

¹
Salt Lake Book Festival, Oct. 28 '06

PACE
I full well realize I was asked to this splendid library today as a

writer, but you'll be relieved to know that I'm not going to stand up here
in front of you and write--writing is not an outstanding spectator sport.

No, what I want to do instead is to simply sashay in here as a lover of
libraries and sing under their windows for a while. Perhaps give those of
you who didn't know you were sitting in on a serenade a chance to
finally/break that rule of library silence/and chuckle a bit along the way.

I don't usually think of myself as a wandering minstrel, yet when I
count up the libraries I have been to for the sake of my work, and the
literary melodies that have been put into my books by so many old loved
libraries, something like minstrelsy it seems to be. In the course of this

talk I hope to show you how some of the makings of my eleven books
 have come from libraries, but first you should know the stirrings of that
 music of the stacks. That light from the pages that shows into other
 times and souls and thus helps us to illuminate our own.

INTENSE
 So now, as quick as this, you are eighteen years old. You have come
 by train--which tells how long ago this ^{is}--from a Montana town with a
 population of 75, to begin college at Northwestern University, in
 suburban Chicago. And you set off to walk the campus you have never
 laid eyes on before, and there on a slight rise atop a wide green sweep of
 spotless lawn stands the university library, Deering Library. Deering
 was a library like they don't build 'em any more, of noble stone with tall
 stained-glass windows and a lofty long roof with a pair of gothic towers

3
poking up at each end. Deering has architectural fame of a sort. The story was that Frank Lloyd Wright had driven past the Northwestern campus one day, looked at Deering Library with those gothic towers nobly poking into the air, and said, "It looks like a pig on its back."

I think what he really didn't like about it, though, was that Deering Library so much resembled a cathedral. And there's where Mr. Wright was wrong. There was nothing inappropriate about that resemblance, that library was a kind of cathedral, in several ways it behaved like a cathedral. You step now into the reading room of Deering^{LIBRARY}-you are that college freshman from Dupuyer, Montana, remember, who by the magic of time is also at this microphone this moment--and in the reading room of then, you find that the banks of lights hang just above the tables, they

CATHEDRAL
4

hang all the way from the vaulted ceiling, they hang down what seems to

be ~~thousands~~ ^{HUNDREDS} of feet just for your reading convenience, they hang there

like the watchfobs of the gods. You sit with your book there in the

golden pool of reflection, the lens of light brings the printed words up

into your ^{EASER} eyes. The diarist Bruce Frederick Cummings has written of

“the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come

into being in somebody’s mind.” Passing by out there, Frank Lloyd

Wright is not listening to the desires of the books. But you are there in

the great reading room, and college kid from the West that you are, you

do listen to that desire.

Once upon another time, another western kid cocked a keen ear to

that music of the stacks, those desires of the books--right here in town.

Wallace Stegner recalled for an interviewer what ensued in his boyhood when his family left their Saskatchewan homestead and, with characteristic stops and starts, eventually made their way to Salt Lake City. **STEGNER SAID:** "I found the public library. I didn't really find it until we got to Salt Lake, but I lived in it Salt Lake. Books are a habit, and once you've created a book-habit I suppose it lasts."

In my own case, and of course in Wallace Stegner's distinguished career as a writer of history and biography as well as fiction, libraries and the holy order that operates them, librarians, have induced in me not only a book habit but what might be called an "obscure detail" habit as well. I'll talk a bit more about this, while trying to elevate it into the more respectable literary term of "crystalizing detail," as I go along, but

I want to make the point as strongly as I can that the library holdings most valuable to me are often the near-outcasts, the trivia, the seldom-used. In the great community of facts--the community honeycombed in libraries--stashes of old newspapers and dust-gathering volumes of local histories and other shelving headaches are part of the arithmetic of particulars, from which our stories get told. I don't know if I am lucky or not that they are the last sweepings that will ever be swept--if ever--into the universe of Google and the on-line gurgles beyond it. In any case, I am a bookman, in every possible meaning I can give to that term, and thus not a believer that you should just wire up the inside of a library building like an electronic jukebox and knowledge will be transmitted. There's also the chance, on-line, that ignorance will be shared.

So, for the next little while I'd like to try to make the point that in the era of computerization--which I am as glad as anyone to use when it is a servant, in the search for knowledge, rather than the master--the point that books and perhaps even some old-fashioned clutter of hard-to-classify material are still a ^{PRETTY} good idea ^{MOST} in ^{AT LEAST THE RESEARCH} libraries, ^{ONES.} Certainly for a writer but often for a reader, too, many times that's where the gold is hidden.

What/mental finding tools, though, should a writer bring to his or her search for ~~lustre~~ light from the pages? What frame of mind? Grab the research and run? Dither endlessly and call it serendipity? What are the proportions of the imagination that should go to the research and the written result?

Well, there's the story that is told about Vladimir Nabokov when he was teaching his course on the novel, at Cornell ^{UNIVERSITY}, (Incidentally, back there in the Eisenhower years, that course of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!)

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic-alphabet equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in the classroom, one minute confiding to the class in ^{HIS} heavy Russian accent, "By the way, ^{JAMES} Joyce made only one error in English usage in 'Ulysses,' the use of the word 'supine' when it should have been 'prone,' and the next moment handing back, with evidently genuine horror, the test papers on which half the class blithely discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style--with a "D"--when Nabokov all semester had actually been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of "Lolita" and "Pale Fire" and "Speak, Memory" and other linguistically highly-honed books peers over the rims of his glasses at the class and cries out his summary of the writing life: "You must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

/ Pausing as if he hasn't heard himself quite right, Nabokov says in a baffled tone: "But wait--have I made a mistake? Don't I mean 'the passion of the artist and the precision of the scientist?'"

Then like the verbal acrobat he was, he gleefully completes his act: "No! I mean, you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

To me, that passion that Nabokov so rightly prescribed begins with investigation, the restless spirit of inquiry--let's say, passionate adventuring among a library's holdings. This may or may not show up directly in some written result, but at the very least it's apt to show up in the writer and his or her approach to the written work. Let me provide a quick but prime instance of a library session provoking me into some thought or attitude I otherwise would not have had.

This has to begin with my letting you in on a writerly secret--it's not much of a secret or I wouldn't be blabbing it over the radio, would I. But it's this: one of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out--~~what~~^{was} that a bat that just flew

past? Or the whispering ghost of Plato? As a writer you have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from much of anybody else, at least in the course of the day--long enough to figure out those shadowy patterns in the mental cave.

But modern society isn't really set up for hermits, is it. Back there in the early years when I was a freelance magazine journalist and incipient book writer--a state of being that a friend of mine once called self-unemployed--I had to wonder sometimes about the aptness of my chosen existence as something like a suburban druid: solitary, all day long, just me and the words and the commas and the white space on paper, while my wife went off to her college teaching job to support us. There's always been that One Big Saying that lone-wolf writers try to

cling to--naturally it was by another writer, Edward Gibbon, probably

thought up in self-defense when he was holed up for all those years

while working on **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:**

SAID GIBBON.

“Solitude is the school of genius,” Gibbon’s saying has never

convinced everyone. One time when he did venture out after having

completed another book, he was greeted by the Duke of Gloucester with:

“Scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?”

“I wasn’t scribbling, but I was certainly doing a lot of typing to which

I was the only witness. Then one day during research at what in a sense

is my home library in Seattle--the University of Washington library,

which I’ve been using ever since I lit in there as a graduate student the

year Simon and Garfunkel recorded “The Sound of Silence”; I think

that's ~~enough~~ of a historical marker to put on any year--I was wandering out past the shelf of "new releases" and stopped to take a look. Amid those new books was one titled, lo and behold, Solitude.

The dust jacket described the author--Anthony Storr-- as Clinical Lecturer in Psychiatry at Oxford University--and while I wasn't sure that I wanted to read anything that might put me in the category of "clinical," the question of working alone for what was looking like the rest of my life interested me enough that I checked out the book. And in its pages came across this:

"What takes place in the circuitry of the brain is a mystery; but it can be confidently asserted that these processes require time, passivity, and preferably solitude."

"Some of the people who have contributed most to the enrichment of human experience have contributed little to the welfare of human beings in particular, ^{THE BOOK WENT ON,} It can be argued that some of the great thinkers listed above--(that list included Descartes, Newton, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard)--were more preoccupied with what went on in their own minds than ^Nwith the welfare of other people. The same is true of many writers"--uh oh-- "composers and painters. The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own validity. His most significant moments are those in which he

EMPHASIS

attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are, chiefly, if not invariably, those in which he is alone."

Imagine my surprise and pleasure. Talk about the light from the pages—~~it~~ ^{IT} was all right to be alone! Maybe it's even creatively healthy.

Those years ago, I came away from Anthony Storr's book, serendipitous gift of library browsing, with the understanding that work itself can be a legitimate companion. It's amazing how much less anti-social you feel after seeing that written in a book.

Thus validated--by a clinical psychiatrist, no less--in the passion to be alone in investigating the byways of thought and word, the writer then needs to live up to that other half of the Nabokovian proposition, to seek to perform with the precision of the artist.

Language, characterization, plot, form--all of those must be worked
 with, in the closest approximation of Rembrandt light that the writer can
 conjure, on the literary canvas of a novel, and each might be the subject
 for another talk another time. Today I'd like to stick with the pantry of
 ingredients that libraries so wondrously provide, the makings ~~of what~~ ^{THAT}
 I've never known what to call except "the slow poetry of fact." The
 arithmetic of particulars ^{THAT STORY} which creatively gets added up into story and
 gives ~~it~~ a kind of majestic fidelity. Or as I called it earlier, crystalizing
 detail, which leaves in the reader's mind a crystal of beguiling but valid
 scene--a memory waiting to happen, there in the interiorly lit pages of a
 book. Think of that moment in **Madame Bovary** when Flaubert sends
 notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other end of the

village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and

DECORATED

in ~~his~~ slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and so

from that one sentence we fully picture that music-struck clerk--

bareheaded, in nice slippers, sheet of paper in hand--and we listen there

with him ever after.

In my own case, the crystalizing details I seek are often in some

obscure record of the past. At least from **this** novelist's point of view,

it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is

contained within that most generous other word, "history." Let me give

you the freshest possible example--I have just been on a trip to Montana

which took me into World War Two, the time period of the novel I'm at

work on. ^{now} It's a big work of fiction about a number of men and women,

too, swept into uniform in wartime, and to particularize it to the
homeland of so much of my fiction--the Two Medicine country of
northern Montana--I knew that I had to learn about another piece of
geography that haunts that one: New Guinea. Many of those young men
from the prairies of Montana and their allies from the outback of
Australia found themselves in jungle combat on New Guinea, in terrible
terrain--beachheads backed by a few miles of jungle backed by a
colossal mountain range where the Japanese forces were dug in. Some
of my characters simply have to be there--it was a generation-marking
experience much the way the combat in Iraq leaves its imprint on those
who serving there and their small towns and families back home.

So, at the state Historical Society library in Helena a couple of weeks ago, there I was going through World War Two letters, diaries, oral histories, battle reports. Deep in the second day of that, I came onto a letter by a World War Two veteran which did not begin very promisingly:

“A story of my life as a chaplain’s assistant would be dull reading, I’m afraid.”

Well, dull or not, my job in searching for precision of detail requires me to keep reading. The letter got a little better:

“I don’t know that I was truly able to assist the Chaplain very much during the Salamaua campaign”--one of the New Guinea beachhead landings-- “except to be near him much of the time... Was I supposed to

be his bodyguard? He never said so, but he did manage to scrounge a

very old .45 automatic pistol for me to tote in addition to my M-1 rifle.

OF CHAPLAIN'S ASSISTANT

You ask how I got the job and I must say that I got it ~~at Fort Lewis~~ the

day the firing range officer reported to the chaplain that I was high scorer

on the pistol range--and he knew I could play the piano or organ for his

services."

Some personality begins to come out there, doesn't it. I read on,

though, to find that the letter-writer had never actually been in any

combat, had never even seen an enemy soldier except dead ones. But

then he remembered coming ashore before dawn in the beach landing at

Salamaua and seeing this:

“Our boat landed just after the first assault troops... My next memory is the sight of a magnificent Australian soldier standing on the shore with his guide light, stark naked except for his beat-up old Digger hat.”

// Now that's what I mean by a crystalizing detail.

One of the wisest western women I've ever known once said to me, you can tell a lot about a man by how he wears his hat. She happened to be talking about my father, who always wore his Stetson cocked. But that image in that old letter, of that bold Australian soldier who swam behind enemy lines to light that beach ahead of the assault and then shucked off all of his cold wet clothing except for his defiantly-worn Aussie hat--that tells me to put that guy in the book.

AND THAT HAT OF HIS

There have been so many, many other examples of libraries
proffering to me the crystals of my writing--

--the Scottish libraries, of St. Andrews and Edinburgh and Glasgow,
where I quite literally came away hearing music--

“Dancing at the rascal fair,

Devils and angels all were there,

Heel and toe, pair by pair,

Dancing at the rascal fair.”

That little ditty, as you may or may not recognize, is an old
traditional Scottish song--which I made up, after research in those
libraries. It became the theme and title of what has long been the best-
selling of my almost dozen books--miraculously being challenged, I am

happy to say, by my current one, **The Whistling Season**, which you are
 about to meet.

--the Reading Room of the British Museum, with its reputation that
 any London family with a madman in it would drop him off for the day in
 the Reading Room; be that as it may, the time I spent there led me into
 musings and ~~reveries~~ ^{RUMINATIONS} which convinced me I could write a book called

This House of Sky.

--the small-town libraries of Choteau, Montana, and Sitka, Alaska,
 and Wickenburg, Arizona, where those old newspapers and other
 lovingly hoarded obscurities contributed to three other of my books.

I think you get the idea. The light from the pages, in these secular cathedrals called libraries, is a perpetual beacon to a working writer such as me. My pages couldn't exist without those pages in places like this.

And in this circle dance of romance with libraries, I think it's time now to go back to where it all starts, that first infatuation when a kid meets a library and realizes there is a world there where his or her imagination can roam free.

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul."

THE WHISTLING SEASON

Those are the words of my narrator of ~~this novel~~, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that serves as the readiest answer to that toughest question a writer out on a booktour ever gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy

answered when asked that about ~~Anna Karenina~~?) It is true that a novel needs to be somewhat longer than a single sentence such as

“Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul,” and this

~~130,000-word book~~ ^{OF} mine conforms to that by taking in a span of time

from the coming of Halley’s Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the

Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957, and involving its characters in

America’s biggest single land-rush (the West’s homesteading boom

early in the 20th Century), and interweaving its plot with affairs of the

heart and wallet among the story’s grownups--but for our purpose today,

the heart of this book, **The Whistling Season**, is Paul Milliron’s lamp-lit

center of the universe where he meets a school library and its keeper.

It's the library of a one-room school, which amounted ~~probably~~ to a single shelf ~~or two~~ of well-worn books clad in black and red. This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, the soul of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a western locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it would be up there near where the Marias River flows into the Missouri in north-central Montana.

It's country I have known myself from the soles of my shoes upward.
 CUT
 to
 P. 28
 29 min to here

By ~~one of the strokes of~~ luck that was entirely disguised at the time, I happened ~~to go to high school~~ in that prairie part of the world in a town built ~~on a particularly dreary~~ my boast. IT WAS THIS "Aridity is insurance against ~~the~~ of-the-twentieth-century advertisements for

land around Valier, an indeed arid spot on the Montana prairie chosen for a gargantuan irrigation project, a manmade lake three miles long, and the exuberant plat of a town to hold ten thousand people.

But by the time I put in my four years of school there just after mid-century, Valier had peaked at a population of only a thousand, and, having waned to half of that since, it is ending up as a slow-motion ghost town. The irrigation project, however, continues to make the prairie bloom, and that ungainly small-town school, with its sprinkling of idiosyncratic scintillating teachers, gave me some roots as a wordsmith who looks back at boom-and-bust places such as Valier. I saw a natural work of fiction waiting there in the story of the pell-mell homesteading land rush--starting around the turn of the twentieth century and ending

just after World War One--which drew in people by the boxcar-load
 (they would pile all their belongings and themselves into Great Northern
 Railway boxcars in the Midwest and be delivered to sidings on the
 naked earth of the West, where they would climb off and try to turn
 themselves into homesteaders)--a storyline of dreamers galore told by a
 narrator who would view it all for us through one of the most versatile
 lenses of the American experience, a one-room school.

THE WHISTLING SEASON

And so, Paul Milliron in ~~my novel~~ ^{is} a western kid head over heels
 in love with words and those magic boxes of pages they come in. As
 Paul puts it, "My books already threatened to take over my ~~part~~ ^{PART} of the
 bedroom and keep on going. Mother's old ones, subscription sets Father
 had not been able to resist, coverless winnowings from the schoolhouse

shelf--whatever cargoes of words I could lay my hands on I gave safe harbor."

When Paul's widower father hires a housekeeper sight unseen from Minneapolis to try to bring some upkeep to a household that has been more accustomed to downkeep, even that intrepid housekeeper, Rose Llewellyn, is a bit in awe as she arrives before dawn each morning and finds Paul reading by the kitchen lamp. The morning she finds him immersed in **Robinson Crusoe**, she remarks a bit mournfully: "I always have to think twice whether that's about the opera singer or the shipwrecked sailor."

So passionately interested is Paul in the world of books and language that the teacher--and librarian and janitor and all else at that

one-room schoolhouse--decides one language can't hold Paul. He starts
 being tutored in Latin, after school, ~~in the~~ by ^{THAT} an imaginative teacher
 whose lofty flights of thought Paul can only compare to balloon
 ascensions. Paul himself is drastically down to earth in his Latin
 translations; to him, *Noli excitare canēs dormientes*, quite plainly means
Do not disturb the canines that are asleep, until his teacher shrinks it to
Let sleeping dogs lie.

Highly literal as this schoolboy character is, it gives him one great
advantage in the exploration of language. Whenever he is stumped by
 some fresh swatch of vocabulary or labyrinthine conjugation, Paul hears
 the echo of that long-suffering patient teacher telling him, "Look to the
root, you must always look to the root of the word." As Paul puts it:

“It caused me to see into two languages at once. *Fabula*, story; and I gaped at the birth of *fabulous* and *fable*. Similarly *school* from *schola*, *recess* from *recedere*--suddenly everything I read was wearing a toga.”

And of course, we are here today, in a building that is called a “library” because of one of those noble roots: “*liber*,” the Latin noun for “book,” and not coincidentally, the same Latin word as an adjective, meaning “free, open, unrestricted”--the root of “liberty.” Back there in Paul Milliron’s time, his erudite teacher, Morrie Morgan, insists Paul--with the intellectual liberation those schoolhouse books in two languages are giving him--must passionately put his imagination to a particularly pertinent translation:

"Here's one for you," Morrie tells him, and Paul goes on: "I
 thought I caught an impish gleam in him as he stepped to the blackboard
 and wrote it out. *Lux/desiderium/universitatis*. It did not look hard,
 which made me suspicious. "It is one of my favorites," Morrie was
 saying. (An authorial aside here: *Lux desiderium universitatis*, as you
 may or may not recognize, is a traditional Latin saying, that I made up.
 Paul again:) Morrie looked at me sternly. "A hint. It does not have to
 be translated into precisely three words, nor does it need to be cumbered
 up with passive verbs and whatnot into a dozen or more. There's a
 lovely balance in the middle, to this one. Translate away, ~~disciple~~."

PAUL GOES ON.

"I worked on it for some while, Knots of language entranced me even
 then, even through my fumbling and bad splices and hauling in heavy

bowlines where I should have been threading slipknots. Finally, I cleared my throat and spoke:

“Everything wants to have light.”

Morrie pursed his lips, lifted his eyebrows, and eventually shook his head.

“Uh, ‘wishes’ to have light,” I backpedaled, “‘is homesick for’ light --”

“Latin is the subject you are purportedly studying at this moment, I believe, Paul, not guesswork,” he closed me off. “I want you to keep at this line, it will do you good.”

Ultimately, the meaning that Morrie wants to kindle in Paul’s young mind does reach him, in two different ways. The first is from on high,

with the appearance in the western sky of Halley's Comet, making its once-every-seventy-five years visit to our earthly night sky:

“As soon as our eyes had night sight, we could pick out the faint trailing smudge of light, like the here-and gone strike of a match, that marked the visitor amid the standing clusters in that corner of the sky. The tail of the comet would grow and grow as it neared, Morrie had told us in school. Each night would add to its paradoxical cloud of brightness. I already was dazzled that the nature of things could be vast enough to cast a stray diamond of light across the spaces of night probably just once in our lifetimes, yet one so legible that the blink of an eye brought this single migratory glow home to us out of all the glimmers held by the sky.”

Ultimately that magical comet brings with it what Morrie the teacher has sought from Paul the pupil, the eloquent translation of *Lux desiderium universitatis*--“Light is the desire of the universe.”

Comets come and go, however, and Paul and the other characters of **The Whistling Season** must find earthbound enlightenment as they continue on through life, mustn't they. I mentioned earlier the writer's desire to provide that “majestic fidelity” of made-up things living true on the page for the reader, the craft side of writing. Sometimes the crafty side. Writers aren't always up to all the tricks that critics think they're catching us at as we carpenter our books. Flannery O'Conner was asked once if she had put a black hat on a farmer in one of her Georgia stories

THE MAN

to symbolize how mean ~~he~~ was, and she said no, she did it because Georgia farmers wear black hats.

Sometimes, though, in the making of a book, yes, the writer consciously resorts to some literary device or another that best seems to do the job for a particular scene, and for our last few minutes here I'm going to share with you another writerly trade secret ~~here~~, worth about as much as the air it is written on--but here it is: one thing writers sometimes do, there on the page, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together.

shown us that this is something Tolstoy gave to Anna Karenina herself under ~~the~~ train, asking

THAT

CUT

she "looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and

at the great iron wheels of the first car that was slowly rolling by..."

To cut Tolstoy short, which is always a shame but often necessary,

the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and

in the reader's mind, where a character's circumstance is both physical

and metaphysical.

How to do that with my character Paul Milliron, back there in 1910

looking for places his thirteen-year-old mind can go? Paul at the time

has no idea that, by 1957--Sputnik's year--when he is telling this story to

himself and us, he will be Montana's state superintendent of schools,

with a thousand suddenly beleaguered one-room schools under his

jurisdiction. At this point of the book, Paul is looking back to that

magical school year when he is a seventh-grader, and he and the other homestead kids daily ride horseback to the Marias Coulee school and picket their horses to graze during the schoolday. That lofty-thinking male schoolmarm, Morrie Morgan, has just arrived, and Paul's family is pitching in to ready up the teacherage, out back of the school, for ~~him~~ MORRIE to live in. Paul as always is assigned to pump and carry water, and here he has just been sent off to fill the mop bucket at the pump in the schoolyard.

"It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last of my water errands, shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I watched. From the feel of the

air, night would bring our first hard frost. The schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could distinctly hear my lone soft footsteps on ground that was stamped across at each recess. Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the pump handle just yet.

“I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy, that set me aware of everything around, as though Marias Coulee school and its height of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of all that was in sight. I remember thinking if I wanted this moment for myself I had better use my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the dwindling light of the

afternoon I tried to take in that world between the manageable horizons.

The cutaway bluffs where the Marias River lay low and hidden were the

limit of field of vision in one direction. In the other, the edge of the

smooth-battered plain leading to the town ^{OF} Westwater. Closer, though,

was where I found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play

area, there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the

horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around

their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the

one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly

registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as

there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard

spot where I stood unnaturally alone."

PAGE

I think perhaps there, with that inquisitive western kid reading the patterns in the prairie that lead to that solitary schoolhouse, where the books waiting for him on its library shelf whisper everlastingly to him in a duet of languages that "light is the desire of the universe," may be the melodic note to end up on, today.

Thank you for listening.

Salt Lake Book Festival, Oct. 28 '06

I full well realize I was asked to this splendid library today as a writer, but you'll be relieved to know that I'm not going to stand up here in front of you and write--writing is not an outstanding spectator sport. No, what I want to do instead is to simply sashay in here as a lover of libraries and sing under their windows for a while. Perhaps give those of you who didn't know you were sitting in on a serenade a chance to finally break that rule of library silence and chuckle a bit along the way.

I don't usually think of myself as a wandering minstrel, yet when I count up the libraries I have been to for the sake of my work, and the literary melodies that have been put into my books by so many old loved libraries, something like minstrelsy it seems to be. In the course of this talk I hope to show you how some of the makings of my eleven books have come from libraries, but first you should know the stirrings of that music of the stacks. That light from the pages that shows into other times and souls and thus helps us to illuminate our own.

So now, as quick as this, you are eighteen years old. You have come by train--which tells how long ago this--from a Montana town with a population of 75, to begin college at Northwestern University, in suburban Chicago. And you set off to walk the campus you have never laid eyes on before, and there on a slight rise atop a wide green sweep of spotless lawn stands the university library, Deering Library. Deering was a library like they don't build 'em any more, of noble stone with tall stained-glass windows and a lofty long roof with a pair of gothic towers poking up at each end. Deering has architectural fame of a sort. The story was that Frank Lloyd Wright had driven past the Northwestern campus one day, looked at Deering Library with those gothic towers nobly poking into the air, and said, "It looks like a pig on its back."

I think what he really didn't like about it, though, was that Deering Library so much resembled a cathedral. And there's where Mr. Wright was wrong. There was nothing inappropriate about that resemblance, that library was a kind of cathedral, in several ways it behaved like a cathedral. You step now into the reading room of Deering--you are that college freshman from Dupuyer, Montana, remember, who by the magic of time is also at this microphone this moment--and in the reading room of then, you find that the banks of lights hang just above the tables, they hang all the way from the vaulted ceiling, they hang down what seems to be hundreds of feet just for your reading convenience, they hang there like the watchfobs of the gods. You sit with your book there in the golden pool of reflection, the lens of light brings the printed words up into your eyes. The diarist Bruce Frederick Cummings has written of "the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come into being in somebody's mind." Passing by out there, Frank Lloyd

Wright is not listening to the desires of the books. But you are there in the great reading room, and college kid from the West that you are, you do listen to that desire.

Once upon another time, another western kid cocked a keen ear to that music of the stacks, those desires of the books--right here in town. Wallace Stegner recalled for an interviewer what ensued in his boyhood when his family left their Saskatchewan homestead and, with characteristic stops and starts, eventually made their way to Salt Lake City: "I found the public library. I didn't really find it until we got to Salt Lake, but I lived in it Salt Lake. Books are a habit, and once you've created a book-habit I suppose it lasts."

In my own case, and of course in Wallace Stegner's distinguished career as a writer of history and biography as well as fiction, libraries and the holy order that operates them, librarians, have induced in me not only a book habit but what might be called an "obscure detail" habit as well. I'll talk a bit more about this, while trying to elevate it into the more respectable literary term of "crystalizing detail," as I go along, but I want to make the point as strongly as I can that the library holdings most valuable to me are often the near-outcasts, the trivia, the seldom-used. In the great community of facts--the community honeycombed in libraries--stashes of old newspapers and dust-gathering volumes of local histories and other shelving headaches are part of the arithmetic of particulars, from which our stories get told. I don't know if I am lucky or not that they are the last sweepings that will ever be swept--if ever--into the universe of Google and the on-line gurgles beyond it. In any case, I am a bookman, in every possible meaning I can give to that term, and thus not a believer that you should just wire up the inside of a library building like an electronic jukebox and knowledge will be transmitted. There's also the chance, on-line, that ignorance will be shared.

So, for the next little while I'd like to try to make the point that in the era of computerization--which I am as glad as anyone to use when it is a servant, in the search for knowledge, rather than the master--the point that books and perhaps even some old-fashioned clutter of hard-to-classify material are still a good idea in libraries. Certainly for a writer but often for a reader, too, many times that's where the gold is hidden.

What mental finding tools, though, should a writer bring to his or her search for lustrous light from the pages? What frame of mind? Grab the research and run? Dither endlessly and call it serendipity? What are the proportions of the imagination that should go to the research and the written result?

Well, there's the story that is told about Vladimir Nabokov when he was teaching his course on the novel, at Cornell. (Incidentally, back there in the Eisenhower years, that course of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!)

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic-alphabet equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in the classroom, one minute confiding to the class in heavy Russian accent, "By the way, Joyce made only one error in English usage in 'Ulysses,' the use of the word 'supine' when it should have been 'prone,'" and the next moment handing back, with evidently genuine horror, the test papers on which half the class blithely discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style--with a "D"--when Nabokov all semester had actually been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of "Lolita" and "Pale Fire" and "Speak, Memory" and other linguistically highly-honed books peers over the rims of his glasses at the class and cries out his summary of the writing life: "You must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

Pausing as if he hasn't heard himself quite right, Nabokov says in a baffled tone: "But wait--have I made a mistake? Don't I mean 'the passion of the artist and the precision of the scientist?'"

Then like the verbal acrobat he was, he gleefully completes his act: "No! I mean, you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

To me, that passion that Nabokov so rightly prescribed begins with investigation, the restless spirit of inquiry--let's say, passionate adventuring among a library's holdings. This may or may not show up directly in some written result, but at the very least it's apt to show up in the writer and his or her approach to the written work. Let me provide a quick but prime instance of a library session provoking me into some thought or attitude I otherwise would not have had.

This has to begin with my letting you in on a writerly secret--it's not much of a secret or I wouldn't be blabbing it over the radio, would I. But it's this: one of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out--what that a bat that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Plato? As a writer you have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from much of anybody else, at least in the course of the day--long enough to figure out those shadowy patterns in the mental cave.

But modern society isn't really set up for hermits, is it. Back there in the early years when I was a freelance magazine journalist and incipient book writer--a state of being that a friend of mine once called self-**un**employed--I had to wonder sometimes about the aptness of my chosen existence as something like a suburban druid: solitary, all day long, just me and the words and the commas and the white space on paper, while my wife went off to her college teaching job to support us. There's always been that One Big Saying that lone-wolf writers try to cling to--naturally it was by another writer, Edward Gibbon,

probably thought up in self-defense when he was holed up for all those years while working on **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire**:

“Solitude is the school of genius.” Gibbon’s saying has never convinced everyone. One time when he did venture out after having completed another book, he was greeted by the Duke of Gloucester with: “Scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?”

I wasn’t scribbling, but I was certainly doing a lot of typing to which I was the only witness. Then one day during research at what in a sense is my home library in Seattle--the University of Washington library, which I’ve been using ever since I lit in there as a graduate student the year Simon and Garfunkel recorded “The Sound of Silence”; I think that’s enough of a historical marker to put on any year--I was wandering out past the shelf of “new releases” and stopped to take a look. Amid those new books was one titled, lo and behold, **Solitude**.

The dust jacket described the author--Anthony Storr-- as Clinical Lecturer in Psychiatry at Oxford University--and while I wasn’t sure that I wanted to read anything that might put me in the category of “clinical,” the question of working alone for what was looking like the rest of my life interested me enough that I checked out the book. And in its pages came across this:

“What takes place in the circuitry of the brain is a mystery; but it can be confidently asserted that these processes require time, passivity, and preferably solitude.”

“Some of the people who have contributed most to the enrichment of human experience have contributed little to the welfare of human beings in particular,” the book went on. “It can be argued that some of the great thinkers listed above”--(that list included Descartes, Newton, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard)--“were more preoccupied with what went on in their own minds that with the welfare of other people. The same is true of many writers”--uh oh-- “composers and painters. The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are, chiefly, if not invariably those in which he is alone.”

Imagine my surprise and pleasure. Talk about the light from the pages--it was all right to be alone! Maybe it’s even creatively healthy. Those years ago, I came away from Anthony Storr’s book, serendipitous gift of library browsing, with the understanding that work itself can be a legitimate companion. It’s amazing how much less anti-social you feel after seeing that written in a book.

Thus validated--by a clinical psychiatrist, no less--in the passion to be alone in investigating the byways of thought and word, the writer then needs to live up to that other half of the Nabokovian proposition, to seek to perform with the precision of the artist.

Language, characterization, plot, form--all of those must be worked with, in the closest approximation of Rembrandt light that the writer can conjure, on the literary canvas of a novel, and each might be the subject for another talk another time. Today I'd like to stick with the pantry of ingredients that libraries so wondrously provide, the makings that I've never known what to call except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars which creatively gets added up into story and gives it a kind of majestic fidelity. Or as I called it earlier, crystalizing detail, which leaves in the reader's mind a crystal of beguiling but valid scene--a memory waiting to happen, there in the interiorly lit pages of a book. Think of that moment in **Madame Bovary** when Flaubert sends notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other end of the village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in decorated slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and so from that one sentence we fully picture that music-struck clerk--bareheaded, in nice slippers, sheet of paper in hand--and we listen there with him ever after.

In my own case, the crystalizing details I seek are often in some obscure record of the past. At least from **this** novelist's point of view, it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is contained within that most generous other word, "history." Let me give you the freshest possible example--I have just been on a trip to Montana which took me into World War Two, the time period of the novel I'm at work on. It's a big work of fiction about a number of men and women, too, swept into uniform in wartime, and to particularize it to the homeland of so much of my fiction--the Two Medicine country of northern Montana--I knew that I had to learn about another piece of geography that haunts that one: New Guinea. Many of those young men from the prairies of Montana and their allies from the outback of Australia found themselves in jungle combat on New Guinea, in terrible terrain--beachheads backed by a few miles of jungle backed by a colossal mountain range where the Japanese forces were dug in. Some of my characters simply have to be there--it was a generation-marking experience much the way the combat in Iraq leaves its imprint on those who serving there and their small towns and families back home.

So, at the state Historical Society library in Helena a couple of weeks ago, there I was going through World War Two letters, diaries, oral histories, battle reports. Deep in the second day of that, I came onto a letter by a World War Two veteran which did not begin very promisingly:

“A story of my life as a chaplain’s assistant would be dull reading, I’m afraid.”

Well, dull or not, my job in searching for precision of detail requires me to keep reading. The letter got a little better:

“I don’t know that I was truly able to assist the Chaplain very much during the Salamaua campaign”--one of the New Guinea beachhead landings-- “except to be near him much of the time... Was I supposed to be his bodyguard? He never said so, but he did manage to scrounge a very old .45 automatic pistol for me to tote in addition to my M-1 rifle. You ask how I got the job and I must say that I got it at Fort Lewis the day the firing range officer reported to the chaplain that I was high scorer on the pistol range--and he knew I could play the piano or organ for his services.”

Some personality begins to come out there, doesn’t it. I read on, though, to find that the letter-writer had never actually been in any combat, had never even seen an enemy soldier except dead ones. But then he remembered coming ashore before dawn in the beach landing at Salamaua and seeing this:

“Our boat landed just after the first assault troops... My next memory is the sight of a magnificent Australian soldier standing on the shore with his guide light, stark naked except for his beat-up old Digger hat.”

Now that’s what I mean by a crystalizing detail.

One of the wisest western women I’ve ever known once said to me, you can tell a lot about a man by how he wears his hat. She happened to be talking about my father, who always wore his Stetson cocked. But that image in that old letter, of that bold Australian soldier who swam behind enemy lines to light that beach ahead of the assault and then shucked off all of his cold wet clothing except for his defiantly-worn Aussie hat--that tells me to put that guy in the book.

There have been so many, many other examples of libraries proffering to me the crystals of my writing--

--the Scottish libraries, of St. Andrews and Edinburgh and Glasgow, where I quite literally came away hearing music--

“Dancing at the rascal fair,
Devils and angels all were there,
Heel and toe, pair by pair,
Dancing at the rascal fair.”

That little ditty, as you may or may not recognize, is an old traditional Scottish song--which I made up, after research in those libraries. It became the theme and title of what has long been the best-selling of my almost dozen books--miraculously being

challenged, I am happy to say, by my current one, **The Whistling Season**, which you are about to meet.

--the Reading Room of the British Museum, with its reputation that any London family with a madman in it would drop him off for the day in the Reading Room; be that as it may, the time I spent there led me into musings and ruminations which convinced me I could write a book called **This House of Sky**.

--the small-town libraries of Choteau, Montana, and Sitka, Alaska, and Wickenburg, Arizona, where those old newspapers and other lovingly hoarded obscurities contributed to three other of my books.

I think you get the idea. The light from the pages, in these secular cathedrals called libraries, is a perpetual beacon to a working writer such as me. My pages couldn't exist without those pages in places like this.

And in this circle dance of romance with libraries, I think it's time now to go back to where it all starts, that first infatuation when a kid meets a library and realizes there is a world there where his or her imagination can roam free.

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul."

Those are the words of my narrator of this novel, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that serves as the readiest answer to that toughest question a writer out on a booktour ever gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy answered when asked that about ^{War and Peace} ~~Anna Karenina~~?) It is true that a novel needs to be somewhat longer than a single sentence such as "Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul," and this 130,000-word book of mine conforms to that by taking in a span of time from the coming of Halley's Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957, and involving its characters in America's biggest single land-rush (the West's homesteading boom early in the 20th Century), and interweaving its plot with affairs of the heart and wallet among the story's grownups--but for our purpose today, the heart of this book, **The Whistling Season**, is Paul Milliron's lamp-lit center of the universe where he meets a school library and its keeper.

It's the library of a one-room school, which amounted probably to a single shelf or two of well-worn books clad in black and red. This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, the soul of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a western locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it would be up there near where the Marias River flows into the Missouri in north-central Montana.

~~It's country I have known myself from the soles of my shoes upward.~~
By one of those strokes of luck that was entirely disguised at the time, I happened to go to high school in that prairie part of the world in a town built on a particularly dreamy boast.

"Aridity is insurance against flood!" trumpeted the turn-of-the-twentieth-century advertisements for land around Valier, an indeed arid spot on the Montana prairie chosen for a gargantuan irrigation project, a manmade lake three miles long, and the exuberant plat of a town to hold ten thousand people.

But by the time I put in my four years of school there just after mid-century, Valier had peaked at a population of only a thousand, and, having waned to half of that since, it is ending up as a slow-motion ghost town. The irrigation project, however, continues to make the prairie bloom, and that ungainly small-town school, with its sprinkling of idiosyncratic scintillating teachers, gave me some roots as a wordsmith who looks back at boom-and-bust places such as Valier. I saw a natural work of fiction waiting there in the story of the pell-mell homesteading land rush--starting around the turn of the twentieth century and ending just after World War One--which drew in people by the boxcar-load (they would pile all their belongings and themselves into Great Northern Railway boxcars in the Midwest and be delivered to sidings on the naked earth of the West, where they would climb off and try to turn themselves into homesteaders)--a storyline of dreamers galore told by a narrator who would view it all for us through one of the most versatile lenses of the American experience, a one-room school.

And so, Paul Milliron in my novel is a western kid head over heels in love with words and those magic boxes of pages they come in. As Paul puts it, "My books already threatened to take over my part of the bedroom and keep on going. Mother's old ones, subscription sets Father had not been able to resist, coverless winnowings from the schoolhouse shelf--whatever cargoes of words I could lay my hands on I gave safe harbor."

When Paul's widower father hires a housekeeper sight unseen from Minneapolis to try to bring some upkeep to a household that has been more accustomed to downkeep, even that intrepid housekeeper, Rose Llewellynn, is a bit in awe as she arrives before dawn each morning and finds Paul reading by the kitchen lamp. The morning she finds him immersed in **Robinson Crusoe**, she remarks a bit mournfully: "I always have to think twice whether that's about the opera singer or the shipwrecked sailor."

So passionately interested is Paul in the world of books and language that the teacher--and librarian and janitor and all else at that one-room schoolhouse--decides one language can't hold Paul. he starts being tutored in Latin, after school, by an imaginative teacher whose lofty flights of thought Paul can only compare to balloon ascensions. Paul himself is drastically down to earth in his Latin translations; to him, *Noli excitare canes dormientes*, quite plainly means *Do not disturb the canines that are asleep*, until his teacher shrinks it to *Let sleeping dogs lie*.

Highly literal as this schoolboy character is, it gives him one great advantage in the exploration of language. Whenever he is stumped by some fresh swatch of vocabulary or labyrinthine conjugation, Paul hears the echo of that long-suffering patient teacher telling him, "Look to the root, you must always look to the root of the word." As Paul puts it:

"It caused me to see into two languages at once. *Fabula*, story; and I gaped at the birth of *fabulous* and *fable*. Similarly *school* from *schola*, *recess* from *recedere*--suddenly everything I read was wearing a toga."

And of course, we are here today, in a building that is called a "library" because of one of those noble roots: "liber," the Latin noun for "book," and not coincidentally, the same Latin word as an adjective, meaning "free, open, unrestricted"--the root of "liberty." Back there in Paul Milliron's time, his erudite teacher, Morrie Morgan, insists Paul-- with the intellectual liberation those schoolhouse books in two languages are giving him--must passionately put his imagination to a particularly pertinent translation:

"Here's one for you," Morrie tells him, and Paul goes on: "I thought I caught an impish gleam in him as he stepped to the blackboard and wrote it out. *Lux desiderium universitatis*. It did not look hard, which made me suspicious. "It is one of my favorites," Morrie was saying. (An authorial aside here: *Lux desiderium universitatis*, as you may or may not recognize, is a traditional Latin saying, that I made up. Paul again:) Morrie looked at me sternly. "A hint. It does not have to be translated into precisely three words, nor does it need to be cumbered up with passive verbs and whatnot into a dozen or more. There's a lovely balance in the middle, to this one. Translate away, *discipule*."

I worked on it for some while. Knots of language entranced me even then, even through my fumbling and bad splices and hauling in heavy bowlines where I should have been threading slipknots. Finally, I cleared my throat and spoke:

"Everything wants to have light."

Morrie pursed his lips, lifted his eyebrows, and eventually shook his head.

"Uh, 'wishes' to have light," I backpedaled, "'is homesick for' light --"

"Latin is the subject you are purportedly studying at this moment, I believe, Paul, not guesswork," he closed me off. "I want you to keep at this line, it will do you good."

Ultimately, the meaning that Morrie wants to kindle in Paul's young mind does reach him, in two different ways. The first is from on high, with the appearance in the western sky of Halley's Comet, making its once-every-seventy-five years visit to our earthly night sky:

"As soon as our eyes had night sight, we could pick out the faint trailing smudge of light, like the here-and gone strike of a match, that marked the visitor amid the standing clusters in that corner of the sky. The tail of the comet would grow and grow as it neared,

Morrie had told us in school. Each night would add to its paradoxical cloud of brightness. I already was dazzled that the nature of things could be vast enough to cast a stray diamond of light across the spaces of night probably just once in our lifetimes, yet one so legible that the blink of an eye brought this single migratory glow home to us out of all the glimmers held by the sky.”

Ultimately that magical comet brings with it what Morrie the teacher has sought from Paul the pupil, the eloquent translation of *Lux desiderium universitatis*-- “Light is the desire of the universe.”

Comets come and go, however, and Paul and the other characters of **The Whistling Season** must find earthbound enlightenment as they continue on through life, mustn't they. I mentioned earlier the writer's desire to provide that “majestic fidelity” of made-up things living true on the page for the reader, the craft side of writing. Sometimes the crafty side. Writers aren't always up to all the tricks that critics think they're catching us at as we carpenter our books. Flannery O'Connor was asked once if she had put a black hat on a farmer in one of her Georgia stories to symbolize how mean he was, and she said no, she did it because Georgia farmers wear black hats.

Sometimes, though, in the making of a book, yes, the writer consciously resorts to some literary device or another that best seems to do the job for a particular scene, and for our last few minutes here I'm going to share with you another writerly trade secret here, worth about as much as the air it is written on--but here it is: one thing writers sometimes do, there on the page, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together. ~~The patron saints of writing have long shown us that this is something worth doing--the lasting power that Tolstoy gave to Anna Karenina's final instant of life, ready to throw herself under the train, asking “Lord, forgive me for everything!” while she “looked at the bottom of the freight cars, at the bolts and chains and at the great iron wheels of the first car that was slowly rolling by...”~~

~~To cut Tolstoy short, which is always a shame but often necessary, the point is to try to get the writing to the frontier, there on the page and in the reader's mind, where a character's circumstance is both physical and metaphysical.~~

How to do that with my character Paul Milliron, back there in 1910 looking for places his thirteen-year-old mind can go? Paul at the time has no idea that, by 1957--Sputnik's year--when he is telling this story to himself and us, he will be Montana's state superintendent of schools, with a thousand suddenly beleaguered one-room schools under his jurisdiction. At this point of the book, Paul is looking back to that magical school year when he is a seventh-grader, and he and the other homestead kids daily ride horseback to the Marias Coulee school and picket their horses to graze during the schoolday. That lofty-

thinking male schoolmarm, Morrie Morgan, has just arrived, and Paul's family is pitching in to ready up the teacherage, out back of the school, for him to live in. Paul as always is assigned to pump and carry water, and here he has just been sent off to fill the mop bucket at the pump in the schoolyard.

"It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last of my water errands, shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I watched. From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost. The schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could distinctly hear my lone soft footsteps on ground that was stamped across at each recess. Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the pump handle just yet.

"I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy, that set me aware of everything around, as though Marias Coulee school and its height of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of all that was in sight. I remember thinking if I wanted this moment for myself I had better use my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the dwindling light of the afternoon I tried to take in that world between the manageable horizons. The cutaway bluffs where the Marias River lay low and hidden were the limit of field of vision in one direction. In the other, the edge of the smooth-battered plain leading to the town Westwater. Closer, though, was where I found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play area, there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot where I stood unnaturally alone."

I think perhaps there, with that inquisitive western kid reading the patterns in the prairie that lead to that solitary schoolhouse, where the books waiting for him on its library shelf whisper everlastingly to him in a duet of languages that "light is the desire of the universe," may be the melodic note to end up on, today.

Thank you for listening.