

Jim Kobak's

# KIRKUS REVIEWS

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**Doig, Ivan**  
**DANCING AT THE**  
**RASCAL FAIR**  
Atheneum \$18.95  
9/18 SBN: 689-11764-7

The second installment of Doig's projected Montana trilogy (which began with *English Creek*, 1984): a moving, graceful story of two Scottish immigrants who homestead together but eventually become bitter rivals.

Narrator Angus McCaskill (forerunner of young Jick McCaskill in *English Creek*) and his best friend, Rob Barclay, leave their sooty little Scottish town in 1889 and emigrate to Montana, hoping to find Rob's long-lost Uncle Lucas. Find him they do—high up in the mountains, in the little would-be town of Gros Ventre. Lucas has lost both hands in a mining accident and now owns a bar; he helps the boys get settled, start their homesteads in the valley that will come to be known as Scottish Heaven, and buy the sheep that will sustain them. Despite the brilliant scenery that surrounds them (beautifully

described), Angus and Rob lead lives filled with turmoil—droughts, blizzards, raging fires, the great influenza epidemic of 1918. Angus falls deeply in love with schoolteacher Anna Ramsay, but she marries another; on the rebound, he marries Rob's sister Adair—they have a son, Varick—but he can't stop loving Anna, and contrives to see her (albeit chastely) whenever he can. This seeming betrayal of Adair so enrages Rob that he turns Varick against Angus. Angus then batters Rob to the ground in a fistfight, and their partnership is bitterly dissolved—until wise old Uncle Lucas dies and leaves them sheep they must care for in tandem.

A gripping saga, with a wonderfully rugged and evocative Montana.

Fiction

# Homing instincts

A memorable paean to Montana's early settlers

## Dancing at the Rascal Fair

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 405 pages, \$18.95

Reviewed by Alan Cheuse  
The author of "The Grandmothers' Club" and the forthcoming autobiography "Fall Out of Heaven"

I always hated homework. You probably did, too, all that tedious spadework in the garden of our educations, all that stoop-labor. That's something like what I felt reading my way through Ivan Doig's new novel, another of his attempts to bring the early years of Montana settlers to a high light in the minds of serious American readers.

Homework—"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" plays with that concept, and with the notion of homesteading. And home *steadying*, as well, with its story of two Scotch immigrants who come to Montana at the turn of the century to make their lives unfold. Making a home in the New World stands as Doig's major theme, a good American motif.

Angus McCaskill begins his story on the verge of the passage over water made by him and his close friend and fellow immigrant Rob Barclay. His narrative seemed at first as shaky to me as his own intentions about giving up Scotland for the Rocky Mountain west. His voice sounded clotted and gawky, awkward and even occasionally tedious in my ears, filled as it was with the necessity for exposition, as in this passage about his and Rob's arrival in New York, "the portal to confusion... Castle Garden was its keyhole. The entire world of us seemed to be trying to squeeze into America through there. Volleys of questions were asked of us, our health and morals were appraised, our pounds and shillings slid through the money exchange wicket to come back out as dollars and cents. I suppose our experience of New York's hustle and bustle was every America-comer's..." Too many moments such as this weighed on



Illustration from the book jacket

my reader's hands, and I nearly put the novel down a number of times because of them.

But as Angus and Rob made their way west after they met Lucas Barclay (Rob's uncle, the handless victim of a mining accident and their mainstay for a long time in Montana, their godfather and their grubstake), as they decided on sheep ranching as a means of making a homestead in the northern Montana region Doig celebrates, the Two Medicine River country, I persevered, and my determination brought me the rewards of affection for these slow-to-develop but finally quite credible and memorable characters. The first sign that I should stay with the book came to me with some of Angus' lovely descriptions of the mountain landscape and its special variety of light, a light, as he tells us, "like no other I had ever seen, a silver clarity that made the stone spines of ridges and an occasional few cottonwood trees stand out like engravings in book pages. Any outline that showed itself looked stangely singular, as if it existed only right then, never before. I seemed to be existing differently myself..."

So does the book, which takes on true life and vigor around this time, about 50 pages in, becom-

ing a kind of paean in prose to the Rockies, and a dramatized historical record of the blood, sweat and tears that went into the homesteading of Montana, which itself becomes a kind of emblem of all our settlements west of the Mississippi.

Angus and Rob each fall in love with women who remain unavailable to them, and when Angus marries Rob's sister, Adair, their partnership in sheep ranching and their friendship become tested as arduously as they have been tried by the winters during the nearly 20 years of the narrative's duration. Work and play, shouts and songs, births and deaths, harvests of wool and heartbreak, the outbreak of the great influenza epidemic and the Great War: these things test them, too. Homesteading takes "hope, muscle and time," Angus tells us at one point in this account of his—and our—early years in America. He might well have been speaking of what it takes to make a novel as dense and true to history as this one. He could have been speaking of what it takes, in these days of empty celebrity, cultural false alarms, quick and vacuous fixes, and the urgent desire to be wher-ever else we are not at the moment, of what it takes to read a novel such as this.

# Homesteading In Montana

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig

Atheneum; 403 pages; \$18.95

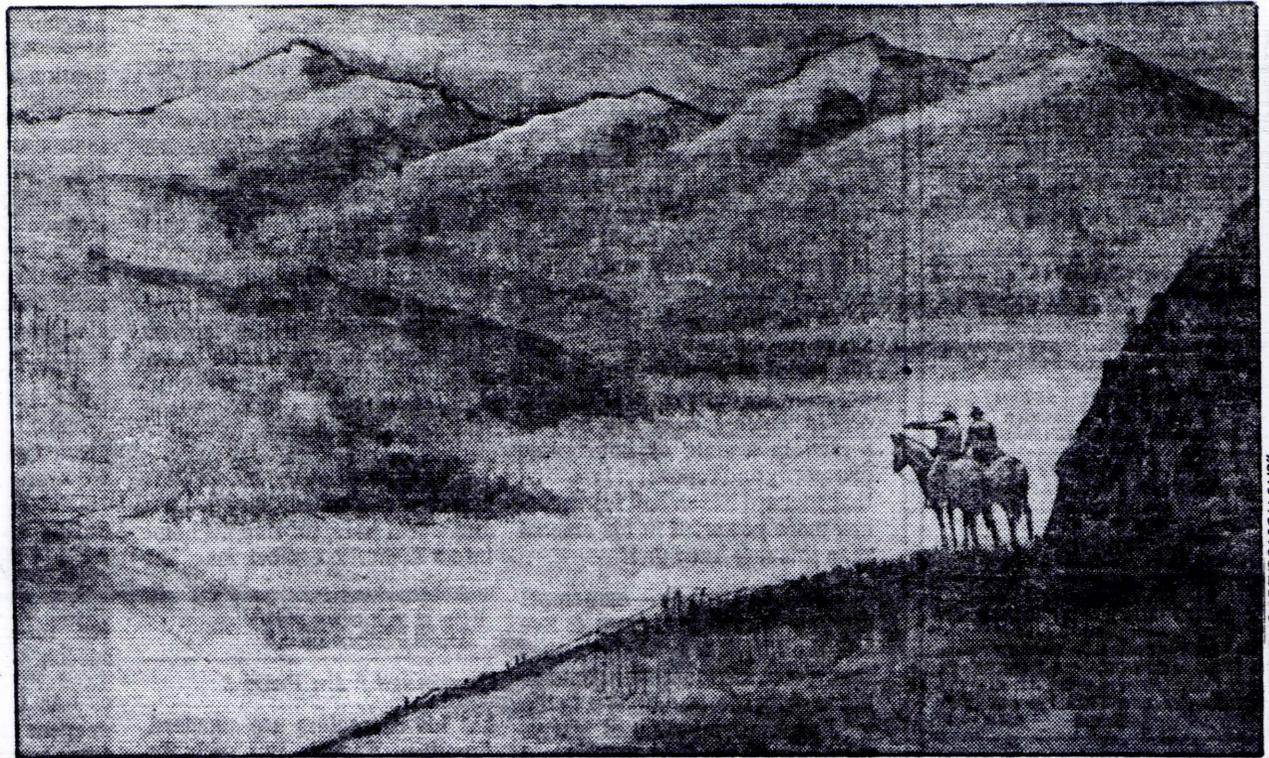
REVIEWED BY PAMELA GULLARD

In this second of a three-novel series, Ivan Doig brings to life the drama and ironies of homesteading in Montana at the turn of the century. I find myself filled with such high praise for this book that instead of relating paltry bits of it, I want to quote the whole glorious thing.

Take Doig's account of a Scotsman's glance to the sky while searching for a suitable homestead: "... above to my right a hawk hung on the wind, correcting, correcting." I am moved not just by the perfection of this description, but also by the way Doig so gracefully packs his words with hints of larger meaning. Here, he speaks not just of the bird, but also of the wide-eyed homesteader who will hang onto a patch of raw land and spend the rest of his life battling drought, low sheep prices, disease, blizzards — that is, correcting, correcting.

The immigrant Scotsman, narrator of the book, is Angus McCaskill. He is the forefather of characters in the first novel in this series, "English Creek," which appeared to wide acclaim in 1984. In his fiction and in nonfiction histories of the West, Doig moves with authority back and forth through time. This gives his novels a haunting, fated quality, as if whatever is about to come has in some sense already happened.

In "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," Angus McCaskill's future is intertwined with that of his best friend, Rob Barclay. The two come from Nethermuir in Scotland to America to find Rob's Uncle Lucas. The boys hope Lucas will show them how to become Americans, and more importantly, "Montanians." Their first lesson about the beautiful,



FROM "DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR"

unforgiving land — where they eventually build homes, marry and grapple with the elements and with each other — comes when they meet Lucas face-to-face. He is not a rich silver miner, as they had believed, but rather a saloon-keeper in the fledgling mountain village of Gros Ventre.

And there is one other fact about him the boys learn to their horror: His hands have been blown away in a mining accident. Says Angus, "There was no known rightness of behavior, just as there was no rightness about what had happened to Lucas. Like the clubs of bone and flesh he was exhibiting to us, any justice in life seemed ripped, lopped off. To this day the account of Lucas Barclay's mining accident causes my own hands to open and close."

So Doig plunges right in and, while giving us a gorgeous

story, simultaneously peels that tale back to expose the nubbins of human despair — injustice, failure and that incalculable restlessness exemplified by the immigrant. All the while, Doig's work contains the old-fashioned, Shakespearean notion that even the most complex thought or feeling can be made accessible. Indeed, Doig seems to revel in his accessibility. Gleefully, he has witty Angus remark on the lively chatter at seasonal, "rascal" fairs in Scotland — "That locution of the rascal fair, up there with Shakespeare's best."

Doig always favors clearing the path between the reader and the characters. For example, instead of reproducing a thicket of strange spellings to duplicate a Scottish burr, he

See Page 4

## 'DANCING'

Continued from Page 3

for these characters is their speech.

This is not a sad book, however, for the losses Doig depicts seem hugely worth the effort. I think

## 'DANCING'

*Continued from Page 3*

has his characters use standard, American English. But such English! Doig has delved into the Scottish lilt and brought out the humor, metaphor and the unexpected tenderness of the imported language. These people greet each other on the range with, "Hullo, what do you know for sure?" Describing a Bible-thumping neighbor, Angus says, "I thought many a time that to watch Ninian on the dance floor was like hearing a giggle out of God." Lamenting disastrously low mutton prices, Lucas declares, "By Jesus, the woollies do make a lovely sight. If we could just sell them for scenery." Author Doig shows that the saving grace

for these characters is their speech.

As the novel progresses, he deepens this theme of the need to filter harsh facts through wry expression. Earlier, Lucas painfully taught himself to write again by using both forearms. Why did he take such trouble to pen the letter that enticed the boys to America? "Matters pile up in a person. They can surprise you, how they want out." People as resilient as Lucas find their voices again. Others are not so lucky. In this book, a father becomes estranged from his son, friends quit speaking to each other, and spouses look elsewhere for fulfillment. Doig shrewdly shows that even the most engaging characters can build silences against each other.

This is not a sad book, however, for the losses Doig depicts seem hugely worth the effort. I think that it is interesting to see how the shrunken-hearted of the world survive their own banality. But it is dazzling to watch Doig depict generous, high-spirited characters seeding their lives with sorrows of their own making. Doig shows us all sides of the damnable human longing for whatever is out of reach. In so doing, he unveils "this rascal thing life." As Angus says about wool, "The pelt that grows itself again ... You cannot overlook the marvelous in that." ■

*Menlo Park writer Pamela Gullard has published fiction in The Iowa Review and Primavera.*

## Doig grips with descriptions

Despite dearth of literary quality, novel tells an engrossing story

Reviewed by Bruce Benidt

Ivan Doig can make you feel landscape.

He puts you on the rolling hills of ground that bunch up against the Rockies, makes you feel the earth rise beneath your feet like the deck of a ship lifted by a wave. Wind, blowing through his words, makes you want to put up the fleecy collar of your coat as you read. Sunrise, as he describes it glowing on the mountain faces, makes you almost put down the book to stare up at the scene.

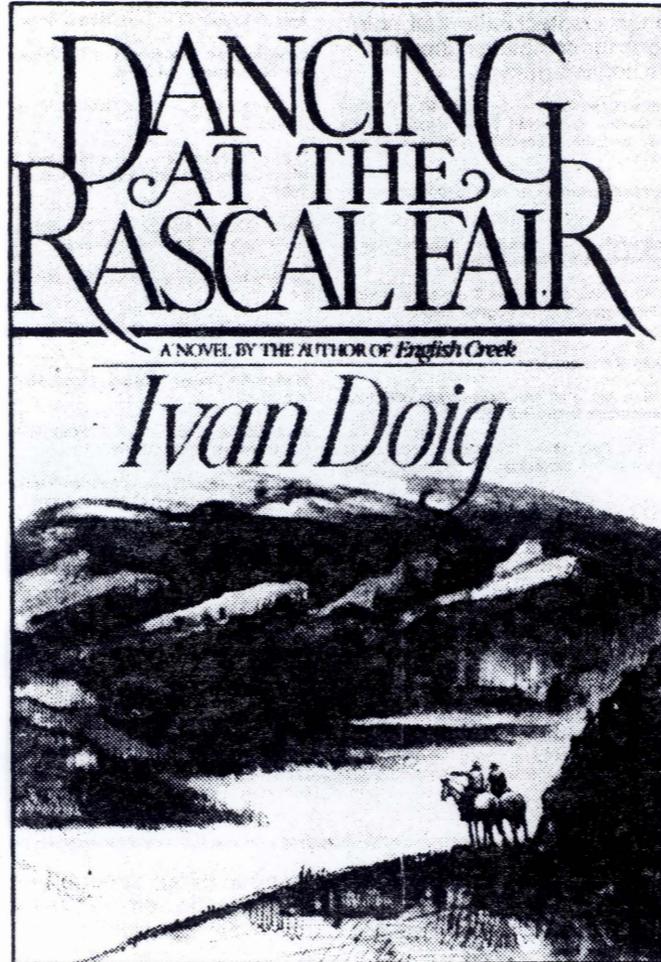
Doig uses these powers of description, of evocation, fully in his new novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair." This is the story of two Scotsmen who go to Montana at the end of the 19th century to homestead and raise sheep. They contend against drought and fierce winters, against increasing crowding, against loneliness and finally against each other.

Everywhere in the story, as much a presence as the human characters, is the land. The land is partner and

antagonist, beauty and beast. Doig masterfully reminds us what life was like when everything had to be worked for, what getting across the face of the land was like before we just flew over it on airplanes or interstates.

And he reminds us what it was like for the expansive western dream of America to come up against the reality of limits. In this novel the sheep and cattle ranchers who've used the open range as their own are confronted with a government that finally realizes that some land needs to be set aside and conserved.

His novel is a bit wooden in the telling, a little simple-minded here and there, with parts of the story that wander off like sheep and get lost. It's hopelessly sentimental in parts, some of the feelings don't seem fully enough explained in the character's development, and some of the changes of heart are too abrupt to understand. The literary quality just isn't high enough, it doesn't take your breath, make you shake your head in wonder at how that could have come out of his



mind or out of his pen.

But, those grouses registered, I have to say I found his book a companion I wanted to keep going back to. I wanted to stand out in that valley, with the Rocky Mountains of myth and epic reality rising behind my shoulders. I wanted to be in Doig's country, see how Doig's people would make it through another day of hard work and hard-earned grandeur. He's a good storyteller, and I wanted to be wrapped up in his tale.

The story of "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the story of immigration, which is the story of America. Though it's told over and over again, it's wonderful to hear. How people came here with their hopes and their strength, spilled out on the open land and created a life and a home. There's a dark side to the story, of course — the prejudice immigrants faced, the poverty in clogged cities, landlords and companies taking advantage of farmers and laborers, the harsh land crushing hopes and lives. But as true as all of that are the stories of endless labor rewarded by success, of families drawn together by their efforts and by seeing the flowering of what they've worked for.

There's a fair measure of both in Doig's book, where his characters

### Dancing at the Rascal Fair

By Ivan Doig

Atheneum

400 pages, \$18.95

call a homestead "a 160-acre berth in the future." The losses are painful and the successes warmly human. Anyone with a feel for the West or with ancestors who homesteaded will feel in Doig's book the powerful allure of the land.

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (the title refers to a Scottish country fair where farmers bargain with farm workers for a season's labor) isn't as fresh, heartfelt and well-crafted a book as Doig's first, "This House of Sky," which told his own story of growing up in Montana. But it gives a good view of how new Americans made a home for themselves in the huge country of Montana, a land so big, "You could put all of Scotland in the watchpocket of this place," as Angus McCaskill, the main character, said.

Bruce Benidt is a reporter for the Star Tribune.

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**'Dancing  
At The Rascal Fair'**

**By Ivan Doig**

**(Atheneum, \$18.95)**

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"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the best book I've read in ages. It's all here: lyrical writing, gentle philosophy, entertaining story carefully and craftily plotted, real characters who fairly leap from the page. No stereotypes here, no caricatures, but honest folk carving lives from the Montana wilderness of the early 20th century.

Young Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay set out from Scotland in 1899 en route to Helena, Mont., to join Rob's uncle Lucas. Traveling first by heaving steamship, then by clattering train, they reach Helena only to discover that Lucas Barclay isn't there. It's a year before they learn that he is living in a small settlement to the north. When spring finally comes they set out, eventually finding him and deciding to homestead nearby. The young men become sheep ranchers and neighbors. Angus falls in love with a pretty schoolteacher from a neighboring town, and the reader exults, suffers, and ponders the triumph and tragedies of their lives.

Maybe you won't hear it if you weren't blessed with a Scottish grandmother straight from the old country, but in some effortless, magic way the rhythm of Doig's prose evokes the music of the Scottish tongue. This book is a rare treat and one I look forward to enjoying again and again.

**Sunny Tiedemann**

(Mrs. Tiedemann, Bartlesville, is a newspaper columnist.)

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Ivan Doig proves it again: He is one of the finest writers working in the land

### DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig (Atheneum, \$18.95).

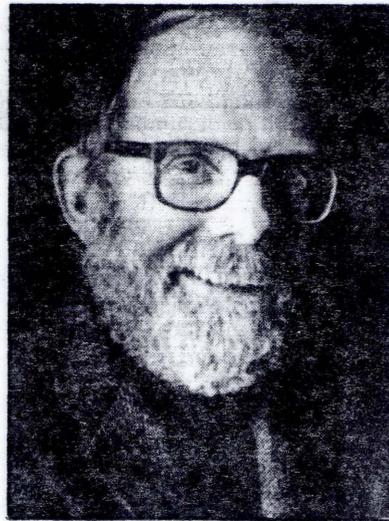
By PAUL PINTARICH

of The Oregonian staff

Though Ivan Doig has lived and worked in Seattle for the past several years, his heart lingers in northern Montana. There, beneath the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains where his father and grandmother kept sheep, Doig was raised through a remote and rural childhood remembered in his first book, "This House of Sky."

That book was a quiet masterpiece, a critical success that earned him a full page in *Time* magazine prior to the book's publication in 1978 (excellence that will never be a best seller, that sort of thing), as well as a nomination for the National Book Award.

The autobiography was followed by the haunting and less successful "Winter Brothers," Doig's personal search for the spirit of James Swann, writer and legendary denizen of historic Port Townsend, Wash.; after that came "The Sea Runners," his first novel, a histori-



IVAN DOIG

Never enough of Montana

cal novel about Russian Alaska that revealed Doig's commitment to a life near the sea.

"The winters," he explained, "I had enough of the Montana winters."

But not enough of Montana, for with the publication of the novel "English Creek" in 1984, Doig began

a trilogy, his epic history of the McCaskill family that actually begins with this second book, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair."

Doig uses the word "prequel" to describe this literary juxtapositioning and validates his intent by explaining that the trilogy will conclude in the present, his personal acknowledgment of Montana's centennial in 1989.

While "English Creek" is concerned with the decades abutting the region's dire Depression years, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" begins in 1889, when boyhood friends Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay emigrate from Scotland to seek land and new lives in America — in Montana where there is so much room that "you could put all of Scotland in the watch pocket of this place."

The two friends arrive in Doig country, settling among other Scots in a region called Two Medicine Country, but known more familiarly as "Scotch Heaven." Each takes a 160-acre homestead, and with the help of Barclay's uncle Lucas, a saloon keeper who has lost his hands in a mining accident, they build their homes and begin the rais-

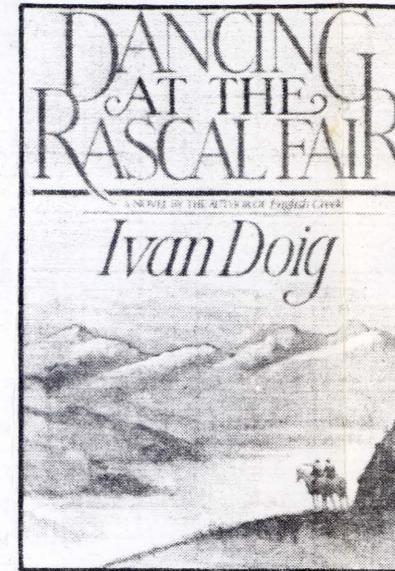
ing of sheep.

Doig has filled the balance of the novel with a comfortably human story of success and survival, love and how to understand it. And there is nature, of course, for Montana is determined by an often unforgiving climate — some winters are more appropriate to the herding of polar bears.

McCaskill and Barclay, as close as brothers, have different temperaments nevertheless. McCaskill is capable of teaching school, as he does for many years; Barclay is attuned to real estate and owns Scotch Heaven's first automobile.

Drama is created through McCaskill's longing for another woman, Anna Ramsay, who jilts him to marry a horse trader. Though he marries Barclay's sister Adair, brought over from Scotland, he carries a torch that ultimately fires the book's conclusion.

To reveal more would be to reveal too much, however. Doig's strength, as it is with most good writers, is in his characters. We begin caring about these people from the start, and that care keeps us interested as we share their sheep shearing, the



blizzards, the droughts, the fires; the romping dances in the school house, the plaguelike deaths from Spanish influenza; the lives that are lived so preciously day to day; lives understood so well by the author.

Yet it is Doig's greater strength that he knows the land so well. He is no James Michener swooping down

and then off, remaining a stranger, but a man who as a boy buried his mother in this same land, shared the struggles of his father and grandmother in the high summer ranges, and even now cares enough to return each year, where Montana receives him as a kind of literary hero.

In any Doig book, however, it is always the writing that is most important. Doig is adept at changing points of view, and he feels free to experiment with any style that enhances his story.

An example: "I still maintain that if the Atlantic hadn't been made of water I could have gone to America at a steady trot. But it seems to be the case that fear can sniff the bothering places in us. Mine had been in McCaskills for some eighty years now. The bones of the story are this. With me on this voyage, into the unquiet night, came the fact that I was the first McCaskill since my father's grandfather to go upon the sea."

Doig is from Montana, so can be called a Northwesterner — yet he is no regionalist. He is one of the finest writers working in the land.

# Doig's fine new epic of Montana

**Y**ou are permitted to begin in the kind delusion that your utensils of homestead-making at least are the straightforward ones—axe, hammer, adze, pick, shovel, pitchfork. But your true tools are other. The nearest names that can be put to them are hope, muscle and time.”

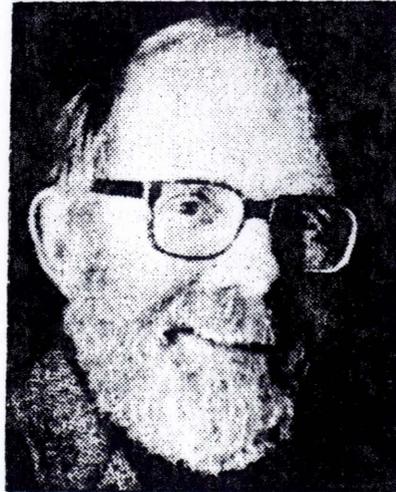
No truer words have been written about the American West than these in Ivan Doig's new novel, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Atheneum, \$18.95). It's a tale of two Scottish immigrants, Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay, who leave Glasgow in 1889 and fetch up in the Montana plains just east of what is now Glacier Park.

Side by side on adjoining homesteads for the next 30 years the two men deal with the trials and tribulations of sheep raising, schoolmastering, high-country snows, and droughts, loving a woman and losing her to another man, marriages of convenience, sheepmen vs. cattlemen and both vs. the fledgling U.S. Forest Service, and the great influenza epidemic of 1918-1919.

The press of endurance upon character is a theme as old as

Homer, and Doig freshens it with what Angus calls “the unexpected ferocities of family,” which as time passes shapes the two Scots-Americans' lives as much as do wind, weather and work. Angus' relationship with Rob becomes as stormy as that with his wife Adair—Rob's sister—and its denouement is shocking and unexpected.

Doig's prose is so muscular and sculpted, so simple and purposeful, that I can think of only Edward Hoagland and Wallace Stegner as Doig's equals among living writers about the American West. Nobody has done better than Doig in contemplating the meaning of American Westernness than *This House of*



Ivan Doig

*Sky*, his classic meditation on Montana.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, by the way, is the second of a projected trilogy about the McCaskills; the first, *English Creek* (1984) concerned the 14th summer of Angus' grandson, Jick, on the eve of World War II.



HENRY KISOR  
Book Editor

TO IVAN

LIBRARY JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER 15, 1987

★Doig, Ivan. **Dancing at the Rascal Fair.**

~~Atheneum~~. Sept. 1987. c.403p. ISBN 0-689-11764-7. \$18.95. F

The settlement of Montana between 1890 and 1919 is recounted through the quiet but compelling life of Angus McCaskill, a young Scotsman who travels with his friend Rob Barclay to Montana's Two Medicine Country to homestead. Doig writes fervently of the voyage from Scotland and the lean first years, as the two share the work and hardship of establishing claims and building up flocks of sheep. He tells of their separate marriages, the severing of their friendship, and the final resolution of their conflict through death. Doig successfully recaptures the violence of the Montana elements and the staunch heritage of the Scottish settlers which served so well in his earlier novel *English Creek* and faithfully represents the struggle for survival on the frontier as he continues the McCaskills' story. Highly recommended.—  
*Thomas L. Kilpatrick, Southern Illinois Univ. Lib., Carbondale*

## PW INTERVIEWS

EDITED BY SYBIL STEINBERG

## Ivan Doig

His novels of the American West benefit as much from his painstaking research as they do from his poetic imagination

BY WENDY SMITH

For just under a decade, in five books resonant with the echoing spaces of the American West, Ivan Doig has examined the ways in which history and geography interact to shape individual and national character, demonstrating our membership in a "community of time" that links Americans to those who preceded us in the landscape, as well as a community of place that knits us together in a complex weave of familial and social obligations.

In *This House of Sky*, his sensitive memoir of growing up in Montana in the 1940s and '50s, and in *Winter Brothers*, an exploration of the Pacific Northwest coastline through the diaries of a man who first ventured there in the 1850s, Doig mingled past and present in discontinuous narrative that skipped around in time yet presented coherent, moving visions of human possibilities against two very different backdrops. He turned to fiction—but not away from the past—in *The Sea Runners*, which chronicled the escape of four men from a Russian prison in 19th century Alaska and their daring canoe journey down the Pacific coast.

Doig is delving deeper into his Montana roots in the McCaskill family trilogy on which he has been at work for the past six years. *English Creek* took up the family's story in the middle with the tale of 15-year-old Jick McCaskill's coming of age in the summer of 1939. His newest nov-

el, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Fiction Forecasts, July 31), which Atheneum is launching with a 50,000 first printing, goes back to the beginning: the arrival of young Scotsman Angus McCaskill in Montana's Two Medicine Country in 1889, the year the territory became a state. Doig expects to complete the third volume—and carry the McCaskills into the present—in time for the statehood centennial in 1989.

Why has the American past laid such a hold on this writer's imagination? "I think it helps us to know what we are and where we are by knowing where we came from," he says. "Also, I grew up with people in Montana who had a great link to the past. They weren't educated enough in classroom terms to know factual history, but they had a lot of lore in their heads. And it was in the language, too, the sayings that showed up in my father's and grandmother's talk. Going back to Scotland three summers ago to research *Rascal Fair*, I found some of the turns of phrase originated there."

Doig came to the Seattle area, where he has lived for 21 years, to get a Ph.D in history, and his training is evident in the way he works. An energetic, friendly man of 48 whose glasses and gray-red beard give him a vaguely professorial air, he shows PW the file-card boxes filled with research material. "I'm a pretty literal person; I tend to imagine from facts. For example, 'Dancing at the Rascal Fair' is a traditional Scots tune—which I wrote one sleepless night. It comes from this very staunch, Scots, quasi-Marxist sociological book, *Social Class in Scotland, Past and Present*, where I read mention of the fact that when farmers and laborers met to bargain out the summer's wages it was called 'the rascal fair.' I like that phrase. I went to bed one night, not having a title for the book, and the next morning told Carol [his wife], 'I think it's going to be called *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*.' Then I bought a rhyming dictionary and worked

hard on making up the song. Quite a lot of what I do comes that way, the imagination ramified by this kind of dry sociology."

Doig's uncommon ability to bring the past vividly to life stems in part from his attention to detail. "I would talk to people who had been homesteaders at the turn of the century and ask them, 'You were a school kid. How'd you get to school?' 'Well we rode horses.' 'Okay, what'd you do with the horses?' Out of that would come bits of lore: in the sagebrush part of Montana, they'd probably hitch the horse to a bit of sagebrush; if they lived in the grassie part, the fathers would probably build a hitch rail for the school. The details of Angus's teaching came out of those sort of particulars." To help him visualize the towns he was writing about, Carol Doig took photographs of individual buildings all over Montana and Scotland. Doig arranged the slides on a light table grouping the pictures together to get a sense of what a given street might have looked like in 1889 or 1919.

The language of Doig's books is also carefully researched. "Language led me to the McCaskill trilogy as much as anything else. I was interested in using the language of my Dad's generation in *English Creek*, which is narrated by a character roughly his age. Then it followed that Angus would narrate *Rascal Fair* in his Scottish-born voice. It was a big decision, because it takes a long time to accumulate the language for these three books. I have a file-card box called 'Montana Lingo,' and I'm working my way through *The Dictionary of American Regional English* to find out how language forms itself, how it comes out in everyday dance and prance—the poetry of the vernacular, because often people who don't have much else in life are very rich in language. I think what I'm up to is an attempt to write a trio of books in some of the West's own language."

The West itself—Montana in par-

Wendy Smith writes frequently for PW.



© Jim Bates

ticular—is virtually another character in the McCaskill trilogy, and all Doig's books display a deep attachment to the land and a profound sense of place. "Part of that was growing up in the 'great weathers' of Montana. The space is always around you in various configurations—whether it is the mountains or the plains or simply that almost endless sky—big, booming distances in the landscapes. . . . The echoes of those stay with a person. We moved to Seattle largely because of the geography: the mildness of the climate, the nearness of the water, the greenness. Place is important to me and I think to quite a number of Western writers. Richard Hugo, the great poet of Montana, has a line that always sounds to me like something he picked up in a Missoula bar: 'If you ain't noplace, you can't go nowhere.' To have a base, a plot of existence on the earth, to be familiar with its changes of the seasons, there's a kind of propulsive rhythm to that."

But the West Doig knows so intimately and writes about with such eloquence is *not* the West of legend. "I'm writing deliberately about sheepherding, because we've had too damn much cowboy West. I don't think that's what the West has been about, although we've got a guy in the White House who thinks so: too many movie sets will give you that idea. The West has been about families, schoolteachers, miners, fur trappers, town-builders, all kinds of people coming out here to try and make a living. I'm trying to write against the grain of what I call 'Wisterns,' after Owen Wister, the author of *The Virginian*. He went off from Philadelphia and Harvard and got in with some of the rich cattlemen of Wyoming. So far as he could tell, no one in the West ever had to do any work. In 'Wisterns' it's all card games and saving schoolmarms; nobody ever milks a cow or plants a spud. As best I can tell, there's got to be some kind of catering service out of Omaha that comes out and takes care of the whole damn West. It's nonsense, and I think it's harmful nonsense.

"So much of the West has been nurtured and can only be nurtured by Federal policy: the national forest, the Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management. It's an enormous, dry, fragile part of our country—what Wallace Stegner called 'a land of little rainfall and big consequences.' We've had a complex histo-

It seems to me there's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world"

ry of coming to terms with that; there's an ecologically, socially and culturally complex quilt out here from the Ohio River westward. To think that fixing it is just a matter of strapping on your chaps and sixgun is infantile nonsense. This almost tidal swash back and forth between beneficial consequences and harmful consequences interests me."

Doig's characters are always aware that actions have consequences, and the plots of his novels are often driven by the conflict between people's desires and their strong sense of responsibility. "My characters accept that in their lives they do have second thoughts, that part of what we carry around in the attic of our heads are our thoughts about the past. You feel your way along and do as much as you can, yet trying at some point to lead your own life. You're forever feeling your way along this line of equilibrium. Part of the consequence of being alive is that it's not always comfortable."

But Doig also tries to imbue his work with a sense of how many things in life are not within people's control. "My interest in history showed me that both time and the times you live in are going to change you, and I'm trying to write about that. You see in *English Creek* and *Rascal Fair* how much the two

world wars dropped into people's lives out of nowhere. I was trying to use actual historical realities. First the twin calamities of World War I and the flu epidemic of 1919—one out of every 100 Montanans died. Then the fact that one year you were a kid on a ranch in Montana who'd never been further away than the 90 miles to Helena, the next year you're in the Aleutians or the South Pacific, and the year after that maybe you're dead. I'm trying to deal in fiction with the issue of history dropping on us. Of course, we hope it doesn't drop on us in the big way—in the great words of *Riddley Walker*, a book I greatly admire—"The One Big One."

Russell Hoban is one of the many authors whose work Doig has warmly praised during the conversation; his strong sense of identity as a Western writer doesn't preclude a larger feeling of kinship with world literature. "I've been very much aware of being a Westerner all my life, partly because of memories of the landscape, partly because of the way I was brought up in the West through the accident of being motherless after I was six. I have in some ways the best of both worlds: I'm halfway regarded as a Montana writer, and yet I live outside. The Humanities Council in Billings asked me to talk about looking at Montana from the outside. They have finally said, 'Okay, you're an outsider at last.'

"Montana has always had this big colonial question, part of the land question: Are we simply, can we ever be, more than an energy colony to be mined? So the West has a lot in common with writers from the old outposts of the British Empire, who are often very skeptical of government and very potent. Nadine Gordimer is one of the most potent writers extant in showing the awful naked skin under her society. Then there are books like *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* and *Riddley Walker*, which push the language out into odd, eloquent corners of the world: the Isle of Guernsey, post-Holocaust England. I'm tending toward the idea, and I don't think it's at all original with me, that there are quite a bunch of us out here at our own centers of the universe, and they're not the metropolitan, polar centers. It seems to me that there's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world." □

# Doig's new novel weaves historical threads into fiction

By J.M. SWANSON  
For the Tribune

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" by Ivan Doig. Anatheum Publishers, New York. 405 pages. \$18.95.

With the exception of his proverbial first and best book — the National Book Award-nominated volume of memoirs "This House of Sky" — writer Ivan Doig has completed his best book of fiction, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair."

Doig, a native Montanan and former magazine writer who now lives in Seattle, has parlayed his doctorate in history into a recreation of history and creation of fiction before, at times more successfully than others.

"English Creek," published in 1984, was the first book of Doig's current trilogy, although the book was the

## Book review

second in the three-part series, chronologically. At times, "English Creek" felt thesis-bound by historical detail, at the expense of the fictional story. Not so with the trilogy's first book, Doig's latest work, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair."

Narrator Angus McCaskill, grandfather of the young narrator Jick of "English Creek," and his best friend, Rob Barclay, leave Scotland in 1889 for Montana. Hoping to find Rob's long-lost Uncle Lucas at his Great Maybe Mine near Helena, they find him at the base of the Rocky Mountains in the Two Medicine country of Scotch Heaven, the same general country later detailed in "English Creek."

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" details 30 years of historical events. The coming of miners and homesteaders and subsequent years of blizzards, forest fires, drought, the great flu epidemic of 1918 and American involvement in World War I, all are recounted. More subtly, we learn of the curtailing of freedoms that culminates with the arrival of the Forest Service.

Doig's new novel is, in part, a love story that explores the tragic implications of unrequited love and the stoic acceptance of a requited love that requires as much adjustment as the harsh Montana landscape.

"I am from a house of storm," young Angus intones at the beginning. He is not given to overstatement.

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is also a tale of friendship. A drowned horse at Greenock dock on page one provides an omen of events to come.

Some of the best portions of the book are the second-person silent speeches to Rob from Angus, detailing the love and intensity between these two reserved young Scots.

Humorous and providing a colorful avalanche of detail that seems almost Dickensian, Doig is a graceful writer who performs his best when he writes about the country that he loves. Montana's Two Medicine country, also the subject of "This House of Sky," is part of that country.

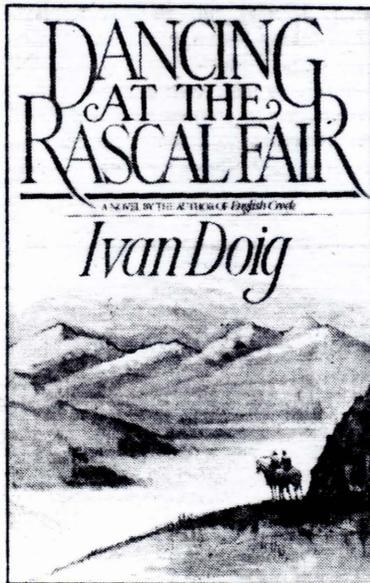
From the autobiographical memoirs of "This House of Sky," Doig has transcended his raw material into successful fiction. In his subtle exploration of universal themes and repetition of patterns, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" enters the realm of Montana literature.

In a sense, Doig's trilogy furthers another trilogy, A.B. Guthrie Jr.'s "Big Sky" series about the West-ering of America.

Some final questions remain: What happened to Angus and Adair

in the interim between "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "English Creek"? After spending a book with them, the reader will want to know. But perhaps the final book of the trilogy will answer a few of the questions.

What will Ivan Doig show us about Montana next? Based on the improvement shown in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" over "English Creek," this reader, for one, can't wait for the final novel. Let's hope it doesn't take another three years.



Doig

Anniston Star - 9/27/87

# Doig brings fresh Montana air

"DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR," by Ivan Doig: Atheneum, New York, 1987, \$18.95.

Ivan Doig's love for his native Montana shines through his work like a brilliant shaft of mountain sunshine, making each new novel a fresh joy.

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair," which precedes his 1984 "English Creek" and picks up the early years in the lives of young Jick McCaskill's Scottish grandfather and great-uncle, is as beautiful a book as all the rest, a story of pioneer Montana life from 1889 until just after World War I, peopled with the



Doig

three-dimensional human beings whom this exceptional writer can conjure up in a few short chapters and make as unforgettable as any real-life neighbors.

It is Angus McCaskill who tells the tale, from the moment he and his irrepressible friend Rob Barclay set sail from the River Clyde aboard the immigrant-loaded James Watt, through the next 30 years in Montana's Two Medicine country.

The boys were just 19 when they braved the wide, wild waters, an ambitious clerk and a promising wheelwright bound for the American West to join Rob's Uncle Lucas, owner of a prosperous mine near Helena, who would certainly help them get started.

BUT NOBODY in Helena had heard of Lucas Barclay, and it was Christmas before a letter from

back home in Scotland finally placed Lucas in Gros Ventre, "a coming town," where he had purchased a business.

Gros Ventre proved to be a few half-finished buildings and a whoop of cowboys; Lucas' business was the Medicine Lodge saloon. And Lucas Barclay, the master wheelwright, the hard-working prospector, was now a man with only stumps where his hands had been, maimed in a mine explosion, angry but still unbroken.

It was a shock indeed, but all Montana was still there, ready for any high-spirited young man who cared to challenge her.

And when Angus rode one day to the mountain above North Fork, intoxicated with this beauty and the knowledge that the land here was free for the asking, he persuaded Rob to homestead with him here, to build cabins and raise sheep on neighboring farms and become part of the harsh glory.

And settle they did.

It was not long before Rob married Judith Findlater. And Angus, a Robert Burns-quoting, enthusiastically scholarly young man who had had some slight experience as a schoolteacher's helper in Scotland, found himself the teacher at the local school, an experience he embraced gladly.

And when a beautiful new schoolteacher, Anna Ramsey, came to work at a second school not far away, Angus fell in love, irretrievably and forever.

BUT ANNA was never to become his wife — he

married Rob's sister from Scotland instead, plucky little Adair Barclay, who accepted second-best in a land that was always to feel too big for her.

And circumstances were to strain the friendship of Angus and the increasingly irascible Rob, to provide a deep undercurrent of drama to match the harshness of Montana when it chose to show its cruel side.

Author Doig, who was born and raised in the terrain he writes about, now lives in Seattle, where he has long pursued a writer's profession, but he has not forgotten the smallest part of Montana's magic, be it the lyric beauty of its Junes or the fierce winters that forgive no human frailty. He knows farming and sheepraising intimately — here is a practical, hands-on rancher talking about his own world, one that can be difficult indeed, but has its special rewards.

In Angus and Rob, in stubborn little Adair, in regal, unattainable Anna, larger-than-life Lucas, no whit diminished by his tragedy, in all the other settlers and neighbors who people the book, including the enigmatic forest ranger, Stanley Meixell, who is a second father to Angus' only son, Varick, Ivan Doig has brought to life another unforgettable world, one we can look forward to finding again in the remaining volume of the trilogy that includes "English Creek."

And through it all runs the old Scottish folk song, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," a joyful, bouncing, barn dance tune that somehow sings of the unquenchable spirit of the place and the time.

—BARBARA HODGE HALL

# Big Sky yarn amounts only to a big yawn

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair.* By Ivan Doig. Atheneum. 440 pp. \$18.95.

By MICHAEL A. FARGO

This is Ivan Doig's second installment of a projected trilogy begun with his novel "English Creek," published in 1984, which tells the story of the fictional McCaskill family's life in Montana during the 1930s.

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the story of the emigration of Angus McCaskill (ancestor of the McCaskills of "English Creek") and Rob Barclay from Scotland to the United States and Montana in 1889. Doig follows McCaskill and Barclay through 30 years of homesteading at the base of the Rocky Mountains.

Doig attempts to write historical fiction like O.E. Rolvaag's novel "Giants in the Earth," in which three-dimensional characters live and die in the Norwegian homesteading of South Dakota. Rolvaag uses historical fact and incident to explore the complexities of the human condition.

Doig, however, fails in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" to produce even a pale imitation of this type of historical fiction. His characters are two-dimensional; they elicit no empathetic response from the reader. Lust, love, physical violence, heroism, ambition are reduced to mimicry of real human emotions, real human qualities. This weakness of characterization lies chiefly in Doig's choice of narrative voice.

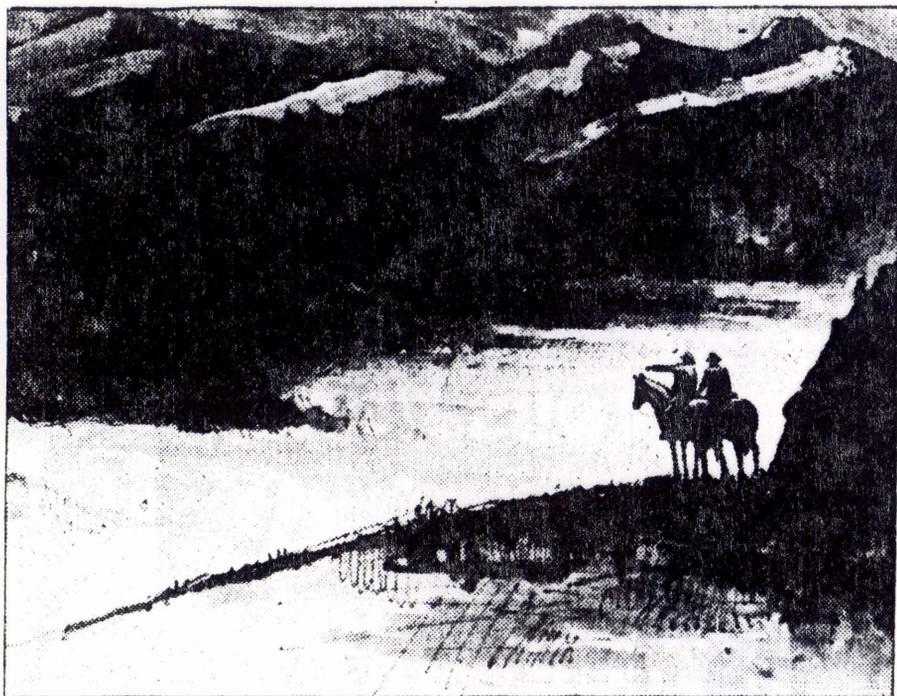
McCaskill, the narrator and protagonist, too often speaks and thinks in the verse of Robert Burns, or, worse, in Doig's imitation of Burns. In the "Acknowledgments" at the book's end, Doig addresses the use of Burns' verse: "Some of Angus' remembered verse is indeed Burns; some is Burns and Doig; and some, alas, merely Doig." It is one thing to create imaginary dialog for historical figures, but published verse should not be subjected to the imagination of the novelist.

Narrator McCaskill tells the reader what he should think of the story's other characters instead of allowing the reader to reach his own conclusions through observation of action and listening to dialog — "Uh, no thanks, uttered Varick with that eloquent dismayed swallow only a boy can perform."

McCaskill perceives what his fellow characters are thinking to the point of clairvoyance — "No, I know where Adair put the blame. On Scotch Heaven itself, oh Montana, on a land so big that people were always stretching dangerously to meet its distances and season-long moods. Not that she came out and said so." Other than McCaskill, Doig's characters seldom do say so.

When Doig's characters are not speaking or thinking in verse, his prose is rife with homespun platitude — "Oh, I knew that all you could count on in life is your fingers and your toes"; hyperbole — "I know the country is so full of smoke you can cut it with a scissors"; and cliché — "I beat that man as if he was a new drum."

The Scottish emigration to and homesteading of Montana should have made for a fascinating, poignant story. In Doig's hands it is merely boring.



Ivan Doig delves deep into his Montana roots in the McCaskill trilogy.

# Ivan Doig: Dancing to history's details

## WRITERS AT WORK

By Wendy Smith

**S**EATTLE—Why has the American past laid such a hold on Ivan Doig's imagination?

"I think it helps us to know what we are and where we are by knowing where we came from," the novelist says.

For just under a decade, in five books resonant with the echoing spaces of the American West, he has examined how history and geography interact to shape individual and national character. In doing so he has demonstrated our membership in a "community of time" that links Americans to those who preceded us, as well as in a community of place that knits us together in a complex weave of familial, social and ecological obligations.

Doig mingled past and present first in nonfiction.

*Sea of Sky* (1978), his first novel, is of growing up in the 1940s and '50s, and in 1980), an exploration of the Northwest coastline of a man who lived in the 1850s.

fiction—but not in *The Sea Run*, which chronicled the esom Russian indeny Alaska and their march down the Pacific

per into his Mon-McCaskill family has been at work

for the past six years. *English Creek* (1984) took up the family's story in the middle with the tale of 15-year-old Jick McCaskill's coming of age in the summer of 1939. His newest novel, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Atheneum), goes back to the beginning: the arrival of young Scotsman Angus McCaskill in Montana's Two Medicine country in 1889, the year the territory became a state. Doig expects to complete the third volume—and carry the McCaskills into the present—in time for the statehood centennial in 1989.



Ivan Doig

Another reason Doig's books are rooted in history is that he grew up "with people in Montana who had a great link to the past. They weren't educated enough to know actual factual history, but they had a lot of lore in their heads. And it was in the language, too, the sayings that showed up in my father's and grandmother's talk. Going back to Scotland three summers ago for the research on *Rascal Fair*, I found some of the turns of phrase originated back there."

Doig came to the Seattle area, where he has lived for 21 years, to get a PhD in history, and his training shows in the way he works. An energetic, friendly man of 48 whose glasses and gray-red beard give him a vaguely professorial air, he shows his visitor the file card boxes filled with the research material he gathers to give his novels verisimilitude.

"I'm a pretty literal person; I tend to imagine from facts," he said. "For example, 'Dancing at the Rascal Fair' is a traditional Scots tune—which I wrote one sleepless night. It comes from this very staunch, Scots, quasi-

Marxist sociological book"—he pulls *Social Class in Scotland, Past and Present* down from a shelf—"where I read mention of the fact that when farmers and laborers met to bargain out the summer's wages, it was called 'the rascal fair.' I liked that phrase.

"I went to bed one night, not really having a title for the book, and got up the next morning and told Carol (his wife), 'I think it's going to be called *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*.' Then I bought a rhyming dictionary and worked on making up the song. Quite a lot of what I do comes that way, the imagination ramified by this kind of dry sociology."

Doig's uncommon ability to bring the past vividly to life stems in part from his attention to detail. "I would talk to people who had been homesteaders at the turn of the century and ask them, 'You were a school kid. How'd you get to school?' 'Well, we rode horses.' 'OK, what'd you do with the horses?' Out of that would come bits of lore: In the sagebrush part of Montana, they'd probably hitch the horse to a bit of sagebrush; if they lived in the grassier part, the fathers would probably build a hitch rail for the school. So the details of Angus' teaching came out of those sort of particulars."

To help him visualize the towns he was writing about, Carol Doig took photographs of buildings all over Montana and Scotland. While he was working, her husband arranged the slides on a light table, grouping the pictures to get a sense of what a given street might have looked like in 1889 or 1919.

The language of Doig's books is also carefully researched. "Language really led me to the McCaskill trilogy as much as anything else. I was interested in using the language of my dad's generation in *English Creek*, which is narrated by a character roughly his age. And then it followed that Angus would narrate *Rascal Fair* in his Scottish-born voice. It was a big decision, because it takes a long time to accumulate the language for these three books.

"Over here's a file card box called 'Montana Lingo,' and I'm working my way through *The Dictionary of American Regional English* to find out how language forms itself, how it comes out in everyday dance and prance—the poetry of the vernacular, because often people who don't have every much else in life are very rich in language. I think what I'm up to is an attempt to write a trio of books in some of the West's own language."

The West itself—Montana in particular—is virtually another character in the McCaskill trilogy, and all of Doig's books display a deep attachment to the land and a profound sense of place. "Part of that was growing up in the 'great weathers' of Montana. The space always around you in various configurations—whether it was the mountains or the plains or simply that almost endless sky—big booming distances in the landscapes.

"The echoes of those stay with a person. Place is important to me and, I think, to quite a number of Western writers. Richard Hugo, the great poet of Montana, has a line that always sounds to me like something he picked up in a Missoula bar: 'If you ain't no place, you can't go nowhere.'"

But the West Doig knows so inti-

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# Writers at work

Continued from Page 15

mately and writes about with such eloquence is *not* the West of legend. "I'm writing deliberately about sheepherding, because I thought we'd had too damn much cowboy West. I'm trying to write against the grain of what I call 'Wisterns,' after Owen Wister, the author of *The Virginian*. He went off from Philadelphia and Harvard and got in with some of the rich cattlemen of Wyoming—so as far as he could tell, no one in the West ever had to do any work. In 'Wisterns' it's all card games and saving schoolmarms; nobody ever milks a cow or plants a spud. It's nonsense, and I think it's harmful nonsense.

"Because so much of the West has been nurtured and can only be nurtured by federal policy: the national forest, the park service, the bureau of land management. It's an enormous, dry, fragile part of our country—what Wallace Stegner called 'a land of little rainfall and big consequences.' We've had a complex, interesting history of coming to terms with that; there's an ecologically, socially and culturally complex guilt out here from the Ohio River westward. To think that fixing it is just a matter of strapping on your chaps and sixgun is infantile nonsense."

Doig tries to imbue his work with a sense of how many things in life are not within people's control. "My interest in history showed me that both time and the time you live in are going to change you, and I'm very much trying to write about that. You see in *English Creek* and *Rascal Fair* how much the two world wars dropped into people's lives out of nowhere. I was simply trying to use what were actual historical realities.

"First, the twin calamities of World War I and the flu epidemic of 1919—one out of every 100 Montanans died. Then the fact that one year you were a kid on a ranch in Montana who'd maybe never been further away than the 90 miles to Helena, the next year you're in the Aleutians or the South Pacific, and the year after that maybe you're dead. I'm trying to deal in fiction with the issue of history dropping on us. Of course, we hope it doesn't drop on us in the big way—in the great words of *Riddley Walker*, a book I greatly admire, 'The One Big One.'

"The more I began to read around and take a look at a world class of writers like Nadine Gordimer—I read *A Sport of Nature* earlier this spring and, my God, it's unbelievable; she makes the rest of us look like kids with crayons in our fists! But a lot of outsiders are really making their mark on literature, people from the outback, the back pockets of the world: Gordimer in South Africa; Thomas Keneally in Australia; Salman Rushdie, born in India; V.S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad. Some of them live in the so-called literary centers now, but they were formed elsewhere, and they're writing about that.

"Montana has always had this big colonial question, part of the land question: Are we simply an energy colony to be mined? The West has a lot in common with these writers from the old outposts of the British Empire. Then there are books such as *Riddley Walker* and *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* that push the language out into odd, eloquent corners of the world: the Isle of Guernsey, post-Holocaust England. There are quite a bunch of us out here at our own centers of the universe, and they're not the metropolitan, polar centers.

"There's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world."

# Putting Socks on Snakes in Scottish Heaven

**DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR**, by Ivan Doig.  
Atheneum, 400 pp., \$18.95.

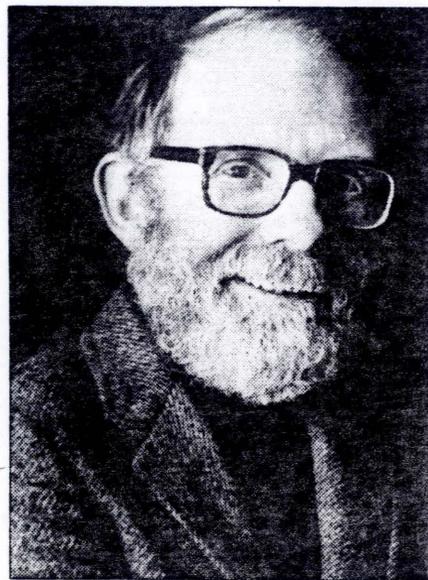
By Richard Lipez

IF LITERARY PRIZES were given for sheer likability, Ivan Doig's lively novel about the Montana homesteading years would win one. Which is not to say that "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" flinches from the crueler natural and other realities of a time and place Montanan Doig obviously loves well. Cold, heat, drought, death by drowning, blizzards, forest fires, the influenza epidemic of 1918 and an assortment of human weaknesses all bring terrible hardship to the Scottish and other immigrants trying to build lives around sheep-herding and farming at the edge of the northern Rockies back when the U.S. Government was populating this new state by giving its land away to anybody who would work it. The considerable charm of this novel, the second in a planned trilogy — the first book was "English Creek" (1984) — lies mainly in its narrator, Angus McCaskill, as droll and sweetly expressive an observer as any who ever put down a community's history.

Young Angus and his buddy Rob Barclay set out from the Scottish lowlands in 1889 to locate and follow in the

path of Rob's long-lost Uncle Lucas, who has mailed the family a U.S. hundred-dollar bill each Christmas. Down in steerage, "like kittens in the bottom of a barrel," they cross the ferocious North Atlantic, with its "ocean nights as dark as the inside of a cow."

In Gros Ventre, Montana, Angus and Rob find Uncle Lucas, handless after a mining accident, but succeeding well with a prosperous saloon. They



Ivan Doig

take his advice and start up as sheep ranchers with some fellow countrymen in the new village of Scottish Heaven. Angus also is recruited to be schoolmaster, in which capacity he eventually gets into trouble with religious conservatives by exposing the town's youth to Thomas Carlyle, who said, "I don't pretend to understand the universe; it's a great deal bigger than I am."

The even deeper trouble Angus gets into is when he falls in love with passionate, erratic Anna Reese, the school mistress in a neighboring town. The day they meet she tells him there is a matter he might help her with, and Angus thinks, "Anything, anything. Wheelbarrowing a mountain from here to there. Putting socks on snakes."

Angus, previously a man with "an enlarged sense of carefulness where weddings were concerned," is instantly daft with love for this untraditional woman, and stays that way for years, decades even: after Anna marries another man, Angus marries Rob's sister Adair on the rebound, and Rob — "a man not too insubstantial to carry contradictions" — becomes Angus' enemy by spitefully revealing to Angus and Adair's teenaged son, Varick, that Angus' true love is Anna, not the boy's mother.

That might sound a little too grand operatic for rural Montana, but in Doig's deft hands it is not. There are a

few spots in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" where Steinbeckian over-literary hyperbole hovers just over the horizon — "We're the people; we go on" — but Doig always backs off in time. In fact, the language in this novel generally is so trim and graceful and pleasurable that if Doig did not refer to Scotland at least once per page, I would begin to suspect that his characters were actually Irish.

Doig also does a first-rate job of telling the history of Montana through the lives of his characters. He makes the economics of ranching passably interesting, and I think I could now shear a sheep. The U.S. Forest Service, founded by Teddy Roosevelt in 1907, is favorably described; in the story, Angus McCaskill persuades hostile ranchers to back it. Referring to the high grasslands, a forest ranger tells the ranchers, "You can use it, but not use it up."

A few benighted Blackfoot Indians appear in Doig's saga, but only sketchily and peripherally. The full story of their tragedy is told in the novels of another fine Montana writer, James Welch. To learn about the civilization that supplanted the Blackfeet's, you'll not do better than Ivan Doig's immensely enjoyable work of rich Americana.

*Richard Lipez writes mystery novels under the pseudonym Richard Stevenson.*

Newsday  
9/27/87

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 1987

# Immigrant's tale of the wild, hard landscape of heartbreak

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig

Atheneum, \$18.95, 405 pages

REVIEWED BY WOODY WEST

**D**ancing at the Rascal Fair" is the story of two young Scotsmen, Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay, who, like so many thousands of their countrymen, cross the Atlantic to fashion new lives in a new land. The pair embark from Glasgow in the fall of 1889, heading for Montana, where an uncle of Barclay's had gone a decade earlier to wrest his fortune from the land.

It is the story of the 30 years during which the two men invest muscle and hope and souls to attach themselves and their families to the gloriously harsh landscape of northern Montana. It is also the painful charting of a friendship that the years expose to bitterly antagonistic valuations of life, and of a blighted love that for years corrodes a family.

This is an affecting story, wonderfully well told. The novel (its title is from an old Scottish song — "Dancing at the Rascal Fair/devils and angels all were there") is both a history of emigration and a tale of the gritty existence of the frontier, which in Mr. Doig's Two Medicine County is still primitive as the 19th century wanes.

Angus and Rob stake their homesteads and begin to raise sheep in the lush grasslands, contending with the vast contrarities of the Montana climate and the only slightly less turbulent storms of human nature. The Barclay uncle, Lucas, whom they finally track down and discover has lost both his hands in a mining accident, helps them get started as ranchers. Lucas, tough and sagacious, now runs a saloon in Gros Ventre, a town that is more aspiration than actuality.

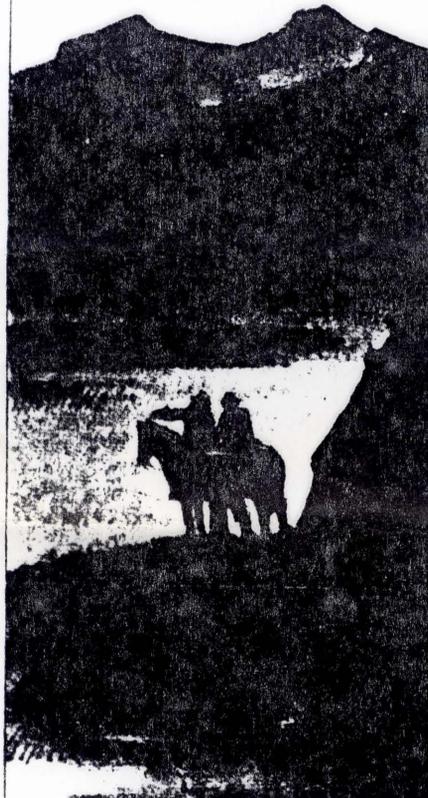
Mr. Doig neatly uses the creation of a national forest abutting the homesteads in "Scotch Heaven" — the valley between and along the forks of English Creek — as a vehicle for change. This large intervention of the U.S. government in their lives, restricting their access to grazing lands, is a fascinating demarcation between frontier and modernity, if you will, in Mr. Doig's telling. In a way, this is Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the end of the American frontier reflected in individual lives.

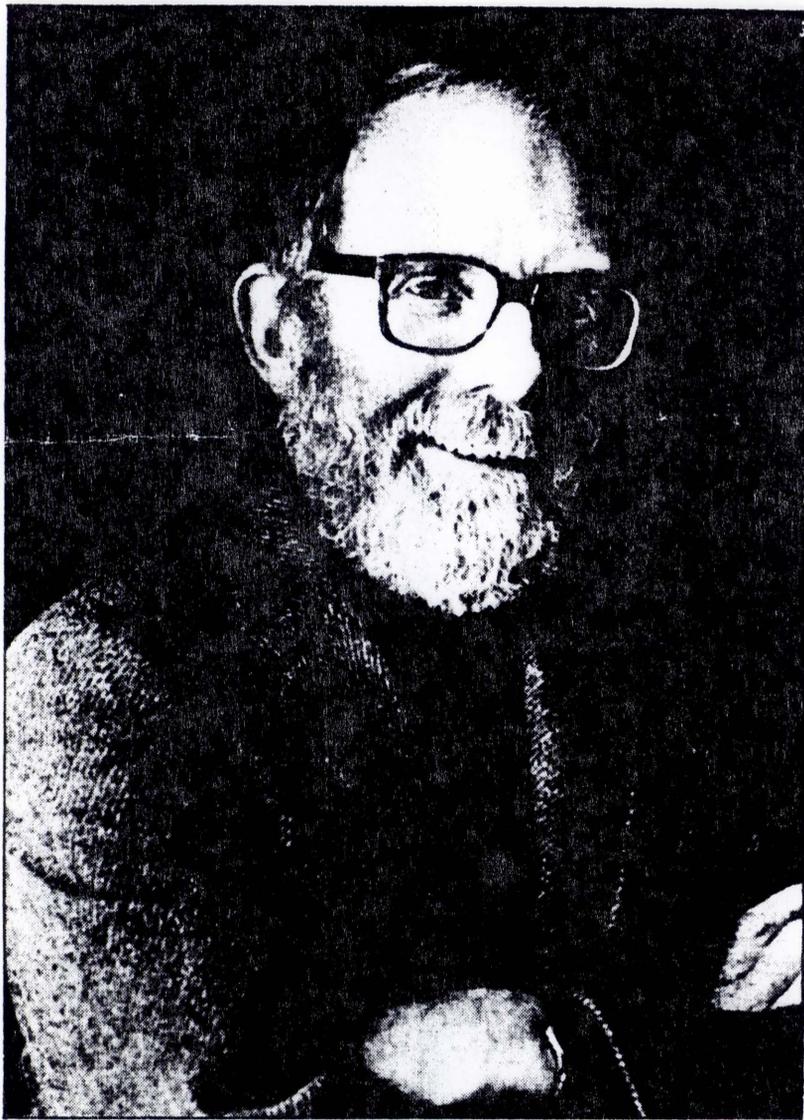
It has been nine years since Ivan Doig's memoir of a Montana childhood, "House of Sky," was published. With each succeeding title, he becomes a surer talent. "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the second novel in a projected trilogy. The first, "English Creek," was published in 1984, and in it the reader met the grandson of this novel's McCaskill narrator. "English Creek" displayed Mr. Doig's felicitous as a writer — his eloquent portrayal of the land, and his fidelity to the realities of existence upon it. But the characters in the first novel were less developed than the landscape, and there was, in my view, less self-assurance in the "voice" of the novel.

In this successor volume, however, Mr. Doig has matched the land and its men and women. Perhaps it was the exercise of going back to roots, tracing the genesis of his main characters and fleshing out their lives, that gave Mr. Doig the impressive extension of his novelistic people in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair."

From the small Scots village of Nethermuir to the rude town of Gros Ventre, Angus and Rob were part of the construction of a new culture, which in so many bemusing ways still is shaping itself. There is a mythic component to Mr. Doig's Western writing that he manages to blend magnificently with the realities of life on the Montana land — no mean job of proportionality.

As Angus and Rob embark for the see FAIR, page E8





Ivan Doig, author of a tale of immigrants' struggle in the American West.

## FAIR

*From page E7*

the United States, Mr. Doig elaborates on an emigrant guide of the period:

"Do not emigrate in a fever, but consider the question in each and every aspect. The mother country must be left behind, the family ties, all old associations, broken. Be sure that you look at the dark side of the picture: the broad Atlantic, the dusty ride to the great West of America, the scorching sun, the cold winter — coldest ever you experienced! — and the hard work of the homestead. But if you finally, with your eyes open, decide to emigrate, do it nobly. Do it with no divided heart."

Doing it nobly does not exclude deep pain. This is a place where the

land leaves an indelible imprint on its people, where failure and success can be so hard to tell apart that inner resources are critical to survival.

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■ This is an  
affecting story,  
wonderfully well told.

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The final volume of the trilogy presumably will bring English Creek into post-World War I America. Can't hardly wait. In the meantime, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is a piece of work that lodges deeply in that corner of the mind where lovely novels endure.

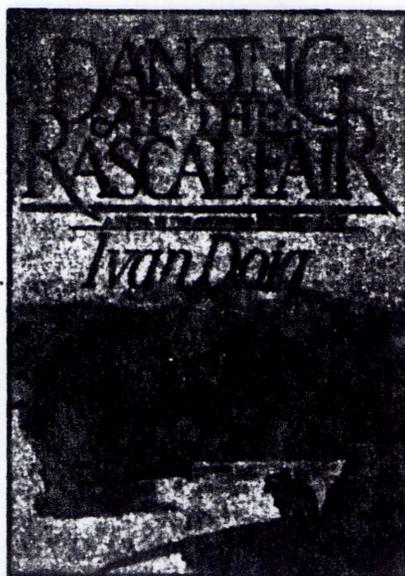
Woody West is associate editor of *The Washington Times*.

ters on two historical incidents: when a pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising on a coffle (a group of slaves chained together and herded, usually to market) in 1829 in Kentucky and a white woman living on an isolated farm in North Carolina in 1830 who gave sanctuary to runaway slaves.

Sherley Anne Williams has performed a *tour de force*. *DESSA ROSE* is one of the finest, richest, most moving novels about slavery.

How did she write it? "The novel...is fiction...invention. Maybe it is only a metaphor," says the author, "but I now own a summer in the 19th century." A beautiful comment from a gifted writer. (Sept., 260 pp., \$3.95)

Kathryn Falk



**Dancing at the Rascal Fair**

Ivan Doig

Atheneum

★★★★★

Here's a little secret — I like this book so much I've requested it be added to the preliminary list of nominees for The National Book Critics Circle Award for best fiction. *RASCAL FAIR* is everything a read should be: poetic, romantic, an exciting story, characters you love and hate but understand, insight into the how and why of living. I, who carry an innate prejudice against westerns (and this book, set in the Montana wilderness, is definitely a western), I loved every minute of it. I will read it again — and again.

Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay are teenagers in 1899 when they set out from Scotland for Helena, Montana, to join Rob's Uncle Lucas. They survive the stench and indignity of steamship steerage, enduring stormy ocean and inadequate diet. Arriving in Helena by train, they discover that Lucas Barclay isn't there. It's a year before they learn that he is living north and west of Helena, in the small almost-town of Gros Ventre.

With the advent of Spring they take a stage to Augusta, then a freight wagon northward to Gros Ventre. Finding Uncle Lucas is difficult and not without surprises, but find him they do. They select their homesteads and Angus becomes a schoolmaster for the growing community. It isn't long before he falls in love with a teacher from a neighboring town, the bonnie lass of his dreams, Anna Ramsey. He courts her, they fall in love and Angus' world becomes one of perfect enchantment. But enchantment is

doomed in this practical world.

It is an understatement to say that Doig is a writer whose words breathe life into place and time. When the sea tosses their steamships so brutally that it seems as though they'll be regurgitated from its groaning hulk, when brutal winters freeze their lives as still as if they were cast in a glass ball to be shaken to watch the snow, when a plague of influenza closes its death-grip on the community, when friendship forged in steel begins to shatter like crystal cast upon stone — this author brings us lilting phrases of fresh insights, unveiling lives of noble spirit.

**DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR** is a rare book — the best I've read in a long, long time. I've ordered others by Doig: *This House of Sky* (1978), *Winter Brothers* (1980), *The Sea Runners* (1982) and *English Creek* (1984). I may become a fan. (Sept., 403 pp., \$18.95)

Sunny Tiedemann

**Woman In the Wind**

Pamela Townley

Putnam

★★★★

Pamela Townley has written an historical saga of pride, love, vengeance and betrayal. It is a rags-to-riches story of Dickie Bennet, a simple English farm girl, who at the age of fifteen was ruthlessly raped by the sons of the influential Redfields, owners of the land her family works in order to scratch out a meager living.

Dickie raises her illegitimate son

and helps her father work the land when her beloved brother, Sam, is killed in World War I. After the war, Dickie discovers a new world of excitement when a barnstorming pilot lands in a field near the farm and takes her for a ride in the fragile plane, a Curtiss Jenny, which was used as a training plane during the Great War. After that first flight Dickie is enchanted — she dreams of being at the controls of a plane in flight. She listens to the pilot talk of stunt-flying, wing-walking, and parachuting. She sees in aviation a way to lift herself and Max out of the old life and into a bright future. She takes her son to America and joins a troupe of dare-devil flyers.

Over the next twenty years, Dickie uses every ounce of her energy and cunning to fulfill her promise to herself and to her bastard son Max, to become richer than the Redfields and get her revenge against Rupert and Frederick Redfield.

Later, with the help of a man who loves her far more than she will ever love him, Dickie founds an airline empire and with an awesome determination, contracts to deliver mail. A new industry is born.

By the time Dickie returns to England, wealthy and successful, ready to seek vengeance on the Redfields, the seeds of her discontent have taken root in her son Max—with malevolent consequences.

The story, set in the lush English countryside, New York and California, spans the years 1913 to after the Second World War and the Berlin Airlift. It is filled with scenes of family conflict and has all the ingredients for a page-turning story—a spunky heroine, a handsome hero, and a villain who is paid off in the end. (Aug., 471 pp., \$19.95)

Dorothy Garlock

**The Playmaker**

Thomas Keneally

Simon & Schuster

★★★★

**THE PLAYMAKER** is a serio-comic look at Australia during the late 1700's. Through the eyes of Lieutenant Ralph Clark, Thomas Keneally gives the reader an insight into the prison conditions in Sydney and also into the hearts of those sentenced there.

To amuse both the prisoners and the English army outcasts, Clark, the protagonist, is assigned to produce a

RAVE REVIEW  
10/1/87

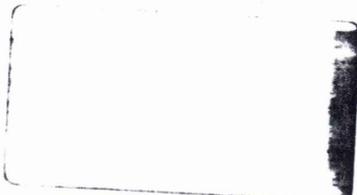


# California

**Dancing at the Rascal Fair**, by Ivan Doig (Atheneum, \$18.95). The new novel by the author of the wonderful *This House of Sky* follows the adventures of two Scottish immigrants as they leave their homeland for a new life in Montana, circa 1889.

CALIFORNIA MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1987



# Pioneer living without the sweeteners

"DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR." By Ivan Doig. New York: Atheneum, 405 pp. \$18.95.

By JOHN KRULL  
The Indianapolis News

Ivan Doig's new novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," does just that.

It dances.

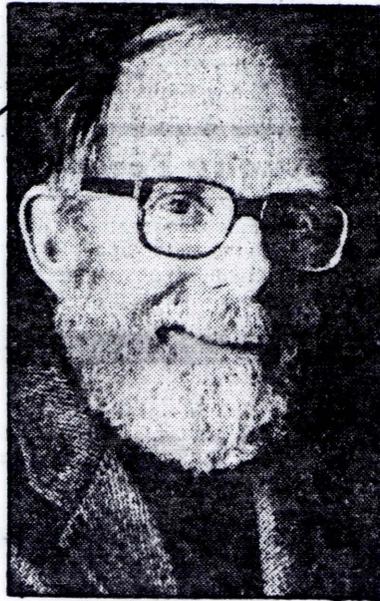
The book moves sprightly and lightly through steps of surprising complexity. The result is a performance more powerful than anything else Doig has done.

The principal dancer in "Rascal Fair" is the book's narrator and protagonist, Angus McCaskill. Angus is an American immigrant, a 19-year-old Scotsman who arrives in Montana with his best friend, Rob Barclay, in 1889 — just in time to celebrate Montana's statehood.

The novel, whatever sidetrips it might take, is the story of these two men, of their friendship, their families, their fights, their failures, and, yes, their victories.

Their tale is one of home-steading, of trying to eke out life in a stubborn land. Almost as soon as they arrive in Montana, Angus and Rob stake out adjacent plots of earth and — with the help of Rob's uncle, the memorably drawn Lucas Barclay — they begin shepherding together.

Soon, their lives are tied in other ways. After a painful ro-



Ivan Doig

*Sprightly steps in a powerful tale*

mance with another woman, Angus marries Rob's younger sister, Adair. Angus' and Adair's love is less than complete: Angus still yearns for the other woman and Adair is less than thrilled by the brutal lifestyle Montana imposes.

Within the boundaries of these relationships — Angus and Adair, Angus and Rob — Doig offers some new choreography in "Rascal Fair." Doig's strength always has been his ability to make the land seem

like a breathing character. He makes people seem connected with the place where they live.

That strength still is in evidence. Angus, Rob and Adair all are shaped by the Montana landscape. But they also are molded and remolded, in completely credible ways, by each other.

Take, as an example, the first days of Angus' and Adair's marriage to each other and the land itself:

"That winter, then. Adair and I so new to each other, and the snow-heavy valley of the North Fork so new to her. I at least believed I could take hope from the calendar. Even as the year-ending days slowed with cold and I fully realized that Adair's glances out into the winter were a prisoner's automatic eye-escapes toward any window, even then I still could tell myself that with any luck at all she would not have to go through a second Scotch Heaven winter with only cards for company."

This is pioneer living deprived of the artificial sweeteners of the West's romantic mythology. Death and tragedy occur in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," but they aren't caused by blazing six-guns or Indian attacks.

That's because "Rascal Fair" is about the battles that really won the West. The quiet battles individual men and women had to fight against loneliness, hard-

ship, the weather and human weakness.

In the course of telling of those battles, Doig offers a small but satisfying moral. The rewards of life in "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" — a loyal family, sufficient food and housing, respect from friends and neighbors, even survival itself — go to those who live within limits, who accept what life and land offer them and make do with it.

Perhaps those qualities are not heroism on a Hollywood scale, but they were heroic enough to people and settle the American West. And they are heroic enough to make Angus McCaskill a character to remember, and his shuffles through life's rascal fair a dance to treasure.

10/3/87

## Language of American frontier comes alive

### Research gives Doig narrative realistic voices

By Steve Paul  
The Star's book review editor

Ivan Doig's new novel, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, is a quiet but vigorous story of the Scottish immigrants who settled Montana in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The book is made all the more compelling by the lovely lilt of its language and the abundance of everyday historical detail. Doig has carefully endowed his narrative with an organic and convincing sound, just as he captured the vernacular ambiance of western Montana in the 1930s in *English Creek*. That 1984 book was the first of Doig's trilogy which, chronologically, actually follows *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*.

"It was a deliberate decision to try and write this trilogy in pretty much the language the people of the time might use," Doig said in an interview earlier this year at the American Booksellers Association convention in Washington. "In a sense I want their language to be part of the story."

"I was trying to get kind of a shimmer behind the language, I guess. The everyday poetry in the language, the way people talk on the ranches and in small towns or within the forest service."

"Whenever you get a closed occupational group or a small town or something, people are often poor in almost everything else but very often rich in language in a sense. The Irish are certainly an example of that. The Scottish are almost as poor, but as eloquent, I hope."

For *English Creek*, Doig said, he absorbed family remembrances and delved into the WPA federal writers' project collection of '30s vernacular. For the day-to-day language of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, Doig used not only the historical resources of Montana but also library and museum archives in Scotland, where he studied letters written home from America and diaries of people in the period. One other useful discovery, he said, were Scottish joke books of the 1880s and '90s.

"There would be page after page of this kind of ponderous, Victorian notion of what was funny. And then you come across



Ivan Doig...  
Montana's  
everyday  
poetry

a wonderful line about every eighth or 10th page. They were great on the class-consciousness kinds of jokes."

Although Doig made wide use of those sources directly, he also felt free as a novelist to invent what he wanted—a letter from home, an emigrant's guide, even Scottish verse—all of it with a ring of authenticity.

"Scholars of Robert Burns," Doig wrote in an acknowledgment in the book, "may be mystified by a number of the lines mentally quoted by Angus McCaskill herein. Some of Angus's remembered verse is indeed Burns; some is Burns and Doig; and some is, alas, merely Doig."

An example of his colorful collection of phrases is the bar-room toast. In *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, when Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay arrive in Rob's uncle's "raggle-taggle fringe of structures" known as Gros Ventre, they are greeted with a round at the Medicine Lodge and the preamble, "Broth to the ill, stiltis to the lame."

Doig said he would probably work in a similarly vivid phrase in the next Montana book. "It's not exactly a toast, but I once heard a guy in a bar say to the bartender, 'Nurse, we'll have another round of jelly sandwich-

es.' I want this kind of gamut of language."

Doig, 48, grew up in Montana, as readers of his 1978 memoir, *This House of Sky*, well know. He left for college at Northwestern University, then jobs in journalism, and for most of the last 20 years he has lived with his wife in Seattle. But Doig clearly has a love affair with the Big Sky state's land and its people. He is at work on the last book of the Montana trilogy, which will take young Jick McCaskill of *English Creek* into the present, coinciding with the state's 1889 centennial.

What makes Montanans so attractive?

"I guess it's the farmer, the working stiffs of the ranches," he said. "I am interested in people who are making a living with their hands—their feet, their heads, whatever—but working on the land, working against that big, strong, beautiful and very often treacherous country. There's one notion, in that country where the population thins out so much, that the figures of the people stand out that much more."

"I've lived in Seattle for 20 years, but I've not written any suburban or metropolitan stuff. I'm not sure if I ever will or not."

### Immigrant characters endure harsh Montana in 'Rascal Fair'

By Lenore Carroll  
contributing reviewer

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, by Ivan Doig (466 pages; Atheneum; \$18.95)

Ivan Doig's historical novel, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, is the second volume in a trilogy that began with *English Creek*, but it stands alone as a story and accomplishes what a historical novel should: Doig has researched the times and the place so that the Two Medicine country of Montana of 1889-1919 is as real as Kansas City today. His story captures one's attention without resorting to melodrama or cheap romance.

Doig's language is a major delight. The narrator is a man who quotes poetry to himself—sometimes Robert Burns, sometimes a pastiche—a schoolteacher whose students learn the old Scotch songs (some of them written by Doig himself):

*Dancing at the rascal fair,  
moon and star, fire and air,  
choose your mate and make a pair,  
dancing at the rascal fair.*

The narrator can relate all the characters' action and his own emotions in appropriate language. This is his first view of the Rockies:

"Ahead was where the planet greeted.

"To the west now, the entire horizon was a sky-marching procession of mountains. . . Peaks, cliffs, canyons, cite anything high or mighty and there it was up on that rough west brink of the world. . . How deep into the sky their motionless tumult reached, how far these Rockies columned across the earth."

Doig tells what it was like for two young adventurers, Rob Barclay and narrator Angus McCaskill, to leave Scotland in 1889 and travel to Montana in search of Lucas Barclay, Rob's uncle. They spend a winter in Helena, then find Lucas in the tiny would-be town of Gros Ventre just east of the Rockies. Readers learn the back-breaking life of these men and other homesteaders who move to Scotch Heaven.

One character says: "People keep having to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. This Montana sets

**There are no Indians in the kitchen garden or bears killing sheep.**

its own terms and tells you them or else."

They also are shaped by their own passions. Carefree Rob Barclay sends for his sister Adair to marry McCaskill, the sober narrator. Before she arrives, McCaskill falls in love with another woman. Their sexual attraction isn't enough and he marries another, but McCaskill never stops longing for her, though he marries Adair. His longing leads eventually to a rift between McCaskill and Barclay and between McCaskill and Adair.

There are no Indians in the kitchen garden or bears killing sheep, no gunplay or forced drama. This is a book of the people's personalities from their destinies and how accidents of time and place—a mining explosion, a chance meeting at a camp, the influenza epidemic of 1917-18—force changes in their lives. The reader has a sense of the overwhelming landscape, effects of the harsh climate on people's lives and fortunes, the compromises that the characters are forced to make.

This is a real story, not a Saturday afternoon western movie conflict of good and evil where the cowboy wears a white hat and always wins. This story all of the characters are good and bad. Time passes and people change and grow. The carefree Rob Barclay, your partner of McCaskill, becomes the angry and embittered man who turns McCaskill's back against him and dissolves their partnership until the terms of the deal will force them together again. He fails in business and falls back on sheep ranching to survive, but his stubbornness destroys him.

Doig has re-created the texture of the lives of people who may be fictional, but who could have been real.

6-D

## Entangled struggles in Big Sky Country

*DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR.* By Ivan Doig. Atheneum, 403 pp., \$18.95.

By MAUDE McDANIEL

"Elbowroom for the spirit," thought Scottish immigrant Angus McCaskill in 1889 when he first laid eyes on the Montana country, where "the planet greated" and the Rocky Mountains "startled and stunned a person . . . how deep into the sky their motionless tumult reached, how far these Rockies columned across the Earth."

Ivan Doig has never let readers down, through four books that melded the "entangled struggle" of human beings into a land and weather where "people keep having to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much." *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* upholds his tradition gloriously.

Named after an old Scottish market song ("devils and angels all were there/heel and toe, pair by pair"), it precedes *English Creek*, in Doig's trilogy of autobiographical fiction, embedding the American roots of that story's McCaskills in the frontier history of homesteading in Montana, where Doig grew up, "listening to Montanans."

Angus of the watching eyes, his Robert Burns ever at the ready, leaves for America from Nether-

### BOOKS

muir, in company with his best friend Rob of the proclaiming eyes and a "burnish that glowed" with the "Barclay special mix" of charm and cocksureness.

Finally locating Rob's uncle, Lucas, they thread into America, homesteading together along the Rocky Mountain front with their thousands of sheep over the next 30 years. But only for 24 years do they remain friends.

Angus tells the story of this friendship and the final ripping flesh of it in an angular prose that elbows its way along like the Rockies themselves, with a billow and a flourish that few authors can pull off without sounding more artificial than artful. Yet Doig manages, and, as in his other books, moves the reader beyond a leisurely appreciation of creative writing to engagement with the events and people themselves.

For Doig, the land where this humanity roils is as much a personality as Rob or Angus. Only it lacks something, a tongue to speak "the words of the land," to say for itself "here is Montana, here is America, here is all yet to come."

Never mind. Doig says it all.

McDaniel is a Maryland newspaper columnist.

*Handwritten signature*

## ENTERTAINERBOOKS

# Doig's craft is word magic

*But his practical pragmatism regards promotion as the lambing out of writing*

By GINNY MERRIAM  
for the Missoulian

Ask Ivan Doig if he's a Montana writer, and he has a definite answer.

"I consider myself a writer, no adjective," he said in an interview last week in Missoula.

Doig, whose recently released "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is a novel about a sheep-ranching family at the turn of the century in the Two Medicine country, said his training and the craft aspect of his work are what make his writing, not his upbringing in Montana. He'd have been a writer anywhere, he said, and "within that I'm working on country and lives that interest me."

"I think writers can be grounded in local land and language and still be writing about the biggest country of all: Life," he said.

He said "Montana writers" is "a quick, convenient tagline like 'New York Yankees'" and in that sense a legitimate way to look at books that share a setting.

But, he said, "In terms of standing back and looking at the body of the work, there I hope we're writing into bigger country."

Doig has been out promoting his book, which may turn out to be his most commercially successful so far because of its appealing love story and Doig's growing name recognition with the public.

His tour includes Oregon, Wyoming, the San Francisco Bay area, Philadelphia, New York and

lots of places in between. Each time he finishes a book, he said, he takes out two months for promotion — his practical background allowing him to regard promotion as the lambing time or grain harvesting of writing.

In Missoula, he signed books at three bookstores and gave a public reading at the University of Montana. At the reading, he told the crowd he misses many things about Montana, but not the winters or the wind. He's a droll man who seems happy with where he is, the Seattle area.

"A lot of overnight success happens after 20 years," he said at the reading.

Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs in 1939. His family moved to a sheep ranch near Dupuyer during his freshman year in high school, and he graduated from Valier High School, where he was "an inept javelin-thrower," in 1957.

A united effort by his family and a full tuition scholarship sent him to Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., where he earned undergraduate and master's degrees in journalism.

"Getting me out of the Dupuyer-Ringling area was our equivalent of a moonshot," he said.

After working as an editorial writer for a chain of downstate Illinois newspapers and as assistant editor of The Rotarian magazine, he moved to Seattle, where his wife, Carol, teaches mass media at Shoreline Community College.

His journalism training is "the



Ivan Doig: He's out promoting his new book, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair."

muscle and sinew" of how he works, he said. It taught him how to research and trained him to approach writing as a craft, like woodworking, he said, "right down to the consonants and vowels."

It also taught him about deadlines, which he said he never misses.

"I take the word literally," he said. "I used to think you died if you missed one."

Doig doesn't draw a strict line between fiction and nonfiction, saying a writer can find stories, not necessarily invent them.

"I'm a fairly literal, practical-minded son of thousands of years of Scots men and women. I tend to see writing as writing," he said. "The supposed high walls between fiction, nonfiction and poetry aren't really there for me.

It's all words, and the point is to do the words as magically as you can."

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair," his fifth book, tells of the same family as did "English Creek," published in 1984, but comes first chronologically. Doig said this was deliberate;

Doig first became acquainted with Missoula when he came for an autograph party for his book "This House of Sky" in 1978. In May 1979, UM creative writing professor Bill Kittredge convinced him to participate in the "Who Owns the West" conference here. Doig had just returned from Scotland and researching for "Dancing," and almost didn't come. Now he's glad he did.

"It was a landmark event," he said. "I came out of that with friendships that have brought me back and back to Missoula."

## Doig dances with life, love and language

By GINNY MERRIAM  
for the Missoulian

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair," by Ivan Doig, Atheneum (Macmillan Publishing Co.), 1987, hardback, 400 pages, \$18.95.

Saying that Ivan Doig has good command of the language is like saying that eastern Montana

### Review

is breezy. Doig makes the language sit up, roll over, speak, fetch and lie down. The reader is the one who begs for more.

Doig's new novel reaches back to 1889 and the emigration from Scotland to Montana of the forebears of the McCaskill family of Doig's "English Creek."

Rob Barclay, whose insouciance and ruddy face give him "a stance like a lord and a hue like a lady," and Angus McCaskill, a

wheelwright's clerk with a deep, thoughtful streak, step off for America past a drowned horse at the dock. At 19, they discover seasickness before America, where they hope to find Rob's Uncle Lucas in Montana.

They arrive in time for Montana's statehood party in Helena and eventually make their way to Gros Ventre, a "thin scatter of buildings," none of which qualify as "much more than an eyesore." Here they find Lucas, who is not as they expected him to be, but who helps them get started at homesteading and sheep-ranching in the Two Medicine country.

The story continues through the winter of 1919-1920, with narrator Angus telling of the lives he and Rob find, along with the lives of others in Gros Ventre and what grows into a settlement at Scotch Heaven.

Doig gives us strong, large, wonderful doses of a younger Montana, long-suffering characters and the reaction of land and people created when the two get together.

In "Rascal Fair," we live through marriages, accidents, deaths, lambs smothered by snow, droughts, blizzards, personal fallings-out, depressed prices, an influenza epidemic, a frustrated love story. There are enough conflicts for three novels: sheepmen vs. cowmen, ranchers vs. Forest Service, father vs. son, friend vs. friend, optimism vs. life, settlers vs. Montana. The land is changed by the people, and the people are anything but neutral about Montana.

Rob on Montana: "You don't find a place like this Montana just any old where."

Angus on winter Montana: "Here was existence scoured down as far as it could go."

Forest ranger Stanley Meixell on Montana: "There's never enough weather in Montana except when there's too much of it."

Lucas on Montana: "Lad, at least Montana is the prettiest place in the world to work yourself to death, ay?"

## NEW BOOKS

### No 'Rules' left

■ "The Rules of Attraction," by Bret Easton Ellis. Simon & Schuster. 250 pages. \$17.95.

Bret Easton Ellis' characters have an odd resemblance to Beatrix Potter's.

True, they drink, get high, get tranquilized, spend a great deal of their parents' money and practice junk-food sex. The comparison with the chaste Miss Potter's crew may seem far-fetched. Furthermore, her rabbits and squirrels are more human than Ellis' college kids, and livelier.

But the resemblance is there. Both groups live snugly in burrows and have infrequent contact with the outside world.

Of course, Potter's point is the coziness of small, furred things. Ellis' point is the bleakness of a lost generation with platinum credit cards. But both the coziness and the bleakness are laid on; neither is earned.

Ellis' first novel, "Less Than Zero," was set in Los Angeles, its protagonist a New England college student back home for the summer. "The Rules of Attraction" is New England college life on the spot.

There are no parties; there is only partying. There are no real characters; there are only names.

Ellis' theme, traditional to social satirists, is "How We Live Now" or, given the anomie of his young people, "How We Fail to Live Now." His ear and eye for the patter and drift of his contemporaries in the rich college set are sharp; his surfaces are sometimes convincing.

But he never departs from surface. Ellis, both here as in his first book, lacks the strength — or perhaps the courage or desire — to precipitate his swirling materials.

— Richard Eder, Los Angeles Times

### Different 'Light'

■ "South Light," by Michael Parfit. Collier Books. 295 pages, \$7.95, paperback.

From its riveting opening passage, which describes three planes trying to land during a whiteout in Antarctica, to its graceful and haunting epilogue, Michael Parfit's "South Light" is an enchanting chronicle of the year Parfit spent way down south.

Parfit, who has lived in Montana at times, has crafted a superb piece of travel writing. The people you meet in "South Light" — the scientists and explorers who are trying to understand Antarctica — share a gentle obsession with the land. It's an obsession shared by the first explorers of this brutal yet beautiful land.

Finally, it's an obsession that infects Parfit as well. Reading "South Light," it's one that's easy to understand.

We missed "South Light" when it was first released in hardcover. It's finally been issued in paperback, and it's well worth checking out.

— Mike McNally, Missoulian



POSITION	BOOK / AUTHOR	LAST MONTH	MONTHS ON CHART
1	Dancing at the Rascal Fair / Ivan Doig	-	1
2	Rubber Legs and White Tail-Hairs	12	2
3	Rock Springs / Richard Ford	-	1
4	A River Runs Through It / Maclean	1	7
5	Tough Trip Through Paradise / Garcia	-	5
6	Lonesome Dove / Larry McMurtry	-	1
7	This House of Sky / Ivan Doig	-	1
8	English Creek / Ivan Doig	-	3
9	Owning It All / Wm. Kittredge	5	5
10	The Beet Queen / Louise Erdrich	-	1
11	Roadside Geology of Montana / Al, Hyndman	2	7
12	Fools Crow / James Welch	-	4

**Books of regional interest**

\* Returns to chart after an absence of at least one month

# Doig's newest storms the charts

By GINNY MERRIAM  
for the Missoulian

Ivan Doig's "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" has stormed onto our West Sellers chart.

Not only did the book receive unanimous support — a vote from every bookstore polled — but it did it in its first month on

## West Sellers

the chart. It also pulled along two previous Doig titles, giving him three best-selling books at once. Booksellers are happy, and Doig and his publisher probably are, too.

"Rock Springs" made a strong debut on the chart, and Patrick McManus' "Rubber Legs and White Tail-Hairs" made a good showing of its own, receiving best-selling votes from every bookstore and moving up from the bottom of the list to the No. 2 spot. "Rubber Legs" also has sparked sales of older McManus books.

This month's big drop: "Roadside Geology of Montana," which has been on the chart each of the seven months we've done West Sellers. It fell from the No. 2 slot all the way to No. 11. One bookseller speculated that the decline in "Roadside Geology" was caused by the start of the icy-road season (well, it's supposed to have started). At any rate, the tourists are gone, and natives apparently are staying home.

Books that didn't make the chart included Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety," which received rave reviews from three

booksellers, who said it has a Western flavor and is unmistakably Stegner.

Booksellers also were talking about "Hanging the Sheriff: A Biography of Henry Plummer" from the University of Utah Press. The book offers a revisionist view of the vigilante sheriff, whom historian K. Ross Toole regarded as "undoubtedly psychopathic." Also mentioned this month was "Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water," a 1986 book recently out in paperback from Viking that's a critical history of water management in the West. Watch for reviews of both these books soon on this page.

Our Dillon bookstore reported interest in a book called "Madeline," an anonymous memoir of a woman "of the oldest profession," as Pat Blade of The Bookstore so delicately put it. It's a Persea Books reproduction of a 1919 edition that originally was suppressed. The heroine visits and describes Butte and Bannack (but practices her trade Back East).

A word about our polling method, prompted by a reader inquiry: we poll, by telephone, 10 bookstores in western Montana — six in Missoula and one each in Kalispell, Bigfork, Hamilton and Dillon. Booksellers, who are consistently helpful, list 10 or 12 of their top-selling books of regional interest — some connection, however vague, to the West is sufficient. In our tally, each book gets one vote, regardless of position on anyone's list. In the case of ties, we close our eyes and put down a finger on a title. It's decidedly unscientific, as we've said before.

# Exhibit targets nature's violer

By MICHAEL MOORE  
of the Missoulian

There is, in the mostly literal disaster scenes wrought by San Francisco artist James Morris, an unsettling sense of connection with the natural world.

Morris, whose show opens Friday at 7 p.m. in Missoula's Brunswick Gallery, brings us, through drawing and sculpture, to the threshold of nature at its most



MICHAEL GALL

James Morris: S aster run through

## Preview

catastrophic — tornado, earthquake, flood, volcano, tidal wave — then makes us to come to terms with it.

"A very important function of art is seeking that connection, to reawaken it in people who have become so insulated from their environment," Morris said.

Morris's show — five charcoal drawings, more than a half dozen ceramic sculptures and a transformation of the Brunswick itself into a sort of witness to disaster — fulfills that artistic goal.

Morris, who taught one quarter at the University of Montana two years ago, has long been fascinated by nature unleashed; his arrival in the world came amidst massive flooding in California. He's seen the depth of drought, the trembling of earthquake, the panic of flash flood.

"I guess my fascination with natural disasters finally caught up with me," he said.

The show envelops one in disaster. The drawings, in particular two flood scenes and an ominous faceoff between truck and tornado, are haunting, almost photo-journalistic in their shades-of-gray rendering, yet somehow beyond real.

In a calculated absence, no people are seen in either the drawings or the sculptures, forcing the viewer into the scene.

"I don't want people feeling empathy with some particular person in the piece," Morris said. "I'd rather have the viewer come up with his own reaction."

Which is not to say that Morris leaves the viewer without hint as to his own feelings in the face of cataclysm.

Along the sides of the ceramic sculptures — all of which are small enough to be held in the

hand — are writing Morris' entrance in In streaming sentences comes witness to di a perspective from fected by the drama the view comes from son, sometimes from child, but always t beyond the physical tumultuous realm o

To enhance Mo Brunswick's small transformed into a lief center, comple and refreshments, opening.

"It's just a way little fun along wit said gallery directo wick.

James Mor for five weeks. Afte opening, the gallery regular hours, noo Tuesday through S

For insu



# Book World

## Ivan Doig: The Old West And the New

### DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum. 403 pp. \$18.95

By Richard Critchfield

**I**VAN DOIG is a happy mixture of poet and historian. In just nine years he has produced five truly distinctive books set in Montana and the Pacific Northwest, three of them novels. All beautifully evoke the American westering experience and firmly establish Doig as one of our finest Western writers.

Look at his achievement: *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, published in 1978 when he was 39, is a powerful memoir about his widowed, sheep-herding father, Charles Doig, son of Scottish immi-

Richard Critchfield is the author of "Those Days: An American Album" and "Villages." He is currently writing a book about Britain.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RYAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

grants, who instills in his son a deep affinity for language, storytelling and the raw Montana landscape.

This strong sense of the land and a growing preoccupation with time are further developed in *Winter Brothers* (1980), interwoven observations by Doig and excerpts from the 1862-90 diaries of James G. Swan, an obscure artist and observer of coastal Indian life in the Pacific Northwest.

The imaginary retrieval of the past became central in *The Sea Runners* (1982), his first novel. Based on an actual event, it tells of the escape by four indentured Swedes from Russian America (1853 Alaska) to what is now Oregon in a stolen canoe; two die on the way. It is a little masterpiece of harrowing adventure.

In *English Creek* (1984), the first novel in a projected trilogy, Doig introduces the fictional McCaskill family and their sprawling Two Medicine Country. This is the familiar geography of *This House of Sky*, though the town of Dupuyer, just below the Rocky Mountain Front, has now become Gros Ventre (the locals say "Grove-on"). It is summer in the 1930s and Jick McCaskill, the 14-year-old narrator, goes on a horseback trip with his forest ranger father, Varick. Some of the set pieces in this coming-of-age story, such as a Fourth of July rodeo and a forest fire, are terrific.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* is the trilogy's second volume. Another panorama of life in Two Medicine Country, it takes place much earlier, 1889-1919, —Continued on page 11

# Dancing at the Rascal Fair

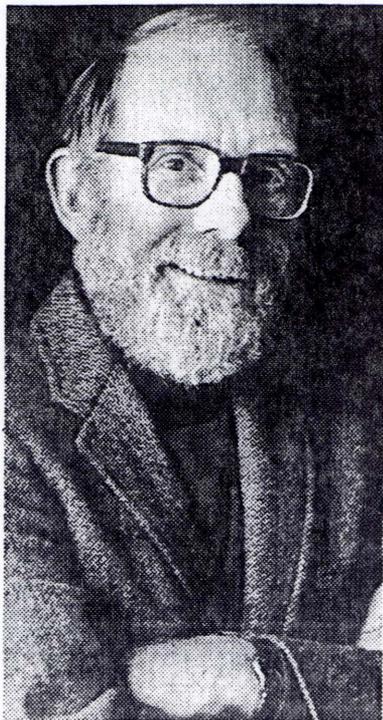
Continued from page 1

and its dramatic thread is the friendship and eventual falling out of two Scotsmen, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, Jick's grandfather. They venture from Glasgow by steerage, fellow villagers of Nethermuir, and homestead as neighbors in Montana, doing what they know, sheep-farming. At work out on the range, in the lambing shed and docking corral, over 30 years they prosper. Angus teaches in a one-room school and, thwarted in his love for Anna Ramsay, another teacher, he marries Rob's sister, Adair.

Time passes through them as they go from youth to middle age, and blizzards, the 1918 influenza epidemic and the raw, rugged land take their toll. The building of fences to divide the once-open rangeland into national forest spells the passing of these pioneer days.

The book is warm in feeling and rich in texture; I found that it packed more emotional punch once Varick, the McCaskills' only child, enters the story; there are strong overtones of Doig's own relationship with his father. Indeed, Charles Doig is quoted at the outset: "Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out." An attraction of Doig's books is how they all fit together; they expand our experience.

Doig does better to convey the quiet feel and detail of ordinary life than to crash cymbals in dramatic crescendo. As Chekhov said, the best writers are realistic and describe life as it is. Doig has said that he tries to "make the stuff up as realistically as I can." But to describe



BY JIM BATES

## Ivan Doig

past life as it was is to lack the stimulus of immediate experience. How does he breathe so much life into it?

The secret of Ivan Doig's gift, I think, is his sense of surfaces and place and his ear for dialogue; his people come alive when they talk. And they talk all the time. All but one of his books is written in the first person.

In the earliest, 1889, passages of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, his two Scots speak English strongly influenced by Biblical and Shakespearean cadences. By 1919, they sound a lot more like their fellow American sheep-herders and ranchers. Doig can enter the talk of Burns-quoting Scottish immigrants or grim Scandinavian escapees of a

century ago. Or the talk of modern cowboys at a rodeo. He changes his voice as he becomes for the time being one of them.

Here is Angus McCaskill, noting infant lambs are "a majority of legs, long and askew as the drone pipes of a limp bagpipe." The same narrator voices Doig's creed of realism: "It would be heartening to think the world is growing less harsh, but the evidence doesn't often say so."

Nor is Doig's gift merely literary. Besides his intuitions and artistry there is the iron of purpose of an ex-ranch hand who has earned his PhD in history. An enormous researcher, Doig is one of those historians who goes from library to library forever on the scent of new documentation. He pours over faded records and newspapers, he reads, he hikes, he travels, he explores, and he talks to all the old people he can. Unusual among novelists, he provides an acknowledgments section at the back of each book, telling how he put it together and who helped him.

In Montana and the Pacific Northwest, this gifted poet-historian has enormous, vivid experience to draw upon as he sets out to rescue some more of our past from oblivion. Let us cheer him on, hoping the next nine years will be as productive as the last. ■

# Rocky Mountain Blues

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

by Ivan Doig

(Atheneum Publishers:  
\$18.95; 384 pp.)

Reviewed by Winifred Blevins

In his impressive new novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," Ivan Doig stakes a claim to the mantle worn by Wallace Stegner for half a century, the reputation as our foremost recorder and interpreter of life in the historic high, dry American West. With "This House of Sky," "English Creek" and especially this book, he has earned it.

In "Rascal Fair," Doig returns to the mythical Two Medicine country of "English Creek," a creation based on the region of his own growing up, along the Rocky Mountain front in Montana. And the principal character here is Angus McCaskill, the grandfather of "English Creek's" Jick Mc-

Caskill.

Angus is the McCaskill who uproots the family tree from Scottish soil and replants it in Montana. In 1889 he crosses the Atlantic with friend Rob Barclay, a journey by boat that terrifies Angus. He journeys on westward, drawn by the siren song of free land. He claims a homestead and ekes out a living raising sheep.

Angus' life does not turn out to be the adventure the young Scot was romantically looking forward to, the rascal fair of the title, a carnival of traveling musicians and gay Highlanders, a time for dancing:

*Dancing at the rascal fair,  
devils and angels all were there,  
heel and toe, pair by pair,  
dancing at the rascal fair.*

*Dancing at the rascal fair,  
moon and star, fire and air,  
choose your mate and make a pair,  
dancing at the rascal fair.*

Homestead life proves to be hard—physically, economically, especially emotionally. Angus falls in love with a young woman—the depiction of his rapture is the great

charm of the novel—but she chooses another.

Angus proceeds. He raises his sheep. Marries a second-choice woman. Has one son. But he never stops longing for his first sweetheart, and that passion sours his life. It turns his lifelong friend Rob into an enemy. It keeps his wife at a distance. Most painfully, it turns his

son against him.

Doig makes these losses seem not exceptional but the human condition, and the way we cope with them the fabric of what we are. His greatest strength is exploring the coagulated feelings of human beings within the family. His characters are not the morality-play heroes of the genre Western, but

real people, tangled in their feelings, handicapped by their deficiencies, deeply decent, yearning for closeness, finding it only intermittently. Their melancholy dance of life is rendered with exquisite nuance.

*Blevins is a writer and critic living in Jackson, Wyo.*

## REVIEW

# When Montana was the Great Maybe

Dancing at the Rascal Fair

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum  
405 pp., \$18.95

By Carol Van Strum  
Special for USA TODAY

Two dead horses, separated by 30 years and half a world, frame the lives and landscape of Ivan Doig's new novel, the second of his Montana trilogy.

"Trouble never travels lonesome," remarks Jick McCaskill in *English Creek*, the first in the trilogy. *Rascal Fair* leaps a generation back to Jick's grandfather, Angus McCaskill, and his friend Rob, "stepping toward America past a drowned horse," on the quay at Greenock, Scotland, in 1889. Full of hope and unspoken misgivings, the two young men gamely turn from the pinched old bit of earth called Scotland to brave first the seas and then three decades of trouble together as homesteaders in the northern Montana Rockies.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, its title drawn from a bargain-festival song, is told by Angus in retrospect. What begins as a simple lament for his lost friend reels into a celebration of their tumultuous friendship and the vivid, shifting patterns of the lives it joined.

Cocky, irresistible Rob lures Angus to the New World with his glib tongue and visions of adventure and wealth in a silver mine called the Great Maybe. Rob's bridge to this vision is his Uncle Lucas, the maimed but indomitable survivor of a mine explosion, who becomes their guide to the wilderness and its often eccentric pioneers.

Uncle Lucas tactfully extricates Rob and Angus from their romantic follies and repeated financial crises, shepherding Angus through his loveless, oddly tender marriage to Rob's sister. Not even Uncle Lucas, however, can mend the resulting rift between Rob and Angus; in his anger, Rob turns Angus' own son against him. Even in death, Uncle Lucas never gives up trying to reconcile the two



By Jim Bates

DOIG: 'Rascal Fair' is the second in his Montana trilogy.

friends, bequeathing them joint ownership of the sheep that ultimately bring Rob to his death.

More powerful even than Uncle Lucas in shaping the two friends' destinies is the landscape and climate of northern Montana. Here, against the brutal beauty of the Rockies, turn-of-the-century homesteaders flock, staking their families' lives on a gamble with floods, drought, fires, blizzards, winter isolation and the suicidal whimsies of livestock.

The few who endure inevitably confront the productive limits of the land itself; resistance to those limits erupts in the community's dramatic response to the creation of a national forest that ends unlimited grazing on public land.

"I don't know of anything you can just keep on using up and using up and using up, and not run out of," the unwelcome new Forest Service ranger tells his hostile audience. "And that's all the Forest Service is saying with this Two Medicine National Forest. You can use it, but not use it up." In moving the reluctant community to accept the ranger's wisdom, Angus unwittingly shapes the future for his son.

Such moments tolled the end of the American frontier. Doig's *Rascal Fair* captures the spirit of a people poised between the buckboard and the Model-T, between the old and the new West.

Carol Van Strum is a writer in Tidewater, Ore.

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# BOOKS

10/25

Denver Post

**DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR**

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, \$18.95

# Novel about Scotsmen in Montana is a rare treat

By Noland Norgaard

Ivan Doig's "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is one of the rarest treats a reader may enjoy: a novel to be savored from word to word, page to page — a realistic tale of pioneer Scottish ranchers battling for survival in the northernmost reaches of Montana, told in the lyrical prose and sly idiomatic wit that was their heritage from remote Gaelic ancestors.

The narrator is Angus McCaskill. His opening words, "To say the truth, it was not how I expected — stepping off to America past a drowned horse." It was October, 1889, and Angus, age 19, and his bosom pal, Robert Barclay, had left their Forfareshire home and were embarking as steamship steerage passengers to seek their fortunes in Montana, which attained statehood that same year.

Angus is indeed a fictional character but he rings true, as does his account of the ensuing 30 years in which he doubled as sheep rancher and country school teacher. His melodic words are a blend of Scottish aphorisms, witticisms of American ranchmen of the period, and choice borrowings from poet Robert Burns.

Only a competent writer with Doig's background could have written this book. Son of a ranch hand, with the appropriate middle name of Campbell, he was born in a tiny Montana town on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. First a ranch worker, he then was a small-town newspaper editor and free-lance writer while earning an education capped by a doctoral degree.

Realist that he is, the author offers no gunfights, range wars, saloon brawls or other stereotypes of Old West fiction. His central fig-

ures, the McCaskills and Barclays, are cast somewhat in the pattern of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare and the old Greeks: capable of enduring all natural hardships but destined to suffer and even to perish because of their own uncontrolled passions and obsessions.

As for the odd title, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," it was the rollicking anthem sung in Angus' native village "when Nethermuir farmers and farm workers met to bargain out each season's wages and terms and put themselves around a drink or so in the process." It began with:

"Dancing at the rascal fair  
"Devils and angels all were there

"Heel and toe, pair by pair," and became quite risqué as the drink or so became many.

Doig's earlier works have brought 13 awards, including a fellowship that enabled him to devote three years to research in Scotland and England and to study various American sources for an ambitious trilogy on early western life, of which this volume is the second. The first, "English Creek," was published in 1984.

Wallace Stegner, a true authority on early days in our West, paid this tribute to that first volume: "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real Montana, and real West, through the eyes of a real writer." This new work deserves at least equal acclaim.

Noland Norgaard is a former correspondent with *The Associated Press* both in this country and abroad. L-1

## Books

Doig captures  
"flow of life"Irene Wanner  
Reporter

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the second part of Seattle writer Ivan Doig's Montana trilogy, whose completion will coincide with that state's centennial in 1989. The first novel, "English Creek," was set in the Depression era; the new volume begins in 1889, with Scotsmen Angus McCas-

ill and Rob Burns immi-

grating to America.

Drawn from their homeland by many reasons — youth, dreams, the mysterious promises of a

crisp \$100 bill that magi-

cally appears each Christ-

mas from that far place called Montana — the boys

embark on a voyage that ends in Gros Ventre and

begins a tale of 30 years' struggles and pleasures.

The sweep and size and sheer seeming endlessness

of the Two Medicine country thrill Angus, Doig's

narrator. Over the years, Rob emerges as more self-

interested: Land is a boundless gift for his profit.

Conservation isn't an issue until Roosevelt's newly-

formed national forests cause grazing quotas.

Both men marry: Rob, quickly, and years later,

Angus, to Rob's sister, Adair, as a make-do solution

when the love of his life, Anna Ramsay, chooses

another man. Angus pines for Anna throughout the

book. He is the story's center — the book's "I" and eye

but also centered on himself and his lost love.

Because of this continuing love, Rob meddles in

Angus' marriage, protesting Angus' coolness to Adair;

Adair simply makes do. She dreams of a "visit" to

Scotland, because "There is so much of this country.

People keep having to stretch themselves out of shape

trying to cope with so much."

Both the land and its language are Doig's territory.

In a 1984 Seattle Review interview, he spoke of his

aims for the trilogy. "My interest is in using working

language of the area," he said, and for "working people

in the American West." The "richness" of "native

Montanese" colors the story brightly.

Yet at times, Doig's "carving" to get the "poetry

under prose" is evident: heavy alliteration ("levered

liquid to their lips"), nouns turned into verbs

("gloomed," "barring," "processioning"). Doig's desire

to "write for the ear" works when it isn't so glaring. In

this fall's Seattle Review, another accomplished

Montana stylist, Norman Maclean, showed similar

concerns for hard lessons: Pacing, understatement,

action undelayed by explication. He warns against ever

letting a reader "suspect" you're "writing pretty."

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is built on diligent

research, a strong and unpredictable story, and a grand

mix of characters. The pace is more assured than that

in "English Creek," but readers may still "fast

forward" where the writer's love of land and language

overpowered decisions to edit.

Doig's fiction improves with each novel; he

captures "the flow of life," even if he's sometimes

reluctant to leave the detail-oriented nature of those

other genres behind.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Dancing at the  
Rascal Fair**By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum

400 pages. \$18.95

# Doig novel gives a sense of place, and love

Ivan Doig bounces back with his new novel about turn-of-the-century Montana. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* takes us back two generations in the McCaskill family. Readers of Doig's earlier *English Creek* (a book I liked much less than *Rascal Fair*) will recall that in that book we followed young Jick McCaskill during his 14th summer in the high mountain country where Doig himself grew up. In *Rascal Fair* we flash back to Jick's grandfather Angus, the first of the clan to come to America from Scotland.

Instead of one summer's leisurely boyhood preambulations, in the new book we live through 20 exciting, excruciating years. Angus McCaskill leaves his impoverished Scottish town, travels across the Atlantic and across North America to Montana, where he builds a new life raising sheep in the beautiful but harsh Big Sky country. The two very different McCaskill books have that one key ingredient in common: The Montana setting. Doig knows his own country and its weather and knows how to make us feel what they are like. I don't know that country at all; I've never been there. But through Doig's descriptions I feel I have.

Doig is in an honorable American tradition in picking a geographical place in which to build a series of historical novels. Among



Thomas  
O'Connell

others, James Fenimore Cooper, William Faulkner, and Conrad Aiken have told multi-volume stories set in memorable places. Doig's Montana stories remind me most of Hervey Allen's series of novels about the first settlers in the southwestern Pennsylvania area. True, Allen's books were set much earlier in American history than Doig's and they centered on one key protagonist (with the wonderful name of Salathiel Albine) rather than on a family. But, like Doig, Allen captured the flavor of an actual place through changing times.

In Allen's case it was specifically the confluence of the Mongahela and Allegheny Rivers that forms the Ohio, during the earliest days of European colonization. He then traced the development of American civilization through decades of hard times. As with Doig's Montana, I identify with Allen's Pitts-

burgh and know its history in my bones. That's what a masterful series of historical novels can do.

Like so many 19th century ocean voyagers, as well as professional sailors, Angus McCaskill never learned how to swim. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* might have ended differently if he had. Also Angus' terror in the ship's hold during his long voyage across the Atlantic would have been much less. It has always amazed me that so little attention was paid to teaching people how to swim previous to our own times. Think of all that ocean travel by sailors who drowned if they happened to fall overboard! Angus sees to it that his own son learns to swim, but even then he is unable to force himself to learn.

**THE MOST** affecting thing in *Rascal Fair* is, surprisingly enough, a romance. In Doig's previous books we haven't seen much of love affairs. *The House of Sky* and *Winter Brothers* were autobiographical and affairs of the heart were played down. Jick McCaskill in *English Creek* is too young to have a real romance. *The Sea Runners*, Doig's only other novel, is about four men; no women appear. So it is a delight to find Doig handling an achingly tender romance with such sensitivity. I don't want to spoil it for you, so suffice it to say I can't get it out of my mind: it haunts me.

In contrast to the romance, which is played up, Doig plays down the sheer drudgery of the life of his characters. They accept brutally difficult, unremitting work as part of life. Hard labor is simply omnipresent. Those who aren't strong enough to do the work leave for a marginally easier life elsewhere.

Some, like Angus' wife and his best friend, Rob Barclay, are beaten down by it. But Angus plugs along; he doesn't complain that life is mostly hard work literally from dawn to dusk every day of the week. His life goes on in spite of it, or, perhaps more accurately, it goes on at the interstices of the tough chores he must always get back to.

As I read of Angus' unremitting labors, I found myself thinking what an enormous debt his descendants, like young Jick in *English Creek*, owe to him. Oh! The guts and fortitude of all of those forbears who got on those boats to come to America and then with agonizing labor built new lives! I hereby thank my own counterparts of Angus McCaskill who came a bit earlier from Ireland's County Cork and County Tipperary. I hope you all get *The Journal-American* up there where you are now and can read my words of gratitude!

O'Connell teaches Spanish at Bellevue Community College.

# Doig's newest novel deserves attention

## NORTHWEST BOOK NOOK

BY ANN SALING  
FREE-LANCE WRITER

**Dancing at the Rascal Fair**, by Ivan Doig. Atheneum, New York, 1987. 405 pp. Hardback, \$18.95.

You can, if you prefer, read this fifth and newest novel by Seattle author Ivan Doig solely for the plot action, the conflict: human against human (quarrels, rivalry, fist fight, jilting), and humans against nature (drought, blizzard, forest fire, flu epidemic). There are sheep shearing and bronc busting competitions, alienation of best friends, and of father and son. Each event is described with the meticulous "you are there" detail typical of Doig's previous four books. (**English Creek**, an earlier, award-winning book, is a sequel to this one in the trilogy Doig is writing; its main character is the grandson of this book's narrator.)

Doig, who knows the Rocky Mountain area of Northern Montana from his childhood days and who has been "listening to Montanans" for over 40

years, re-creates that physical world with stunning realism. Through all the senses, he makes us feel the rhythm of its seasons and even times of day: "The mountains were washed a lovely clean blue and gray in the first sunlight. The peaks and their snow stood so clear I felt I could reach out and run a finger along that chill rough edge."

The characters who interact with the land are fictional but convincingly involved in real-life events: World War I, the influenza epidemic of 1918, the coming of railroad, telephone, model T. Doig's sprightly dialogue keeps reader interest high throughout, giving the feel of a Scottish accent without complicating the spelling. The driver who brings the two boys into the rugged country comments on it: "Kind of slaunch-wise country, ain't she?"

Doig tells the story of two young Scots, Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay who at 19 leave their small town in Scotland and travel to America. There they claim homestead land in Montana's Two Medi-

cine country. "Free but not costless. Not nearly." They pay in hard labor and heartbreak.

Angus and Rob are different in nature; Rob stubbornly self-confident, willing to impose his will on the land by overgrazing, building a reservoir instead of using the creek; Angus, more introspective, more in tune with the land. The highly dramatic ending, which echoes the beginning, is a shocker.

If you prefer, however, to read on a deeper level, where conflict is psychological, people struggling to fathom the unknowable in other humans ("those stormy countries of the mind"), Doig rewards you with richly complex characters who are not only fully realized humans but sometimes symbols also. Recurring motifs of dancing, music and rhythm stem from and enrich plot and characters. Watch for them. The title alerts you to their importance. When Angus comments "That rascal life," you realize that the often-mentioned rascal fair in Scotland with its dancing and job-hunting is symbolic of life itself, a central motif of the novel. Schoolhouse dances, the love of Angus's wife Adair for dancing, Angus's comment about sheep-raising: "This I know the tune of," his thoughtful comment on dancing ahead into time: "Say it better, the future is our blind-fold dance...."

The most intriguing symbol of all is the beautiful schoolmistress Anna, with whom Angus falls recklessly in love. She comes alive as a real woman, with a voice "as rich as a field of buttercups," but the similarities between his obsessive love for her, even after she marries someone else, and his lifelong love for Montana are indications that she stands for something far more powerful than man-woman love. Even

her name: is derived from Montana.

Both the Two Medicine country and the woman promise and promise, hold out hope for future happiness, seduce Angus with "honeyed weeks" but always let him down. His feeling, both for the country and for the woman, "burned like a sun in me;" they were "the rhythm in my life I could do nothing about."

Angus is so love-smitten he could easily allow his wife Adair, who doesn't like Montana, to return to Scotland without him; he would quickly leave her if only Anna were free. Much of the conflict between him and Rob, stems from this obsession with Anna. Near the end of the novel, his son's choice of a wife reenforces that symbolism.

The book is lavishly studded with the original phrases that make Doig's books so outstanding. Angus wishes "I knew how to snipper Barclay stubbornness into five-foot chunks to sell as crowbars." Rob has "hands quick enough to shoe a unicorn." One of Anna's students is "only barely bright enough to sneeze." The national forest ranger, who comes to limit grazing that was once unrestricted, has "the look of a man with a lot of before in his life." A letter from Scotland informs Rob of the death of his father bears "as much sadness as paper can absorb." Rob and Adair's Uncle Lucas reacts to a remark with a face that "could have taught stoniness to a rock." Lucas, who is one of the novel's most memorable characters, has been maimed by his work in Montana but still he loves that country, as Angus loves it, and Anna, even after his psychological "maiming."

**Dancing at the Rascal Fair** is a major U.S. novel by one of this country's most talented writers of fiction. The novel richly rewards those who care enough about quality writing to ream out all the juice



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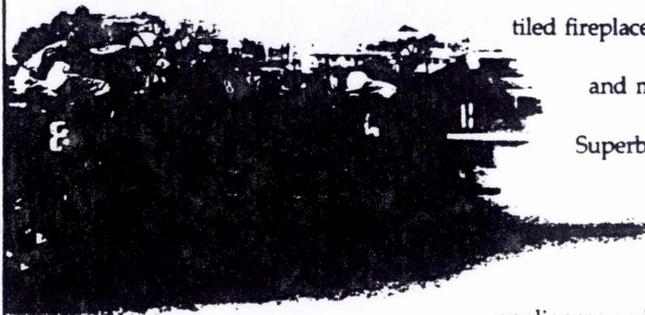
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It should be noted that this intemperate outburst follows Muir's recital of some of man's worst atrocities: extermination of the passenger pigeon; mass slaughter of California's wild robins and larks to satisfy gourmet appetites from San Francisco to New York; and the upsetting of nature's balance by settlers who waged indiscriminate wars on jackrabbits, squirrels, eagles, bears, coyotes and any other species that seemed to threaten them.

Readers of this fascinating little volume must go back to Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" for John Muir's basic text: "He prayeth well who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast." —NOLAND NORGAARD

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* by Ivan Doig (Atheneum, \$18.95).

Ivan Doig's *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* is one of the rarest treats a reader may enjoy: a novel to be savored from word to word, page to page. It's a realistic tale of pioneer Scottish ranchers battling for survival in the northernmost reaches of Montana, told in the lyrical prose laced with sly idiomatic wit that was their heritage from remote Gaelic ancestors.

The narrator is Angus McCaskill, and his opening words are: "To say the truth, it was not how I expected—stepping off to America past a drowned horse." It is October 1889. Angus, age 19, and his pal Robert Barclay have left their Forfashire home and are embarking as steamship passengers, steerage class, to seek their fortunes in Montana, which attained statehood the same year.

Angus is indeed a fictional character, but he rings true—as does his account of the ensuing 30 years in which he doubled as sheep rancher and country school-teacher. His melodic words are a blend of Scottish aphorisms, witticisms of Ameri-

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BOOKS

can ranchmen of the period and choice borrowings from the poet Robert Burns.

Only a writer with Doig's background could have written this book. He was born in a tiny Montana town on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains—not far from the imaginary "Scottish Heaven" locale of his story—the son of a ranch hand with the appropriate middle name of Campbell. He too was first a ranch hand, then a small-town newspaper editor and free-lance writer while earning his university degrees.

Realist that he is, Doig offers no gun-fights, range wars, saloon brawls or other hackneyed stereotypes of the Old West. His central figures, McCaskills and Barclays, are cast somewhat in the pattern of classic tragic heroes: capable of withstanding dire external hazards but destined to suffer, even perish, because of their own uncontrolled passions.

Doig's early works accumulated 13 awards, among them a fellowship that enabled him to devote three years to research in Scotland and England and to study various American sources for an ambitious trilogy of which this volume is the second. Of the first, *English Creek* (1984), Wallace Stegner, an authority on pioneer life in the American West, comments: "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real West, through the eyes of a real writer."

This new work deserves equal acclaim. As for its title, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the rollicking anthem sung in Angus McCaskill's native village when Scots "farmers and farm workers met to bargain out each season's wages and terms and put themselves around a drink or two in the process." The lyrics become more risqué as the drinks exceed two and become many. Cheers!

—N.N.

*With or Without* by Charles Dickinson (Knopf, \$15.95).

As a novelist, Charles Dickinson received critical kudos for his recent book *Crows*. In *With or Without*, Dickinson offers his readers short stories with an interestingly

November 1, 1987

# Love in the Back 40

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig.  
405 pp. New York:  
Atheneum.  
\$18.95.

By Lee K. Abbott

**I**N 1956, in the South Atlantic Quarterly, Eudora Welty published an essay which argued that place, that crossroads of time and character, was "one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction." Clearly, it is a conclusion that, in spirit, Ivan Doig has attended to scrupulously. In his third novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," which brings to life the ancestors of the people he created for his popular "English Creek," little is more important to the lives we watch and the turn-of-the-century times we observe than that "angel" that is Montana — a place that "sets its own terms and tells you, do them or else."

This book relates the adventures of two 19-year-olds, Robert Burns Barclay and Angus Alexander McCaskill, who emigrate from Scotland in 1889 to the Two Medicine country, a fictional region along the Rocky Mountains near Dupuyer, "Eden's best neighborhood." They are, our narrator McCaskill informs us, "green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double damnedest not to show it."

Armed with the energy and the cheerful spirit of their seemingly permanent friendship, as well as with strong backs and Angus's inexhaustible supply of quotations from Robert Burns, our heroes confront a land nothing in their experience as a wheelwright and a wheelworks clerk has prepared them for: a "radical mood of terrain . . . the climb of the continent to its divide, higher, greater, more sudden than seemed possible; like a running leap of the land." It is a place of great hardship — from the coyotes, bears and wolves that threaten the sheep they raise, to a nature of drought, flood, blizzard, fire and disease. It is a place, Angus reminds us, where a pilgrim's true tools are not hammer, pick and shovel, but "hope, muscle and time."

• • •

Against this masterfully evoked backdrop, Mr. Doig addresses his real subject: love be-

Lee K. Abbott, whose latest book is "Strangers in Paradise," a collection of stories, teaches English at Case Western Reserve University.

tween friends, between the sexes, between the generations — "the intricate come and go that weaves us and those around us." Like the landscape itself, love is by turns breathtaking and daunting, irksome and joyful, a "part of life that did not care about human details, it existed on its own terms."

Mr. Doig is at his best when he turns from the lay of the land to that of the heart. Consider, for example, this moment when Angus, estranged from his son and from his pal, finds himself mourning the death of his true love while still married to a good woman whose love he cannot return: "Again my life was not under my own control, now that everyone I had tried to stretch myself toward had yanked away from me. I felt so alone on the homestead that if I had shouted, I would have made no echo. When I tried to occupy myself with tasks and chores, even time was askew. Hours refused to budge, yet days went to no good use."

Unhappily, however, for those not charmed by the transformation of history alone, this remains a story whose life, from its plot to its sentiment, is achingly familiar — a kind of back-40 "Big Valley," in which we discover the usual melodrama of suffering and triumph, fellowship and rivalry, loss and gain, a place in which "the pattern of ourselves" is sometimes arrived at by the clunky device of coincidence. It must also be noted that there are several developments — whom Angus's son Varick will marry, for instance — that, while a surprise to our narrator, are to us as predictable as snow in winter.

**F**UNDAMENTALLY, Mr. Doig is a writer we read less for anything new that he expresses than for his new and stylish expression; though it serves the conventional wisdom, his is a prose as tight as new thread and as special as hand-made candy. Here, for example, is Angus at 40: "But we never do dance ahead into time; every minute is a tune-step of ours to the past. Say it better, the future is our blindfold dance, and a dance unseen is the strangest dance of all, thousands of guesses at once." A head is "the attic atop our shoulders," a silence is "deep as a corner of eternity," and watching a fellow Scotsman on the dance floor is "like hearing a giggle out of God."

Though its hindsight is not insight, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" races with real vigor and wit and passion — three other lesser angels Mr. Doig is blessed to have in his native Montana heaven. □

The Weekly Nov 11-17  
Seattle's News Day

Books

GARDENING / Ann Lovejoy

# Earthy delights

A Bouquet of Garden Writing  
edited by Ursula Buchan  
David Godine, \$25

THESE ARE QUITE A FEW OFFERINGS OF EXTRACTS from great gardeners on the market these days. Some of them mere mish-mashes, snippets titled "the best of..." and often unrelated in any meaningful way. *A Bouquet of Garden Writing* is the most intelligent collection I have yet seen, handsomely produced and with appropriate illustrations (including 20 color plates). The first chapters are devoted to succinct and accurate biographies for each of the five "masters" chosen: Gertrude Jekyll (rhymes with "treacle"), Vita Sackville-West, E.A. Bowles, William Robinson, and Reginald Farrer (who was one of the greatest of the plant hunters). All were exceptional plantsmen and fine writers (though only Sackville-West had the true common touch), and all are charmingly and effectively represented here.

Further chapters compare the experiences, the great loves, the intense dislikes, the pet theories, and sometimes radical practices of the Big Five on a number of topics: garden design, the use of herbaceous plants, water gardening, scented plants, plant hunting, and

so forth. The contrasting and decided opinions of these people make delightful reading, some of it hilarious, all of it fascinating.

The use of longer passages from each writer allows each to create his or her own special atmosphere for the reader, and this is perhaps the happiest aspect of the book. Robinson, the Grand Old Man of modern gardening, discusses bedding plants (in somewhat violent terms), ground covers, and trees in the garden. The gentle Bowles, a keen gardener with a famous eye for fine plant forms, gives us loving, golden glimpses of his fabled garden. Sackville-West on her favorite plants is irresistible, her delight in them infectiously stimulating. Jekyll is seen at her determined best, planting cardiocrinums or selecting primroses, arums, and junipers from the nearby woods. The famed portrait of Jekyll's boots by Sir William Nicholson (included in these pages) demonstrates that she was far from just the foreman of her garden staff. Her stout garden boots, clumped with stiff clay, remind us of that old Kentish saying, "The best muck is the farmer's boot." The fiery Farrer is bitingly scornful of detested "miffs and mimps" (any plants that didn't perform up to his standards), yet praises his chosen to the skies in astonishingly powerful language.

For many modern readers, these people—always excepting Vita Sackville-West—are known by repute and reference only. The leisurely Edwardian writing style can be off-putting, impenetrable, or even maddening. The selections here capture the essential gardener in each of these writers, and will hopefully spark enough interest to encourage further reading of their works. This bouquet will make a good holiday gift for gardeners ready

to expand their horizons, and eager to learn more about the influences which created gardening as we practice it today. □

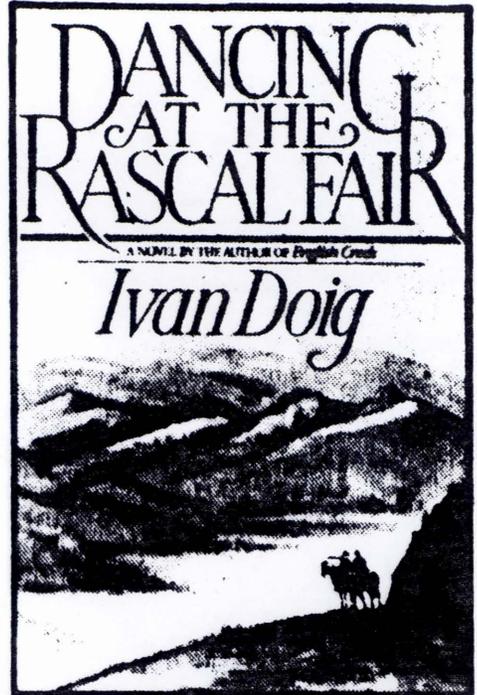
FICTION / Bart Becker

# Ivan Doig, part two

Dancing at the Rascal Fair  
by Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, \$18.95

THE SECOND OF SEATTLE NOVELIST DOIG'S projected Montana trilogy, which began with *English Creek*, is about Angus McCaskill, who emigrates from Scotland in the late 1800s and becomes a sheep farmer. The beautiful, natural spaciousness of the mountains and meadows is contrasted with the claustrophobic social pinch of the small farming community. McCaskill's life is beset on both fronts: his sheep are subject to the vagaries of natural catastrophe (droughts, blizzards) and he carries a lifelong torch for a lover of his youth who marries another in the little town. Doig is a clean and careful writer so, though some readers may find that it is possible to learn too much about sheep ranching, the book is crafted with a tint of Old World idiom that only occasionally seems quaint.

On the other hand, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* is rather a technical writing exercise when



NEW DOIG: OCCASIONALLY QUAIN.

compared to the irrefutable force of Doig's stunning first novel, *This House of Sky*, also set in Montana. That was a provocative and emotional work about little lives, big country, love, death, blood, survival, and family. Everything important distilled to a few seemingly unremarkable characters, remarked upon by Doig in powerful prose. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* is much more self-conscious and, though longer, lesser. ■

# Ivan Doig constructs an authentic mythology of the West

## Montana-born author shuns shooto-em-ups

By Clayton Fox  
Special to The Olympian

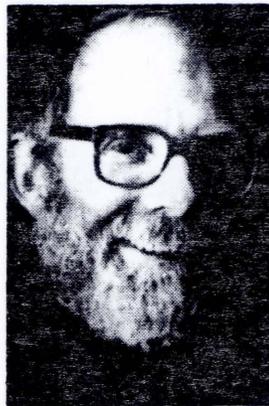
Ivan Doig grew up impatient with the published myths of the American West. He was raised (Western kids are not reared, but raised, like colts and lambs) in Montana range country. Stern, silent men did not ride into town to shoot it out at high noon, and arguments between sheepmen and cattlemen were largely confined to how much U.S. Forest Service grass each could wangle for himself.

The written myths of the West, from Owen Wister's "The Virginian" to Louis L'Amour's Sackett novels, were concentrated on the conflict between man and man, with the landscape just a colorful backdrop to these struggles. The other conflicts, between man and environment and man against himself, played minor roles.

Doig, young in the beautiful but terrible country southeast of Glacier National Park, felt that the effect of geography and history were not sufficiently recognized by Western writers. The West he saw was not the one he found in books.

After graduation from high school, Doig "went East" to Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. A stint followed as an editorial writer for a chain of newspapers in Illinois. Besides, there was a woman named Carol in Chicago. To someone to whom the eastern ramparts of the Rockies had been a daily sight, the Midwest's flat cornfields were not inspiring. In a short time Ivan and Carol Doig came west to Seattle.

"We moved to Seattle largely because of the geography; the mildness of the climate, the nearness of water, the greenness . . .," Doig said during a recent visit to Olympia to read his works at South Puget Sound Community College and to sign books at The Fireside Bookstore.



Ivan Doig

"It seems to me there's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world."

He set out to capture this eloquence. It was while he was working for his doctoral degree in history at the University of Washington that

Doig wrote "This House of Sky," a memoir of his Montana boyhood. A Seattle friend who was looking for something to do while she awaited the birth of her baby undertook to sell the book for him. The 13th publisher who looked at the 25,000-word excerpt and proposal decided to publish it.

"It was the first and only book she ever agented," Doig said. "She has other children."

The publisher acclaimed "This House of Sky" as "the landscape of the Western mind." Among the awards it won was a Governor's Writers' Day award.

Doig followed this with "Winter Brothers," his study of Washington pioneer James Swan. It was an unusual interplay of a year in Doig's life with excerpts from Swan's 2.5 million-word history of his days at

Port Townsend, Neah Bay and the Queen Charlotte Islands.

"Winter Brothers" was followed by "The Sea Runners," a story of four early-day Russians who escaped jail and made a daring canoe voyage down the Pacific Northwest coast.

For the past six years Doig has been working on a trilogy about Montana settlers. "English Creek" is closely related to "This House of Sky," although set a generation earlier. Oddly, it is the second book of the trilogy, though written first. The time is 1939, the hero 15-year-old Jick McCaskill.

Doig's current book, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (Atheneum; 405 pages; \$18.95) is the first book of the trilogy, and Doig is encouraging readers to read it first. "Rascal Fair" concerns Jick's grandparents, immigrants from Scotland and Denmark who homestead beautiful, harsh Montana.

The stubbornness that enabled these women and men to survive and protect their homes and sheep from blizzards, forest fires, hailstorms, coyotes, eternal wind, blistering sun and loneliness is the same stubbornness that amounts to character flaw.

Angus McCaskill will not, cannot, forget his first love, even though he has married a wonderful wife of his own and his first love firmly turned him down to marry someone else. And Rob Barclay, who emigrated from Scotland with him and has shared all his hardships, cannot forgive Angus's obsession.

It's a tricky business, writing what essentially is a Greek tragedy played by Montana sheepherders: What is hubris in a Greek tyrant can be simple hard-headedness in a Montana rancher.

Doig brings it off, though. He does it by scrupulous attention to detail and the use of poetical speech of Scots ancestors and lonely ranchers which run

through his books like hidden music. He even writes his own "Robbie Burns" poems that have readers puzzling over which is Burns and which is Doig.

And the fact that his books venture close to classical tragedy does not prevent them from being very funny in spots. The adventures of Jick McCaskill with the balky pack horse in "English Creek" and Angus McCaskill's method of dealing with outhouse-tipping schoolboys in "Rascal Fair" rank right along with Mark Twain.

Critic George Roche has written: "The one thing we cannot say about myths is that they are not true. Myths are men's stories, a common heritage of all peoples. They have always been — until the rise of the anti-hero — a reflection of something very deep in our nature, and a common source in symbolic language of the transcendent truths that bind us in human society."

To which Hillaire Belloc might add: "To write a truthful history one must know the towns, the country houses, the landscape, the whole physical setting; one must talk to the old men and women, besides reading other people's books; one must peer imaginatively behind the veil of yesteryear."

Doig puts it more succinctly: "I try to show that historical events have consequences."

At 48, he is happy he can make a living writing. He searches for authentic history and authentic language to construct his own true mythology of the West.

Short, energetic, with grayed rusty hair and beard, he suffers from the occupational disease of writers who must read much: eyestrain.

And when he was in Olympia, he gave the one unflinching sign of the successful writer: The seat of his corduroy pants was well worn from constant application to the writer's chair.

# This is the way we are

## ***Dancing at the Rascal Fair***

By Ivan Doig  
Fiction  
Atheneum. \$18.95

REVIEWED BY  
**JEFF GUINN**

After reading his latest novel, I've decided I would like to be Ivan Doig's best friend. Doig's ability to capture in print the many conflicting emotions, phobias and dreams of all human beings is so rare that he has to be a very special person himself.

*Dancing At The Rascal Fair* is Doig's third novel, and the second of a trilogy set in northwestern Montana. As readers of Doig's wonderful semi-autobiography *This House of Sky* will recall, this is the author's old stomping ground. His new book communicates his love for the region's mountains, plains and rivers through the eyes and experiences of Angus McCaskill. Angus and inseparable friend Rob Barclay emigrate to Montana from Scotland in 1889, two 19-year-olds hungry for the pioneer lives they believe they can find in the American wilderness.

What they find, of course, is nothing like they expected. An agonizing boat trip across the Atlantic and the mazes of turn-of-the-century New York are skillfully delineated by Doig before Angus and Rob eventually find themselves in Helena. What they *don't* find is Rob's uncle Lucas, an earlier traveler to Montana whom the boys expected to help settle them in to their new lives.

From there, Doig offers a 30-year look at Angus' life in the new world, introducing character after character that could each be the book's focus: the eventually found Lucas Barclay, a stump-armed survivor determined to help Angus and Rob succeed as ranchers; Anna Ramsey, the love of Angus' life who returns his affection just enough to torment him; Adair, Rob's stubborn sister, who follows her brother to Montana and a life where she must settle for far less than she wants or deserves.

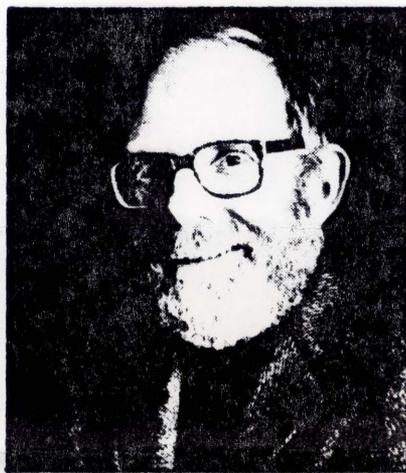
The amazing thing about these characters is that, as they are introduced by Doig, each immediately seems familiar. It's impossible to read *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* without many pauses to think that *this* is what people act like, *this* is how most of us think and hope and make our mistakes.

Any page contains concise, beautiful writing. The ground, to Doig and his characters, is earthskin. A stagecoach driver, wanting to know the availability of women in Helena, asks for "the calico condition."

It appears to be Doig's belief that life may be limited, but emotions are timeless. None of his characters leads perfect lives; their quirks and bad qualities receive equal attention with better attributes. But there's no bitterness in this story. The only message is that we all try our best, usually with mixed results.

But there's nothing mixed about the quality of Doig's writing or its latest testimony. This is a beautiful piece of work, and I'd give a lot to say so in person to its author.

Jeff Guinn is a *Star-Telegram* columnist.



Ivan Doig

JIM BATES

# Far, far removed from glitzy world

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

IVAN DOIG

Atheneum. 405 pp. \$18.95.



WILLIAM L. TAZEVELL

Ivan Doig's "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and Tom Wolfe's "The Bonfire of the Vanities," which was considered here last week, are both novels about life in these United States.

But the cultural gap between the two worlds is to be reckoned in literary light-years.

Wolfe is writing about Manhattan in the '80s. His is a cynical, glitzy, trendy world. Doig's subject is the coming of the homesteaders to the English Creek/Scotch Heaven section of Montana, about a century earlier in American history. His is a hard-scrabble world, where the settlers and the sheep they tend are hard put to survive the cruel, long winters. Both are hard worlds. The weather is unforgiving in Doig's Montana; the people are unforgiving in Wolfe's.

The distance between the two worlds can be calculated in economic terms.

In Doig's Montana, "The time was September of 1896, a week before shipping the lambs, and Lucas and Rob and I were holding a Saturday war council on the west ridgeline of Breed Butte where we could meanwhile keep an eye on our grazing bands. By now Rob and Lucas's sheep had accumulated into two oversize bands, nearly twenty-five hundred altogether, as Rob kept back the ewe lambs each year since '93 rather than send them to market at pitiful prices. The band he and I owned in partnership I always insisted keeping at a regular thousand, as many as my hay would carry through the winter. So here they were in splendid gray scatter below us, six years of striving and effort, three and a half thousand prime ewes and a fat lamb beside each of them, and currently worth about as much as that many weeds."

And here we are in Manhattan, where Sherman McCoy and his wife are attending a dinner party in Wolfe's world: "Sherman and Judy arrived at the Bavardages' building on Fifth Avenue in a black Buick sedan, with a white-haired driver, hired for the evening from Mayfair Town Car, Inc. They lived only six blocks from the Bavardages, but walking was out of the question...."

"It would be perfectly okay for the two of them to arrive for dinner at a Good Building (the going term) on Fifth Avenue by taxi, and it would cost less than three dollars. But what would they do after the party? How could they walk out of the Bavardages' building and have all the world, *tout le monde*, see them standing out in the street, the McCoy's, that game couple, their hands up in the air, bravely, desperately, pathetically trying to hail a taxi? The doormen would be no help, because they would be tied up ushering *tout le monde* to their limousines. So he had hired this car and this driver, this white-haired driver, who would drive them six blocks and depart. Including a 15 percent tip and the sales tax, the cost would be \$197.20 or \$246.50, depending on whether they were charged for four or five hours in all."

Angus McCaskill — homesteader, shepherd, schoolmaster, father and family man — is an economic survivor in Montana at the turn of the century, and just marginally that. Sherman McCoy, the boy bond

William L. Tazewell is a Charlottesville writer formerly of Norfolk.

salesman, is earning just under a million dollars a year in Manhattan before his world falls in upon his head. I suppose the distance from the one to the other is the triumph of capitalism, unless you happen to think it's the Decline of the West. In either event, it's not a literary judgment.

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is the second in Ivan Doig's Montana trilogy, but chronologically it precedes "English Creek" the first, which is set in Montana in the 1930s. Angus McCaskill, the immigrant-narrator of "Rascal Fair," is the grandfather of Jick McCaskill, the boy narrator of "English Creek." The connection between the two is Varick, Angus' son and the father of Jick. He is born in "Rascal Fair" and grows up during the narrative's span of 30 years; he breaks completely with his father, leaves home, goes off to World War I, survives the flu epidemic of 1919, and is reconciled with Angus at the book's end. In "English Creek," Varick is a forest ranger, a job that is foreshadowed in "Rascal Fair," and Jick is growing up in hard times, too. The third novel in the trilogy is unwritten; I presume it will be Jick's story and bring the McCaskill saga up to the present.

The fictional Montana of "English Creek" and "Rascal Fair" is an invented landscape Doig has named "the Two Medicine Country," but it closely parallels "the actual area along the Rocky Mountain Front near Dupuyer Creek, Montana, the cherished country of my growing-up years." Doig wrote about his "growing-up years" in his memoir "This House of Sky," which was nominated for a National Book Award. I admire all three of the books greatly; I haven't read his two earlier novels.

"Rascal Fair" is a frontier story. It's about the settlement of one of the last frontiers in the old 48 states, and it isn't as lyric in its telling as "English Creek," which bursts with the juices of youth. But I don't mean to suggest that it is a grim narrative, or covert economic history, or anything of the sort. Doig is a marvelous writer, and "Rascal Fair" is full of incident and readable set pieces — the Atlantic passage, sheep-shearing, square dances in the one-room schoolhouse and an account of the overturning of the outhouse by the schoolboys that would be a credit to Mark Twain. Above all else, the book is a love story about the woman Angus McCaskill courted, who jilted him, and the woman he married, Rob's sister, and the life they all led. Doig's Montana saga, still unfolding, is one to which the adjective "epic" can be applied without any embarrassment.

He now lives in Seattle. If he lived in Manhattan he might be one of our most celebrated novelists — though maybe he wouldn't be writing about Montana and I can't imagine his wearing a white suit, *a la* Tom Wolfe, or appearing comfortable on the cover of Vanity Fair. But I'll bet people will be reading Ivan Doig when they've forgotten Tom Wolfe.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum. 406 pp. \$18.95.

By Frank Zoretich

Ivan Doig, a Seattle writer and historian, spent much of his boyhood herding sheep in that part of the wild and woolly West known as Montana. "Life moved a major step in efficiency by putting fleece on sheep instead of directly onto us," he writes, near the middle of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*. Luckily for Doig, and for us, life's inefficiencies give the warmest colors to the story he knits.

Nothing is easy for the characters inhabiting this book, nor do they ever expect it to be. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* opens in 1889 with a drowning horse and closes in 1919 with another drowning horse. In between, protagonist Angus McCaskill sails from Scotland to America, homesteads a patch of Montana land at the foot of the Rockies, falls in love, marries, raises a son and battles blizzard, drought, Scotch stubbornness and the sheer stupidity of sheep.

Although this book is volume one of a projected trilogy, Doig wrote it after completing volume two, *English Creek*, published in 1984, in which McCaskill's teen-age grandson, Jick, plays the leading role.

Doig is a historian of language as much as of fact. The voice of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* sounds Scotch-born: "There's more to life than what you can put in your pocket, ay?" *English Creek*, by contrast, speaks in the tongue of 1930s America. And volume three, which should appear soon, will bring the McCaskills to the present day.

Albuquerque Journal Mag / IMPACT 1/26/88

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# Style

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## How Montana Was Won

Author Ivan Doig and His Western Trilogy

By Michael Kernan  
Washington Post Staff Writer

"Dancing at the Rascal Fair" is a daguerreotype of early-day homesteaders in the Montana high country. There they are, scuffing their boots in the dust of Main Street, or galloping through knee-high grass to herd their sheep, or loafing beside the barn on a summer day, and you want to climb right into the picture with them and smell the clean air.

The way Ivan Doig writes it, you almost can.

His wife Carol took rolls of pictures of buildings all over Montana, and in Scotland where the novel starts in 1889, and for hours he would pore over the slides on a light table, arranging them in rows to give himself a sense of what a frontier Main Street might have looked like back then.

He keeps file boxes of Montana lingo and stray bits of dialogue he has picked up from old letters and diaries, from his taped conversations with grizzled shearers. Some of it is new. In the small blue notebook he always carries is a snippet he overheard at a Garrison Keillor show last year.

First Woman: "Yes, I'm from St. Paul and my husband, he's from Minneapolis."

Second Woman: "Oh. A mixed marriage, huh?"

Maybe that will find its way into the final volume of Doig's trilogy, due to come out in 1990 for the celebration of the state's centennial.

"I do 800 words a day, four triple-spaced pages," the author said in a visit here. "I don't work consecutively. I might just write some dialogue and store it up."

See DOIG, C3, Col. 1



PHOTO OF DOIG BY ELLSWORTH J. DAVIS—THE WASHINGTON POST



Left, author Ivan Doig; above, from the cover of "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," the second novel of his trilogy on life in the Montana high country.

# Ivan Doig

DOIG, From C1

There is a lot of cutting and pasting in Doig's technique. On the other hand, most of the set pieces—the big blizzard, the sheep-shearing contest, the forest fire in "English Creek," the first of the trilogy—are written as they come up.

Doig is nothing if not methodical. When he visited Scotland three years ago he found the very dock where his ancestors left for America. Had his wife photograph the scene. Wrote notes to himself about exactly what a person could see from that spot. With his 5-by-8 index cards and his careful research, he sounds more like a historian.

Which in fact he is. He has a PhD in American frontier history, obtained early in his 21 years in the Seattle area. Even the fair of the book's title comes from a sociological study he read. And the accent of the hero's talk is historically accurate, you may be sure, as it changes subtly through the story, almost imperceptibly losing its Scottish lilt and turning into American Western.

But of course all the tape recordings and photos and research in the world can't make a novel sing. Or charm away the wooden heroes and cutout heroines, the travelogue landscapes, the tin-eared talk of so many best sellers.

What you need is passion.

*Below us in its broad canyon the Two Medicine wound and coiled, the water base for all the world that could be seen. The sentinel cottonwoods beside the river rustled at every touch of wind. Up where we were and out across the big ridges all around, pothole lakes made blue pockets in the green prairie. Anna, you need to see this with me, I vowed that June morning on the green high bluffs of the Two Medicine. Sometime we must come, just the two of us, and on a morning such as this watch summer and the earth dress each other in light and grass.*

This isn't something a writer gets from a textbook. It's something you know because you are the son of an easygoing ranch hand named Charlie Doig and Berneta, the woman he loved, and because you remember the night of your sixth birthday in the cabin high in the Bridger Mountains, when you heard your mother's asthmatic breathing labor, choke and then stop, while your father fumbled, crying, to light the lantern in the dark. "She's dead, Ivan. Your mother is dead."

The author remembers Charlie, after that, taking him along on his sheepherding jobs, and into the saloons of White Sulphur Springs, and then making peace with his mother-in-law, widowed Bessie Ringer, and settling with her as housekeeper into a more stable life for the sake of his son.

And the July afternoon when he was still a sophomore in high school, shearing sheep on the Blackfeet reservation and getting hit with a terrific icy rainstorm that stampeded the sheep and even froze some to death, and

he decided in that one moment that this was enough, that he was going to get out of Montana, beautiful or not.

And the times he waited in the middle of nowhere, stood by the tracks with his suitcase at Ringling, Mont. (pop. 45), for the depot agent to flag down the train, and it would sit there hissing gigantically, and a guy in a white jacket would jump down and set out a portable step so he could get aboard, just him, to go to Northwestern University in Illinois.

"I got a doctorate. I never used it," Doig said. "I thought about journalism and ended up as a free-lance magazine writer. 'This House of Sky' came out of my exasperation at the money situation."

That first book, a memoir published in 1978, helped some, as did his first novel, "The Sea Runners," but basically his wife Carol, a teacher, supported the two of them until "English Creek" came out.

From the beginning he knew it would be a trilogy. He left little holes—enigmatic references to the past—in the first book, which happens in the '30s, knowing that he would fill them in one way or another in the second. The third will cover the centennial celebration and will tie up some loose ends in his McCaskill family, Scots like his own grandfather, Peter Doig, who came west to settle the hard country of Montana.

"I tried to figure what Scots guys would look like in those days," said Doig, 48, who with his graying red beard and long Saxon face wouldn't be a bad model himself. "I thought about Thomas Carlyle, with that long upper lip and big nose. Then there was a woman I wanted for Beth McCaskill, and I found her in the library, but she was 60 years old, so I asked her to get me a picture of herself at 40."

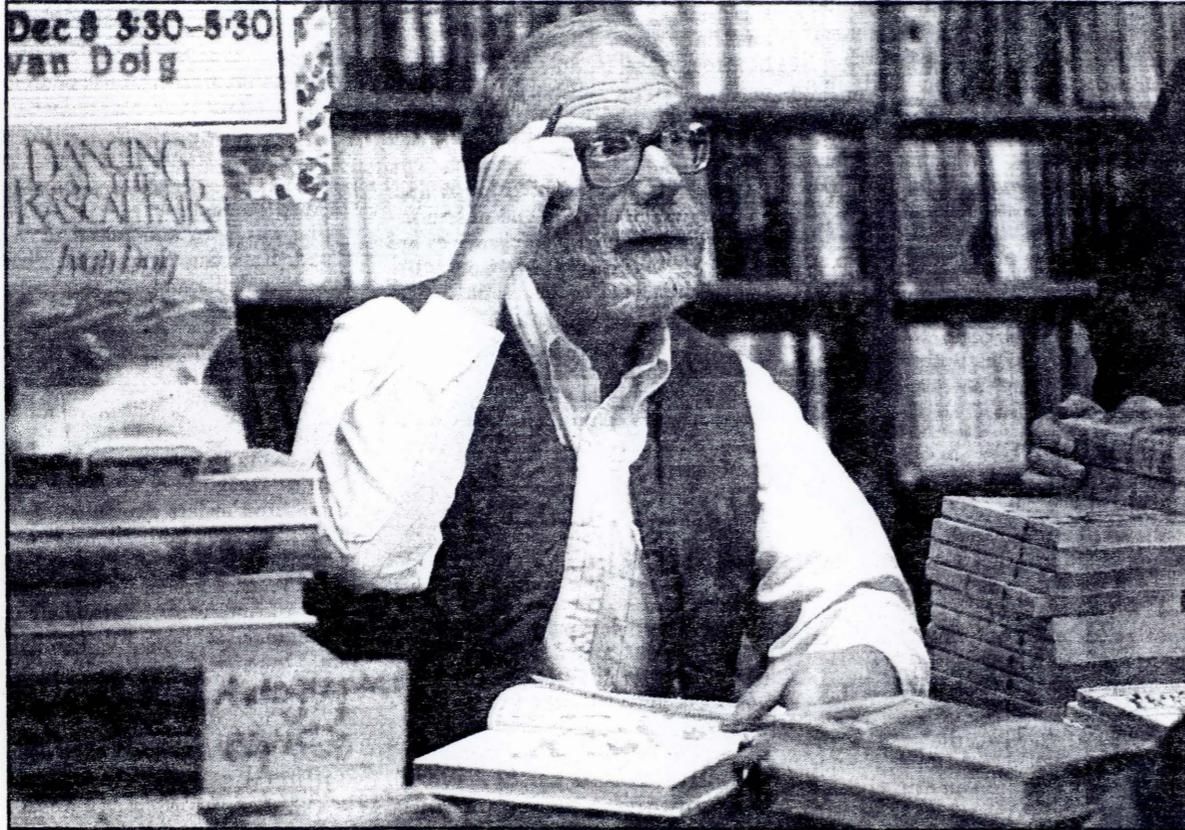
And the family albums. "My mother kept one. There was a photo of my father when he was a rodeo cowboy, young, in chaps, with his bandanna flowing. It was terrifically evocative. It reminds you—they were young once too, by God, young and crazy and this and that."

(In "This House of Sky" Doig talks about this picture. ". . . He was so slim down the waist and hips that the seat of his pants forever bagged in and the tongue of his belt had to flap far past the buckle, as if trying to circle him twice. Certain photos catch this father of mine as almost mischievous, cocking the dry half-grin which sneaks onto my own face as I look at him . . .")

Doig and his wife still live in Seattle. She still teaches, and he still writes on a manual typewriter because word processors affect his eyes. And he remains, still, a Montana boy.

*Everything was in place. The continent's flange of mountain range along the west. The dark far butte called Heart and the nearer slow-sloping one like an aft sail. The grass plateaus beyond Gros Ventre and its cottonwood creek. The soft rumple of plains toward the Sweetgrass Hills and where the sun came from. Enough country that a century of Robs and Anguses would never fill it.*

# Novelist's Montana series finding critical favor



Statesman-Journal photo by Gerry Lewin

Ivan Doig signs copies of his novel at Jackson's Books.

By Ron Cowan  
Of the Statesman-Journal

**P**ORTLAND — The headline on a Texas newspaper review of Ivan Doig's new book said, "This is the way we really are."

Doig's *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, the second book in his trilogy about Montana life, has been pleasing western reviewers. But Doig, who has spent 30 years away from his native state, has found Montana a place he can capture from a distance.

He grew up in a sheep ranching community in the Montana highlands, but has lived in Seattle for 21 years.

The author, who is in Oregon to promote his new book this week, disdained the designation of a regional or western writer.

"My God, there are utterly valid, breathing characters in these so-called books of place," he said.

Doig, who was relaxing in a Heathman Hotel suite, wore a western-style belt buckle. But his dress was more Northwest than Montana. At 48, his hair and full beard are more grey than red.

His attitude is easy and direct,

## Doig to visit schools

Ivan Doig will be autographing copies of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* from noon to 2 p.m. today at the Oregon State University bookstore, in the Memorial Union building in Corvallis.

At 3:30 p.m. Thursday he will read from his book in the Gumwood Room of the Erb Memorial Union at the University of Oregon in Eugene.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, published by Atheneum, is available at local bookstores in hardback at \$18.95.

without pretension.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* has turned out to be Doig's most successful book. It is a best-seller in San Francisco, Denver, Portland and Seattle. The publisher, Atheneum, has issued 52,483 copies.

He has received 13 literary awards and a National Book Award nomination in his five-

book career.

The new book continues his trilogy about the McCaskill family. The trilogy started in the middle, in 1939 Montana with *English Creek*.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* opens in 1889 when the first McCaskill, Angus, arrives from Scotland as a homesteader. The final book, due in three years, will be set during the statehood centennial 100 years later.

Doig left Montana behind as an 18-year-old, when he boarded a train in Ringling, Mont., to attend Northwestern University in Chicago and study journalism.

"I felt that if I stayed in Montana I would end up as a ranch hand. There wasn't any economic footing that I could see."

Doig has been back, both to do research and when his father, Charles Campbell Doig, died of emphysema in 1971. He quotes his father as saying, "Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out."

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* was his most difficult book, he said.

Solom Statesman - Journal 12/9/87 p B1

# Big sky guy



Image Bank

## Montana novelist Ivan Doig is one of a number of regional writers yearning for wider pastures

By Peter Gorner

In 1961, when Ivan Doig submitted his master's thesis about televised congressional hearings on organized crime, his faculty adviser at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism clipped a note to the paper. "Around 1836 or 1837," the professor wrote Doig, "people used to stand on the dock in New York and wait for the latest installment of the Pickwick Papers. With something of the same anticipation, I've waited for and read the chapters of your thesis."

Most people today have a similar response when introduced to Doig's way with words, especially when he writes about his native Montana, the place he left but has never been able to shake as a writer. Yet for a decade, with 11 literary awards behind him, the 48-year-old former sheepherder, hayraker, journalist and historian has been trying to shake the curse of the so-called "regional writer."

"There's a decided effort with my new novel to break me out," he said recently in Chicago on his first national book tour. "I'm not sure why 'Dancing at the Rascal Fair' [Atheneum, \$18.95] is not considered regional and my other books were. Today there seem to be a bunch of us writers working at our centers of the universe, and these centers are not the metropolitan centers."

"The success I'm gaining on comes from such works as 'Love Medicine' by Louise Erdrich and 'Housekeeping' by Marilynne Robinson. I think their success, writing books set in what the rest of the country could consider jerkwater little places has benefited the rest of us."

The going has nonetheless been slow for this warmhearted, friendly, businesslike and methodical novelist—"a lumberjack with horn rims," he has been aptly called. "The soul of a poet and the mind of a clerk."

Gradually, the rest of the nation is discovering what westerners have long known—that the rugged, elemental highlands of northern Montana, where the grasslands meet the Rocky



Tribune photo by Ovie Carter

**'Today, there seem to be a bunch of us writers working at our centers of the universe, and these centers are not the metropolitan centers.'**

—Ivan Doig

Mountain Front, belong to Ivan Doig as surely as did Wessex to Thomas Hardy and Yoknapatawpha County to Faulkner.

There are, however, no gunfights in Doig's books, no grizzly bear maulings and only a few dispirited Blackfoot Indians who drift peripherally by. Doig does not write what he calls "Wisterns," after Owen Wister, author of "The Virginian," which characterize the settling of the West by six-guns, redskin massacres, poker games and the



rescuing of schoolmarms.

"Nobody ever milks a cow or plants a spud," Doig has complained. "As best I can tell, there's got to be some kind of catering service out of Omaha that comes out and takes care of the whole damn West. It's nonsense, and I think it's harmful nonsense."

Instead, Doig writes of immigrant families, dedicated schoolteachers, miners, fur trappers, town builders. He probes the uncertainties of friendship and love, and colossal battles of will, set amid the vast unpredictabilities of a land notable for sudden deadly floods, agonizing droughts; blizzards and forest fires, a land where human figures stand tall because there are relatively so few of them; the twin disasters of World War I and the influenza epidemic of 1918 killed 1 Montanan in every 100.

The Doig story began in southwestern Montana, in the high, dry, town of White Sulphur Springs, where he was raised. His father, Charlie Doig, worked for other, richer men as their foreman. He was a top hand, and he loved Bernita Ringer, small and frail, doomed by asthma. He courted her for six years. Ivan was their only child.

"Because of her asthma, my mother during the summer haying would take me to some cool corner under a tree and read to me," he recalled. It wasn't great literature, but adventures, pulp novels, sports, whatever was available. "I have no memory of ordinary children's books—a few years ago I finally read 'Treasure Island' and remember thinking: 'God! What a piece of work this is!'—but I had unlimited access to comic books."

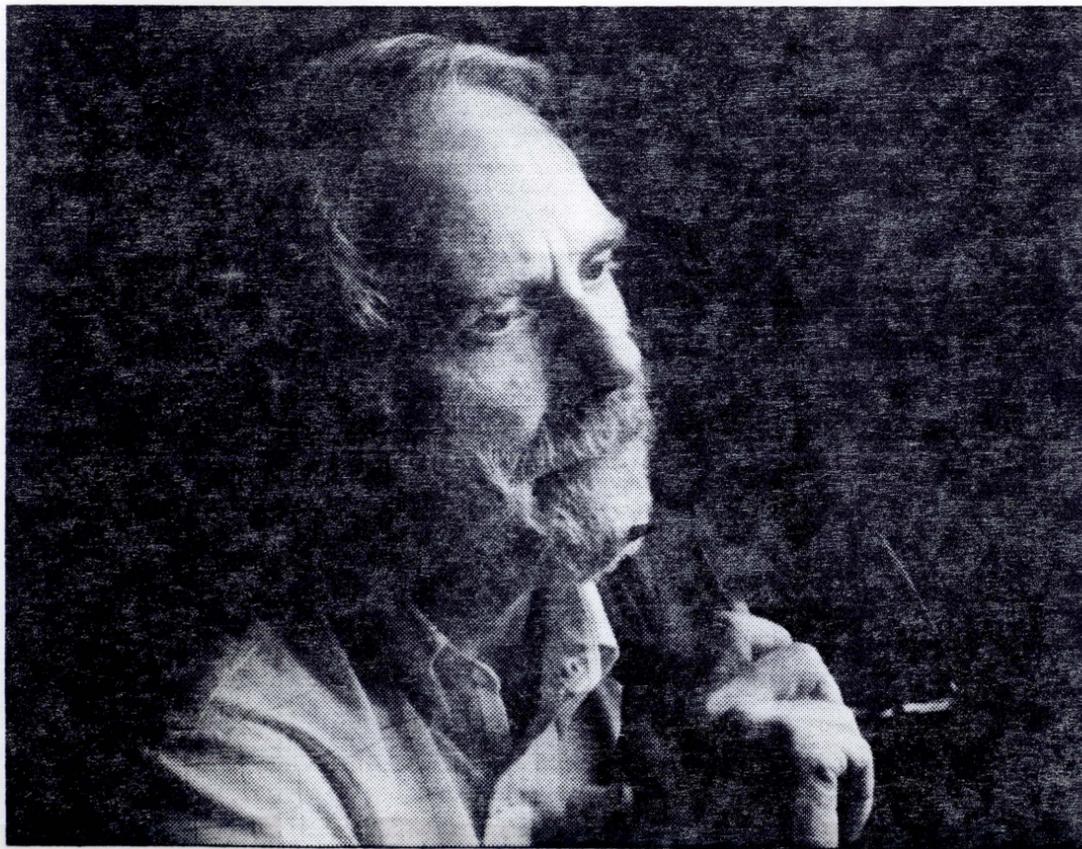
Inevitably as Doig's mother weakened, the family moved closer to a night on the Bridger Range in a herder's cabin, when Ivan was 6 and lay in a nearby bunk listening to her breathing finally cease. A lantern was lighted. His father started to sob.

It fell upon Charlie Doig and Bernita's mother, Bessie Ringer, to raise the boy, but not, they decided, in the wilderness. He was shifted between his wandering kin and town families who

See Doig, pg. 6

## books

## Master of Montana



PHOTOGRAPHER: JAY KOELZER

Ivan Doig couples a deep love of the language with an interest in history in his writings.

## Meticulous Ivan Doig finds a home in his writing

By Margaret Carlin

HERE'S a tinge of ginger in his hair and beard, the legacy of ancestors who left Scotland in the 1890s for the great American West — Montana, to be exact.

Exactness in prose, diction and "everything else" is a matter of pride to Ivan Doig, 48, author of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* and four other meticulously researched books about the western experience.

"I like my writing to have no errors," Doig says. "I like it to be precise."

Even the musical title of his critically acclaimed new novel is anchored in fact, natural for this methodical man with a doctorate in history.

"I was reading *Social Class in Scotland*, about how landowners and laborers would meet to work out farm wages every year at what they called the 'Rascal Fair.' Rascal Fair ... I just liked the sound of that, so I got a rhyming dictionary and made up *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* to the music of a traditional Scots tune."

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, the first in Doig's trilogy, opens in 1889 when Angus McCaskill arrives in what Doig calls Two Medicine Country of Montana and covers 30 years of pioneer life. The second, *English Creek* (1984), covers the '30s and '40s. The final volume, bringing the McCaskills up to the present, will come in 1989 to mark Montana's centennial. The tentative title is *Ride With Me, Maria Montana*.

"I wrote *English Creek* first because I knew how things were in the '30s and '40s, from listening to my father and grandmother talk. The circumstances of the Depression froze rural life. People were still haying with horses because they had to, gas

was so hard to get. Things pretty much stayed the way they always were, money was so tight."

Although Doig's literary reputation is firmly grounded in his love for the West, he discovered early on that it was hard for a writer to survive financially in cowboy country. So for 21 years, he and his wife Carol have lived in Seattle, where she teaches journalism at Shoreline Community College and he writes.

"But I've always used what I call my 'creative cupboard' — my childhood — for patterns of speech and details about the ranching way of life. When I was writing *Rascal Fair*, Carol and I spent time in small towns in Montana and in Scotland, too.

"Carol made photographs, which I'd line up as I was creating Gros Ventre (fictional name for Montana's Dupuyer Creek, "The country of his growing-up years"). I can tell you exactly how many feet it is to the pump we share with the neighbors, just what the streets and houses were like, how many sheep would be on a trail drive, what it's like to shear a sheep, details like that."

But a deep love of the language is as much responsible for Doig's trilogy as his interest in history. A tireless researcher, he keeps file cards of western lingo, and considers *The Dictionary of American Regional English* relaxing reading. He finds rich poetry in the speech of ordinary people, and harvests memories from as many older people as he can.

A few years ago, he spent time in Scotland, fine-tuning his knowledge of the Scottish turn of phrase in the library at the University of St. Andrews by "reading old diaries and folklore books, and immigrants' letters, too. I got a copy of the Scottish National Dictionary to study. I wanted

(readers) to recognize my characters as Scottish without having to decipher the dialect."

Doig writes his prose with a poet's eye and ear: "Montana's crystal mornings made it seem we'd been living in a bowl of milk all those years in Scotland ... the mountains were washed a lovely clean blue and gray in the first sunlight. ... I heard the rush of the creek where the water bumped busily across a bed of rocks."

He describes the "white knuckles of the storm ocean" and describes sheep: "In theory, a band of sheep is a garden on legs. Every spring a crop of lambs, every summer a crop of wool."

A teacher talks about "my pupils, my minnow school of new Montana" and Doig describes Montana unforgettably. "There is so much of this country. People keep having to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. Distance. Weather. The aloneness. All the work."

And the weather: "... across the mountains the sky looked bruised, resentfully promising storm. ... clouds like long rolls of damp cotton were blotting out the summits of the mountains. ..."

Four days a week, without fail, he settles himself at his old manual typewriter (his computer languishes in neglect), and turns out exactly 800 words a day. "Four pages, triple spaced. The fifth day I set aside for research and editing," he says, underlying his dedication to meticulous prose.

Doig has been a ranch hand, newspaperman and magazine editor, but it is as a writer that he has found his intellectual home.

"I like history, I like doing research, I like being my own boss."

## Author's prose dances warmly

**Dancing at the Rascal Fair**  
By Ivan Doig. Atheneum. 403 pages. \$18.95.

By Richard Critchfield

Ivan Doig is a happy mixture of poet and historian. In just nine years, he has produced five truly distinctive books set in Montana and the Pacific Northwest, three of them novels.

All beautifully evoke the American West, firmly establishing Doig as one of our finest western writers.

Look at his achievement: *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, published in 1978 when he was 39, is a powerful memoir about his widowed, sheep-herding father, Charlie Doig. Doig, a son of Scottish immigrants, instills in his son a deep affinity for language, storytelling and the raw Montana landscape.

This strong sense of the land and a growing preoccupation with time are further developed in *Winter Brothers* (1980), interwoven observations by Doig and excerpts from the 1862-90 diaries of James G. Swan, an obscure artist and observer of coastal Indian life in the Pacific Northwest.

The imaginary retrieval of the past became central in *The Sea Runners* (1982), his first novel. Based on an event, it tells of the escape by four indentured Swedes from Russian America (1853 Alaska) to what is now Oregon. It is a little masterpiece of harrowing adventure.

In *English Creek* (1984), the first novel in his trilogy, Doig introduces the fictional McCaskill family and their sprawling Two Medicine Country of Montana. This is the familiar geography of *This House of Sky*, though the town of Dupuyer, just below the Rocky Mountain Front, now has become Gros Ventre (the locals say "Grove-on").

It is summer in the 1930s, and Jick McCaskill, the 14-year-old narrator, goes on a horseback trip with his forest ranger father, Varick. Some of the set pieces in this coming-of-age story, such as a Fourth of July rodeo and a forest fire, are terrific.

*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* is another panorama of life in Two Medicine Country, it takes place much earlier (1889-1919), and its dramatic thread is the friendship and eventual falling out of two Scotsmen, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, Jick's grandfather.

They venture from Glasgow by steerage and homestead as sheepherding neighbors in Montana. Time passes through them as they go from youth to middle age, and taking their toll are blizzards, the 1918 influenza epidemic and the rugged land.

This book is warm in feeling and rich in texture. The secret of Doig's gift is his sense of place and his ear for dialogue. His people come alive when they talk, and they talk all the time.

In Montana and the Pacific Northwest, this gifted poet-historian has enormous experience to draw upon as he sets out to rescue more of our past from oblivion. Let us cheer him on.

Richard Critchfield is the author of *Those Days: An American Album* and *Villages*. He currently is writing a book about Britain. From the *Washington Post Book World*.



# Acc

The News Tribune

# IVAN DOIG

## His words breathe life into the pages of Montana history

By Kathleen Merryman

The News Tribune

Ivan Doig's dry wit crackles at the notion of himself reigning as the philosopher king among Western writers.

Writers, scholars, journalists come to his modest home on North Seattle's Shoreline, convinced they will find in the author of *This House of Sky*, *English Creek*, *Winter Brothers*, *The Sea Runners* and now *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, a light of understanding beyond the mere telling of tales.

What they find, he says, is a workman, a craftsman with a schedule and a way of organizing jumbles of memory and research into tales.

The light they see is the illumination of history lived firsthand and hard and with modesty.

At 48, Doig is a young man raised in an old time.

The son of Charles Campbell Doig — sometime ranch hand, cafe owner, sheepman — and Berneta Ringer Doig — frail with asthma in the high country where the air blows as thin as grass in a drought — Doig grew up in a succession of dying towns stuck on the hardest edges of Montana. In an era of malls and climate control and credit cards, those edges still jut into American life like slabs of rock thrust up through the earth's green crust into the wrong geologic time frame.

The men and women who populate them rub against modern life like sandpaper — tough, gritty and made for work. Doig retains those qualities, though early in life he discovered another: a love of words and facts and the ability to make them live on the printed page.

It is that ability that has enabled him to live away from Montana and yet keep its great dry openness with him in the warm house set into a Seattle hillside heavy and damp with trees.

As a teenager it propelled him away from the towns where he had grown up — White Sulphur Springs and Ringling and Dupuyer — with a full-tuition scholarship to Northwestern University. It helped him survive a stint in the Air Force Reserves once he discovered the base library. It led him through a succession of jobs in journalism — from reporter to magazine editor — before it landed him at the University of Washington's graduate school, where he earned a doctorate in American frontier history.

It was the Montana in him that pulled him away from the safety of an academic life and into a 10-year career as a magazine free-lancer, which in terms of uncertainty, low pay and hard work, compares to the life of an itinerant ranch hand.

"Across almost 10 years of that I wrote a couple hundred magazine articles. It was impossible, financially impossible, at least for a guy like me who has more imagination than marketability in national terms. I never really cracked the kind of magazines you have to make it as a free lance. *Atlantic* and *Harper's* I never managed



Sunday, December 20, 1987

## 'The Ties That Bind'

### Holidays open the floodgate to a lifetime of memories

Editor's note: In this excerpt from her latest bestseller, *The Family: The Ties That Bind . . . And Gag*, Erma Bombeck remembers a Christmas 50 years ago and one of today.

By Erma Bombeck  
Special to The News Tribune

**T**he family. We are a strange little band of characters trudging through life, sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.

The years have challenged families in a way no one would have thought it possible to survive. They've weathered combinations of step, foster, single, adoptive, surrogate, frozen embryo and sperm bank. They've multiplied, divided, extended and banded into communes. They've been assaulted by technology, battered by sexual revolutions and confused by role reversals. But they're still here — playing to a full house.



#### The Family: 1936

It was the best of times

I had my watch, a tricycle and a clip-on Erma Bombeck Shirley Temple hair ribbon that covered the entire right side of my head. My mother wore an apron and silk stockings and baked every day.

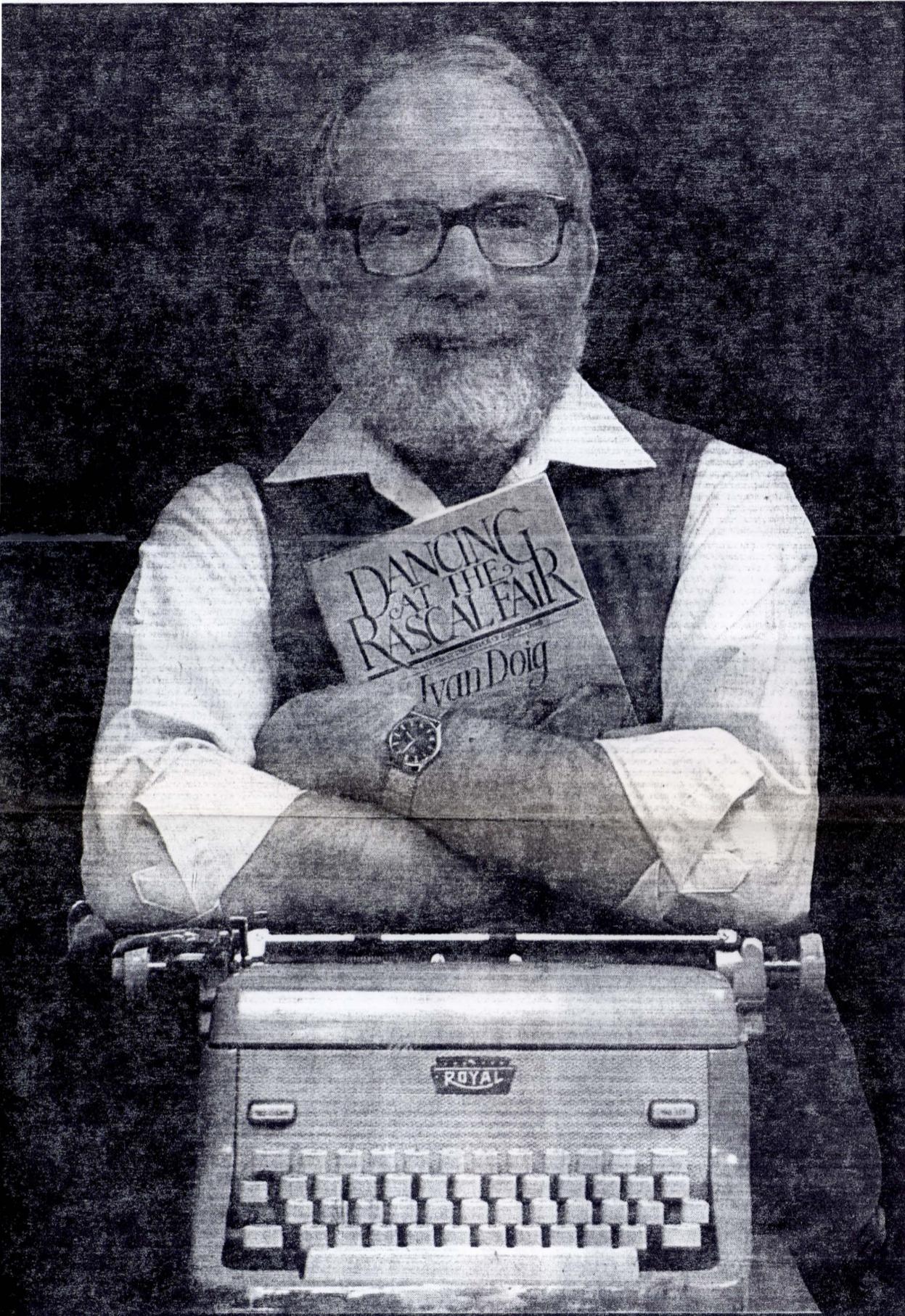
The family sat on the front porch in the summer and talked about the squeak in the swing. My dad always told me to get my tricycle off the sidewalk at night before someone fell over it. I never did. My mother cleaned the living room every day. We never sat in it. Once I turned on one of the lights and the cellophane around the lamp shade smelled and I got my hands slapped.

Mom cut the grass and filled the clothesline every day. Every Friday, she hosed out the garbage cans. In the spring she really got crazy . . . lugging mattresses out to the back yard and setting up curtain rods to dry the lace curtains.

My sister bossed and went to high school. She didn't do anything else. I was insanely busy going to school and being a servant to everyone.

One morning my father didn't get up and go to work. He went to the hospital and died the next day.

I hadn't thought that much about him before. He was just someone who left and came home and seemed glad to see every one at night. He opened the jar of pickles whe-



Joe Giron/The News Tribune

Ivan Doig spent years researching his Montana roots before writing his first book, 'This House of Sky.'

to crack. The best I did was *The New York Times* travel section, which was a wonderful audience and the best editing I ever had as a magazine writer, but you still couldn't make any money at it. You'd get paid 250 bucks for a piece you might have spent three weeks or a month on, and they didn't pay your expenses," Doig said, sitting in the study he shares with his wife, Carol.

He credits Carol with supporting them during that time with her salary as a professor at Shoreline Community

College, doing the same again when they agreed he should put his energies into writing *This House of Sky*.

"The shift towards books, toward *House of Sky* began in the late Sixties when my dad was still alive but was long dying of emphysema in White Sulphur Springs, and I was going back, time after time to try and help him deal with that. When he died in '71 I realized I wanted to write something about him and, in a way, his generation, a gen-

Please see Doig, D3

# WHAT'S | WHAT'S

## HOT | NOT

### Nationally

From Page C1



**C. Everett Koop**



**Ivan Doig**

**"Crime Story"**  
**Seamed stockings**  
 Fireplaces  
**French manicures**  
 Certificates of deposit  
**Long hair**  
 Pictionary  
**Tom Selleck**  
 Johnny  
**New Orleans Saints**  
 Destiny  
**Glenn Close**  
 Kirstie Alley  
**Dabney Coleman**  
 Capt. Picard  
**Butter**  
 C. Everett Koop  
**Feminine dresses**  
 "Bloom County"  
**"Jeopardy"**  
 Pat Sajac  
**Couch potatoes**  
 Analog

**"Miami Vice"**  
**Anklets**  
 Wood stoves  
**Sculpted nails**  
 Home equity loans  
**Perms**  
 Trivial Pursuit  
**Don Johnson**  
 Oprah, Phil  
**New York Giants**  
 Nostalgia  
**Kathleen Turner**  
 Shelley Long  
**Bruce Willis**  
 Capt. Kirk  
**Margarine**  
 Shere Hite  
**Dress for success**  
 "Doonesbury"  
**"Wheel of Fortune"**  
 Vanna White  
**Fitness freaks**  
 Digital



**Shere Hite**



**Stephen King**

Christmas  
 chime  
 high-t

My friend Stanley  
 Christmas ghost  
 He ranks the  
 up there with  
 Ebenezer Scrooge  
 contrast to Scrooge  
 Stanley's story is  
 true.

Stanley lives  
 dy bachelor apart  
 from Greece.  
 cal scholar,  
 much time at home

When he isn't  
 search in some du  
 he is sandwiched  
 footnotes and bib  
 but someone has

Stanley, who  
 aside his monogra  
 Christmas with fa

"I haven't bee  
 reported. He said  
 enough to prepare  
 Christmas cards a  
 ed and full of Chr

But he was ho  
 strange, ethereal

**"JINGLE BEL**  
 it, over and over."



Donald Trump



Glenn Close



Mikhail

Larry King  
Susan Dey  
Doctors  
Mikhail and Raisa  
Muffins  
Spalding Gray  
Daniel Inouye  
Weekend vacations  
Common sense  
Showy engagement rings  
Mr. Potato Head  
Liberal arts degrees  
Congress  
Summits  
Russians  
Michael Jordan  
Columbia  
Grateful Dead  
Accountability  
Crystals  
Fruit juice sparklers  
Curves  
Shriver-Schwarzenegger  
Donald Trump  
Sunday school  
Big screen TV  
McGruff  
CNN  
Minnesota Twins  
Anti-lock brakes  
Range Rover  
Cher  
Lee Hart  
Liz Taylor  
Cilantro  
Jay Leno  
Afghanistan  
Tom Brokaw  
Rat pack  
Peanut butter  
Poor urban professionals  
Sun block

Paul Harvey  
Cybill Shepherd  
Lawyers  
Chuck and Di  
Croissants  
Garrison Keillor  
Oliver North  
60-hour work weeks  
Life in the fast lane  
Prenuptial agreements  
Slinky  
MBAs  
The president  
Medium-range missiles  
Australians  
Dr. J  
SMU  
Run DMC  
Deniability  
Astral projection  
Wine coolers  
Starvation  
Penn-Madonna  
Lee Iacocca  
Televangelists  
Personal computers  
Spuds MacKenzie  
Home Shopping Network  
New York Mets  
Automatic seat belts  
Cadillac Allante  
Sigourney Weaver  
Donna Rice  
Joan Collins  
Basil  
Eddie Murphy  
Nicaragua  
Dan Rather  
Brat pack  
Sushi  
Young urban professionals  
Freckles



Lee Iacocca



Kathleen Turner



Princess Di

sounds as if it's ra  
At first, he th  
coming from the a  
on his neighbor's  
playing her stereo  
"No," said his  
the radio on."  
Stanley went  
friends that he co  
happening.  
"The season m  
said. "I ke clear  
chorus of 'Jingle B  
er tune. 'Santa Cl  
think."  
"Someone's wi  
quaintance.  
Wind chimes t  
Stanley knew bett  
the source.  
He started sea  
in earnest. He wen  
listen. The sounds  
room.  
Stanley search  
shelves. Could it b  
from the apartmen  
He went down  
the man who lived  
wasn't coming fro

**STANLEY WE**  
dered. Could it be  
his stereo system?  
He unplugged  
hear "Jingle Bells."  
"I wondered if  
confessed. "I even  
ghost?"

He rejected the  
doubt his hearing  
doubt his hearing.  
couple who lived n  
to help him find th  
They arrived wi  
"Here we are, C  
merrily. But thoug  
they, too, were stur  
dismantle everythin  
About half an h  
attacked the stack o  
"I hear it best o  
started leafi thro  
time. Three-fourths  
stack, she unearthed  
"Here it is!" she  
Yorker is playing 'Ji  
It was. The Dec.  
centerfold ad for Ab  
ad was designed to p  
the page was med  
or mailing process, tl  
damaged. It was play  
over.



Steve Largent



Dave Krieg



B. Bickerstaff

Rosanne Royer  
**Laser sound systems**  
 Cary Bozeman  
**Cocooning**  
 Discount stores  
**Seattle 2000 Commission**  
 Steve Largent  
**Bernie Bickerstaff**  
 Takeout food  
**Pinot Noir**  
 Coffee  
**Espresso**  
 Mountain climbing  
**Spandex tights**  
 Cotton  
**Neighborhoods**  
 Ballard  
**Tennis**  
 The Seattle/Club  
**Dave Krieg**  
 Couch potatoes  
**KNUA-FM**  
 Ivan Doig  
**Montana**  
 Victoria, B.C.  
**Sun Valley**  
 Pike Place Market  
**Seattle SuperSonics**  
 Jim Marsh  
**Seattle Tennis Center**  
 Rockport  
**Sailboarding**  
 Port Townsend  
**Brian Bosworth**

Charles Royer  
**White-wall tires**  
 Tim Hill  
**Discos**  
 Designer jeans  
**Metro**  
 George Argyros  
**Barry Ackerley**  
 TV dinners  
**Johannisberg Reising**  
 Sparkling water  
**Budweiser**  
 Backpacking  
**Stirrup stretch pants**  
 Permanent press  
**Downtown Seattle**  
 Bellevue  
**Racquetball**  
 Supermarket Singles Night  
**Dave Krieg**  
 Movers and shakers  
**Drive-time DJ's**  
 Stephen King  
**Washington, D.C.**  
 Vancouver, B.C.  
**Whistler Mountain**  
 Columbia Center  
**Husky basketball**  
 Wrestling hold of the week  
**Private tennis clubs**  
 Nike  
**Water-skiing**  
 Everett  
**The Boz**



George Argyros



Dave Krieg



Barry Ackerley

hadn't found it?" Stu  
 dissected mechanism  
 "But by the time the  
 have been driven to  
 Done in by the Chris

■ Jean Godrien is  
 four times a week

**Slice of life**

Clyde the  
 no Christ

The Associated Press

TULSA, Okla. —  
 four days was one thing  
 weight around and  
 time was just too much  
 A 2,000-pound car  
 from the Miller Bros. C  
 Drive Baptist Church

But after Cal  
 being able to take  
 Richard Harrison, a  
 volunteered to help  
 "Clyde is not affect  
 who because of his  
 quick," Harrison said  
 Those like myself  
 ends do not get  
 its you one time you

**How they rate**

Following are last  
 television shows as com

- op-rated TV shows**
1. 60 Minutes
  2. Garfield's Christmas
  3. The Little Match Girl
  3. Growing Pains
  5. Claymation
  5. Murder, She Wrote
  7. Golden Girls
  7. Who's the Boss?
  8. Monday Night Football
  9. Matlock