NEW MONTANA FICTION BY IVAN DOIG, WRITER'S PROFILE BY WILLIAM KITTREDGE

THE LANE RANCHES: A FAMILY BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND UP

FISHING THE BLACKFEET INDIAN RESERVATION

THE IMAGERY OF THE MONTANA DREAM
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COVER AND TABLE OF CONTENTS PHOTOS: Will Brewster.
A few years ago, Ivan Doig began researching what will surely be seen as one of the most remarkable novels to come out of the western literary landscape in some time. **Bucking the Sun**, a historical work set during the building of the Fort Peck Dam, opens with two bodies in a drowned truck. Two naked bodies.

They're both named Duff, and they're both married... just not to each other.

The plot turns the pages, but Doig's history of the dam—the remarkable, precise documentation of what it was to work and eat and sleep and drink around the largest earth-filled dam in the world—gives this novel breath and life.

We have excerpted one of the later chapters.

---

Four days before the river was to be closed off, in the middle of an already complicated enough afternoon of jigsawing the dredgelines back together downstream from the dam, Owen was called to the field telephone.

"Sangster. Sounds like he's got a hair crosswise," the pipehaul foreman warned before handing him the phone.

"Owen," said the thin voice on the other end, "you better come see something."

"What, at the trestle again? I'll be right—"

"Huh uh," the fieldphone voice now sounded as if it was having trou-
WRITERS WEST:
IVAN DOIG
BY WILLIAM KITTREDGE

Back in the winter of 1978, it was hanging around in a Missoula bookstore, and the woman who owned it handed me a copy of the galleys of a book called This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind. I stayed up late and loved the reading—a memoir which starts with the death of Doig's mother, Berneta, in 1945, and tells the hard story of Ivan growing up with two full-scale westerners—his father, Charlie Doig, and his grandmother, Bessie Ringer. It was a narrative which rang of emotional accuracy and the difficult dead-right details of life on the blue-collar end of the stick. A River Runs Through It, his book had been well-rejected by the publishing establishment in the East, and then enjoyed great success (it sold something like 130,000 hardback copies).

In the spring of 1979, Bob Reid and I staged a literary conference in Missoula called "Who Owns the West." One of my proudest memories is of introducing Dorothy Johnson, Bud Guthrie, Norman Maclean, Ross Toole, and Ivan Doig to one another—had my heroes in one place for a weekend.

Since those days, Ivan has published a whole line of books: Winter Brothers (1980); The Sea Runners (1982); the McCaskill family trilogy, English Creek (1984), Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987), Ride With Me, Mariah Montana (1990), and Heart Earth (1994). Literary people in the northern West owe a considerable debt to Ivan Doig. He helped prove to agents and editors in the East that books about this part of the world could sell, and sell very well. I owe him a personal debt—be and Carol were among those responsible for encouraging me to write my own memoirs.

But his most important gift is his ability to find significance in the texture of our lives. In the West, many of us live far way from the self-importance of the so-called "Great World." It's hard believing itself. "This is at the truss bridge again."

H is first look at the slipped section of fill resembled a muddy scallop shell perhaps two hundred feet long and a hundred high. It had slid, still in one arched piece, several feet down into the river channel. Scoured away underneath by the flood, loosened by the rapid fall of the floodwater, who knew what the precise cause was: it had slid. The arc of gap where the shell edge had pulled away from the dam was spookily neat, as if a hill had just taken an innocent step forward from the mountain of earthfill. There was nothing innocent about it. The shifted heap of fill was throwing enormous weight down against the main pier of the railroad bridge.

"It holding okay?" Owen tore his eyes away from the sickening dam slippage to ask about the health of Sangster's bridge.

"Not really," Sangster said. "Sangster's was whiter. It's first look at the slipped earth, within spitting distance of the truss bridge, sent Owen white-faced. Sangster's was whiter. The slipped section of fill resembled a muddy scallop shell perhaps two hundred feet long and a hundred high.

Owen spoke six or eight expletives, rapid-fire. "I agree," Sangster said. "But we've got to do something besides cuss at it."

They knew they had only minutes before the official car delivered Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and general hell.

They already had the gravel cars going by the time the Ad Building contingent descended. First thing, everyone could see that much. If they lost the truss bridge they lost the railroad loop, the key to plugging the river; they would lose the entire dam schedule, they
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INC.
would lose all advantage over the riv­
er for Christ knew how long. Thirty
timely railcars of gravel, dumped on
the weak side of the cracked concrete
pier to temporarily shore it up, saved
them from that at least for the mo­
moment. But now came the question of
holding together both the bridge’s
underpinning and the channel shoul­
der of the dam until they could get
the river plugged.

Owen and Sangster and everybody
in the vicinity nervously sized up the
Corps officers as the briefing was
convened there at the river. Colonel
Parmenter appeared to be wishing
for the Philippines. Major Santree
looked a little smirky, as he often did
when things went wrong.

The colonel made short work of
the question. But now came the question of
holding together both the bridge’s
underpinning and the channel shoul­
der of the dam until they could get
the river plugged.

Owen took the deep, deep breath
needed to go for broke.

F ort Peck woke up to dynamite at
dawn.

The detonation, at 4:20 a.m. sharp,
breached the dike which had been
holding back the riverwater above
the tunnel portals. That quick, with
one ke-BOOM and a dirt geyser of
blown dike, the map of the Missour­

i River changed. Now the river forked
at the dam, the main flow still tum­
bling through the channel but an
earresting eddy swirling its way into
the tunnel inlets. It was a bit past
dawn when the first riverwater made
its passage through the tunnels and
surged into the outlet channel below
the dam, frothing white against the
confining concrete.

At the main channel, at the truss
bridge, four years of calm planning
and temperate engineering about
how to most handily close off the
Missouri River had to be fed into the
meatgrinder of the next twelve hours.

Improvising every inch of the way,
they were going to make the river in­
to the counterweight proposed by
Owen Duff, by backing the water up
against the sloughed section of fill
like a liquid retaining wall. Which
meant plugging the river here and
now, at the downstream end of the
channel, instead of upstream at the
trestle the intended three days from
now.

“Owen, where the hell’s that dis­
patcher, we got to get rolling on—”

Which meant that the forty-five-car
trainload of plugging boulders could
not be jauntily dropped straight into
the river—the side girders of the truss
bridge were in the way—but needed
to be unloaded at both ends of the
bridge, spilled down onto gravel
approaches to the river.

“I know, I know, Colonel, it’s not
the greatest field office there ever
was, but it’s all the ready-built crew
could skid over here to us in a hurry.
What exactly is it? Well, sir, it’s a two­
boiler.”

Which meant that the crane barge
laberating in the middle of the river
current had to grapple the boulders
from the gravel banks one by one, to
build a rough sill out into the chan­
el.

“Oh, Max, so this is slower than
the wrath of God, but we don’t have
any choice but to keep that crane boat
about.”

Which meant that the rail fleet of
gavel cars couldn’t let fly with their
massive plug of gravel until the boul­
der sill was firmly there to keep it
from washing away.

“Oh, Jesus, it won’t be done until
WHEN?”

To the engineers, this was like be­
ing trapped in a very long game of
checkers when they had been all set
to play bombs-away.

H eld, you see-and-so. There’s no
damn reason for you to be falling
into the river.

Owen wasn’t addressing this
thought to the truss bridge although,
heaven knew by the blue smoke of in­
jective and energy he was lending in
support of Sangster and it, he did not
want to see the steel span hit the wa­
ter either.

Either nobody savoirs or nobody’s say­
ing—not even you, Max—that the truss

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bridge could be only the first symptom here.
Whatever else he was at, through this longest day, Owen kept the slipped section of damfill guardedly in sight, forever in mind.

Just hold. That's not asking such a hell of a lot, is it? Sit there, another few hours is all, and then I can tend to you. If he ran the arithmetic of the situation through his head once this day, he ran it two hundred times. The site of the slippage, the core pool, the distance between: by every calculation he could think of, the core pool sitting dumb, fat and happy up there in the east half of the dam should be safely far enough from where that odd shell of fill had given way; look, millions of other cubic yards there in the channel shoulder supporting the core pool hadn't given way. Result: the slippage as it now stood didn't necessarily mean that the core pool was going to start leaking out of it any minute and the leak would increase to a gush in less time than it took to tell about it and the gush would speedily grow to be a breach and the breach majestically would cave away and the entire somnambulating core pool would rush out in a 150-foot-high avalanche of water and fill, tearing the guts out of the dam.

Owen Duff, engineer, knew the slipped spot didn't necessarily mean that.

Owen Duff, alarmed member of the human race, Fort Peck sub-group, was not so sure. This version, the one he had to traipse around in while big rocks got fumbled into place beneath the bridge, would not breathe easy until he had the plugged Missouri and a Niagara of freshly piped dredge material both at work shoring up that slipped spot.

So hold, damn it, okay?

The bridge pier needed helpings of gravel every so often, and so Sangster at least had spurs of being busy at that, having the train dispatcher roll another thirty-car cut of dumper cars in, which Owen envied him. He himself had the pipeline crew hauling and installing along the channel shoulder and had called in the bullgang to help out with the last needed section of the strutworks there, and all four of his dredges were standing ready downriver, so that as soon as the river was safely plugged Owen had ready or was getting ready everything he could think of to throw at the channel. But for now he was reduced to scenery inspector, standing watching the ungodly slow progress of the rock sill under the bridge.

The river boiled around the crane barge, which stood there in mid-stream like a patient broad-butted fisherman, its long boom swinging as it brought a ton-and-a-half boulder into the water, going back for another.

R eporting for pipeline work, the bullgang watched the scurry and commotion around the truss bridge with envy.

"Not much call for guys with hammers in that, is there?" someone asked wistfully.

"Afraid not," answered their foreman, Jepperson. "No, most of you, just whack away at setting up the next section of struts. I goddamn well know you're going to spend most of your time gawking over there, but try and look..."
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The four men up there," he asked his head in the direction of the railroad bridge, "who’re used to doing it will show you how. Oh, and you’ll draw an extra two bits an hour." Someone sang out “Our chance to be big rich!” and there was a little laughter.

“So, let’s say—” Jepperson made a show of looking around—“Morrie... Livingston... Duff... Not I, said the man named Me.

The expression on Darius put a fitter.

Neil bit a corner of his mouth, but stepped forward.

And...” Jepperson shopped through the crew for one more. He stopped as Birdie Hinch moved indicatively. The three the foreman had named so far were all much younger.

“Birdie, sorry, but I’m supposed to send guys who can run like chicken thighs—” He broke off, then grinned. "Yeah, okay. And Birdie.”

By midafternoon, officers and engineers were running on coffee and habit. They had all been up through the night, pitching in on the final readying of the inlet channels and the tunnels for the river diversion, and even since early morning they had watched boulder by boulder as the sill gradually grew, and they were close to becoming zombies because Sangster cured them with:

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and turning to run back past the other three sets of men to the fourth dumper car back in line, following beside it until the "Pull!" signal again. They finished the first train, two thousand tons of gravel gone to the river bottom, and the next train immediately came...

Every time a carload was dumped now, some gravel was swept away in the current as with mud along the banks, "Not two hands higher than a duck"—was a possibility gained, the hail of pebbles building up in a rough channel. The gravelmasters worked like the army and navy doing their bit in the great war. Tired as they were, the gravelmasters worked like acrobats now, buncing to the catwalk railing to peek down at the effect of each dumpload, then back into the rhythm of catching their next dumper car, yanking the springpin-gripping hands.

In the half-dusk, the gravel dumping slowly but unobtrusively continued. The gravelmasters worked like acrobats now, buncing to the catwalk railing to peek down at the effect of each dumpload, then back into the rhythm of catching their next dumper car, yanking the springpin—In the end it was a carload dumped by Birdie Hinch and Neil, and a very tired Neil that brought the shout: "That one's staying dry!" Neil scooted to the railing beneath Owen's perch and the two of them stared down. In the vast wallow of gravel mush below, a low conelike heap—as Darius would have said, "Not two hands higher than a duck"—was a dried gray. The Missouri, by just that much, was captured now.