

SPIRAL JETTY BY ROBERT SMITHSON

# FAVORITE



**LEONARD RIGGIO**

Chairman  
Barnes & Noble

*Spiral Jetty* c. 1970,  
**ROBERT SMITHSON (1938-1973)**,  
rock and dirt, 1,500 ft. long  
and 15 ft. wide

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eonard Riggio stood along Utah's Great Salt Lake, studying a roadway that stretched far into the eerily tranquil water. He knew that the piled-up surface of black basalt rocks and earth he was about to traverse, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, was often below the water line, but that day, it was wholly visible.

"The moment I started walking on it," he recalls, "it seemed as if I was on a surface that had always been there, that it wasn't man-made. It started out as an ordinary walk, but the tighter the spiral got," he says, referring to the form of this 1,500-foot-long, 15-foot-wide sculpture, "the more I became aware of its shape. Yet it felt part of the natural order of things."

Although Riggio lives in a Park Avenue apartment filled with masterworks by Picasso, Mondrian, Magritte,

and others, he has a special fondness for Smithson's sculpture 2,000 miles away. Six thousand tons of rock and dirt were moved by an army of trucks and equipment to fashion it in just three weeks. Completed in 1970, it is perhaps the best known exemplar of Land Art, a movement practiced by Smithson, along with Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, and Nancy Holt (Smithson's widow).

"The one piece of art I own — sort of — which stands out among others is *Spiral Jetty*," Riggio says. "Of course, I don't exactly own it, but I did give Dia the money to buy the piece — sort of — by funding the foundation that takes care of it, and arranges visits to it." (He means the New York-based Dia Art Foundation, which acquired it from Holt and her late husband's estate.) "No one really owns

*Spiral Jetty*," Riggio explains, "because it is now in the much safer domain of the great American landscape. It simply exists, for its own sake. I move that this magnificent work of art be declared as unowned, and thereby priceless."

Indeed, one defining feature of *Spiral Jetty* is its ephemerality. For years, it could be experienced only from the air, but now, due to drought, it can be experienced on foot. "I'm not ascribing to Smithson this intention — he had his own, I'm sure — but when people 'perform' that walk, they become a part of the performance of the artwork," says Riggio. "When I think about *Spiral Jetty*, it brings a smile to my face. It's a work of the heart; it strikes a person's inner spirits."

David Masello is an essayist and poet who lives in New York City. Riggio Photo by Philippe Cheng.