1 April '99

Dear Ms. Shumway--

I appreciate your interest in my work--for that matter I liked what little I've read of Robert Laxalt's--and yes, I'll respond as best I can to your questions across the next year. Letters primarily and by phone when necessary, please; if you reach a point where you need to resort to the phone, we'll need to work out a routine where you first call me or my phone machine and arrange a time when you can call back and talk to me at length. (My phone number is up there in my letterhead, and please also note my new address.) In a pinch, we can resort to fax, although I prefer not to use it a lot because my machine shares my phone line.

Some possible bumps ahead in the schedule, in terms of your being able to reach me: knee surgery and recuperation/rehabilitation which will occupy my time from the end of this month until about mid-May; the bookstore tour for my next book, which will take me to Montana the last two weeks of August and sporadically take me out of touch through September and maybe the first week of October; and exigencies of the writing schedule, which sometimes keep me from my mail for a couple of weeks at a time.

Now let's see what I can do with your initial questions:

1. The trilogy form felt right for the amount of time and plot I wanted to deal with. While I have always thought of those three pieces of writing centered on the McCaskills as a single expanse of work--in essence, they represent how I spent the 1980's, writing them--it made no sense to me to cram them into a single massive book. For one thing, it is devilishly hard to modulate language, characters, and a book's pace successfully for a thousand consecutive pages, rather than three or four hundred at a time. (Even *Anna Karenina*, the worthiest doorstop-sized book I can think of, tails off ~~when~~ after Anna meets her fate under the train, and we then get days and days of Levin, who perhaps ought to be traipsing around all that countryside in some book of his own.) For another, as a professional writer I would have been unwise to make a commitment of nine years, as I knew the trilogy would take, to a publisher on a single whopper of a book. Indeed, by the time I was writing *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana,* the publishing house had changed hands and my editor had left the business--but the first two-thirds of the project, i.e. *English Creek* and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair,* were by then safely in print and only *Mariah* had to suffer the tribulations of a publisher in upheaval.

In choosing to do a trilogy, I can't say I had your classic examples of Aeschylus and Sophocles at the front of my mind, nor even my own nearer classic, Faulkner. But of course the form bestowed into literary practice by those writers was thereby granted to me; through their inspired craft, the trilogy concept is there and available in my bag of tricks as a writer. In short, I believe I chose to do a trilogy for my own reasons, but from what I at least unconsciously knew was a proven and perfectly serviceable approach to big storytelling. On the conscious side, if this is any help, I do remember telling myself that Faulkner's experience with *The Hamlet, The Town,* and *The Mansion* defined what *any* writer's perceived success with the form was going to be: readers and critics were going to look at any trilogy and rank them 1-2-3, favorably to un-, even if you were a Nobel laureate. I had no problem with that prospect for my own trilogy, in effect accepting it as a fact of literary life, and indeed came out luckier than expected; of my trio, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* has been the readers' favorite and the best-selling of any of my books, *English Creek* sells quite well and has a lot of adherents among historians in particular,

and *Mariah* has a continuing life in paperback and in the minds of audiences who standardly ask me if I have a daughter like Mariah McCaskill.

2. Each novel has its distinct arc of time--thirty years in *Rascal Fair,* one Montana summer in *English Creek,* the quick crowded weeks of *Mariah*--and its own pace and plot, leading to a concluding scene which is meant to close the cover on that particular story but to let the characters live on. The intricacy of my trilogy, which I think of as an organic intricacy, the intricacy of a living shape-shifting form, I hope is in such things as:

-- its sense of language,which I deliberately made evolve through the books from Scottish-lilted to modern Western wordplay. Note, for instance, the drinking lingo that ranges from an early "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame!" to Jick's latterday order, "We'll have another round of jelly sandwiches here, please." The songs (all of which I wrote) mirror the different times through the course of the books; so does the cussing. The persistence of linguistic play, and of the characters' love of stories, poetry, all the dances of the tongue, is a deliberate weave throughout the three books.

--the family trees of the characters. Family names thread throughout the books, some of them making "America changes" of their own--the homesteading family of Findlaters in *Rascal Fair* have become Finletters by the time of *Mariah,* and Isaac Reese's origins as a Riis similarly twines between those books. The Two Medicine country is purposely four generations deep, in lingering story if not actual population, almost anywhere you look.

--the plots, in which past actions have continuing consequences. I did not have the three plotlines, storylines, worked out when I began the writing with *English Creek,* but simply left myself openings that I thought of as alleys of opportunity to link one plot to another. Example: I wrote Jick's interrogation of his mother about what happened on the wagon trip to the Two Medicine River and beyond without my knowing what happened. When the time came to write *Rascal Fair,* I then had to come up with what happened--Angus's innocent but guilty-looking prairie meeting with married Anna. Plotting by necessity this way is not the hardship it may sound, incidentally; I regard these enforced spots of plotting as something like a whetstone, places to sharpen my imagination on. And they do make for intricacy, in that they must build into and fit what has happened in one of the other books.

3. I'd say the trilogy is the story of a family line, unquestionably; of a state, yes, to the extent that it's an *observed* story--by Angus, Jick, Mariah, Riley--rather than a living historical diorama as, say, Tolstoy evidently intended *War and Peace* to be. The story of a nation, yes, in large terms--the change from rural hopes of the homesteaders to the job nimbleness needed by Mariah and Riley, certainly--but I would point out to you that it is maybe more the story of a country. That is, of a physical section of the earth, more than its political emanation. The word "country" is one I like for its rich variety of definitions, one of which is distinct to the Montana I grew up in and thus the backkground I draw on for the linguistic cosmology of these books. As in "the Two Medicine country," a "country" was the area you could see around you, generally a drainage defined by the ridges or mountains on the horizon and whatever route of water was local to it. In actuality as well as my fiction, these "countries" could be quite compressed; the "White Sulphur Springs country" where I was born is only 22 miles from "the Ringling country," and Ringling in turn is only 12 or 15 miles from the entirely separate "Sixteenmile country" where my dad was born on the family homestead. Not to make too much of this, because in the trilogy I am primarily writing about people, the story of a family, but the story of the bowl of vision within people's horizons I think is an important one, too; it's the arena of our existence.

I hope some of this helps. Good luck with compiling the research for your dissertation--I remember the process well, if not fondly.

regards,

15 March, 1999

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Dr. Ivan Doig
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Dr. Doig,

I am a Ph.D. student in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno. I have completed my comprehensive examinations and am beginning my dissertation. In this dissertation, I plan to discuss your Montana trilogy, along with Robert Laxalt's Nevada Basque trilogy. I will examine how both you and Laxalt use the format of a trilogy to tell a story of a family, state and nation and compare your trilogies with the first trilogies in classic literature (by Aeschylus and Sophocles) and other series since then.

My advisor at UNR is Dr. Ann Ronald. Other advisory committee members are Dr. Tom King (Director of the Oral History Program), Dr. Catherine Fowler, Dr. Robert Merrill, and Dr. Scott Slovic. I hope to complete the dissertation and graduate in May, 2000.

Though this Ph.D. is in English, I do not teach English at this time. Instead, my profession is a librarian (for 22 years). Currently I am at the Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, where I teach how to use the World Wide Web for research. But in addition to my degree in Library Science, I have a B.A. and an M.A. in English, and a love for literature, with a special interest in literature set in the western United States.

Would you be willing to respond to my correspondence over this next year? If so, which method do you prefer: letters, e-mail, or telephone? I have listed several initial questions in the attachment and included a self-addressed, stamped envelope for your convenience. If you prefer e-mail, please let me know and I will be glad to put my questions in that format. My e-mail address is vshumway@mail.occ.cccd.edu.

Thank you for all and any information you provide in support of my doctoral dissertation.

Sincerely,

Vinta M. Shumway

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March 15, 1999

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Dr. Doig,

The following are my initial questions:

1. I read that you decided to write this story as a trilogy right from the beginning. Why and how did you choose the format of a trilogy?

2. How do you feel that each novel works both as a separate work and as an intricate part of the trilogy?

3. What is your reaction to my assumption that your Montana trilogy is a story of a family, a state, and a nation?

Thank you,

Vinta M. Shumway

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