

This Obscure Fishing Book is One of the Most Reprinted English Books Ever

‘The Compleat Angler’ is much more than an instruction manual on fishing. It’s a Walden-like meditation on nature and friendship



The sport of angling ("angle" is an old work for "hook") was a popular 1600s pastime that had a number of guides written about it. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

By [Kat Eschner](#)
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“God did never make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling,” wrote Izaak Walton, born on this day in 1594, in *The Compleat Angler*.

Although the fish would likely disagree with this assessment, Walton’s fellow fishers clearly see something in the idea: after the Bible and Shakespeare, *The Compleat Angler* remains [one of the most reprinted books in the English language](#). This is true even though it’s written in the English of 1676, the date of the final edition Walton edited and revised. Why does it remain so popular?

The Compleat Angler isn't so much a technical manual on how to fish as it is a book on how to enjoy the countryside and all of its bounty. Essayist [William Hazlitt](#), writing in the 1800s, called it "the best pastoral in the language."

There were already many manuals about fishing published by Englishmen, literature scholar Marjorie Swann [told](#) The Izaak Walton League of America, one of the country's oldest conservation groups, but "what sets *The Compleat Angler* apart from these previous how-to books is Walton's insistence that there's so much more to being an angler than a technical knowledge of bait and tackle. For Walton, fishing is at once an environmental, social, and spiritual experience." People still read *Walden*—why not this?

For the people of his own time, Walton's book offered a welcome break from the chaos that surrounded them. "When Walton first published *The Compleat Angler* in 1653 England was in ruins after years of civil war: Walton's beloved Anglican Church was abolished, his king was executed, and the English landscape was devastated by warfare," Swan says. These circumstances inspired Thomas Hobbes, in 1651, to [describe](#) humanity's "natural state" as "mere war... a war of all men against all men." But rather than grappling with issues of state brutality and how to create order, Walton wrote a book about the joys and spiritual merits of spending time in the countryside, going about the relatively peaceful practice of "angling" with friends.



Izaak Walton in 1672. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

Like other books of the period, although it is an advice guide, *The Compleat Angler* is written as a story. Nick Redgrove [explains](#) in an article for *Standpoint*:

The majority of the book is comprised of a dialogue between Piscator, the fisherman, and Venator, the hunter, in which the former attempts to persuade the latter of the practical and spiritual merits of angling. Piscator reminds Venator that Saints Peter, Paul and John "were all Fishers" before quoting verses from other keen anglers: Montaigne, George Herbert and John Donne. The conversation takes place over several days on a fishing trip in the Lea Valley, during which they journey from Tottenham to Ware in Hertfordshire.

"The waters are nature's store-house, in which she locks up her rarities," Walton wrote. Among those rarities: "the hog-fish, dog-fish, dolphin, cony-fish, parrot-fish, shark, poison-fish, and sword-fish among many incredible fish," [writes](#) Ruth Scurr for *The Times Literary Supplement*. Besides describing the wonders of nature and friendship, "he interleaved his fishing instructions with poems, songs, illustrations, recipes and other diversion," she writes.

The whole is a pleasurable read that shows an "awareness of the environment... centuries ahead of his time," [writes](#) Simon Redfern for *The Independent*. The [former tradesman](#)-turned-author spent years working on later editions of the book, which captured a view of nature from the perspective of his tumultuous lifetime.

It also captured something universal about the experience of being in nature. "Men are taken to be grave," Walton writes, "because Nature hath made them of a sowre complexion." They are "money-getting-men," he writes, "men that spend all their time first in getting, and next in anxious care to keep it." But "we Anglers pity them perfectly, and stand in no need to borrow their thoughts to think ourselves so happy."

About Kat Eschner

Kat Eschner is a freelance journalist based in Toronto who focuses on technology, culture and ethics. She recently graduated from the master's program in journalism at Ryerson University, where she served as editor-in-chief of the Spring 2016 issue of the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*.

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