novel full of hard lessons and the wisdom gained from them across generations."

Campbell's second short story collection, *American Salvage: Stories*, has garnered immense critical and

popular attention. It was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2009. The book is set at the turn of the millennium in rural Michigan, and its characters suffer addictions to methamphetamine. Many also contend with the recession that was sparked by the failing automotive industry. Despite the characters' bleak circumstances, Campbell told Susan Ramsey in a Maud Newton Web site interview, "I think hope is huge in all my stories. And not everybody sees it, again, people feel my stories are despairing, but despair has to be balanced by hope. I don't think I'd want to write a story where I left a character without hope." Seaman, again writing in Booklist, noted this dichotomy in her review, finding that "Campbell's busted-broke, damaged, and discarded people are rich in longing, valor, forgiveness, and love."

Certainly, the stories in the collection are filled with dark subject matter. In the title story, "King Cole's American Salvage," William Slocum, Jr., oft-referred to as Willie, is desperate to help pay for his girlfriend Wanda's mortgage and her meth addiction. To do so, he robs the owner of an auto salvage yard, beating him to a pulp with a pipe in the process. In "Fuel for the Millennium," Hal Little believes society will crumble when Y2K arrives, so he begins stockpiling fifty-five-gallon drums of gas. Hal, however, must confront others who do not share his beliefs. Remarking once again on the collection's mix of despair and hope, Mostly Fiction Web site contributor Poornima Apte remarked that "despite this intense hopeless desperation, the characters in American Salvage show amazing courage and a determination to make the best of their circumstances. That they really don't have much of a

choice but to do so, is almost beside the point. "Chicago Tribune reviewer Alan Cheuse also focused on the stories' integral dichotomy, finding that Campbell is addressing "the question of life among Michigan working-class folks, and making stories that dig deep and somehow soar at the same time." He added: "In these stories about cold, lonely, meth-drenched, working-class Michigan life, there's a certain beauty reaching something like the sublimity of a D.H. Lawrence story. ... Because of their despairing feel, and their shape and form, they seem quite lifelike."

Campbell's second novel, *Once Upon a River*, draws inspiration from Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* and Homer's *Odysseus*. Again set in Campbell's native Michigan, *Once Upon a River* is a journey tale and a prequel to *Q Road* in that the main character, sixteen-year-old Margo Crane, later becomes mother to Rachel, the protagonist of Campbell's first novel. Margo's journey along the St. Joseph River to find her mother is punctuated by dangerous new relationships and dilemmas.

"Because Margo is so strong and idiosyncratic, because she possesses such great natural innocence, the reader would like her to transcend her circumstances," wrote novelist Jane Smiley in the *New York Times Book Review*. "But the constant refrain of her life, as young as she is, is not transcendence but consequences." Smiley concluded that *Once Upon a River* is "an excellent American parable about the consequences of our favorite ideal, freedom." Booklist reviewer Donna Seaman remarked that "Campbell juxtaposes spare prose with lush details in this stark chronicle of hardship and splendor." A Publishers



Weekly concluded that *Once Upon a River* is "a fine and sobering story with more than a little *Winter's Bone*-style grit in it."

## Reviews

### *Library Journal*

This second novel by National Book Award finalist Campbell ([American Salvager](#)) is set in Murrayville, a rural Michigan town far removed from the modern world. Inhabitants have lived off the Stark River for generations, including 16-year-old Margo Crane's family. She's been taught the best fishing spots and knows the hidden dangers downstream from the Murray Metal Fabricating Plant. Her carefree existence ends when her mother, a depressed alcoholic, leaves town, and Margo is raped by her uncle Cal. Margo's unique revenge leads to her father's death, a tragic event that never-the-less sets her free from being at the mercy of the Murrays. Equipped with ammunition, food, her father's ashes, and a pink envelope with her mother's return address, she takes her father's boat downstream, determined to find her mother. Margo survives by hunting, fishing, and garden pilfering and by distrusting people. Her river odyssey ultimately leads to self-preservation on her terms. VERDICT A truthful and deeply human story that pulls us in and won't let go. Readers looking for superior fiction are in for an uplifting, first-rate story. --Donna Bettencourt, Mesa Cty. P.L., Grand Junction, CO (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc.

## *Booklist*

**\*Starred Review\*** Margo Crane, 16, is called Sprite, River Nymph, a throwback, and a river princess. Beautiful, strong, and quiet, she is a hunter and a sharpshooter. Abandoned by her self-indulgent mother, she turns to her extended family across the Stark River in rural Michigan, but her uncle Cal is rapaciously lustful, and things turn violent. Margo steals Cal's fancy rifle, grabs her sacred text, a kid's book about her idol, Annie Oakley, and takes off in her grandfather's teak boat. And so begins a dramatic and rhapsodic American odyssey, a female Huckleberry Finn, a wild-child-to-caring-woman story as intricately meshed with the natural life of the river as a myth. Margo first appeared in Campbell's debut book, *Women and Other Animals* (1999), and Campbell, a National Book Award finalist for *American Salvage* (2009), knows her protagonist so well that she conveys all that Margo does, thinks, and feels with transfixing, sensuous precision, from the jolt of a gun to the muscle burn of rowing a boat against the current to the weight of a man. From killing and skinning game to falling in with outlaws and finding refuge with kind if irascible strangers, Margo's earthy education and the profound complexities of her timeless dilemmas are exquisitely rendered and mesmerizingly suspenseful. A glorious novel destined to entrance and provoke. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** National Book Award and NBCC finalist Campbell is on a trajectory to best-seller status with this powerful novel. -- Seaman, Donna Copyright 2010 Booklist

## *Publisher's Weekly*

In her follow-up to National Book Award finalist [American Salvage](#), Campbell trains her unflinching eye on Margo Crane, a down-on-her-luck 16-year-old living in late 1970s rural Michigan who is, in rapid succession, abandoned by her mother, raped by her uncle, and witness to the shooting death of her father. An accomplished marksman who worships Annie Oakley, Margo takes off, traveling up the Stark River and struggling to survive on her own, having been once again rejected by her mother. Encountering a progression of strangers, both kind and otherwise, Margo is a modern-day pioneer whose steely resolve is matched only by her guarded need for tenderness. Forced to kill a man in a moment of panic, Margo must learn to forgive those who have hurt her in order to forge a new and better life for herself. Working against the backdrop of a beautiful but unforgiving landscape, Campbell juxtaposes spare prose with lush details in this stark chronicle of hardship and splendor, friendship and disappointment, and families undone and reunited, and though the novel occasionally flags under the crushing burden of Margo's unremitting ill fortune, it is, finally, a fine and sobering story with more than a little *Winter's Bone*-style grit in it. (July) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

### **Discussion questions** ([www.litlovers.com/](http://www.litlovers.com/))

1. How would you describe Margo Crane—what inner qualities enable her to leave home at 16 and survive a journey on the river? As a reader, do you find yourself

connecting with her? Or is she too stoic and taciturn to fully engage your emotions?

2. In what way has her mother's abandonment of her shaped Margo's character?
3. Margo's initial reaction to her rape is to wonder whether somehow she was at fault. Do you think her response is typical of rape victims? Had you been a friend or family member, what would you tell her?
4. Is Margo responsible for her father's death?
5. How is this a coming of age story? What, by the end, has Margo learned during the course of her adventures? Does she learn anything? Has she grown or matured?
6. What do you make of Margo's sexual experiences? Is she overly compliant? Is her moral compass askew—in other words, is she morally compromised? Or is Margo a sturdy pragmatist, doing what she needs to survive? Or neither? What does the book suggest about moral clarity? Is there a different code of behavior in the wild than in society?
7. What about the men? Does Brian, for instance, have genuine concern for Margo's welfare, or is he merely an opportunist, taking whatever pleasure presents itself? How does Brian leave Margo exposed to the lusts of other men? What do you think of her relationship with Smoke?

8. Has Campbell presented us with stereotypes of men, or has she created them as distinct individuals revealing a wide variety of behavior? What do you think?
9. In her interaction with Michael, Margo says she was "feeling the same urgency she felt when she had a buck in her sights." Why does Campbell make this connection between sex and violence—what could she be suggesting about how the two human activities are related?
10. Talk about the book's title. What is the thematic significance of the river? What other works can involve a boat or ship and a body of water—ocean or river? What stands behind the metaphor?
11. Do you know the story of Annie Oakley? Why does Margo model herself after Oakley—what is the link between her and Oakley?
12. Margo is on the archetypal quest of a young hero (in this case, heroine). She is in search of her mother. What does the mother represent (young males typically search for fathers)? What do you think of Margo's mother once she finds her? For Margo, was the finding worth the journey?
13. What's to become of Margo? What do you predict for her? What do you wish for her?

## Read-Alikes

Josh Ritter, [\*Bright's Passage\*](#) (2011)

Henry Bright is a veteran of the Great War who comes back from France to his home in West Virginia to find his life in shambles. His horse talks to him, and his actions are led by angels that only he can see. After abducting a girl and impregnating her, he finds himself with an infant son to care for when the girl dies during childbirth. Now the girl's father is after him, and he must race across West Virginia in an attempt to get away.

Daniel Woodrell, [\*Winter's Bone\*](#) (2006)

Reaching her sixteenth year in the harsh Ozarks while caring for her poverty-stricken family, Ree Dolly learns that they will lose their house unless her bail-skipping father can be found and made to appear at an upcoming court date.

Elizabeth Berg, [\*Joy School\*](#) (1997)

The story of first love featuring Katie, 13. When her father, a widowed army colonel, moves to another town, Katie meets Jimmy, 23, a garage attendant, and she falls in love with him. Unfortunately Jimmy is married and a father, and though he likes Katie very much he is not about to leave his family. A tale of platonic love, narrated by Katie.

Alice McDermott, [\*Child of My Heart\*](#) (2002)

A teenage girl, raised on the east end of Long Island among the country estates of the rich, reflects on her understanding of human nature during a seemingly idyllic summer spent with her eight-year-old cousin Daisy.

Francine Prose, [\*Goldengrove\*](#) (2008)

Grieving after the drowning death of her sister, thirteen-year-old Nico falls into a seductive and dangerous relationship with her sister's enigmatic boyfriend during a summer when she realizes that she has moved beyond the help of her parents.

## **Watch-Alikes**

[\*Winter's Bone\*](#), Lionsgate (2010)

An unflinching Ozark Mountain girl hacks through dangerous social terrain as she hunts down her drug-dealing father while trying to keep her family intact.

[\*The Hunger Games\*](#), Lionsgate (2012)

In a future North America, where the rulers of Panem maintain control through an annual televised survival competition pitting young people from each of the twelve districts against one another, sixteen-year-old Katniss's skills are put to the test when she voluntarily takes her younger sister's place.

[\*The Tree of Life\*](#), Fox Searchlight (2011)

This stunningly original triumph from visionary director Terrence Malick stars Academy Awardr Nominee Brad Pitt and Academy Awardr Winner Sean Penn. The epic, yet intimate, story follows the life journey of Jack O'Brien (played as an adult by Penn), the eldest son of a fractured Midwestern family. Pitt delivers a powerful performance as the cataclysmic force of nature in Jack's world, his complex and rigidly authoritarian father. Hailed as a visually breathtaking masterpiece by critics and audiences alike, *The Tree Of Life* won the Cannes Film Festival's highest honor, becoming one of the year's most talked about films.

[\*Into the Wild\*](#), Paramount (2008)

Freshly graduated from college with a promising future ahead, Christopher McCandless instead walked out of his privileged life and into the wild in search of adventure. What happened to him on the way transformed this young wanderer into an enduring symbol for countless people - a



fearless risk-taker who wrestled with the precarious balance between man and nature. Based on a true story.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Warner Bros (1960)

Huckleberry Finn, a rambunctious boy adventurer chafing under the bonds of civilization, escapes his humdrum world and his selfish, plotting father by sailing a raft down the Mississippi River. Accompanying him is Jim, a slave running away from being sold. Together the two strike a bond of friendship that takes them through harrowing events and thrilling adventures.



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