

BOOK REVIEWS:

HEART EARTH  
by Ivan Doig

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b:DOIGHRT

Feb. 16, 1991

# Western author's next

By J.C. Martin  
The Arizona Daily Star



A.E. Aralza, The Arizona Daily Star

Author Ivan Doig is in Tucson

Author Ivan Doig's Arizona fans who read his Montana sagas with unflagging pleasure will like this news: He is about to turn his attention to Arizona.

Doig, born in White Sulphur Springs, Mont., 51 years ago, began his published literary career in 1978 with a Montana memoir, "This House of Sky." He used family recollections to paint the harsh, rewarding life of early Montana pioneers. The book was nominated for a National Book Award.

His next effort, "Berneta's Book," — at the moment just a working title, — will be a continuation of "This House of Sky," Doig says. It will be partly factual.

Berneta was Doig's mother and she died in 1945 when he was barely 6. The family — Doig, his mother and father — spent the winter preceding her death in Phoenix and Wickenburg. There Berneta Doig, who had asthma, tried to regain her health.

In telling his mother's story, basically that of a girl and a woman who grew up in Montana in the early 20th century, the Arizona sojourn will come into the picture through her letters. They were sent faithfully every two weeks to her brother serving in the South Pacific during World War II.

"She was a clear, vivid writer," Doig says. One of her accounts, he remembers, concerned a Montana Club get-together in Mesa.

In spite of Berneta's improving health, Arizona could not keep the Doigs. "Homesickness, family considerations," Doig says, drew them back to Montana. So Ivan Doig did not grow up in Wickenburg, after all, where he might have devoted his talents to presenting Central Arizona with the same chiseled precision he uses on Montana.

On the other hand, although Doig has spent most of his literary career portraying Montana life, he hasn't lived there since 1957 when he left home to attend Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

## book to include Arizona

For the past 26 years he has lived in Seattle with his wife, Carol, a former journalist who now teaches at Shoreline Community College.

He returns to Montana regularly, however, as he did earlier this month to receive a Governor's Arts Award. He won similar awards in Washington in 1979, '81, '85 and '88.

Despite ties to his home state, Doig insists he could never live there. "You have to wear too many hats in a small city."

He cites the case of writer friends whose "good citizen consciences" keep them on civic committees and boards. "That and listening in on the downtown geezer table," Doig shakes his head in cheerful dismay. "They just won't let you alone."

He prefers what he calls the "aloneness" of his Seattle suburb.

Doig traces his decision to be a writer back to junior high school and the encouragement of a sympathetic teacher.

"I dropped out of Future Farmers and

signed up to take a course in typing. You talk about a career decision."

Graduating from Northwestern in 1961, Doig spent a few years at various journalistic jobs (a newspaper and a magazine) before getting a Ph.D. in Western history at the University of Washington.

Beginning in 1970, Doig spent the next 10 years, "twice the length for human sanity," as a full-time free-lance writer. He was turning out a couple dozen articles a year when "This House of Sky" started making the rounds of New York publishers.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, which bought it, was the 13th publisher to read it.

But when the rejection slips started coming back with comments such as, "This is really well-written but we don't see any commercial prospects," Doig says, he knew he was getting close.

"It's hard to say enough good things about what happens when Ivan Doig sets words

See DOIG, Page 7B

## Doig

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down on a page," a critic wrote.

"He has that magical quality," one fan put it, "of being able to make you see, taste, feel and smell what he is writing about."

It is not something he achieves casually. Most Doig books have gone through at least three and often as many as seven rewrites. Doig, who still relies mainly on a manual typewriter, says, "It's the first writing that's tough. Getting the words out of my head and onto anything. By the third draft, it starts to sing."

Using a Roget's Thesaurus that he acquired in college, Doig works at what he describes as "sorting words." (For the Montana trilogy "English Creek," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," and "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," he also used a songwriter's rhyming dictionary.)

Sometimes, Doig says, he will look over a manuscript "just for verbs." Sometimes, "to see how every paragraph begins and ends. I like to read things out loud to hear their rhythm, the turns of phrase." He has been known to sit at his desk reading silently, tapping the eraser end of a pencil in cadence as his lips move.

"I try to work two stubborn substances, research and craft," Doig told an interviewer for the "Contemporary Authors" series, "into becoming the hardest alloy of all — a good story."

Doig will be at The Haunted Bookshop, 7211 N. Northern Ave., 2-4 p.m. tomorrow to sign books and greet readers.

## KIRKUS REVIEWS

In quoting or excerpting, please refer to  
KIRKUS REVIEWS  
Date of Issue: July 1, 1993

◆ Doig, Ivan  
HEART EARTH  
Atheneum (208 pp.)  
\$19.00  
Sep. 1993  
ISBN: 0-689-12137-7

Fifteen years after *This House of Sky*, Doig (*Ride with Me, Mariah Montana*, 1990, etc.) returns to his earliest days in another profoundly original and lustrous re-creation.

Inspired by wartime letters (just recently presented to the author) from his mother to a favorite brother stationed in the Pacific, Doig traces his family's struggles from Montana ranches so isolated that "weather was the only neighbor" to the shared hopes of an Arizona defense workers' housing project and back to Montana, with its steady string of natural indignities. Doig's parents eke out a living, always on the verge of better times despite the shadow of his mother's asthma and the prevalence of daily hardships: coyotes near the sheep ranch; infested one-room houses; road mud "thick enough to float a train." His mother's death comes without warning, on the author's sixth birthday, just as the sheep are ready for shearing and a certain healthy profit. "Nobody got over her," Doig writes, "those around me in my growing-up stayed hit."

Doig captures the serial disasters, as well as several cherished family scenes—including a lunch of Spam sandwiches and lime Kool-Aid—with the clarifying beauty and sure shaping hand of his first book. Even when mining some of the same material that appeared there, he claims new territory for the significant figures in his life.

### ★ HEART EARTH

*Ivan Doig*. Atheneum, \$19 (208p) ISBN 0-689-12137-7

In poetic and precise prose, Doig has crafted a worthy complement to his acclaimed memoir, *This House of Sky*. While that book concerned family tensions after his mother Berneta's death in 1945, here, prompted by a cache of his mother's letters to her sailor brother from that year, Doig recreates a life "the five-year-old dirtmover that was me" could hardly have known. He describes life in an Arizona housing project for defense workers, where his family moved to spare his mother's asthma. He tracks down his Uncle Wally's old beau, about whom his mother wrote. He recalls the battle between his grandmother and father over his mother's medical condition, "the geography of risk" and the family move back to Montana ranching. Doig's writing is immensely quotable—listening to his elders was "prowling with your ears." What makes this book so touching is that, through letters, Doig realizes how much he, the writer, owes to "this earlier family member who wordworked."  
(Sept.)

Publishers Weekly  
July 5, 1993



Carol Doig

Ivan Doig in the Arizona desert of his youth.

## Ivan Doig's 'Heart Earth'

# Searching memory's canyons for a mother lost long ago

By Terry Orme  
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

There's a little saying posted near the desk where Ivan Doig composes his novels and memoirs. It reads: "Anybody can write on a good day."

Growing up in Montana's mountain country prepared him for writing on days good and bad.

"If you've packed water and split wood, you hope that later in life you can write that page of dialogue you don't much want to," he says. "That way of being brought up accounts for a lot of the habits I have as a writer. Some of it is simply a Westernness, an ability to do the chores."

Ivan Doig was reared by his itinerant rancher-father and his maternal grandmother — two people who understood hard work but who also had to overcome animosity to share a life bringing up this son and grandson. It was five years after the death of Ivan's mother before Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer would come together and become a family of three.

*This House of Sky*, Mr. Doig's much-praised 1978 memoir, tells of this tenuous arrangement that became a bond. The book, which introduced

■ See B-6, Column 1

## Author to receive award, read from his new book

Ivan Doig is coming to Utah this week to pick up an award and to read from his new book.

The Seattle-based writer will receive the 1992 Evans Biography Award Tuesday in a banquet at Utah State University, Logan.

On Wednesday, he will read from his new book, *Heart Earth*, at The King's English,

1511 S. 1500 East, Salt Lake City. The reading begins at 4:30 p.m., and reservations are required. Mr. Doig will sign books from 5 to 7 p.m. at the

store.

Mr. Doig will sign books at Waking Owl Books, 208 S. 1300 East, Salt Lake City, Thursday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

## Doig reconstructs his mother's last months

■ Continued from B-1

the author to a national audience, opens with two sentences, unforgettable in their tragic poetry: "Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. Then stopped."

In the ensuing years, restless Charlie Doig wandered from one ranch job to another, Ivan accompanying him through the streets, bunkhouses and bars of small-town Montana. Eventually, Charlie made a truce with his mother-in-law to give his son a settled life. *This House of Sky* was hailed for the way it explored these relationships and the portrait Mr. Doig painted of the 1950s West and the ranching life.

Now, Ivan Doig has written another memoir, *Heart Earth*, inspired by a dozen letters written by his mother — Berneta Ringer Doig — to her brother aboard a destroyer in the South Pacific during World War II. The correspondence, variously postmarked through the first half of 1945, is her personal record of the last six months of her life. It was another 41 years before Ivan saw the letters, having been left them in his uncle's will.

*Heart Earth* holds promise of being a best seller, and already has been named winner of the prestigious 1992 Evans Award for biography, which carries a \$10,000 prize.

(cont. next page)

Using the letters as a springboard, Mr. Doig reconstructs the last months his mother, father and he had together. The memories are vivid: washing the trusty Ford in a stream before going to the funeral of a ranch worker; relocating to Arizona in the desperate hope desert air will heal Berneta's asthma and Charlie will find steady employment in a defense plant; their return to Montana and the high mountain pastures that sustain them financially and spiritually.

Most of all, the book is the story of a writer exploring the "chain lightning of memory and family" and discovering "an indelible young woman" who was his mother.

"That last half-year of my mother's life became a lot clearer," Mr. Doig says of the letters. "It showed her frame of mind, her inclinations as to where she wanted to live in the West. It's startling. I thought I knew what went on. But to hear some of the details, I realized I you really didn't know.

"The letters also let me hear her tone of voice — her thinking — which I really didn't have much memory of. A kid that age couldn't register that his mother had a good sarcastic eye."

Besides the letters, Mr. Doig interviewed family and friends about their recollections of those years when he was young.

"You try and find whatever canyons back into it you can. A lot of it lives on in family stories."

Although *Heart Earth* is just now reaching bookstores, indications are it could match the success of *This House of Sky*. Reviews compare the two favorably.

The Evans Award was established in 1983 by David W. and Beatrice C. Evans. The late Mr. Evans, a prominent Salt Lake City businessman, was interested in the region he called "Mormon Country," designated as parts of southern Canada and northern Mexico, western sections of Washington and Oregon and the Intermountain states. A book doesn't need to be about Mormons to be eligible for the award. Winners are chosen by a jury.

Mr. Doig, 54, and his wife, Carol, have made Seattle their home since the mid-'60s. But Montana continues to capture his imagination. He wrote a Montana trilogy — *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, *English Creek* and *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* — that recounted three generations of the fictional McCaskill family, from their roots in 19th-century Scotland to 1989 and the decline of ranching as a way of life.

Like a poet, Mr. Doig begins a book by playing with words, composing phrases that resonate emotion.

"I wanted to open *This House of Sky* with that sentence about my mother's death. It was the most potent, personal material I had."

*Heart Earth* opens with: "In that last winter of war, she knew to use pointblank ink."

"There was the ostensible war, and the war with her own health," Mr. Doig says now.

Not only is Montana a favorite subject, but the isolation of living there as a boy is one reason Mr. Doig became a writer.

"Being left alone to rely on my imagination had something to do with me becoming a writer. That is one of the things I have learned about myself while writing these books."

# Imagining Mother

**HEART EARTH**

A Memoir

By Ivan Doig

(Atheneum: \$19; 160 pp.)

**Reviewed by Michael Dorris**

“Imagination,” Shakespeare wrote, “bodies forth/The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen/Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name.”

It’s an apt description for “Heart Earth,” novelist and memoirist Ivan Doig’s tough and poignant piecing together of his early past. Prompted in 1986 by an unexpected inheritance of newsy letters written during World War II by his mother (who died from an asthma attack on her son’s 5th birthday) to her brother Wally, then serving aboard the Ault in the Pacific, Doig uses the slender frame of terse communiqués, augmented by his own fragmentary early childhood recollections, to illuminate his parents’ brief life as a couple. The man and woman who emerge are complex and determinedly independent, but they share an abiding affection for the fierce Montana environment of their upbringing and for the son they, against the odds, produced.

Nothing came easy for this pair, except kindness. Charlie Doig, descendant of Scots ranchers, and Berneta Ringer, from a clan “barely clinging to the planet,” were used to adversity. “My [maternal] grandfather Tom,” Doig concludes,

and Berneta, their extended families and neighbors, their dogs and their sheep, their landscape and their horizons fairly burst with immediacy.

Doig, a colloquial stylist without equal (“English Creek,” “Dancing at the Rascal Fair”), refuses to idealize the hard-scrapple struggle of his parents’ existence. His father, he tells us, is “built like a brimming shotglass.” His mother “cannot be sculpted from sugar,” but rather “assembles herself as someone not growing out of childhood but simply flinging it off.” Her mother, who after Berneta’s death made a steely peace with Charlie Doig in order that they might jointly raise the young Ivan, is even more formidable: “The only thing about my grandmother that ever went gray was her hair,” Doig confides. “All else stayed brisk, immutable; the pleasant enough proclamation of face . . . the body of German sturdiness. The hands and arms of Bessie Ringer were scarred from every kind of barbwire work, yet there she sat hooking away at the most intricate of crochetwork, snow-flaking the rough rooms of her existence with doily upon doily.”

Like Doig’s critically acclaimed 1978 “This House of Sky” (recently reissued in a hardcover edition with a new preface by the author), for which this work acts as a kind of self-standing prequel, “Heart Earth” is a book that repeatedly proves the power of language. Whether he’s detailing the “inscribing shadows” of the Southwestern desert populated by cattle

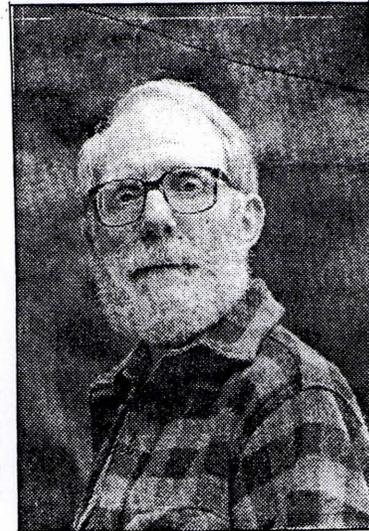
“seems to have been one of those natural bachelors who waver into marriage at middle age and never quite catch up to their condition. My grandmother Bessie, I know for sure, was a born endurer who would drop silently furious at having to take on responsibility beyond her own, then go ahead and shoulder every last least bit of it. Certainly over time their marriage became a bone-and-gristle affair that matched the Moss Agate country they were caught in.”

Their eldest and only daughter, Berneta, “always slept with three pillows propping her up, angle akin to a hospital bed, so that she could breathe past the asthma,” a chronic health condition that prompted a childhood move from Wisconsin to Montana, and later, after her marriage to Charlie Doig, to the dry air of Arizona.

Berneta wrote the way a person perpetually short of breath might speak: staccato, telegraphic sentences, with little in the way of description and all emphasis on the shotgun transmission of vital information. Yet her adult son, decades later, manages artfully to read (no: *sing*) between the lines to find the barricaded personality:

“The box curtains of the mind: We never fully imagine, let alone believe in what was said to one another by those impossible beings, our parents before they were our parents,” the author says, and then, in the magical prose of “Heart Earth,” proves himself wrong. Charlie

*Michael Dorris’ collection of short stories, “Working Men,” will be published in October.*



Ivan Doig

MIRIAM BERKLEY

so gaunt “they look like they’d eat the eyebrows off you,” his father lighting a cigarette “to try to bribe his nerves,” sheep so officious “you’d think the fools had appointments somewhere,” or an eavesdropping child “prowling” with his ears, Ivan Doig uses words like oil paint to create canvasses of enduring value and originality.

Nowhere, of course, does he better excel than in depicting the mountains and valleys of his native Montana. Just listen: “The place has the feel of getting

away with something, pulling a trick at odds with the surrounding geography. The ever so level deck of meadow; how in the world did that slip in here between convulsive gulches that nearly stand on end? Then the cabin knoll, just enough of an ascension to lord it over the meadow; terrace in the wilderness, no less? And the water helling off down the gulch is a surprising amount of creek, yet its flow is disguised away, hidden beneath steep banks until you peek straight down into the disturbed glass of its riffles.”

Such passages—and there are many in this gem of a book—are enough to drive other writers crazy with envy, even as we cannot help but exclaim them aloud to anyone within shouting distance.

Finally, though, “Heart Earth” is a love story, the gift of a child to a parent who wouldn’t stay forgotten, to a woman who, after all her hardship, could simply write, “I got along okay”—who firmly believed you must “extend yourself full slam.” A strong, taciturn, brave woman, who “nobody got over.”

Neither will you.

# Ivan Doig starts book tour in Kalispell

By SCOTT CRANDELL  
The Daily Inter Lake

Author Ivan Doig goes on the road next week to promote his new book, "Heart Earth," and the road begins in Kalispell.

The Seattle-based writer described Kalispell as the "world premiere" kickoff for his tour of the West promoting "Heart Earth," a memoir that is a precursor to his first book, "This House of Sky."

On Wednesday — the official publication date for his latest effort — Doig will sign books at Books West from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and at the Village Book Shop from 1 to 2:30 p.m.

The book tour gives the author a chance to get back to his native Montana, Doig said in a telephone interview, although he wouldn't mind coming back on a more leisurely errand.

"I don't mind the booster part, but two months in airports and hotel elevators are not my favorite form of work," Doig said.

The book he is promoting, his sixth, is a look back to 1945, chronicling his family's travels and travails at the close of World War II, with particular focus on his mother's last year of life.

Doig said "Heart Earth," which ends where "House of Sky" begins, is his most personal effort yet.

"This seemed to me to provide a way to look back at the life of a young woman in the West who happened to be and fortunately was my own mother," Doig said.

His mother's letters, unexpectedly given to Doig when his uncle died, form the basis for "Heart Earth."

Without his mother's writings, the book would not have been possible, Doig said. "I didn't have any notion at all of doing this kind of book until the letters came in."

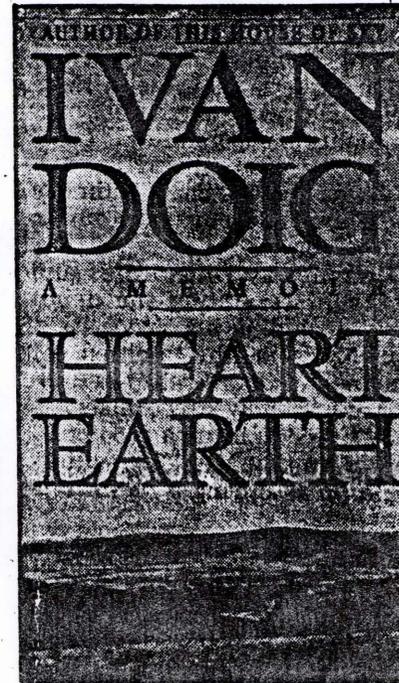
In the letters, Doig found the seeds of his own writing heritage. "Working with words, she had a kind of a sly, wry eye for people," he said. "She loved sto-



IVAN DOIG will be in Kalispell Wednesday at two local bookstores to sign copies of his new book, "Heart Earth."

ries and liked gossip. These are all good writerly attributes."

Doig even went back to his mother's very early writing, a



homemade fifth-grade geography booklet on farming in Montana.

Those familiar with Doig's books will recognize the geo-

graphic eye — and pen — passed from mother to son, since lyrical descriptions of the Montana landscape are trademarks of his work.

In "Heart Earth," readers will encounter again Doig's distinctive style, where prose slips comfortably into poetry.

Also making a return engagement is Doig's reverence for family and the interplay of mother, father and son, plus the land that shaped their existence and relationship.

"Heart Earth" returns to the haunts of Ringling and the Big Belt Mountains, which drew Doig, his mother and father back from a brief 1945 sojourn to Arizona.

"Landscape was obviously very important to her," Doig said of his mother. "She liked the Big Belts and Sixteen Country, and didn't much like the Southwest."

That favored country also was the setting for "This House of Sky," which follows Doig's upbringing after his mother's

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# Doig

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death, as well as the geographic basis for his trilogy of novels.

But as much as the Montana landscape — both mountains and mind — has figured in Doig's literary output, he became an economic emigre from the state.

"I'm the third-generation Montanan," Doig said, "and the economic hardships of the first two were enough to make me think, 'A couple of generations of people hurling themselves at these hills ... maybe it's time someone else went and found work.'"

Where he found work was out of state, eventually Seattle, where he settled with his wife, Carol, who teaches literature of the American West.

Doig, who describes himself in "Heart Earth" as an "exile in the Montana diaspora of the West," says he is still close enough to Montana so that it doesn't hinder his writings about his home state.

"I'm back enough to look at the country so that cancels out the down side of not living there and writing about it," Doig said.

In his promotional travels he also meets more than a few others for whom economics have meant finding a way out of the state.

He recalled a book signing in Washington, D.C., where a substantial proportion of people in line were Montanans "even though their jobs happened to be across the continent."

After Doig's current literary foray into his and Montana's past, he doesn't expect to write another chapter of memoirs for another 15 years or so.

Instead, he plans to venture back into fiction. He is currently 150 pages into a sizable novel set during the building of Fort Peck Dam "with a few time trips."

"I think it's time again for readers to hear from my characters as I put other parts of the past, other pieces of the panorama of language I'm trying to work with into the book," Doig said.

"I think there's a wonderful turmoil of Montana, the West and America during the Depression and the boom towns that sprang up overnight."

This upcoming effort, Doig said, will be based on everything from site visits to oral history to the classic photographs of Margaret Bourke-White.

"It's a very inviting, lively topic for me," Doig said. "Bourke-White's camera will be one of my

characters for me for a while, as the eye of time and the eye of the camera moves around Fort Peck."

This one is a couple of years from reaching bookstores, but for those with a more immediate need for an Ivan Doig reading fix, "Heart Earth" hits the shelves Wednesday.

□□□

("Heart Earth" by Ivan Doig, published by Atheneum, 160 pages, \$19.)

# 'Heart Earth'

## Doig to visit Helena for autographing

By RICHARD MYERS  
IR Staff Writer

Ivan Doig says that "Heart Earth" — the memoir he has written about his mother — is a "private constellation of remembering."

And some of the memories that shape that constellation, he said in a recent interview, are necessarily artistic best guesses.

Doig's mother died in 1945 when he was 6 years old. Doig told the story of her death and its aftermath for his family in "This House of Sky."

But the memories in that book are largely of his father and maternal grandmother. He said the memories of his mother were thin.

But an uncle left Doig a parcel of letters his mother had written in the six months before she died, when the uncle was in a destroyer in the Pacific.

THOSE LETTERS sparked the book.

"A book always needs an architecture, an armature, a direction," he said.

Doig said that the book is spun-together collection of dialogues, memories and imagination that the letters stirred.

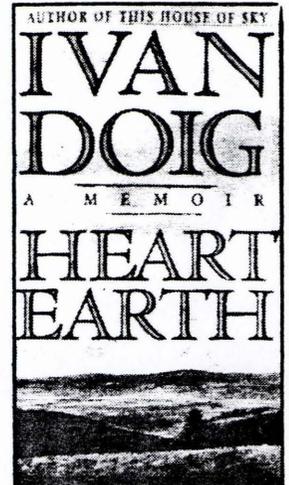
"I was deliberately going through threads in the tapestry, scenes in the weave," he said.

The result isn't a narrative account of Doig's mother; rather, the tale is told through associations that link together chunks of memory.

Much of those memories are augmented by Doig's imagination, dialogues and scenes that he couldn't have seen but were part of his family's lives.

"I always try to have, I guess, historical laws of gravity behind the language. I want the characters to live their lives according to what was going on around them.

"I think the memoir form has to be an essence of a life," he said. "You can't just troop through a person's life, you know, 'the



Ivan Doig will sign copies of his latest book Friday, Sept. 10, at the Little Professor. 'Heart Earth' is a memoir about his mother, set in White Sulphur Springs and Ringling among other places.

next day she got up and had a cup of coffee.' "As long as a reader knows the ground rules, the writer can push the edge of a craft."

FOR DOIG, much of the craft of writing is the crafting of language.

"I approach a book as a work of language more than anything else," he said.

"Norman McClean used to talk about 'the poetry behind the prose,'" he said. "I think there's a lot of that in my work."

The book recounts the end of WW II, when Doig's family moved to Arizona to work the defense plants, and then made the choice to move back to shepherding in Montana despite his mother's asthma.

To research for the book, he spent a winter prowling the area his family worked in Arizona, talking to relatives and rewalking the places around Ringling and White Sulphur Springs where his family lived in Montana.

THE BOOK'S FIRST line is "In that last winter of the war, she knew how to use pointblank ink."

"I spent most of my winter in Arizona working on that line," he said.

He said the book's characters and the way they spoke evokes World War II and how it affected the lives of Montanans — a part of history he said hasn't received enough attention.

"So many people are aware how Vietnam touched the county, but WWII really went into so many homes in Montana one way or another. Even when people were too old or too ill, like my father, it affected us. It seems to me to be one of those turning points, the big corners.

"I'm, glad that's the time when my memory took root. This book gave me the chance to add to a fuller history of that culture. That made it all the richer for me to write."

Doig said that his next project is "a whopping novel" about a large family that takes place during the boom surrounding the construction of the Fort Peck Dam.

"I like it," he said. "It feels big and ram-bunctious."

Doig will hold a book signing Sept. 10 from noon to 1 p.m. and from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Little Professor Book Center, 331 North Last Chance Gulch.

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

SEPT. 5, 1993

REMEMBERING MOTHER

**HEART EARTH**

*By Ivan Doig.*  
*Atheneum, \$19.*

Fifteen years after his memoir "This House of Sky," the novelist Ivan Doig has written "Heart Earth," a prose poem to his mother, who died in 1945 on his sixth birthday. Mr. Doig's point of entry into his early childhood comes when he inherits a packet of wartime letters written by his mother to her brother, a sailor serving in the Pacific. From these letters, Mr. Doig re-creates the nomadic existence of the last years of his mother's life and the first years of his own, during an era when families were "bounced like dice against the war's longitudes and latitudes." From Montana, Mr. Doig and his parents travel a thousand miles south to a defense workers' housing project in Arizona. And then they travel back again, to the high mountain meadows of their home state. Mr. Doig is a trickster of words, writing a dense prose that sometimes turns incomprehensible but more often imbues his scenes with the bright precision of yearning. "Heart Earth" is a memoir of heart-rending suspense.

LAUREN BELFER

NEW YORK NEWSDAY  
Sept. 8, 1993

REVIEW

BOOKS

## A Hardscrabble Boyhood And a Reverence for Work

**HEART EARTH**, by Ivan Doig, Atheneum,  
160 pp., \$19.

**LIFE WORK**, by Donald Hall. Beacon Press,  
124 pp., \$15.

By Vince Passaro

**E**VERY THINKING person's life is hounded by memory and self-assessment, which explains why so many writers are at least tempted, from time to time, to write memoirs. Memoir may be the toughest prose-narrative genre, not least because it seems, at the outset, to be one of the easiest. Memoir doesn't demand, on the face of it, the labors of documentation, reportage or creative imagination. What makes it so tricky though is memory's ability to create extreme dramatic excitement in the person doing the remembering. The writer's finest tool is the ability to cull from what has been written the most interesting and contributory material. But of course everything freshly remembered has a fascination — so how to shape that material into a story a stranger finds compelling. And how to avoid memory's awful sentimentality — its seductive nostalgia and affection? Two recent memoirs by writers well experienced in the task show how difficult this is, and how easily, even line by line, one can misstep.

Set over the course of a few tough and wandering years during World War II in Montana, Arizona and back to Montana, when Ivan Doig was not yet 10, his memoir "Heart Earth" indeed manages to convey a taut drama — early on he lets you know, and if you've read his earlier memoir "This House of Sky," you already know, that his mother did not survive the Doig family's life of nomadic, western, ration-couped, wartime hardscrabble. And so his narrative builds slowly, and leads you, with teeth gritted, toward the fate of a small boy facing the loss of his mother.

A directing, reconstructive motif of Doig's story are his mother's letters from this period to her brother, who, just before his death in 1986, passed them along to Doig. These have all the charm of authenticity and voice that correspondence can give; they also force Doig into an expansion of his own memories, so that the story reads much of the time like a narrative of an adult's world, not a child's.

The book's structure is brilliantly effective, but not all the writing that fills it out works as well. Doig has a style of rushed poetics that falls prey too easily to the excesses of memory's cryptanalytical sentiments. "She takes a breath as big as she is," is a fairly typical description he uses in a charged scene between his mother and father; the scene ends with his father, in full Henry-Fonda-Grapes-of-Wrath-born-of-the-earth wisdom saying, "That's we can any of us do, Berneta, is try."

Doig later describes himself as a small boy running down a steep slope on the family ranch. "In such plunges, if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to. Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling through the language." The comparison is, to put it kindly, a stretch.

Fortunately, as Doig's story moves tightly, frighteningly forward, his language loses much of this dross and rises to meet the occasion. "Heart Earth" is ultimately a powerful and evocative look back on the strains and heartbreaks of noble people trying to survive in a nation undergoing convulsive transformation.

Donald Hall is best known as a poet, but he is also an essayist, a writer of children's books, an occasional literary critic and the author of at least one primer on writing itself, called "Writing Well." His nonfiction style is associative and contemplative, and "Life Work" is perhaps more so than his other books. It takes its impetus and direction from Hall's general idea of work and the very different, almost sacramental place "work" holds in a



Photo by Wayne Arnet

Ivan Doig

writer's mind and his daily life. Thus, Hall grants his narrative free rein to wander the meadows and farm pastures of his life, unbounded by the dictates of chronology, concept or style.

The subject, alas, is a little too open-ended. It forces us to contemplate, for instance, while reading "Life Work," how from day to day it is being written — "After an hour, I was ready to begin 'Life Work,'" Hall tells us early in his story, although we foolish readers had thought, eight pages into the text, and the rest of the book weighing, small but substantial, in our right hand, that he had not only started the damn thing but finished it as well. "I will write about my own work and the sensibilities I derive from, my parents and my grandparents. Oh, I have many notions about work."

Thereafter the book skims and lights like a heron across the waters of Hall's history. His grandparents and parents indeed come into major play — his descriptions of their rural lives and struggles have about them a halo of that dreaded sentiment mentioned before, and the reader often wishes he could be allowed back into real time and the storyline he's been given, thin as it is.

Halfway through the telling, Hall is diagnosed with cancer, and this of course gives new meaning to the concepts both of Life and Work — the disease energizes the text in a curious way, but you are left with an uncomfortable sense that you have benefited as reader-voyeur from the author's sad illness, in that it has given you a better book. And of course, illness is no escape from sentiment either; it merely give sentiment extra weight. ■

# Doig writes intense, brief memoir of his mother

By DENISE MORT  
Tribune Staff Writer

Berneta Ringer Doig packed a lot of living into her short life. She suffered from severe asthma and on the sixth birthday of her only child, her son, Ivan, her heart gave out and she died.

Now Ivan Doig has written a memoir of his mother, "Heart Earth," and it is as brief and as intense as the life of the woman it was written about.

Born in White Sulphur Springs, Doig grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front. Raised by his father and maternal grandmother, he graduated from Northwestern University, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism, and earned a doctorate in history from the University of Washington. He and his wife, Carol, live in the Seattle area.

His books include "This House of Sky," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair"

■ **What:** Author Ivan Doig signing copies of "Heart Earth."  
■ **When:** Thursday, Sept. 9 4:30 to 6 p.m.  
■ **Where:** Hastings, 1017 10th Ave. S.

and "English Creek."

In a telephone interview, Doig said he is already well under way with his next project, a big novel about the building of Fort Peck Dam in northeastern Montana, spanning the years 1933 to 1938.

Doig said "Heart Earth" is the only book he's written that has gotten shorter and shorter, the more he worked on it.

The inspiration for "Heart Earth" was a packet of letters Doig received after the death of his uncle, Wally. Berneta Doig had written the letters to her youngest brother while he was serving on a battleship in the Pacific near the end of World War II. Part of that time she was living in the White Sulphur Springs area.

Each of the five chapters in the book starts with an excerpt from one of the letters and Doig said he

intended the book to have a "kind of correspondence feel."

During the three years he worked on "Heart Earth," Doig said, he distilled a lot of material and honed down the language, searching for the essence of a life.

Asked if it was harder writing about his mother than about some unknown person, Doig said that after receiving the letters he asked himself the first question a professional writer has to consider: Is there a book here?

After deciding that there was, Doig went back before the time covered in "This House of Sky."

Writing about his mother was sometimes emotionally tough, Doig said, but added that as a writer, "You'll have to face that, sometime."

As he worked with the letters, Doig said he discovered a lilt in his mother's way with words. An inveterate letter writer who wrote letters every week, he found that she was a good handler of words and a wicked, sarcastic observer of people.

What he discovered in his mother's letters, Doig said, were "some impulses that came out in me as a writer."

From time to time he forgot — sometimes deliberately — that the subject of his work was his mother. He set out, the author explained, to write as if she were a stranger.

He also had to write about himself as a kid, "somewhat as a stranger."

Aiding him were 500 or so photos of his parents, and their families, and of Ivan himself as a child. He was struck, he said, by these glimpses of "my mom, out finding life to enjoy, whatever time she had."

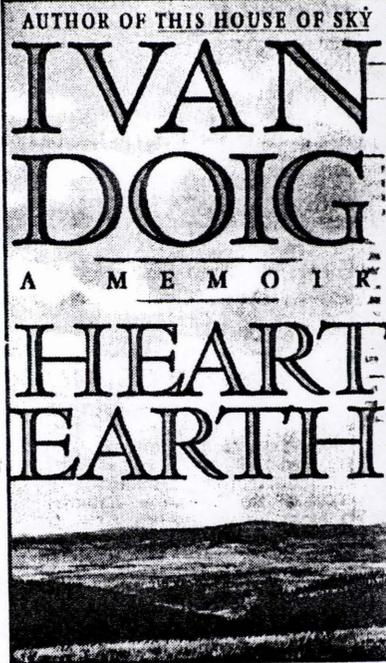
With the contents of her letters in hand, Doig said he visited or revisited places mentioned in the letters, locations he called "starkly evocative places."

Doig feels that he knows his mother much better now that he has explored her life so thoroughly.

"I spent three years with her, so to speak," he said.

"Heart Earth" has been awarded the 1992 Evans Biography Award, established to encourage the writing of biographies.

Judges said of "Heart Earth" that it is "a dazzling piece of writing by a writer who has an incomparable way with words, and it is a remarkable piece of biography."



■ **Book:** "Heart Earth."  
■ **Author:** Ivan Doig.  
■ **Details:** Atheneum, \$19.

**Book World****Life and Death in Montana****HEART EARTH**

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 160 pp. \$19

By Carolyn See

This tale of untimely death and lost love comes against a background of a great—but largely unrecorded—American war, a “Second Civil War,” Ivan Doig calls it: “That Western Civil War of Incorporation . . . powerfully pitted financial capital and government against those who occupied lands or jobs in inconvenient, unconsolidated fashion. . . . Miners, loggers and other industrial working stiffs: defeated in strikes and resistance to technological dangers. Homesteaders, small farmers, back-pocket ranchers: defeated from insufficient acres. The lariat proletariat, where my grandparents and parents started out, was done in by mechanization, ending up in town jobs or none.”

Ivan Doig's parents and grandparents lived—or did not live—through this “war,” all unknowing, pursuing the arts of farming, ranching, herding that were already obsolete, but all that they knew how to do. The place where they lived, Montana, is called “The Last Best Place,” but there's something ironic in that sobriquet: the last best place for *what*? For hard labor, eerie isolation, freezing to death, failing in enterprise, untold hardship, superhuman endurance?

The book that precedes “Heart Earth,” in chronology and in subject matter, is “This House of Sky,” published in 1987. It is the story of how, after Ivan's mother died when he was 6, his father, Charlie Doig, asked his mother-in-law (with whom he had feuded for the duration of their relationship) to raise Ivan with him. There is sweetness and humor in that story; Ivan's grandma arm-wrestling her grandson, swearing quaintly, churning out

truckloads of cinnamon rolls and homemade bread. As Doig remarks about the earlier “This House of Sky”: “Told and done, I thought with satisfaction, as that book took on a life of its own with 150,000 readers.”

Told and done until, years later, Ivan's favorite uncle—and his mother's cherished younger brother—dies, and leaves a packet of Ivan's mother's letters, a record of her last six months on Earth. Letters that seem to fill her grown son with sorrow and yearning and dread, finally bringing the grief home.

Berneta Ringer Doig's letters begin in February 1945 and continue until June of that same year, when she would meet her death. She's been married for about 10 years to Charlie Doig, a maniacally industrious cowboy-rancher-farmer. They both hail from the ferociously demanding landscape of northern Montana; they've grown up in adjoining towns, or ghosts of towns; they've met at a country dance. Both of them know haying, herding, lambing, calving.

In this winter of 1945, Charlie Doig, along with a brother and sister-in-law, bundle Berneta and young Ivan into a car and make the dizzying trip to Phoenix. The upfront reason is that the Doig brothers will find work in an

aluminum factory (and so they do, while their wives mope and pine in jerry-built workers' housing projects). The buried reason is something else. Berneta has suffered from asthma for as long as anyone can remember. In one of their first houses, Charlie had spread feed for the sheep along the road out of town so that the sheep, in their eating, will press down the snow to give the couple at least a chance of making it to the hospital when Berneta has one of her killer attacks. But she's getting worse. And Arizona has a reputation for helping people with lung problems.

But what is life worth without land you love? Ivan's parents go back because Montana is their home, their place, *the* place, the last *best* place, even though its mortality rate is high, fiendishly high. Earlier, the Doig family had gone perhaps to more funerals than dances: People who loved Montana but who had “a wire down somewhere in their lives, a lack of capacity to work for themselves, an emigration into an America they never managed to savvy or get hold of, many with a puppy-helplessness when it came to alcohol, some with sour tempers and bent minds, mateless.”

Berneta, as she confides in her brother out on a ship in the South Pacific, wants to go

home, “out there in the Sixteen country,” “up there on the mountain.” It's her heart earth.

After a short stay in an isolated Arizona desert cabin, where a passing stranger remarks that beautiful young Berneta has “a chute of rocks . . . there in her lung,” the couple go home, back to Montana, and begin again to herd sheep. Berneta is happy. Then, she dies. Her son, stunned then and now, when he is 20 years older than she was when she died, mourns her as if she'd died yesterday.

Ivan Doig's own ferocious Montana is the high mountain of style. He kicks words like his dad herded sheep, and sometimes he doesn't know when to stop. Passages on Pages 9, 20 and 49, on the nature of “time,” “dreaming”

and “language,” respectively, taste like deserts in a French restaurant where the butter may have taken a wrong turn. But the bulk of the language, in salute to his forthright mother, is spare, accurate. My favorite fragment here pays homage to “the Sixteen country”: “view, view, view, gangs of views.” Who could ever leave a place like that? Even if it meant dying to stay there.

*Carolyn See's reviews appear each Friday in Style.*

Sept. 12, 1993

Ivan Doig was in Bozeman Saturday to promote his new book.

By AL KNAUBER  
Chronicle Staff Writer

**R**ecreating events in the life of his mother was sometimes emotionally upsetting for Ivan Doig.  
"If it makes you draw a pretty deep breath, or wipe tears away, or whatever, OK, draw a breath and wipe the tears away and then sit down to the keyboard again," Doig, 59, said.

Such was the price paid during the last three years in which he wrote his latest book "Heart Earth," a story of his mother who died in June 1945 while he was 6-year-old boy. "Heart Earth" ends where his acclaimed "This House of Sky" begins.

Doig was in Bozeman on Saturday as part of a statewide tour to promote "Heart Earth" which he said is selling well.

Writing it was difficult because of the language, he said.

"I worked on that opening sentence most of those seven weeks," Doig said of time spent on research in Arizona for the book's first two chapters.

The book begins: "In that last winter of the war, she knew to use pointblank ink. Nothing is ever crossed out, never a p.s., the heartquick lines still as distinct as the day of the postmark, her fountain pen instinctively refusing the fade of time."

"Those kinds of sentences, you simply work on them until, by God, you get them as

# From 'Sky' to 'Earth'

## Doig crafts a memoir from mother's letters

right as you can," he explained with a laugh.

He compares "Heart Earth" which he describes as a "prose poem" to "This House of Sky" which was published 15 years ago. "This House of Sky" was nominated for the National Book Award in Contemporary Thought and received a Christopher Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Award and the Governor's Writers Day Award.

Doig's research also brought him back to the land northeast of Bozeman near the north end of the Bridger Mountains. It is a land nurtured by Sixteen Mile Creek in which much of the book is set.

"The brusque sagebrush would slap at your stirrups, polishing the leather at the bot-

toms of your chaps, if you rode their country yet today," he writes of the land.

Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs and raised along the Rocky Mountain front. He attended Northwestern University in Chicago and now lives in Seattle with his wife, Carol. Among his seven novels is the Montana trilogy, "English Creek," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "Ride With Me, Mari-ah Montana."

Doig is presently working on a novel about the building of the Fort Peck dam which occurred between 1933 and 1938. That novel is already well underway, he said.

Although it's still a couple of years from completion, he said "It is the book I've most wanted to write."

He works with a typewriter — he discontinued using a word processor because of its effect on his eyes — and begins an eight-hour work day by 7 a.m. He is a former ranch hand for which he blames his habit of rising each day by 5 a.m.

When writing "Heart Earth," he would only strive to complete a couple of hundred words daily. The rest of the day would be spent on research or looking at the rhythm of the sentences and how each paragraph begins and ends.

There is no separating Doig from his love of language and it is "the dance of the language" for which he said he hopes to be remembered.

"That's, to me, what the real writers are remembered for," he said.

## Ivan Doig to promote 'Heart Earth' in Missoula Friday

By GINNY MERRIAM  
of the Missoulian

It's true: Ivan Doig will be in Missoula this week.

Doig's publisher, Atheneum, launched him from his Seattle home Sept. 7 on a tour to promote his new book, "Heart Earth."

"Heart Earth" takes the reader back to 1945, six months before the opening chapter of Doig's acclaimed 1978 memoir "This House of Sky." Its inspiration was Doig's discovery of a cache of letters written by his mother, Berneta Ringer Doig, to her brother Wally Ringer, who was stationed in the Pacific during World War II.

The book recalls the very early years of Doig's upbringing in a sheep-ranching family outside Ringling.

"To live, to belong to a family is to possess private constellations of

remembering," Doig says of the book, "and 'Heart Earth' came to me, as a writer, from the sparks of memory and imagination that fly upward out of her letters."

Doig's schedule in Missoula on Friday, Sept. 17:

**12-1 p.m.:** Book signing at Fact & Fiction.

**1:30-4:30 p.m.:** Doig will speak at and attend the Wallace Stegner symposium at the University of Montana. He will talk on "Stegner's American West as Living Space" at the Montana Theater in UM's performing arts building.

**7-8:30 p.m.:** Book signing at Waldenbooks.

The Stegner symposium is sponsored by UM's Center for the Rocky Mountain West and the Montana Historical Society. It will focus on Stegner as a Western writer grounded in a sense of place. It will run Friday, Sept. 17, 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. with an evening lecture at 8

p.m. and Saturday, Sept. 18, 9 a.m. to noon in the Montana Theater. All events are free and open to the public.

Friday's events include "A Brief Reminiscence: Father, Teacher, Collaborator," a talk by Stegner's son Page Stegner. In addition to Stegner and Ivan Doig, William Kittredge will discuss "Stegner and the Western Landscape."

On Friday evening at 8 p.m., San Diego State University English professor Jackson Benson will talk on "Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner's Fiction."

On Saturday morning, University of Arkansas professor Elliott West will talk on "Stegner, Storytelling and Western Identity"; University of Arizona history professor Richard Etulain will talk on "Wallace Stegner as Western Humanist"; UM history professor Dan Flores will talk on "Stegner, the West and the Environment"; and University of Colorado professor Patricia Nelson Limerick will talk on "Precedents to Wisdom."



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IVAN  
DOIG

Author of *This House of Sky*

Book Signing  
Friday Evening

# A Mother's Letters – A Child's Memories

By Brad Knickerbocker

**I**VAN DOIG was first noticed as a writer 15 years ago with "This House of Sky." That reminiscence of the years spent with his widowed father bouncing around ranches and sheep camps in Montana was followed by five more works, including a trilogy of novels about an emigrant Scottish family in the Rocky Mountain West.

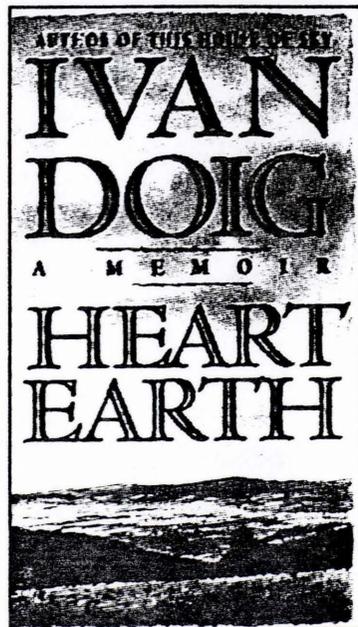
Now Doig, one of the most readable and productive writers out of the American West today, has backtracked to his boyhood in the middle of this century when his parents spent World War II working on isolated ranches and at an Arizona defense plant.

As the only youngster among adults, Doig liked to "prowl with [his] ears." The detailed anecdotes, moods, and impressions mentally tucked away during his childhood are put into print here. A historian and former journalist, Doig also includes other details gathered since then from family members and acquaintances. Most important, he draws heavily on letters from his mother to her brother aboard a United States warship in the Pacific – letters he did not see for more than 40 years.

Where necessary, and as a conscious literary device, Doig also draws on what he calls "deliberate dreams" (he refers to this as "a little help from Pablo Neruda"), a construction of events and dialogue based on his best sense of what happened nearly 50 years ago. "It's the only way I can think of to get at what might have gone on beyond what I can hear and see," Doig told this reviewer in 1991.

This means of filling out the story seems legitimate, a reminder of something attributed to novelist Ken Kesey, another writer out of the West: "Just because something didn't happen doesn't mean it's not true."

## BOOKS



**HEART EARTH**  
By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 160 pp, \$19

For a good chunk of time, the Doigs lived what was essentially a 19th-century frontier existence in the mid-20th century. For months at a time, their home was a one-room sheep camp high in the Bridger Range of the Rocky Mountains with an outhouse and no electricity except for the occasionally used generator.

Both Charlie and Berneta Doig herded sheep, trapped weasels, looked to other chores, and took young Ivan along on their various adventures. Other strong presences are Uncle Wally, the recipient of Berneta's wartime letters, and Doig's maternal grandmother, who later would become a surrogate parent.

"Gnarled and bent as a Knockadoon walking stick, my grandfather; my grandmother, on the other hand, so sturdy she could carry the rest of us over the Crazy Mountains on her back," he writes. "The hands and arms of Bessie Ringer were scarred from every kind of barbwire work, yet there she sat hooking away at the most intricate of crochetwork, snowflaking the rough rooms of her existence with doily upon doily."

Berneta Doig's struggle with illness is a thread through "Heart Earth," and the book closes with the death of the writer's mother on his sixth birthday. But the poignancy and sadness are not overwhelming, and one is left remembering the humor and family closeness (quarrels as well as affection), the strength of character and essential hopefulness that have come to be Doig trademarks.

■ Brad Knickerbocker is on the Monitor's staff.

## Author finds rhythms in family history

By Dan Webster  
Staff writer

Synchronicity involves those moments in life where events or people or mere situations intersect in a manner that turns out ultimately to be meaningful.

Artists tend to notice such moments. They benefit from them. They *thrive* on them.

Ivan Doig, whose artistry comes through the way he paints with words, seldom fails to notice the many intersecting ties that bind his life with his life's work. Throughout a career that has seen him produce such critically acclaimed novels as "English Creek" and "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," along with his moving memoir of mid-20th-century Montana titled "This House of Sky," Doig has taken full advantage of this interweaving of the personal and professional.

Just as he did in March 1991 while working on

what would become "Heart Earth" (Atheneum, 160 pages, \$19), a prequel to his earlier memoir. Making mental notes during his walks along the streets of Wickenburg, Ariz., he retraced the steps that his mother and father had taken some five decades before.

In his parents' time, of course, the Second World War was raging across the Earth. During the late winter of '91, war was again a topic on everyone's lips.

And while the flap in the Persian Gulf — whose ultimate symbol was the yellow ribbon — couldn't begin to compare with the planetary conflagration of the 1940s, the connection, however tenuous, between the two armed struggles resonated within Doig as he walked along.

"To be there in a war, in a sense as my folks were

Continued: Doig, EB

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## Doig: Author combines history and memory to create art

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Continued from

there during a war, made for an interesting rhythm," Doig says.

He'll speak of that rhythm, and the book that resulted from it, during a reading at 7:30 tonight at Auntie's Bookstore & Cafe.

But for now, on a recent weekday mid-morning, the noted Seattle novelist is talking on the phone. He's calling from a friend's Jackson Hole, Wyo., house that rests in the shadow of the Grand Tetons.

Heading into the final week of this, the first leg of a book tour that will take him eventually to some 50 cities, he is in a relaxed mood.

"Went out on the trail this morning at dawn under the Tetons," he says. "Came across an elk and heard him bugle for a couple of hours." Laughing, he adds, "This trip beats the hell out of airports, I'll tell you that."

Listen to any successful writer and he or she can entertain you for hours with book-tour horror stories.

Doig is particularly entertaining, which is one indication of the talent that has placed him at the forefront of the rejuvenated art of personal memoir.

Memoirs have made for good reading since almost the beginning of recorded history. But over the past two decades, the form has attracted a whole new generation of writers who specialize in chronicling Western family life. And when it comes to these Western writers, the memoirs they're producing are nothing less than literature.

How else would you describe Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It" or William Kittredge's "Hole in the Sky"? Mary Clearman Blew's "All But the Waltz" or Sally Tisdale's "Stepping Westward"? Moritz Thomsen's "The Saddest Pleasure" or Tobias Wolff's "This Boy's Life"?

Or, more to the point, Doig's own two books.

"You know," he says, "the family stuff, the personal stuff, is often the richest and strongest that we have to work with."

"This House of Sky" begins as powerfully as any book could, with 6-year-old Ivan listening as his asthmatic mother's labored breathing finally stops. The 1978 non-fiction account goes on to tell the story of his father, Charlie Doig, and his maternal grandmother, Bessie Ringer, and their mutual struggles to forge a life without Berneta, the woman who, even in death, still connected them.

(cont. next page)

At the end of its 314 pages, "This House of Sky" seemed complete. But, as it turns out, it wasn't.

For it wasn't until nearly 15 years after the book's publication that Doig was given what turned out to be a treasure trove of family correspondence.

During the research he had done during the mid-'70s for "This House of Sky," Doig had polled his family for anything that he could use.

"I tried to shake down everybody in the family for anything they might have in terms of family letters or whatever else," he says.

But it wasn't until 1986, after the death of his Uncle Wally Ringer, that he inherited the dozen or so letters that his mother had written to her brother, who was then stationed on a ship in the Pacific.

"I still don't know whether he simply didn't get to it, if it slipped his mind or whether he didn't feel in the mood to do me any favors," Doig says. As he explains in the new book, they'd barely spoken for years because of a dispute over Bessie Ringer's funeral expenses.

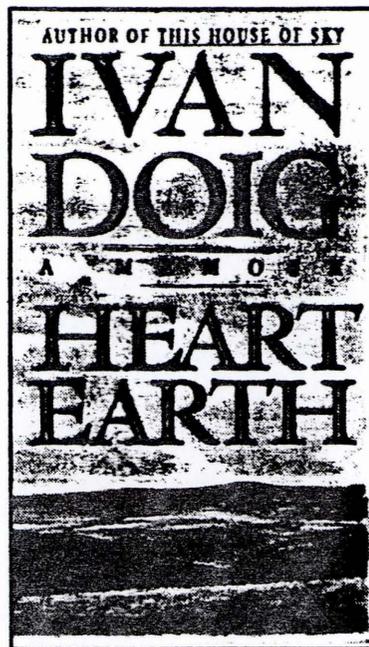
Yet, he writes, "With the packet of letters, then, each dutifully folded back into its envelope edged with World War II airmail emblazons, Wally reached out past what had come between us when he was alive."

And as a new feel for who his mother was opened up for Ivan Doig, the idea for a second book took root.

"I was pretty sure that it had to be an essence book, a short intense book, the essence of my mother," he says. "Use the letters as a focus, the chance to look backward a bit at her life."

He filled in the blanks with research that he did first-hand in Wickenburg, the town that he, his laborer father and his ill mother lived in during those final months of her life. "I followed the trail of the postmarks," he says.

He augmented that search with the information he had left over from his original notes, from the stories that have become Doig and Ringer family lore, and from the conjecture that is the natural territory of a wordsmith.



"She comes to me, naturally by pen," he writes of his mother. And it is, naturally — and exquisitely — by pen, that he passes her on to us. This is his vision, his representation, just as any remembrance says as much about the person seeing that vision as it does about the people and places being seen.

He admits that "It is hard to separate out the family stories and the other influences you have. But I think those become a kind of truth in and of themselves. They become the version that we live by."

Besides, he adds, "You can kind of feel, you just feel some of these things."

There's a familiarity that comes to you that can't come from anywhere else but from the part of the head that does the remembering."

Family history and personal memory, coming together to create art.

What is that if not synchronicity?

- Ivan Doig will read from his new book, "Heart Earth," at 7:30 tonight at Auntie's Bookstore & Cafe, W313 Riverside. Note: Seating space is limited, so plan to arrive early.

# Letters push Doig into volume of self-discovery

## Heart Earth: A Memoir

By Ivan Doig (Atheneum) 160 pp., \$19

In these times of convenient long-distance phone calls, it is easy to forget the rich family history that once was cradled in letters.

Casual conversations disappear in seconds over phone lines.

When left in letters, those same, seemingly unimportant discussions about raising children, weathering mishaps and exploring new territories provide a historical treasure trove.

Seattle author Ivan Doig shares that sense of discovery and reminiscence in his newest book, "Heart Earth: A Memoir." The book recreates Doig's childhood years before his mother's death, complementing his acclaimed earlier memoir, "This House of Sky," which described family tensions after his mother's death.

Berneta Doig died on Ivan's sixth birthday, making her a shadowy figure in his childhood memories.



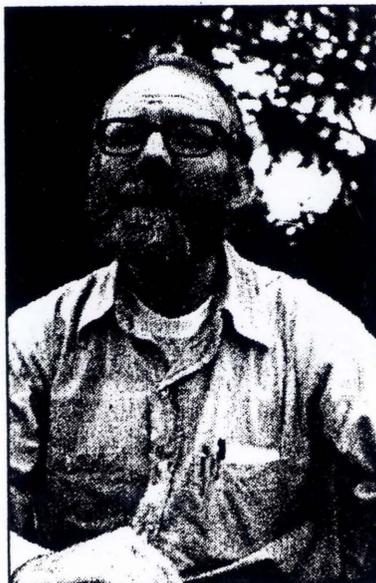
**Carolyn Casey**

But a few years ago, those shadows were illuminated by a cache of letters from his mother to his uncle while he was stationed in the Pacific during World War II. Ivan Doig acquired the letters upon his uncle's death.

These letters filled the gaps in Doig's memory and helped him understand the stormy relationship between his father and grandmother, who united, despite differences, to raise Ivan after his mother's death.

Doig traces his family's struggles from Montana ranches so isolated that weather was the only neighbor, to the confines of an Arizona defense workers' housing project, then back to the wilds of Montana.

Doig's parents chased two dreams. The most compelling was



**IVAN DOIG**  
Echoes from his mother

good health for the severely asthmatic Berneta. Doig's father pushed the family into various climates and lifestyles, trying, ultimately unsuccessfully, to quell the disorder that squeezed the life out of the vital horsewoman.

The other dream, which took a

## ▼ In person

Ivan Doig will read from his newest book, "Heart Earth: A Memoir," at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Village Books, 1210 11th St. Free. After the reading, Doig will be available to autograph books.

back seat, was one of stability and predictability for the family.

Doig's amazing writing ability will spirit readers along on mud-slogging drives through Montana as well as walks through the Arizona desert where the family discovered the magic of cacti-dotted scenery.

The mundane amidst the bizarre of everyday life can be found in excerpts from Berneta's letters: "Dear Wally — Winona and I spent Saturday making formal and catching mice."

But this book is more than a collection of letters.

Rather, the letters were springboards for Doig to unearth information about those years. In researching them, he found his

uncle's former beau, interviewed surviving relatives and dug up countless historical details.

The book is somewhat skinny, but the writing has a dense, packed feeling of a longer volume, and readers are likely to take their time through it.

"Heart Earth" should please fans of Doig and may draw new readers into acquaintance with an author who brings the past to life in vivid nonfiction and fiction alike.

Readers will feel a bit as if they are eavesdropping on an emotional voyage of discovery in which Doig lets himself fall in love with his mother again.

In the end, Berneta's letters solve a final mystery for Doig: the source of his ability with and attraction to the written word.

He writes: "Some of me is indisputably my father and my grandmother, and some I picked up along the way. But another main side of myself, I recognize with wonder in the reflection of my mother's letters."

Carolyn Casey is a free-lance writer who reviews books for the Herald.

# Arts and Entertainment

## Acclaimed writer Ivan Doig brings 'Heart Earth'

By GRACE CARLSON  
Special to the American

With the exacting thoroughness of an archaeologist, author Ivan Doig uses research on the road and faint childhood memories to recreate the adventurous world of a 5-year-old and his frontier-comfortable parents.

Doig's new memoir, "Heart Earth," also used a long-lost cache of his mother's letters to redraw the lost pieces in the puzzle years of his growing up, rediscovering a parent he barely got to know, 45 years after her death.

The Seattle author is best known for "This House of Sky," his 1978 memoir about coming of age between the personalities of his father and maternal grandmother. His new "Heart Earth" is a companion piece, illustrating a rugged piece of the West, and some of the people who tried to tame it.

Doig will be in Anacortes for a book signing from 7 to 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 24, at Watermark Books, 612 Commercial Ave.

Raised in the spare sheepherding society of high-country Montana, Ivan Doig and Berneta Ringer were married in 1934. In 1944, with 5-year-old Ivan in tow, the Doigs left the frozen Montana winter for a chance to make it in war-booming Arizona with a job at an aluminum plant, a cabin in the company town and the

desert air for Berneta's asthma-choked lungs. A thousand miles from family and friends, Berneta began writing to her favorite brother, Wally, stationed on a destroyer in the South Pacific.

*"Dear Wally,*

*"... I shouldn't even be writing you my troubles but I have to spill over to someone. I'd just like to have you around so I could put my head on your shoulder and cry.*

*"... It is going on 1 and we haven't had dinner yet. Charlie is resting and I thought the rest would do him more good than eating. Ivan is out in the backyard building roads. He had a foxhole dug you could bury a cow in."*

*In that last winter of the war, she knew to use pointblank ink. Nothing is ever crossed out, never a p.s., the heartquick lines still as distinct as the day of the postmark, her fountain pen instinctively refusing the fade of time.*

Ivan Doig inherited the inscribed fountain pen from his mother, but little else survived the years since her death on his sixth birthday, in June 1945. Forty-one years later, when he returned to Montana on the occasion of Uncle Wally's death, the stack of war-time letters in a trunk spilled out the loves and fears of a young woman surviving the best she could.

*She first comes to me, naturally, by pen. "There are many disadvantages to farming in some parts of Montana..." The earliest item from her own hand is a grade school booklet she made about Montana, report of a forthright rural child. "Some times there is alkali ground and in other places gumbo soil and then the chinook winds and grasshoppers and all different kinds of insects and some times not enough rainfall." Language is the treasury of the poor, and Berneta minted more than her share...*

Her only son grew up with a love of language born of Montana winters spent reading. By the time he was 16 he knew he wanted to be a writer, and won a scholarship to Northwestern University. Later he worked for a newspaper and magazine in Illinois before heading west to Seattle.

He earned a doctorate in history at the University of Washington and also wrote freelance magazine articles before publishing "This House of Sky," which was a finalist for the National Book Award in contemporary thought. He followed with the non-fiction "Winter Brothers;" his first novel, "The Sea Runners;" and then his Montana-based fictional trilogy — "English Creek," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana."

Doig returns to non-fiction in "Heart Earth," for which he traveled to the back-country sheep ranches

*(continued next page)*

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## memoir to bookstore

of Montana and south to the Arizona desert and the town of Wickenburg. There, he rediscovered the setting for a vivid scene with his mother.

*A carload of Phoenix people interrupts me in mid-mope by depositing themselves on the soda fountain stools with us. We learn from their jabbering to each other that they have driven sixty miles to see the snow on Yarnell Hill north of town, an excursion my blizzard-bred mother finds so comical that she sneaks a giggle to me between licks on her ice cream. Maybe we can go into the snowman business, my mother and I. If people jaunt from far Phoenix just to look upon snow, what might they pay for genuine mitten-made statuary of the stuff, snow fashos mocking the saguaros.*

Arizona is as ill-fitting a garment for the Doigs as a business suit on a cowboy. The family ventures back to Montana roots by the end of March 1945, to a spring of lambing and a summer of tending their own herd of sheep on the mountainside.

*But earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable h, this matter of siting ourselves. Of a place mysteriously insisting itself into us.*

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## Books



Ivan Doig writes of the war years of his youth in Montana in his latest book, 'Heart Earth.'

## Mother's letters inspire book

By **MARY BARQUH EVITT**  
Staff Writer

Author Ivan Doig experienced the changes World War II brought to Montana. Now he has an unusual twist in a memoir written about Big Sky Country in that era.

In "Heart Earth," Doig weaves excerpts from letters written in 1945 by his mother, Berneta Doig, to create the troubled and yet exciting fabric of the times. The book revisits the familiar landscape Doig covered in his best-selling "This House of Sky."

Doig's mother wrote about a dozen letters to her brother, Wally Ringer, who was serving aboard a Navy destroyer in the Pacific. She died six months later, and the letters did not fall into her son's hands for another 40 years.

"I felt as soon as I saw the letters, there was a short, intense book," Doig said in an interview from his Seattle home.

Doig crafted the memoir from the sparks of memory and imagination ignited by the letters, he said.

Though Ivan Doig has lots of photos, paperwork beyond basic documents was scarce because of the family's mobile lifestyle. His father was a sometime cowboy and shepherd, his mother a ranch cook.

"The Brownie camera was the

family diarist," he recalled.

Berneta Doig suffered from severe asthma, so the family moved temporarily to Arizona in hopes the climate would improve her condition and also to benefit from well-paid defense work available in an aluminum-manufacturing plant there.

Heartsick for Montana, the family returned.

Shortly afterward, the frail Berneta Doig died, leaving a 6-year-old son.

"Nobody got over her. Doig or Ringer, those around me in my growing-up stayed hit, pierced, by my mother's death in the mountain cabin," Doig wrote.

In the past 15 years, the author has written seven successful fiction and nonfiction books which have won national literary

acclaim.

A trilogy written by Doig chronicles Montana's history through the fictional McCaskill family, enlivening the vast state for those who live outside its borders.

Doig was born in 1939 in Sulphur Springs, Mont. A former ranch hand and magazine writer, Doig is a graduate of Northwestern University, where he received undergraduate and graduate degrees in journalism. He holds a doctorate in history from the University of Washington.

Doig already is at work on his next book, which he describes as a "Grapes of Wrath of the Northwest." The book focuses on the building of Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River during the Depression.

# Ivan Doig returns to memoir form

By Ted Schmidt  
Loveland Library Director

## Shelf life

**F**ifteen years has become a standard for some people — a home mortgage for lenders and purchasers, a lifetime for parents struggling with a child from newborn to high school sophomore.

Fifteen years has been the writing career of one of the West's best writers as Ivan Doig has artfully delineated family, landscape and history in his two memoirs and his Montana trilogy.

Though Doig earlier wrote for newspapers, the Rotarian magazine and as a free-lancer, 1978 was the year his first book, "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind," was published and nominated for a National Book Award, one of the most prestigious awards in writing.

The book, continuously in print and being reissued this year in a special 15-year commemorative edition, was followed by two books on Doig's adopted northwest, "Winter Brothers" (1980) and "The Sea Runners" (1982).

Then followed the Montana trilogy — "English Creek" (1984), "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (1987) and "Ride with, Mariah

Montana" (1990).

They tell in rich and colorful detail the history of a family, four generations shipping from Scotland to settle the Montana territory, celebrating statehood, emerging from the Depression, to the inventory of the state and its people during the state's centennial years.

Just published is Ivan Doig's return to the memoir, "Heart Earth," a discovery of his immediate roots through an inherited collection of letters given to Doig upon his uncle's death.

Cycles within circles is Doig's style both in the trilogy and memoirs.

The trilogy is a paean to the family set against a rugged landscape, unforgiving weather and a state's economic history which seldom strays from depression.

Marriages are made and broken, births and deaths follow in each of the trilogy books revealing the struggles and strengths of individuals living under and leaving one roof. The same themes wrap around each other in the first and the latest books by Doig.

"This House of Sky" and "Heart Earth" tell two chapters,

or maybe even two versions, of a continuing story, how Ivan Doig grew up and became the writer and person he is.

But that oversimplifies the books which are so rich in characterization and personality.

"This House of Sky" begins where "Heart Earth" ends, the death at a very early age of Ivan's mother following a lifelong battle with asthma.

The books converge on that event as the author's remembrances, interviews with family and local residents recreate his life up to ("Heart Earth") and after ("This House of Sky") the death of Ivan's mother.

Charlie Doig, Ivan's father, takes over the raising of his son, enters into a short-lived and ill-advised second marriage and, after a number of years of non-communication with his first

wife's mother, Ivan's grandmother, he accepts her offer to assist in raising Ivan.

The book bounces from Ivan's memories of growing up in this strange household of father and grandmother to background on each of their families and the conditions of sheep raising, itinerant cowboying, ranch management, terrible weather and the vast, beautiful landscape.

"Heart Earth" is a companion book delineating the last year of World War II, 1945, when Ivan (6 years old) and the family bounce between an Arizona Alcoa factory job, living in a desert cabin and sheep ranching in the spring grass mountains of Montana.

Based on letters that Ivan's mother sent to her brother who was stationed on a battleship in the south Pacific, "Heart Earth" also captures in memory's eye the time and places as well as the people who affected the author.

The books are best read in the

order they were written, "This House of Sky" first and "Heart Earth" second, with the knowledge that 15 years and a trunk full of letters can clarify and change an individual's, as well as a family's, way of viewing pivotal events and personalities.

Whether a person reads Doig's memoirs or the trilogy, many of his themes of family strength, history affecting individuals, and the love of the land resonate.

There is no finer writing currently being offered on the family being affected by the western United States.

### Upcoming Library Events

Oct. 1 — Friends of the Library Book Sale Members Preview from 7-9 p.m. at 451 Railroad Ave.; \$5 Friends memberships available at the door.

Oct. 2 — Friends of the Library Book Sale for the general public from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. at 451 Railroad Ave.

## Nonfiction

# From Ivan Doig: Tough yet tender Montana memories

### Heart Earth

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 160 pages, \$19

Reviewed by Richard Gossweiler  
A playwright and critic

**T**his is a book about six months in a writer's life—at the age of 5. If that doesn't sound exciting, consider this. The principal character in this non-fiction book is not Doig but his mother, a thin 30-year-old with asthma. And the most dramatic scene in the first 60 pages concerns a non-quarrel over the adoption of a stray dog. If you haven't by this time decided to call your bookstore to reserve a copy, let me add one more thing: You could be making a mistake.

Followers of Ivan Doig know him primarily as a writer of novels set in Montana. Two of them, "English Creek" and "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," deal with the same character, Jick McCaskill, at different stages of his life. "English Creek," which concerns Jick's sheepherding boyhood in the 1930s, is the better book—tightly written, almost lyrical. The prose in "Mariah Montana," set in the '70s, is far more pedestrian.

In "Heart Earth," Doig has returned to his lyrical style and improved upon it—"prose poetry" is not an overstatement. In the opening pages, Doig recalls the months in 1945 that his family spent in Arizona, where his father, Charlie Doig, a marginal Montana sheep rancher, settled the family because of his mother's poor health and where a wartime factory offered far better money than he could earn in Montana:

"Like light, time is both particle and wave. Even as that far winter of our lives traced itself as a single Arizona amplitude of season along the collective dateline of memory, simultaneously it was stippling all through us in instants distinct as the burn of sparks."

Here's his description of the ranch where the family had lived before decamping for Arizona:

"Two other ranches lay hidden even farther down the gulches, ... but otherwise weather was the only neighbor. Clouds walking the ridgelines, hurried by chilly wind. Rain, rare as it was, slickening the road as quick as it lit. And if the winter was a tough one—they always were—my father fed hay on the road so that as the sheep ate, they packed down the snow and improved the chance of getting out to the hospital at Townsend when one of my mother's hardest asthma attacks hit."

On the asthma:

"Most often a midnight disorder, sabotage of sleep and dream that had just decently begun, the attack would choke her awake, simultaneously the blue narcotic of carbon dioxide buildup bringing on faintness, a suffocating fatigue. At once she had to fight to sit up and wheeze, her eyes large with concentration on the cost of air, hunching into herself to ride out the faltering lungwork. In and out, the raw battlesound of debilitation and effort sawed away at her. Then worse: a marathon of coughing so hard it bruised you to hear."

The book vibrates with such language as Doig tells about the hard Depression times in Montana, the harder times in Arizona and the return to Montana and to sheepherding. Along the way we meet the people in young Ivan's life.

One is Uncle Wally, on the USS Ault, a

SEE EARTH, PAGE 9

## Earth

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

destroyer in the South Pacific. It was he, the author says, who made this book possible by preserving the many letters sent to him during 1944 and '45 by his sister, Berneta. Doig uses quotes from his mother's letters to form the framework of the book and to jar his prodigious memory. "I have to spill over to someone," she writes, a phrase that succinctly reveals why the letters came to exist at all and helps to explain how Doig acquired his talent.

Doig also quotes from the Ault's logbook, bringing the issues of the day into focus:

"1010 (May 11, 1945) Sighted enemy plane (Zeke) which came out of low cloud astern and dived into the after flight deck of USS Bunker Hill ... Bunker Hill was burning furiously."

Doig writes about his father, hard working and stoical, and

about Winona, a seamstress, his mother's confidant and Wally's bride-to-be. He describes Berneta's mother, widowed, lonely, enduring and no particular friend of Ivan's father.

As for his mother, she treated her son like a grown-up, comforted her husband when he was ill and almost never complained of her own malady. He remembers her shopping on a tiny income, catching mice in a rented house (two in one trap!) and laughing at the fright the family took mistaking a cow for escaped German prisoners. Then comes the day, back in Montana, when she chooses to herd sheep rather than drive their hired sheepherder to town.

Some of Doig's finest writing comes as he describes Berneta on horseback, turning ewes on the mountainside with the help of her dog, Flop, while in town father and son go about getting haircuts. Each scene leads irrevocably to a poignant conclusion in this slim but powerful volume.

# His Mother's Days

*A surprise legacy  
of letters helps  
Ivan Doig write  
a new memoir  
that fills in the  
missing chapters  
on the woman he  
longed to know*

Seattle, WA  
(King Co.)  
Seattle  
Post-Intelligencer  
(Cir. D. 200,495)

**By John Marshall**  
P-I Reporter

**W**riter Ivan Doig had tried his darndest before to get some sense of this woman who had died at 31 in the pre-dawn hours of his sixth birthday, this woman he could remember years afterward only in patchwork memory, this woman who was his mother.

There were family photographs taken with a Brownie camera and tape-recorded reminiscences of his father and his grandmother, some help in the remembering, but Doig still feared he would probably go to his grave with no recollection of his mother's voice.

Then came the surprise bequest of an estranged uncle, his mother's brother. It was a small packet of letters held together by a strand of grocery store string. There were 20 letters in all, 12 from Doig's mother, six from his grandmother, two from his father, all written over a few months in the spring of 1945. Doig took this simple family inheritance in his hands, then promptly set it aside, excited but skittish.

Several days passed before Doig untied the string and made his way through the letters, his head suddenly filled with his mother's voice, as immediate as today, a real person's voice at last.

"She had been this cutout, this figure from a melodrama," Doig recalls. "Dying that early meant nobody ever spoke ill of her or in anything but highly emotional terms. Neither my dad or my grandmother could talk long about her without breaking down.

"But to encounter her in these letters — hey, she's a lively sort of person with kind of a wicked eye for behavior and a wicked ear for gossip; in short, a writer. That brought a person from behind the cutout — she leaps out from behind, really — and it made me think about her and me. I grew up thinking I was my father's son and my grandmother's grandson, but then it dawned on me how much I am my mother's son, too."

What Berneta Doig had written in letters to her brother, who was serving on a Navy ship in the South Pacific, was not destined to remain family secret much longer. For her

writing son has mined family memory for more than 15 years now, giving public life to the unsung laboring people who clawed an existence out of the unforgiving land in the shadow of the Montana Rockies.

"This House of Sky: Landscape of a Western Mind" came first in 1978: Doig's evocative memoir of his upbringing at the hands of his father and grandmother, staunch enemies turned makeshift family partners by his mother's tragic death from an unknown heart condition. This first book by Doig — then a little-known journalist on the free-lance fringe — became a Western classic, nominated for the National Book Award, studied in colleges, beloved by thousands, still selling at a rate of 10,000 copies a year (with more than 130,000 sold).

Two Northwest-based books followed, "Winter Brothers" and "The Sea Runners." Then came a Montana trilogy based on a fictional family called the McCaskills, bearing few similarities to the Doigs, their story told through "English Creek," "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" and "Ride with Me, Mariah Montana."

**BUT DESPITE** years of critical praise and increasing success, Doig seemed destined to be forever linked with "This House of Sky," still his most personal work, his introduction to many readers, the literary equivalent of a first love. Until the unexpected legacy of his mother's letters.

Doig has now worked this paper bequest into "Heart Earth" (Atheneum, \$19), a masterful companion memoir to "This House of Sky." It is his mother's story, a slim volume, but Doig at the top of his considerable powers, moving smoothly between fact and memory and meditation, and the language bearing his distinctive stamp, as if handmade.

Doig writes of "silverghost illumination," "stiffbacked rectitude," "the dreamslow rhythm of the ride" and "moods deep and inscrutable as the keels of icebergs." He portrays a Montana dance hall on a Saturday night as "a plaid of bandannaed gallantry and hooty mischief." And he describes a meadow with "such grass, this rain-fed early summer, that the sheep will fatten on it as if it were candied."



**Berneta Doig**

# Doig: He cares about his readers' response

From Page C1

"I mean," Doig emphasizes, "for the language to be the strength of my work — the actual dance of the words on the page, sentence by sentence. And it may be for some readers. But that also might be the weakness of my work for others. I don't let up, I don't give people much time for their eyes to breathe. The stuff may be a little too intense."

Doig, an easy-talking, good-natured man in conversation, is intent and serious about his work. Woe to anyone who might dare suggest that he could turn a few wartime letters into a memoir by merely sitting at his manual typewriter in his home north of Seattle and letting the words flow.

He is a stickler for detail, a fanatic about research. Doig, 54, gives the impression that one of the great joys of his life is coming upon a well-organized museum in a small town and poring over its dusty files and musty newspapers. Like he did in Wickenburg, Ariz., for "Heart Earth."

His parents had left Montana for Arizona during the war, a trek on "war-bald tires and waning ration books" that the writer would come to see as emblematic of larger themes — the search in the West for the next great place, the dislocations caused by the war, the urge to reinvent lives. Charlie Doig had gone from boss on a Montana sheep ranch to worker in an Arizona aluminum plant, before finally returning north to the Big Sky with his family for good.

**SO IVAN DOIG** poked around sites in Arizona, sought facts of that state during wartime from the National Archives, submerged himself in Wickenburg's Desert Caballeros Western Museum, all these findings carefully cataloged.

"Details tell you more," he says, "and even if I don't ultimately use a piece of information, there's a resonance there."

Doig takes particular pride in the surprise discovery during research, especially when it leads to the debunking of myth. What had originally brought the Doigs from Scotland to Montana had been lost in the passing generations, re-



ROBERT De GIULIO/P-I

**Writer Ivan Doig says of his work:** "I don't give people much time for their eyes to breathe."

placed with supposition that they found the landscape similar, heather replaced by sagebrush. But a research trip to Scotland convinced Doig otherwise.

"I checked up on that and the place they came from looks more like the coast of Maine than Montana; there's no heather for 35 miles," he says. "So they must have come to Montana simply out of choice, putting down roots there with three generations trying to make a living in a place that doesn't want to give you a living."

Doig himself fled the state for journalism school at Northwestern, near Chicago, knowing he wanted to write and convinced he could only pursue his trade outside his native state. He never really went back — this great

## Where readers can hear author

Ivan Doig will make the following local appearances for his new book, "Heart Earth."

**Oct. 7:** 7 p.m. reading at Kane Hall, University of Washington.

**Oct. 8:** 7:30 p.m. reading at Eagle Harbor Book Company, Bainbridge Island.

**Oct. 9:** 1 p.m. signing at University Book Store, Bellevue.

**Oct. 13:** 3:30 p.m. signing at Magnolia's Book Store.

**Oct. 13:** 6 p.m. signing at Tower Books, Seattle.

**Oct. 14:** 7:30 p.m. reading at The Elliott Bay Book Co., Seattle.

irony now, the writer who has done for Montana what William Faulkner did for Mississippi has been a refugee from the place almost all of his adult life.

Seattle has been his home since 1966, originally chosen because of its moderate climate and his doctoral studies in history at the University of Washington. But Doig's wife, Carol, got a teaching job at Shoreline Community College, a job that kept the larder full during her husband's lean years as a magazine free-lancer and a beginning book writer. Their roots in the soggy ground of Puget Sound have only deepened since.

"This has always been the best place for my work," Doig emphasizes. "And there is citizenship incumbent on Montana writers in

Montana; there, I would have responsibilities I do not have here, like serving on committees."

Doig is not one to shrug a writer's responsibilities, whether the well-crafted paragraph or the well-presented public performance. When readings started to become an important part of a writer's life, Doig did not just start showing up at bookstores and winging it on stage, as some writers do. He studied a book on acting by Laurence Olivier.

Prestigious awards continue to come Doig's way: a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Western Literature Association in 1989 for his body of work, a Western biography award (with a \$10,000 prize) this year for "Heart Earth." The prizes, in Doig's mind, belong to the books.

What he considers his is the personal response from readers, the heartfelt expressions of those touched by his work, what matters so much to this writer who freely admits he writes to be read.

Some rare writers do indeed become loved by their readers and Doig demonstrated again why he is one during a recent bookstore appearance in Montana. A woman approached him, asking him to inscribe a copy of "Heart Earth" in the memory of her husband, who had just died.

And then the woman broke down, consumed by grief. And Doig let her cry on his shoulder for a time, before writing a long and careful inscription about the need for life to go on in the spirit of her husband.

"In this work," Doig would remark later, "you've got to be a practitioner of the human soul; there's a responsibility that goes with these words."



Book News from the  
King's English Bookshop  
Volume 1, Number 2  
October 1993

# The Inkslinger

## DOIG GOES HOME ONCE MORE

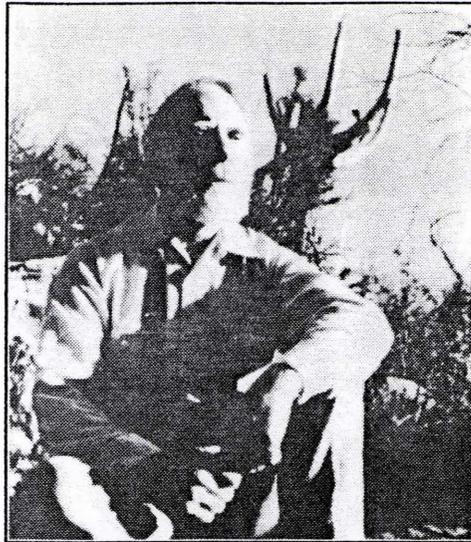
Our acquaintance with Ivan Doig's work began with the publication of *This House of Sky*, a finalist for the National Book Award for Biography in 1978. One reviewer said of his work, "The language begins in western territory and experience, but in the hands of an artist, it touches all landscapes and all life. Doig is such an artist." Doig is a writers' writer, a painterly writer, seamlessly blending words and phrases into tapestries rich in wisdom, exquisitely embroidered with his love of the West and its people, vast in his understanding of the world we all inhabit.

His glorious new memoir *Heart Earth*, winner of the Evans Prize for Biography, is simply the latest canvas to which he has turned his attention (see review, page 2).

We have laughed and loved and ridden and wept with the McCaskills as they made their mark on the harsh Montana foothills. Through three volumes and that many generations of this fascinating western dynasty, Doig has kept us entranced and waiting for more. *English Creek*, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, and *Ride With Me, Mariab Montana* comprise this beloved trilogy.

*The Sea Runners* kept us on the edge of our seats as we followed the escape of four men, indentured servants in 19th century Alaska, fleeing by native canoe from the fierce Alaskan winter into what they hoped would be freedom. Tautly written and tensely plotted, *The Sea Runners* is yet another example of Doig's unsurpassed skill as a storyteller.

In *Winter Brothers*, Doig further explored the Pacific Northwest by brilliantly combining his own words with those of James Gilchrist Swan, an early



Ivan Doig. Photo by Carol Doig.

settler of the region, through excerpts from Swan's diaries. Again *The New York Times Book Review* raved, calling *Winter Brothers*: "a gorgeous tribute to a man and a region unjustly neglected heretofore. The reader has the pleasure of encountering two contrasting styles and two angles of view, both infused with the fresh air and spirit of the Northwest."

Pleasure is a word closely associated with Ivan Doig. He has brought us a great deal of pleasure through the years through his brilliant use of the English language, his innate understanding of human nature, and his uncommon relationship with his land, the vast distances of the West.

—Kathy Ashton

## NEW BOOKS

Fall tends to make us think about moving our lives indoors, away from summer's pleasures, from gardening and outdoor pursuits to a quieter enjoyment, to cool, crisp evenings spent by the fire with a wonderful new book.

This fall offers fiction by some of our very favorite writers, including the incomparable Harriet Doerr (National Book Award winner—first novel—for *Stones for Ibarra*), with a new novel at the young age of 83; poet James Dickey (author of *Deliverance*); John LeCarre; William Styron; and Edith Wharton (yes, she is deceased, this is a posthumous release).

First novel *Smilla's Sense of Snow* is one of the finest thrillers we've read in a long time—and author Peter Hoeg isn't the only brilliant newcomer this autumn. There are a host of wonderful books by first-time novelists. We feel fortunate to offer one of the strongest lists we've ever had, both in hardback and paperback, by authors old and new.

### CONSIDER THIS, SEÑORA,

Harriet Doerr

★ This is the absolute top of our list this fall. We loved it and hope you will too. (See the review on page 2.) Harcourt Brace, \$21.95

### THE BUCCANEERS

Edith Wharton

★ *The Buccaneers* is a triumph. So deftly and imperceptibly has Marion

*Continued on the next page.*

- ★ Unanimous praise
- ✓ Recommended reading
- ▼ Excessive violence

## THE INKSLINGER'S TOP TEN PICKS

You'll find reviews of these books in this issue of the *The Inkslinger*.

*Consider This, Señora*, by Harriet Doerr

*Heart Earth*, by Ivan Doig

*The Buccaneers*, by Edith Wharton

*Gospel*, by Wilton Barnhardt

*Ruin Creek*, by David Payne

*Old Friends*, by Tracy Kidder

*The Night Manager*, by John LeCarre

*Smilla's Sense of Snow*, by Peter Hoeg

*Crazy in Alabama*, by Mark Childress

*Littlejohn*, by Howard Owen

# Montana's Doig shoots holes in the myths of the Old West

By R.E. BAIRD

Colorado Daily Staff Writer

The mythology of the West — the noble cowboy, the honorable law man wresting the town's law-abiding citizen from the forces of disorder — is still strong. Nearly a century of film and the work of popular writers like Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour have left a branding-iron stamp on our view of the time and place.

But a new breed of writer — becoming known as the "Writers of the Purple Sage," to the chagrin of some — is challenging the myth. The old West was a land of heart-break, they say, where bodies and souls withered away under the hardship of the land. And the dominance of Eastern land, cattle, mining and railroad cartels made the American dream that fueled the settlement of the West more often resemble a nightmare.

Ivan Doig, from a three-generation Montana ranch family, is one of the leading voices among these new writers. He will do a brief reading and sign books at the Boulder Bookstore today at 12:30 p.m.

"I'm very much interested in writing against the damn myths of the West," said Doig, who now lives in Seattle. "I came from ranch-hand circumstances. I know damn well it was everybody grab for himself. The cowboy myth just doesn't work."

The drama comes to a head in Doig's latest work, "Heart Earth," a memoir about his family's attempt to stay afloat during the years of World War II.

In the last year of the war, Doig's family packed up and went to Tucson to work in defense plants. "But my mother desperately longed for the Montana mountains. We returned to raise sheep in the Bridger Mountains in 1947. That ended up being the place where her heart gave out."

Doig's previous work, "Ride With Me Mariah Montana," mixes such desperation with hope. An aging rancher who has lost his wife agrees to chauffeur his daughter, who is a photographer for the Missoula "Montanian," and her ex-husband, who is a writer, on a centennial year tour of the state for a series of articles.

Behind the poignant and humorous scenes that develop is an awareness that his ranch, although free from debt, is probably going to fail.

"It's about how you make a living in a land that's indifferent to whether or not it supports you," Doig said of the novel.

But Doig stands out from many of the new western writers in his use of the language, keeping it close to the bone of Western dialogue and narrative — a studied, imperfect delivery of formal English, an education wres-

ted by kerosene lamp-light in wind-blown cabins, shanties and shepherd wagon, but woven with the images of the land and people.

Jick McCaskill, the rancher in "Ride With Me Mariah Montana," describes his daughter, Mariah: "She unfolded up out of her picture-taking crouch and stood there giving me her 'gotcha grin,' her proud long mane of hair deeper than red — the double-rich color that on a fine horse is called blood bay — atop the narrow but good enough face and the figure, lanky but not awkwardly so, that somehow managed to be both long-legged and thoroughly mounded where the female variety is supposed to be mounded; one whole hell of a kit of prime woman suddenly assembled."

"Mariah Montana" is the third novel in a trilogy based on the McCaskill family's attempt to make a living on the Rocky Mountain Front Range in Montana.

While Doig and many of the new Western writers have had a loyal following, the genre is becoming a true literary force, he said. Writers such as Doig, Bill Kittredge, John Nichols, Terry Tempest Williams and many more will be in Denver this weekend for the Rocky Mountain Book Festival.

And although Doig admires these writers, he counts such writers as Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner as his strongest influences. Among contemporary writers, Doig said he looks for "eloquences of the edge of the world," seeking writers in India, Australia and other post-colonial countries that give a different language to many of the same problems that faced the American West — areas where "big money and big governances are somewhere else."

Changes affecting the West today aren't much different than the ones of the past, he said. It's a land of booms and busts where the only consistent winners are the outsiders who finance and profit from the booms.

"There were any number of rushes of one kind or another since white American immigration began," he said. "This is not a new story. Most of the rushes left some kind of environmental degradation behind them."

Still, he would like to see some of the West preserved, at least the viable towns where some resemblance of Western virtues reside.

The new immigration, from urban areas, and specifically from California, has brought a vitality to the West, much like many of the past immigrations. And if that immigration does away with some of the Western tradition, so be it.

"A lot of that Western tradition drove me out of the West," he said.

# For author Ivan Doig, language is the thing

By Jane Wilson

ASPEN TIMES STAFF WRITER

Fifteen years ago when writer Ivan Doig wrote the highly successful book "This House of Sky," it was what he thought would be his only memoir ... he was wrong.

The book was Doig's entree into the world of book writing, a switch he necessarily made from his career as a freelance writer for newspapers and magazines. Although it was a successful freelance career (he contributed regularly to The New York Times), it was far from lucrative.

"This House of Sky," which was nominated for the National Book Award, has sold over 150,000 copies and is frequently used in college literature courses. It is about Doig's own family, mostly his father and grandmother, who raised him after his mother's death from asthma when he was just six.

Doig was born in Montana in 1939 and grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front, where much of his writing takes place. A graduate of Northwestern University, where he received a B.S. and M.S. in journalism, he holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. He left Montana over 20 years ago and today lives in Seattle with his wife, Carol, who teaches literature of the American West.

Other books followed "This House of Sky," including his first novel, "The Sea Runners" (1982), which was named one of the most notable books of the year by The New York

She became an alive person, rather than someone remembered through the gateway of a funeral."

Doig said, "There's bound to be some emotion involved whenever we write about our own families, but that's simply part of the territory that comes with being a writer."

In need of finding a new way to write again about his father and grandmother, he did so this time through his mother's eyes. This, plus using the letters as a basis for the memoir, gave him the direction he needed for writing "Heart Earth" (Atheneum, Sept. 8, 1993).

Since it is a book based on letters, Doig used genuine postmarks as a "trail of stepping stones" to launch new chapters, and he used datelines (since they head letters) from which to leap into important spots of time, to start new scenes.

Doig is a veritable worshiper of language. There's a line in "Heart Earth" that starts out, "Language is the treasury of the poor ..."

Said Doig, "I've tried to use Western vernacular, to make it a shimmer in my books. I often warm up for a day's writing by reading 10 pages in the Dictionary of American Regional English."

Doig was an early reader, in fact, he can never remember not reading. His mother, as a way to stay quiet and calm because of the asthma, read to him frequently. His father was a talented storyteller. "The eye part of being a

writer came from her. The ear part, prowl-

Times Book Review; and his Montana trilogy of novels, "English Creek" (1984), "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (1987) and "Ride with Me, Mariah Montana" (1990), which follow a

family of Scottish immigrants over a 100-year period.

Then the letters came.

During his research for "This House," Doig said this week in a phone interview from Seattle, "I tried to shake down all the family members for old letters, photographs, etc. For some reason, my uncle didn't produce these letters."

The letters were written by Doig's mother, Berneta, to her brother, Wally, as she and her family were trying to make a living in post-war America of 1945, moving from Arizona to Montana, while Wally was aboard a destroyer in the South Pacific.

It turns out she wrote her brother every week to 10 days during the last six months of her life (and the war), but Doig didn't learn of the letters until his uncle's death in 1987.

"After I read them, I could see a short book," said Doig. "The best memoirs, I think, are short, intense ... the essence of a life."

The letters served up a "freshened portrait" of his mother for Doig, who had "a prettified version, but not a vivid picture of her." She died on his sixth birthday.

"To my great relief and excitement, the letters showed her to be a much fuller personality. She had a sharp eye for human foibles, she loved language, turns of a phrase.

for a day's writing  
by reading 10  
pages in the  
Dictionary of  
American  
Regional English."

- Ivan Doig

ing with my ear (eavesdropping being a writer's talent), came from my dad and my grandmother," he said.

Doig doesn't believe the love of language (dialect, colloquialisms, the stuff he calls "lingo")

is becoming lost in today's homogenized, computerized, televised society.

"Generation by generation, language takes on a vividness. Probably the kids growing up in the West today have their own vocabulary of sayings and stories, though they're maybe not as tuned in on that as we have been in the past.

"But I hearken back to the computer generation, the hackers ... yeah, they're focused into these computers, but the first thing they did was create this whole colossal slang to talk about it. It's still a language."

To give an example of Doig's love of language, consider his favorite part of the book-writing process — the rewrites. "Rewriting is what I find fun ... third-drafting and onward, sometimes seven, sometimes a dozen or more drafts. That's where you are really sculpting the language ... that's what I like."

The Washington Post has said Doig's work "makes readers recall why they love to read, reminds writers why they ever wanted to write in the first place."

**Ivan Doig, author of "Heart Earth," will be at Explore Booksellers, 221 E. Main Street, Aspen, tonight (Friday, Oct. 1) from 5 to 7 p.m., to sign copies of his recently published memoir.**

I often warm up

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LUCE PRESS CLIPPINGS

# Doig Fills Pages With Memories

## Heart Earth

By Ivan Doig  
(Athabasca,)

Although Ivan Doig has since written another non-fiction work and four novels, I suspect that most readers will know him from his first book, "This House of Sky." It is a wonderful book which focuses on the author's upbringing and the two dominant influences in his life.

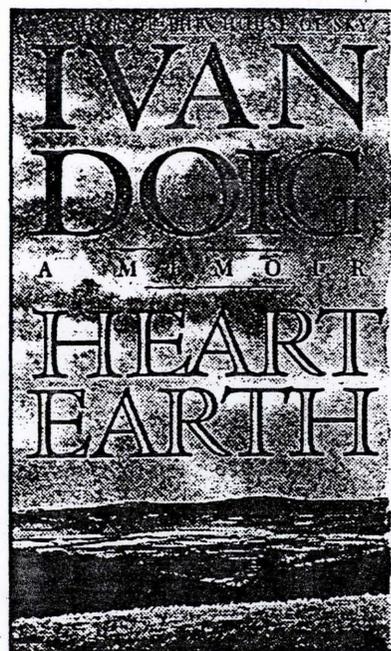
The individuals were Charlie Doig, his father, and Bessie Ringer, his maternal grandmother. The difficult relationship between the two of them, and their shared love for Ivan, create the real material out of which a very compelling memoir was fashioned.

It is because I enjoyed "This House of Sky" so much and have personal affection for Montana (particularly the Smith River Valley) that I looked forward so much to reading "Heart Earth." I was not disappointed.

This smaller volume covers a period which predates much of

the activity in the earlier book. But even where it replows old ground, the reader enjoys great treats. Doig's skills have been honed significantly over the years. He now writes with a level of grace and even with flourishes not present in the earlier work; and none of his straightforwardness of analysis has been lost along the way.

Doig's mother, Berneta, died when he was a young boy. Her brother Wally, Ivan's "favorite uncle," died very recently. After the latter's death, Ivan received a bound packet which contained letters sent by his mother to Wally during World War II. These letters provide the basis for this book which is a remembrance of Berneta Ringer Doig and the times in which she and Charlie and Ivan lived together. It is interesting that Ivan freely acknowledges that he is "a writer, not a transcriber" and divulges that he took the liberty of rearranging sentences and sequences to permit him to present his ver-



sion of the story in a clearer manner.

This is a loving tale. It is the story of three individuals who, despite being a bit miscast in the various worlds, are forced to populate and make the most of life and of each other.

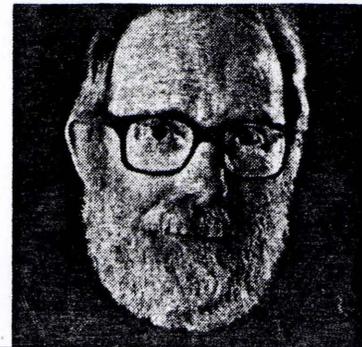
George Singer

Singer is a Tulsa businessman.

## Phrasemongers & Philosophers

**Ivan Doig**  
signing *Heart Earth*  
Monday, October 4, 7:30 p.m.

"Ivan Doig is a writer whose work makes readers recall why they love to read, and reminds writers why they ever wanted to write in the first place", the *Washington Post Book World* says. And for those who know the author of *English Creek* and many other wonderful tales, this memoir of his family set against the backdrop of World War II is guaranteed to draw them inextricably in.



**Robert Fulghum**  
signing  
*Maybe (Maybe Not)*  
Tuesday, October 5,  
12:30-1:30 p.m.

Appearing throughout America on behalf of worthy charitable organizations, Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, will sign copies of his new book. Proceeds from the autographing will be donated to benefit Share Our Strength's Writer's Harvest, sponsors of Meals on Wheels. Numbers for a place in line will be handed out at 12:00 noon.

Terry C. Johnston, one of the most gifted historical novelists of today and author of *Carry the Wind* and *Cry of the Hawk*, joins us to sign his sprawling new novel. Meticulously researched and infused with the essence of the frontier, this is the story of family, honor, war and redemption on the American frontier.

**Terry C. Johnston**  
signing  
*Winter Rain*  
Wednesday, October 6, 7:30 p.m.

**Anne Perry**  
reading & signing  
*A Sudden, Fearful Death*  
Thursday, October 7, 7:30 p.m.

With nearly 70,000 hardcover copies of her first three William Monk novels sold, the wait is over for Anne Perry fans with this, the latest of her brilliant adventure novels featuring the popular Victorian sleuth. Says Sharyn McCrumb of Perry's work, "she lifts the lace curtains from Victorian society to reveal its shocking secrets."

William Joyce's books appeal to the sense of bizarre humor in adults as well as children. His popular picture books include *A Day with Wilbur Robinson* and *Dinosaur Bob and His Adventures with the Family Lizardo*. He will join us on the Lower Level of the store to entertain us with his newest creation. Don't miss it!

**William Joyce**  
presenting  
*Santa Calls*  
Saturday, October 9, 10:30 a.m.

### Tattered Cover

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Denver Post, Oct. 3, '85



Doig

Fort Worth, TX  
**MORNING STAR-TELEGRAM**  
 Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington Met Area

Sunday SUN 356,131

OCT 3, 1993

PREQUELS

# A man of letters

## Ivan Doig's remembrance of home hits the mark

By **BRYAN W. BOGLE**  
 SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

In 1978, readers of *This House of Sky* met an author whose remembrance of childhood read like the best offering of any novel. Fifteen years and six books later, we return with pleasurable surprise to the unexpected beginning of a story that the author thought had been finished long before.

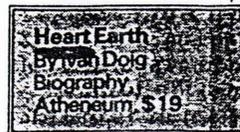
Ivan Doig's *Heart Earth* revives the author's misty remembrance of mother and family, brought to recollection by the testamentary gift of his mother's letters to her brother away at World War II.

Berneta Doig's younger brother, Wally, only 15 years older than the author, became "that perfect conspirator, a favorite uncle." Little more than halfway in age between the two, Wally Ringer in death has opened a door between mother and son by willing six months of letters sent to him by his sister while serving in the Pacific on the destroyer USS Ault.

Reminiscent of western America's great literary families portrayed by Wallace Stegner and John Steinbeck, the Doigs move in search of better wages

and, more importantly, better health for the asthmatic Berneta.

Like the Phoenix of myth, the Arizona city's boomtown fever of wartime employment born out of the desert fire lures many into the aircraft and munitions factories. On a rare entry into downtown Phoenix, the Doigs are caught by a hotel's seeming technological marvel of a looming crescent moon with a brilliant star perched on its peak. For a few short minutes the family is held captive by this vision of lighted night until the father, Charlie, realized the illumination is "not an advertising inspiration after all, but the planet Venus and the ripening moon in rare conjunction."



for kin and country. The illusion that a distant land of unreasonable sunshine can replace the "season-clogged life" of Montana evaporates and the Doigs return northward to their own.

Ivan Doig writes, "... earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable *h*, this matter of siting ourselves. Of a place

mysteriously insisting itself into us."

Doig takes the reader into a story as true as any ever told, the narrative broken only occasionally by curiously placed communiques from the Ault. Because we know the end of the story before its beginning, the approach of emotion strides steadily upon us as the short memoir winds toward its unavoidable conclusion.

Unlike a novel whose author's creations leave interpretations and symbolism for the reader's own possibly misguided discernment, Doig's memoir describes each incident and then elaborates to interpret the meaning as much for himself as for the reader.

The success of *Heart Earth* is its author's ability to tell a 40-year-old story so clearly from a young child's perspective in such poetic prose. Berneta Doig's son writes that he has few of his mother's possessions from those days near the end of the war, other than her fountain pen used for her correspondence. The reader will find that her great legacy to her son was her own way to "cast a sly eye at the human herd... of eternally keeping score on life."

*Heart Earth* finds Ivan Doig once again casting his clever eye upon himself and upon us all.

Former archaeologist **Bryan W. Bogle** is a builder in Fort Worth.

USA Today Oct. 5, 1993

# 'Heart Earth': A mother's lot in a harsh land

**Heart Earth**  
By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 160 pp., \$19

By Peter Filkins  
Special for USA TODAY

As a "prequel" to his popular 1978 memoir *This House of Sky*, Ivan Doig's *Heart Earth* revisits the Montana ranch country of his childhood in order to deepen the portrait of his mother, who died on Doig's sixth birthday in 1945. What allows him to return to her and the past is a set of letters that Berneta Doig wrote to a broth-

er stationed on a destroyer in the Pacific, and that haphazardly descended to Doig after his uncle's death in 1986.

"I had given up ever trying to uncurtain my mother," writes Doig at the start of *Heart Earth*, but like a drawstring, Berneta's letters pull the curtain back. To Doig, they reveal a woman "dangerously more complicated" than any composite picture of the "civic women ... of that hard Montana past," for Berneta remains someone who "cannot be sculpted from sugar."

Rather, despite the asthma that will eventually kill her, she

## BOOK REVIEW

is a figure who "burned bright," whether skillfully handling a horse or caught by the camera as "an inexplicable pixie in a peaked cap or gusled up as a very passable flapper." As in *This House of Sky*, part of this allure rests in the strength of both parents to eke out a life amid such rugged terrain. Doig again captures a sense of place where "one moment, the look of the land strongly stops you in your tracks, and the next, there is something ominous around

your ankles."

However, unlike the earlier memoir that so movingly detailed Doig's own coming of age, *Heart Earth* never quite grabs hold of its subject. Doig works hard to avoid a mere "requiem for the lariat proletariat" in the portrait of his ranching parents, but unfortunately Berneta's handful of letters to her brother reveal little more than the passing rituals of lambing and shearing, as well as the daily concerns of a wife and mother. In her, Doig claims an ancestor who "played seriously at phrase, cast a sly eye at the human

herd," much like himself, but beyond his own conjurings, she remains a shadowy figure.

The poignancy offered by *Heart Earth*, then, rests in its slimmness. Though in retrospect Berneta's early death makes it seem that her letters were an attempt at "making her words persevere for her," it's really Doig who has taken on the task. This in itself is moving, but despite Doig's urge to "voyage on her ink," the real Berneta remains lost at sea.

*Peter Filkins teaches at Simon's Rock of Bard College in Great Barrington, Mass.*

## Doig illuminates his early life

By Doug Esser

The Associated Press

There's not a single cliché in "Heart Earth: A Memoir," in which Ivan Doig writes about his early childhood in the World War II years in Montana without once mentioning Big Sky Country.

There is no lack of description — of the mountains, muddy roads, sheepherding, his mother's aching cough. But the images are freshly minted. And if Doig needs more shiny, jingling words, he coins a few of his own.

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### 'Heart Earth'

- **Author:** Ivan Doig
  - **What:** Montana childhood memoir is a prequel to "This House of Sky."
  - **Publisher:** Atheneum, 160 pages
  - **Price:** \$19
- 

Most of his talent is spent in loving recollection of his parents, Charlie and Berneta Ringer Doig, ranch hands when the West was as tough and grinding as it ever was. Asthmatic, Berneta died young, at the end of the war, before Ivan had started school.

Her memory is resurrected through the letters she had written to her brother, Wally, who was in the Navy. They describe the Doigs' hard life in Montana, a trip to Arizona in search of health and the return to Montana — the earth of their hearts.

Doig illuminates the letters as a projector shines through film and casts a big picture in the movie in the mind.

The letters came to Doig after the Seattle writer's 1978 book "This House of Sky," which describes how he was raised by his father and grandmother — two antagonists bound by the shared loss of a wife-daughter.

"Heart Earth," (Atheneum, Macmillan Publishing Co., \$19) a 160-page hardback, tells the story of the six months before "This House of Sky" begins.

If writing were a car, most people would have basic transportation, something to take you from one point to another. Doig's writing is a one-of-a-kind with classic lines, chrome trim and a smell-of-leather interior. It's a vehicle to behold in itself. And when it takes you to Montana, you can see the Big Sky.

Oct. 17, 1993

# Mother's letters heart of memoir

"Heart Earth" by Ivan Doig  
(Atheneum, \$19)

By Steve Linder

In February 1945, a young woman named Berneta Doig wrote a letter to her brother who was serving aboard a destroyer, the USS Ault. In most ways, the letter was unexceptional; Berneta, a young wife and mother, wrote of commonplace concerns for her family:

Dear Wally —

... I shouldn't even be writing to you my troubles but I have to spill over to someone. I'd just like to have you around so I could put my head on your shoulder and cry.

... It is going on I and we haven't had dinner yet. Charlie is resting and I thought the rest would do him more good than eating. Ivan is out in the backyard building roads. He had a foxhole dug you could bury a cow in.

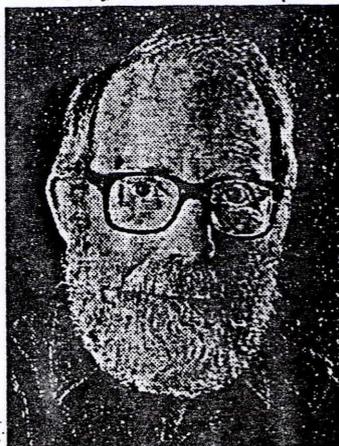
Nearly 50 years later, the little boy in that letter has grown up to

## MEMOIR

become a highly successful author. Ivan Doig doesn't excavate cow-sized foxholes anymore, but he is still fond of digging. Like an archaeologist, he labors to recover the past, sifting through the words in long-buried letters like that one, to unearth a period of time in the life of his own family, and once again bring it out into the sunlight.

Berneta died when her son was only 6 years old. Ivan Doig knows his mother mostly through the recollections of others and a few yellowed and brittle photographs. "In every camera-caught mood, wide-set eyes soft but with a minimum of illusions: on the verge of pretty but perfectly aware she's never going to get there past the inherited broad nose."

In his acclaimed memoir, "House of Sky," Doig wrote of his family's struggle to carry on after Berneta's death, of how they found, in the



Ivan Doig labors to recover the past, sifting through the words of long-buried letters.

rugged Montana landscapes and within themselves, the qualities required to tough out a life together as strong and enduring as it was unconventional.

Then, more recently, when Wally

followed his sister in death, Doig found himself the inheritor of an unexpected bequest: a collection of Berneta's letters, "the only correspondence by my mother I'd ever seen." This surprising gift from an estranged uncle was the genesis of "Heart Earth."

The memoir is really a sort of loving collaboration; Doig sprinkles sentences from his mother's letters here and there throughout the book, then goes on to reveal the harsh reality behind his mother's casual remarks. For example, Berneta writes, "I've been having a little more asthma, but not so bad," a strikingly stoic observation from a woman who, at that time, was working 16-hour days in the saddle, riding herd on sheep all alone, across muddy and treacherous mountain slopes.

The result of this two-pronged narration of the past is a memoir that while brief is satisfyingly rich and revealing. And though Berneta's

See **LETTER**, Page 5E

From Page 4E

letters are pithy and charming, it is Doig's skilled and thoughtfully controlled writing that makes it so. His descriptions have the ring of poetry; open the book at random, and one will find on any page a sentence that will surprise and delight. As when Doig recalls his father, a man who "gave back the tense hum of a wire in the wind"; or when he writes of the land his family loved:

"Grass Mountain itself, a pleasant upsidedownland with timber at its base and meadows across its summit, gave my parents elevation of more than one kind. Their summer of Grassy was a crest of the rising and falling seasonal rhythm that they were now to follow through life together in Montana."

That rugged western landscape did much to shape Doig into the writer he is today. The memoir is a particularly hazardous craft in which less-gifted writers often stumble into sentimentality or self-pity, but Doig never makes a misstep. His

prose is lean and wiry as the people he writes about, always direct and to the point.

A review in the Washington Post once said that Doig is a writer "whose work makes readers recall why they love to read," and this new memoir will make a lot of people nod in agreement. Fans of "House of Sky" — and there are many — will quickly find a place for this book on their shelves, and in their hearts.

Steve Linder is a novelist living in Wichita.

# Memoir of Big Sky Country shows one-of-kind writing

By Doug Esser  
Associated Press Writer

There's not a single cliché in "Heart Earth: A Memoir," in which Ivan Doig writes about his early childhood in the World War II years in Montana without once mentioning Big Sky Country.

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They describe the Doig' hard life in Montana, a trip to Arizona in search of health and the return to Montana — the earth of their hearts. Doig illuminates the letters as a projector shines through film and casts a big picture in the movie in the mind. The letters came to Doig after the Seattle writer's 1978 book "This House of Sky," which describes how he was

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# 'Heart': Poignant family portrait

HEART EARTH: A MEMOIR  
By Ivan Doig  
Alheneum, \$19, 160 pages  
REVIEWED BY WOODY WEST

"What I know of her is heard in the slow poetry of fact," Ivan Doig writes of his mother, who died in 1945 on his sixth birthday. "Heart Earth" is a son's eloquent portrait, and indeed memorial, to a woman who refused to concede either to debilitating asthma or to the hardscrabble life that had to be chiseled out of the harsh Montana country of the 1930s and 1940s.

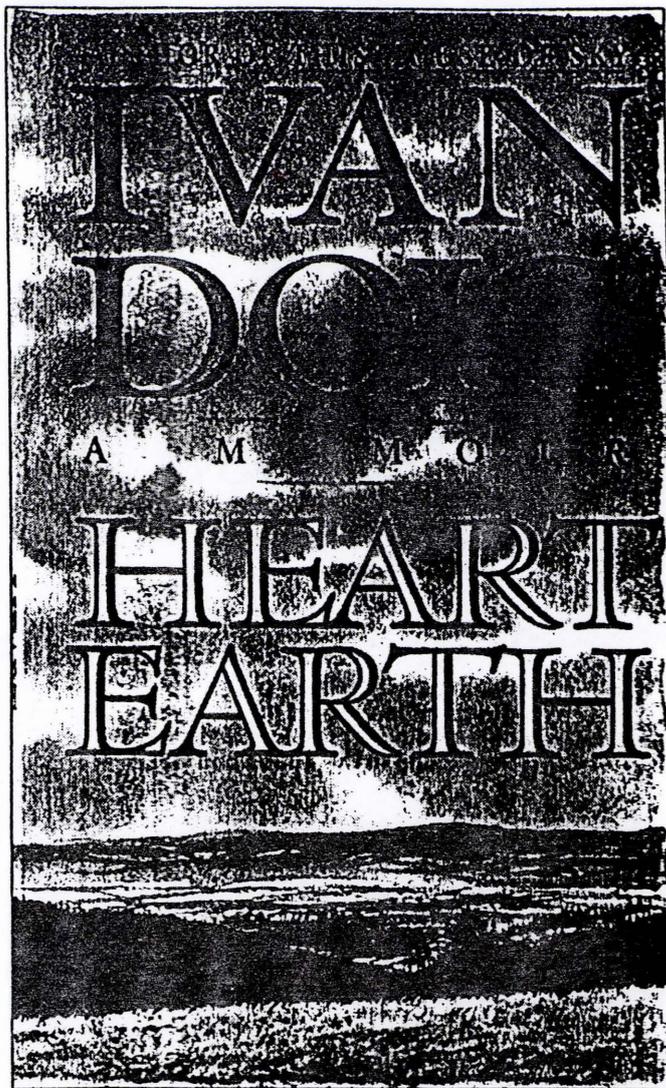
Fifteen years ago, Mr. Doig's "This House of Sky" was published, an equally affecting memoir of growing up after his mother's death amid the loving strain between his widowed father and maternal grandmother. That book, too, was as much memorial to these rough-edged personalities as personal memoir.

In the interval between "This House of Sky" and "Heart Earth," Mr. Doig has written two nonfiction books and a trio of novels about Montana. He is an uncommonly creative writer with an uncommonly incisive sense of the place whence he sprung — the "lariat proletariat," the men and women who went catch as catch can with that unforgiving land and usually emerged with little more than their dignity. But that dignity, which is the quality Mr. Doig celebrates, is the genuine history of America's westering journey.

It is a constant curiosity for all of us to try to imagine the individuality of, as Mr. Doig writes, "those impossible beings, our parents before they were our parents." That usually elusive quest is part of the conundrum of family, the more so when direct knowledge of a father or mother is abbreviated.

Mr. Doig's venture into his past is ignited when his Uncle Wally dies in 1986, his legacy to his nephew a packet of letters written by Mr. Doig's mother during World War II to her brother serving in the Pacific aboard a destroyer.

These letters were the "only correspondence by my mother I'd ever seen, postmarks as direct as a line of black-on-white stepping stones toward that mid-1945 void," when a lifetime of battling asthma overwhelmed her heart.



■ "Heart Earth" is an affecting book, ennobling in the implacable spirit that infuses its pages.

"In the last winter of the war, she knew to use pointblank ink. Nothing is ever crossed out, never a p.s., the heartquick lines still as distinct as the day of the postmark, her fountain pen instinctively refusing the fade of time. Among the little I have had of her is that pen. . . I had given up ever trying to uncurtain my mother. Now her pages begin here: 'I have to spill over' . . . Upward from her held pen, at last she is back again."

In 1934, in the bruising highlands of south-central Montana, Charlie Doig, a 33-year-old "saddle scamp," married Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer, 20. The Ringers, like the Doigs, had committed their heads

and hearts to a way of life that, more often than not, barely let them break even. They were deficient in acres and capital, but not in doggedness.

Berneta's mother was not pleased that her asthma-ridden daughter had chosen Charlie Doig and was convinced that Berneta could not survive the precarious life that marriage to him portended. But, as her son writes, looking at pictures of his mother as a young woman, it was clear that "whenever she had enough oxygen, Berneta burned bright."

Using his mother's letters to her brother as an azimuth, Mr. Doig explores those years, talking to acquaintances from the past and remembering. Any memoir is as much an act of imagination as of recollection, of course, and the author excavates his own recall.

In the early years of World War II, Charlie and Berneta and their young son move from Montana to Arizona, hoping that the dry climate will relieve her constant suffering. Charlie goes to work in a defense factory, turning out aluminum parts for bomber wings. But the irresistible pull of their home country prevails and they return to Montana as the war winds down.

After a series of ranching jobs, the young couple decide it is time to think of putting down their own roots as Ivan nears school age. They hire out to herd sheep in an isolated camp (three miles to a dirt road, 20 miles from the nearest town, which when muddy can swallow their Ford at a gulp). Berneta seems to be doing well, and the couple concoct a plan of investing in their own herd of 1,000 sheep; with lambs and wool, there's a chance for a decent profit and an opportunity to set up for themselves.

This summer, the last that Berneta will know, is gloriously told, a landscape of wondrous beauty and incessant threat, both for the two-legged and the four-legged.

"For the first time in half a year, Berneta's letters seem to catch their breath," Mr. Doig writes. "June 8, 15, and 19, 1945. Her glad reports being with what neighbored our meadow cabin on the face of Hatfield Mountain, a nice stream [his mother writes her brother]. Where my father, getting caught up on his fishing, made its waters our supperland of rainbow trout."

That final summer: "After August when the sheep deal is over, she and Charlie are going to have to quit thinking in seasons. Settle down and stay settled a good long while. With Ivan starting school we are going to have to stay in one place. Wally has been confided in, the wish told to him more than once lately. Some place of our own."

Then on June 27, it ends, the cause of death an overstretching of the heart muscle.

"Nowhere ever written, then or since, was the simultaneous fact of earth: the acrobat heights of Montana earth that kept her so alive, until they killed her."

Mr. Doig reflects on the place and the lives it held there in Montana. "I have stared holes into those mountains, those sage-scruffed flats and bald . . . hills, trying to savvy their hold on her and thus on us, particularly there in severe 1945. . . . But earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable h, this matter of siting ourselves. Of a place mysteriously insisting itself into us."

"Heart Earth" is an affecting book, heartbreaking in recital of the stark severance of a young family's life, but ennobling in the implacable spirit that infuses its pages. Whatever else Mr. Doig may write, "This House of Sky" and "Heart Earth" should endure as magnificent testimonials to the men and women who people them, and classics of the bittersweet history of the American West.

And in his mother's outpouring on paper, Mr. Doig finds a key to his own life as a writer.

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

# Mama was a cowgirl

Memoir: *Ivan Doig's*  
*search for his mother.*  
By Paul Roberts

**E**arly in his memoir *Heart Earth*, Ivan Doig recounts watching, at age 4, a trapper tending a line of weasel traps outside the family cabin in south-central Montana. Contraptions of "jaws and trigger," each trap had been tied to a bowed branch so that, when

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*Heart Earth: A Memoir*  
by Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, \$19

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sprung, would jerk "up into the cold air and the weasel will die a quicker, less contorted death." It is an odd mercy, given the animal's ways with the Doigs' poultry. Yet not, in the author's view, inexplicable. As a "bundled figure" walks the line, as "each frozen ermine form dropped in careful triumph into the gunnysack," Doig reveals that "the trapper is my mother."

And so goes our introduction to Berneta Ringer Doig, trapper, ranch wife, teacher of writing to her future-author son. *Heart Earth* is Doig's attempt both to honor and, more compellingly, understand her: Berneta died of respiratory fail-



*Doig's father (second from right) would shame the most sensitive of men today.*

ure in 1945, early in the morning of Ivan's sixth birthday, leaving him to be raised by her mother and husband.

Based solely on memories, this might have been a less effective tale. But Doig, now a Seattle resident, has done vast archival research and located—trove of biographer's troves—a series of letters from Berneta to her brother, who served

aboard a destroyer in World War II. The result is a biographical and autobiographical hybrid: Doig's own dense prose interspersed with the plainer, more spontaneous language of his mother. "The herder we had planned on lost 30 lambs in 10 days," she writes of yet another chancy ranching venture. "At that rate, we'd have to buy him another band of lambs by fall."

*Heart Earth* moves unevenly in places, jarred by Doig's abrupt scene and time changes and by his occasionally tortured phrasing. It lacks the polish and consistent lyricism of his earlier, fictional works, such as *English Creek* (1984) and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1987). Yet it remains a vivid account of ranching in the transition from Old West to New, a detail-packed description of the people—"the lariat proletariat"—who chose such a harsh, beautiful environment, and why. Elbow room and isolation, mountain ridges and rattlesnakes: "One moment, the look of the land strongly stops you in your tracks," Doig writes, "and the next, there is something ominous around your ankles. . . . What am I to make of my mother's embrace of all this?" His answer: "Earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable *b*, this matter of siting ourselves."

Doig has long been intrigued by the way the hardness of the land warps its people: their bodies, their minds, their ways of knowing one another. His fictional characters are often tragic, prohibited by the land's harsh demands from uttering

whatever it was that might have resurrected a marriage or a friendship. Yet in *Heart Earth*, Doig's real-life characters, no less land-shaped, sense the peril of these personal distances and strive mightily to close them. Doig's father, Charlie—shepherd, saddle scamp, hard-working player in ranching's perennial crapshoot—nonetheless manages an attentiveness to Berneta that would shame the most sensitive of men today.

Berneta, too, seems in a perpetual state of overcoming: her parents' "bone-and-gristle" marriage, her own potentially crippling asthmatic condition. She, too, perseveres—for a time, at least—rejecting the role of invalid for that of cowgirl, working hard, risking childbirth, and, ultimately, spending her married years worried more about her husband's overwork than her own health, even as he in turn watches over her.

Knowing, as we do early on, that Berneta will die gives Doig's tale a creeping suspense. Yet it also renders every detail—her letters, her worries, her aspirations for her husband and son—all the richer. Fifty years after the fact, tainted by intervening experiences and longings, Doig may well be embellishing this person, adding some significance to a life he only briefly knew. But his sense of loss, of lost opportunity, is achingly clear. And, finally, Doig is writer enough to make us understand why, when Berneta left him, it took a half-century to begin searching for her. ■

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*Paul Roberts writes about environmental issues for Seattle Weekly.*

y, October 31, 1993

# Northwest author Ivan Doig: a Flying Wallenda of words

By **DIANE WRIGHT**  
Herald Writer

If writing is a high-wire act, then Ivan Doig is a literary Flying Wallenda.

Only he does it with an old Royal typewriter. Above it, in the writer's north Seattle home, are pinned pieces of paper, typed quotations from many sources.

"This one is from the Wallendas, the high-wire people," Doig says. "It says, 'Life is the high wire; all else is waiting.' In a sense, the writing is like that."

Author of seven books since 1978, finalist for the National Book Award, Doig is like a playwright crafting memory plays, sagas of family, of antique seafaring quests, of generations of hardscrabble Scots and Montanans. He blends a historian's methodical detachment with a writer's soul-baring and love of words.

Vivid images leap off the pages, descriptions like this one from his newest, "Heart Earth" (Atheneum; \$19). Like "This House of Sky," his first book, it tells the story of his family in the high country of Montana. The family was torn apart in 1945 by the death of Doig's mother. He was 6, a mute witness to the attacks of asthma that killed her.

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"About once a year he would mutter about the lack of income for all he was putting out," she says. "I always give credit to those poor-paying publications which finally drove him to say, 'I'm going to try writing a book that I want to write.'"

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"And I knew if there was any meritocracy left in the world," Carol Doig says, "Ivan would succeed."

She was right.

"This House of Sky" sold 150,000 copies and set in motion a reading public, a National Book Award nomination, literary friendships with Wright Morris, Wallace Stegner and Norman McClean, and freedom to take more risks on the printed page.

"That was the virtue of being self-unemployed," Doig quips. "You get the chance to try and do something different with each book."

"Heart Earth" was inspired by a slim sheaf of letters written by Doig's mother to her brother. When he began to read them, his mother's voice sprang to life.

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Scholars have come around. "There'll be the occasional stiff-backed book reviewer. But it turns out the readers actually seem to like that."

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"All these, when you look at them clinically, are all unlikely forms for a book. In each case, I've known that making the form work is part of what I'm up to."

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Author Ivan Doig

outside at his north Seattle home.

# DOIG

from Page 10

speech of his father and uncle. That's something that has been singing in my ear since I was a kid," he says. "I'll work at it too. I'll often warm up, for the day reading 10 pages of the Dictionary of American Regional English."

"I think that's a wonderful thing a writer can do. You can show the shimmer behind the official language; the tricks and wordplay. In 'Heart Earth' it was one of the few treasures my mother's family had. They were churchmouse poor, but on the other hand they were pretty fancy talkers. They could be rich talkers even though they were poor as dirt."

Doig takes a historian's eye to everything from researching Scotland for "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" to the long view of his native state, Montana, where "in the interior West you can still be neighbors to Ted and Jane (Turner and Fonda.)"

"People ask me what's going to happen to, say, Montana and other places in the West, with the celebrification going on. And I keep hearkening back to something like Georgian England where the moneyed people owned estates and the locals got to do chores and look colorful."

Life is never static. Doig's calendar is filled with short pencil-slashes that mark the day's triple-spaced pages, so many a week. To

date, he's written more than 150 pages of his new novel, about Fort Peck, the dam built on the Missouri River in northeastern Montana, which he calls "the earthen dam equivalent of Grand Coulee."

"My writing methods are eccentric in the sense that I don't write consecutively," he says. "I'll

*"I'll often warm up for the day reading 10 pages of the Dictionary of American Regional English."*

— Ivan Doig

skip ahead to get the day's pages. The Fort Peck novel I have figured out in 10 chapters. If I'm stumped on Chapter One, I'll leap ahead. The weird part is you have to smooth it all together, blenderize it in the writing."

Carol Doig, who holds the title of "first reader," says, "I think it will be his best book yet. He'll be spending all next year and most of the following writing it. And he finds that on a big project like this that he needs time to immerse himself. I understand when he has a blank look that there's a whole world being created inside his head and I ought to leave him alone."



Berneta and Charlie Doig, Ivan Doig's parents, in one of their summers of herding sheep in the mountains of Montana.

## Seattleite writes of Montana when it was Montana

AUTHOR OF THIS HOUSE OF SKY

# IVAN DOIG

A MEMOIR

# HEART EARTH

By DOUG ESSER  
Associated Press

There's not a single cliché in "Heart Earth: A Memoir," in which Ivan Doig writes about his early childhood in the World War II years in Montana without once mentioning Big Sky Country.

There is no lack of description — of the mountains, muddy roads, sheepherding, his mother's aching cough. But the images are freshly minted. And if Doig needs more shiny, jingling words, he coins a few of his own.

Most of his talent is spent in loving recollection of his parents, Charlie and Berneta Ringer Doig, ranch hands when the West was as tough and grinding as it ever was. Asthmatic, Berneta died young, at

### REVIEW

■ "Heart Earth," by Ivan Doig; Atheneum, Macmillan Publishing Co.; \$19.

the end of the war, before Ivan had started school.

Her memory is resurrected through the letters she had written to her brother, Wally, who was in the Navy. They describe the Doigs' hard life in Montana, a trip to Arizona in search of health and the return to Montana, the earth of their hearts.

Doig illuminates the letters as a projector shines through film and casts a big picture in the movie in

the mind.

The letters came to Doig after the Seattle writer's 1978 book "This House of Sky," which describes how he was raised by his father and grandmother, two antagonists bound by the shared loss of a wife-daughter.

"Heart Earth" tells the story of the six months before "This House of Sky" begins.

If writing were a car, most people would have basic transportation, something to take you from one point to another. Doig's writing is a one-of-a-kind with classic lines, chrome trim and a smell-of-leather interior.

It's a vehicle to behold. And when it takes you to Montana, you can see the Big Sky.

# Family portrait

'Heart Earth'  
a moving memoir

**DONN FRY**

Seattle Times book editor



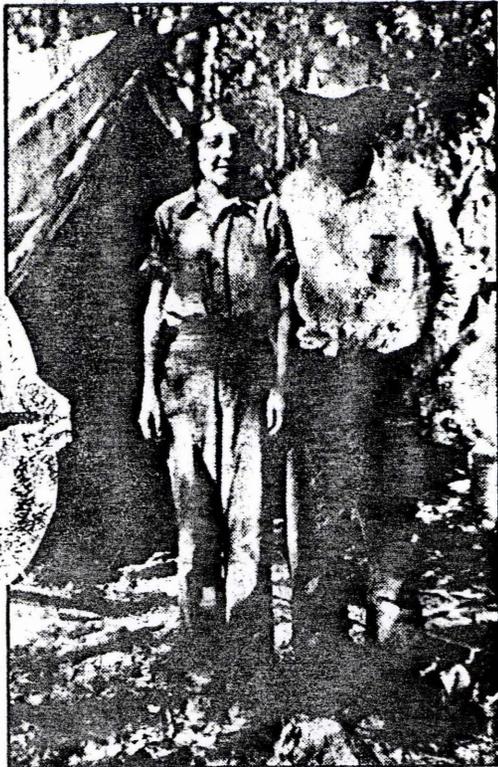
There is a moment in Ivan Doig's new memoir when images of nature, self and family twine together, a braid of memories that give the man today an understanding of where his young life was headed, and his mother's place in it.

It was the early 1940s, when Doig was 4 or 5. His parents, Charlie and Berneta Doig, were at a high point in their lives together, operating a ranch along Faulkner Creek, in south-central Montana. The tyke Ivan would test his mother's limits by bounding pell-mell down the rocky bank behind the ranch house; though she "hugged herself to bruises" watching him, she allowed him the risk. The adult writer begins to see why.

"The way I would grow up, after, was contained in those freefall moments down that shale-bladed slope. In such plunge, if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to," writes Doig. "Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling through the language."

His mother was determined, Doig realizes, "that I should fly free of the close coddling she'd had as an ill child." The passage in "Heart Earth" (Atheneum, \$19) is Doig at his best: fresh, vivid language energizing his keen insight into a woman whose warmth he felt only briefly — a crisp summary of the book, in fact.

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Seattle author Ivan Doig offers a tender portrait of his sheep-herding parents, Berneta and Charlie Doig, in "Heart Earth."

The 54-year-old Seattle writer finally came to know the frail but tenacious woman, who died on his sixth birthday in 1945, through the unexpected windfall of a long-withheld packet of letters. Tracing "the swift skritch of her letters racing down onto paper," he burrows into the mind and heart of Berneta Doig, and in doing so he completes the trio of family portraits he began 15 years ago with his hauntingly resonant first book, "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind."

In effect, "Heart Earth" is a companion volume, a slim and loving coda which captures the person whose death opened "This House of Sky" and whose absence animated the two other people in Ivan's life: his father, Charlie, and his grandmother, the redoubtable Bessie Ringer, Berneta's mother.

If Doig has a fault as a writer, it's that he sometimes strains — increasingly, it seems — toward a too-inventive Western vernacular. Canyons can be "ornery" and

rangelands "elbowy," I suppose, but when he wonders how "a gastric squall could put my whangleather father on the couch, sick as a poisoned pup," or recalls himself "speed out toward the saddle side of things," I find myself wishing he would trust more the common beauty of language as it occurs. This supercharged vernacular can skitter perilously close to being precious — yet nevertheless is seductive.

Doig opens "Heart Earth" with the 1986 funeral of his mother's youngest brother, Wally. Only 15 years older than Ivan himself, Wally was a livewire with a "whopping grin on him" who easily became a favorite uncle. But in the 1970s they had a falling out, a sad rift that never quite healed, over funeral expenses for Bessie. Later, when Doig began to write "This House of Sky," he canvassed family and friends for memories, letters, any scrap of information he could attach to the mother he lost at such an early age. Wally offered nothing.

(cont. next page)

When he died, however, he left the letters for Doig, "making me heir to the lost side of my past." Written during the last year of her life, the letters were brief family chronicles to the young, fresh-faced Wally, who was then a seaman aboard the USS Ault, a destroyer dodging kamikaze attacks in the South Pacific.

Doig uses his mother's terse commentaries as a springboard into the life of a woman born Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer in 1913 in Wisconsin. She was brought to Montana as an infant, when the ill-matched Bessie and Tom Ringer — their marriage "a bone-and-gristle affair" — decided to try new lives in Montana's Smith River Valley.

Berneta was 5 before the first of three brothers was born; she already was "willowing toward womanhood while they still mawked around flinging rocks at magpies." Yet the "shaping sepa-

rateness" of chronic asthma set Berneta apart, consigning her to sudden, wrenching spasms of breathlessness — and bone-jarring drives down primitive mountain roads to the nearest hospital.

The asthma didn't dissuade Charlie Doig, a wiry little whip of a cowboy who courted Berneta for six years before their marriage in 1934. He was 33, a ranch veteran at the top of his trade; she was 20, an eager young woman who refused to let her health slow her down. One of the winning qualities of "Heart Earth" is Doig's tender portrait of the relationship between his parents — theirs seems a rare union, all the more gentle and giving for flourishing amid Montana's rough muscularity.

Yet this dogged, self-sufficient pair could not finally outpace the illness coiled in her chest. Berneta Doig was just 31 when she died in the remote sheepherder's shack where she, Charlie and Ivan were summering a rancher's flock. In the thin mountain air, her heart gave out from the long strain of difficult breathing.

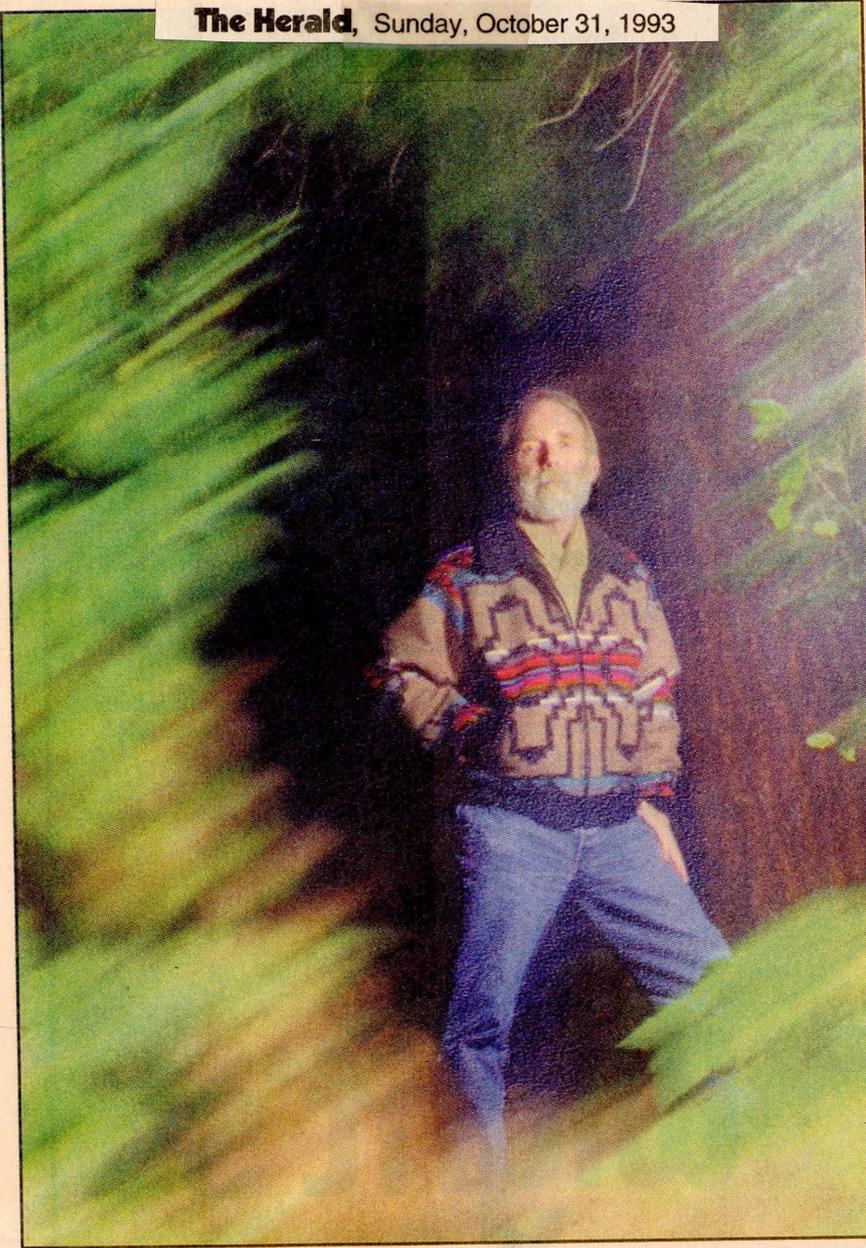
"Nobody got over her," her son realizes. "Doig or Ringer, those around me in my growing-up stayed hit, pierced, by my mother's death in the mountain cabin."

Ivan Doig can join them fully now. By writing "Heart Earth," by finally getting to know the mother he lost nearly half a century ago, he has willingly pierced himself. He'll surely stay hit.

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*Ivan Doig will autograph "Heart Earth" at 3:30 p.m. Wednesday at Magnolia's Bookstore and read from it at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Elliott Bay Book Co. The latter is a benefit for the PEN/American Center (\$3.50).*

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The Herald/**FRANK VARGA**

Author Ivan Doig outside at his north Seattle home.

# Northwest author Ivan Doig: a Flying Wallenda of words

By **DIANE WRIGHT**  
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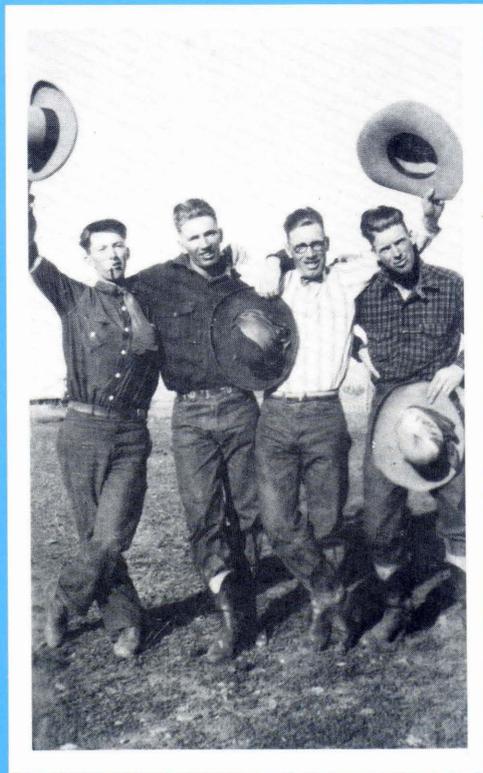
IVAN  
DOIG

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A M E M O I R

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HEART  
EARTH



Cover photo: The Doig boys, circa 1920's: the author's father, Charlie Doig (in striped shirt and bowtie), poses with three of his cowboy brothers at the Doig family ranch in Montana.

# A NEWS FROM THE NEUM

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## HEART EARTH

by Ivan Doig

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## Ivan Doig

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August 1993

# A NEWS FROM T H E N E U M

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## HEART EARTH: A Memoir

by Ivan Doig

Publication Date: September 8, 1993

Price: \$19.00/Pages: 160

ISBN: 0-689-12137-7

Quality Paperback Book Club Alternate Selection

## AWARD WINNING AUTHOR IVAN DOIG OFFERS A COMPANION TO HIS CLASSIC MEMOIR, THIS HOUSE OF SKY, IN HEART EARTH

*"In the last winter of the war, she knew to use pointblank ink. Nothing is ever crossed out, never a p.s., the heartquick lines still as distinct as the day of the postmark, her fountain pen instinctively refusing the fade of time. Among the little I have had of her is that pen....I had given up ever trying to uncurtain my mother. Now her pages begin here: 'I have to spill over'...Upward from her held pen, at last she is back again."*

--Ivan Doig

Since the publication fifteen years ago of his first book, This House of Sky, Ivan Doig has been celebrated as an American original. That memoir was nominated for the National Book Award and received extraordinary critical acclaim. "This eloquent memoir heralds a powerful new American writer....As the land has haunted and shaped him, so his movingly beautiful prose haunts us," said the *The Christian Science Monitor*. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "The language begins in western territory and experience but in the hands of an artist it touches all landscapes and all life. Doig is such an artist."

Now, Ivan Doig returns with **HEART EARTH** (Atheneum; September 8, 1993; \$19.00), a companion volume to This House of Sky that is destined to win a place as an American classic. Set in 1945, the book draws on a cache of letters written by Doig's mother, Berneta Ringer Doig, to her brother stationed in the Pacific. It offers a vivid evocation of an America long since gone--Montana and Arizona during the last months of World War II. "In poetic and precise prose, Doig has crafted a worthy complement to his acclaimed memoir," raves *Publishers Weekly*, and *Kirkus Reviews* hails the book as "another profoundly original and lustrous recreation." It has just been awarded the David W. and Beatrice C. Evans Biography Award for the best biography in the Rocky Mountain West.

--over--

In **HEART EARTH**, Ivan Doig invites readers to join him, his mother, and his father Charlie in the "snappy sky blue 1940 coupe, fat-fendered Ford" as they struggle to make a life together in wartime America. The book begins with a touching and humorous account of how Charlie, "promisingly full of bad intentions," braves the huge open spaces of Montana to court Berneta. Defying "the Depressions's laws of gravity," they get married and five years later Ivan is born. To ease Berneta's asthma, the Doigs move to the vast, dry terrain of Arizona, where Charlie describes his way of life as "sheepkeepers no more, now we be bombermakers." Inhabiting a defense housing project in Arizona, where neighbors "consisted of lizards and scorpions" and "desert cattle that look like they'd eat the eyebrows off you," there was always a fear of an attack from the nearby German prisoners-of-war camp.

Just before summer, they come back to the high country of Montana where, because of the war, "young men and no few women, have been gone for years." They return to sheepherding, together enduring the hardships and isolation of the northwest farm country where even Berneta seems to be feeling better. Eventually, Berneta decides that it is time to settle down, for soon Ivan will start school. "Going to be a handful for the first-grade teacher, he is. Try to start him out on c-a-t and first thing he'll show her he can read catalog and everything in it."

**HEART EARTH** is filled with vivid moments from their early life: eating Spam sandwiches and lime Kool-Aid for lunch, scrubbing the Ford hubcaps while Berneta keeps her dress up with a clothes-pin, taking a long trip into town where Charlie and Ivan buy boots and a hat for Berneta, and searching the drinkeries for their irresponsible herder, Prince Al. The book closes with the death of Berneta Ringer Doig on June 27, 1945, on Ivan's sixth birthday. "Nobody got over her," he writes, "Doig or Ringer, those around me in my growing-up stayed hit, pierced, by my mother's death in the mountain cabin."

#### About The Author

Ivan Doig's This House of Sky was a finalist for the National Book Award in Contemporary Thought in 1978. His other books include Winter Brothers, The Sea Runners, English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana. Born in the Montana mountain country he writes of in **HEART EARTH**, Doig has worked as a ranch hand, newspaperman, magazine editor and writer. In 1989 the Western Literature Association honored him with its Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work. He lives in Seattle with his wife, Carol, who teaches the Literature of the American West.

July 1993

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August 1993

## Books

When is it time to leave  
'the last best place'?

RIDE WITH ME, MARIAH MONTANA

By Ivan Doig  
Atheneum, 384 pp., \$18.95

By Judith Freeman

**W**HEN does a farmer or rancher finally give up on making a living from his land and sell out to some distant corporation or resign himself to foreclosure? When does the small-town grocer, undercut by malls, do the same? And what about the young people in rural America, whose best prospects lie in the big cities? What happens to our collective spirit when we pull up roots and dissolve communities, when families find themselves separated?

"How and when should we leave our own roots?" the main characters in Ivan Doig's new novel ask. In doing so, they voice an issue on the minds of many Americans.

"Ride With Me, Mariah Montana" is the last volume of Doig's Montana trilogy, which covers 100 years of Montana history as viewed through the eyes of the fictional McCaskills, a Scottish immigrant ranching family. The first volume, "English Creek" (1984), took place during the Depression years. "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (1987) opens in the 1880s when the first McCaskills arrived in Montana. Last year, Montana celebrated its centennial, an event that provided the perfect setting for this novel, in which a McCaskill father and daughter set out in a Winnebago to "get the true story" of the state.

Jick McCaskill, a recently widowed rancher, is talked into making this journey by his daughter Mariah, a newspaper photographer assigned to do a series on the centennial. Joining them is Mariah's ex-husband, Riley Wright, a wise-cracking reporter who is to provide the text for Mariah's pictures.

The novel has a lively tone and a quick pace. Doig has a perfect ear for colloquial speech, and he is both eloquent (in passages where he simulates Riley's journalism) and funny (when he sets the trio to verbal sparring). The reconstituted family visits historical monuments, battlefields and preserves where they gaze wistfully at the remaining buffalo — once so thick "the country was one robe." Inevitably their own personal histories unfold. The trip jars memories, of Riley and Mariah's acrimonious divorce, of Jick's own unhappy first marriage and his deeply satisfying second one.

## Not a perfect land

Doig uncovers both the beautiful and the tattered sides of Montana: the dump heaps and earth poisons left by strip mining; the mobile missiles — "blue taxis to Armageddon." But he also celebrates the beauty of the land and the tenacity of spirit found in Montanans "who've been perpetually game to outwork the levels of pay here because they can love a mountain with their eyes while doing it."

The question of how and when to leave one's roots becomes more pressing as the journey progresses. Jick, who has left his sheep ranch in the hands of caretakers, must decide what to do with an operation he can no longer manage alone. Riley and Mariah, who have effected a tumultuous reconciliation, begin planning to move to California once the centennial is over. Will the McCaskills leave the land or find a way to remain rooted in what has become known as "the last best place"?

Montana has come to embody what's left of the "West" as it once was known. But the history of the American West was written as a romance, and the romance has run its course. A more shameful picture has emerged, a story of despoliation and exploitation, corruption and greed. As the United States enters the 21st century, the West looks more and more like a big theme park.

But despite the "sad behavior" of man during the past hundred years, much ends well for the McCaskills. After all, Ivan Doig is the most hopeful of writers — not blindly optimistic but deeply humanistic. "He who owns the soil," he has written, "owns up to the sky."

In Montana, that's a big piece of heaven, something worth hanging on to. ■

## A love of the land

## Ivan Doig is one writer who gets the West right

By Larry Slonaker

**I**VAN Doig's writing issues out of Montana like a squall out of the mountains. He constructs misty sheets of prose that alter one's sight lines — you're looking at the same place, the West, but under the manipulation of his gauzy and refracted light you see it entirely differently.

The view is reflective, too. Exposed to Doig's meticulously researched detail of the land and its inhabitants, and especially of the language they use — "the lilt of Westernisms," it's called in his latest book — his readers, whether inhabitants of the West or the Western world, find themselves reviewing how they fit into his vast setting.

Doig visited the Bay Area recently to plug "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," the third novel of a trilogy concerning the loves and losses of a clan in northern Montana. The title refers to Mariah McCaskill, daughter of narrator Jick McCaskill, and a tour of the state in the centennial of its statehood.

A Winnebago is what drives the narrative — Mariah travels as photographer for a Missoula paper; her ex-husband, Riley, goes as columnist; and Jick goes as driver and concerned curmudgeon. As they travel, their knowledge of themselves and the people they meet widens into thematic terrain, which, coming out of this stretched and diverse land — soaring in



Ivan Doig exhaustively researched his tale of the loves and losses of a northern Montana clan.

pride and beauty, weighted by hardship and impending change — is wide country indeed.

Doig is a master at pointing up human vicissitudes and their sometimes subtle shadings, which he takes painful lengths to portray exactly. From the up-close view of a bison ("To look at up close, the hide on a buffalo is like a matted mud rug that hasn't been shaken for many seasons"), to Mariah's photographic techniques, to the complexion of the tiny towns his characters dive into, Doig tries hard to make it right.

Of his research, which for a section of the trilogy took him to Scotland, he says: "I hope it's exhaustive — it's certainly considerable. It seems to me it lends a power, an authority. . . . Accuracy in the small things, you hope, is going to tincture all through the bigger things, the entire piece of writing. Nothing turns a reader off quicker than to be reading along and find something and say, 'Jesus, I know that's not right.'"

"Also, my imagination, whatever sparks it does create, comes off the flint of actuality."

This is a quality that's endeared the affable, soft-spoken writer both to readers and writers. "He knows that country," says Wallace Stegner. "The difference with someone who knows and someone who doesn't is particularly impor-

tant in books about the West," because the landscape plays such a big role.

"He's honest. He's a real Westerner writing real books about real people — not some hoked-up Hollywood version."

Stegner took note of Doig with the latter's first book, an evocative, deeply felt memoir called "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind." Although the two have met only once, they've corresponded over the years; and Doig dedicated "Mariah" to Stegner.

Doig, and of course the elder McCaskill, carry a deep and searching affinity for the land. Jick treasures his small ranch in the Two Medicine country, and resents the constant pressures he feels to sell out to the voracious outsider conglomerates that eat up places like his for tax write-offs. Certain turns of the screw, such as a plan to use a section of the desolate eastern plains for a gunnery target range, or the peculiarly yuppie advent of fly fishing, drive him nuts.

As the land stirs Doig, so does the sound of the language. The trilogy's second novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," traces through dialogue its characters' progress from speaking as Scots to established Montanans, who have a dialect of their own. "Language, and the music and dance of it, are why I am a writer," Doig says. "This trilogy represents a deliberate gamble that it's worth it to spend most of a decade writing three books in what I hope is a representative voice of the region."

## Beyond Montana

Doig says he feels no compulsion to reinvent form, and "there's not that many plots. So it's in the language that we find the running room."

But he wants the running to carry him beyond Montana. That is where Jick and Doig differ: Jick at 65 remains determined to make a go out in Montana. But Doig, 51, left the state after high school, pushed out by an eagerness to see and learn new things, and pushed over the edge by a vicious July storm, which literally killed off the profits of a long summer's worth of raising sheep.

He went off to study journalism at Northwestern University in Illinois. He returned to Montana to do ranch work in the summers. After he got his master's degree, he returned to operate the binder, a machine that bundles grain. "I'd get occasionally roasted by the other ranch hands. They'd say, 'You got yer master's, you can run the binder. Go get yer Ph.D., you can come back and run the tractor.'"

Doig laughs when he tells it; he also adds, "When I got the Ph.D., I did not go back and run the . . . tractor."

Instead he's ended up in the Seattle area, where he lives with his wife, Carol, a journalism teacher. He wrote a couple of books set in the Pacific Northwest, but he seems drawn continually back to the setting of Montana. He defends his emigration. "I don't particularly consider that I'm writing about Montana. I consider I'm writing about the larger country, life. Great writers have given us the example that you can be grounded in a specific land and lingo, like Faulkner, and yet be writing colossal stuff."

## Deep feeling, clear seeing

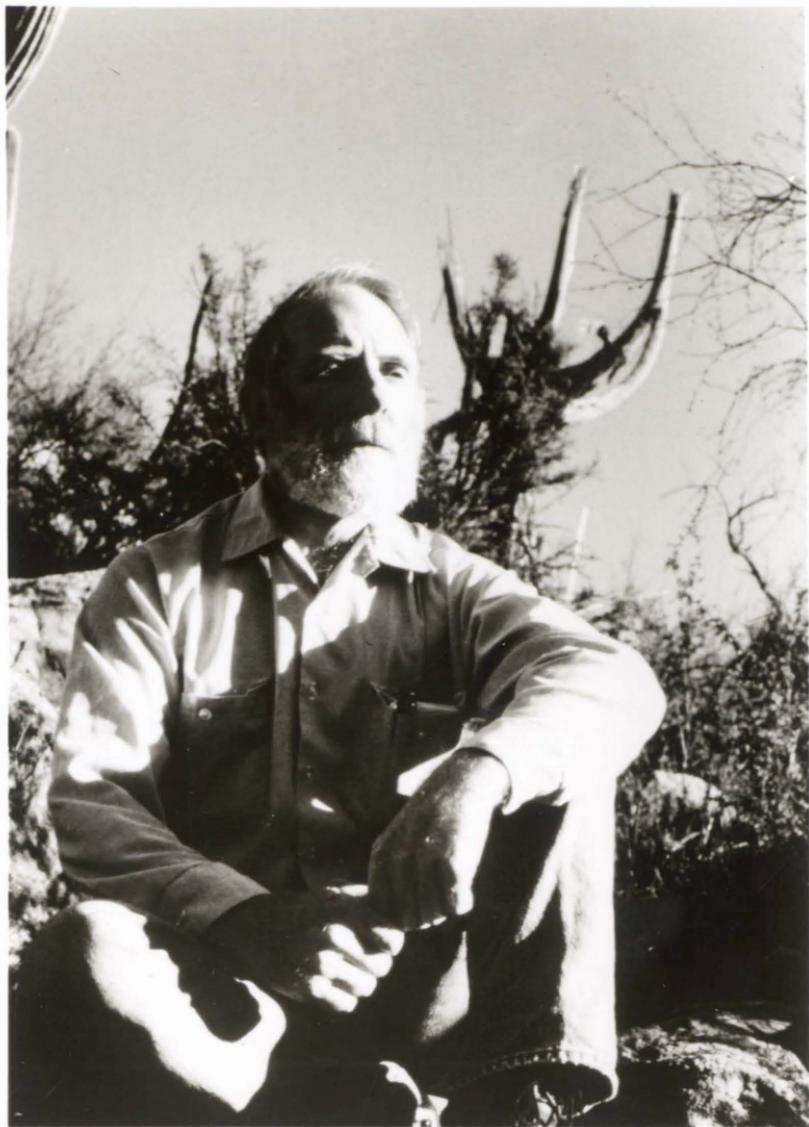
His writing is not nearly so mannered and onerous as Faulkner's, but his fiction hasn't yet approached Faulkner's consistent height. "Mariah," for instance, sometimes gives the palpable feel of a writer trying too hard. Every slice of dialogue, it seems, is culled with an "elucidated" or "intoned" or some sore-thumb modifying clause. The characters never lack color, but they sometimes do lack dimension; one thinks of the widely disparate but emphatically flat targets that pop up in a shooting gallery.

But the few shortcomings shouldn't put off any lover of writing from reading Doig, who consistently achieves the tricky combination of feeling deeply and seeing clearly. And relevant as he is to the diminishing rural West, his stuff touches just as surely urban Californians, living at the very edge or maybe even off the edge of the Western experience. The exuberant love he bears for the land, the people, and their eternal rebirth is an inspiration and a comfort. ■

Slonaker, who grew up in Great Falls, Mont., is a Mercury News columnist and reporter.



"A summer on a mountain that shouted its name in grass": Berneta and Charlie Doig in one of their summers of herding sheep in the mountains of Montana.



Ivan Doig, author of **HEART EARTH**, published by Atheneum. Photo credit: Carol Doig.

# Truth Emerges in Writer's Love of Lingo

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**■ Books:** Ivan Doig, author of a trilogy about a Western family and other books, creates scenes that 'come right up off the page and get you.'

By BRAD KNICKERBOCKER  
 THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Toward the end of "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," the third in Ivan Doig's 100-year trilogy about the McCaskill family, there's a 30-second scene in which a character jumps out of a Winnebago fueling up at a gas station, runs over to the sign for "Air & Water" and grease-pencils the other two ancient Greek elements, "Earth & Fire."

It's a wonderful bit of whimsy, an example of what novelist Doig calls the "crocodile factor" designed to "come right up off the page and get you." And it's just one of the things that makes him one of the most readable and productive authors from that vast expanse of real estate west of the 100th meridian today generating some of the very best American writers.

To read Doig's fiction, to hear him speak wisdom and wit to a gathering of historians in Sparks, Nev., and to discuss his craft over a meal or two is to learn of a man with a passion for language, for the minutiae of life and historical accuracy and especially for "the lingo" of his characters—"the tongues that express their lives."

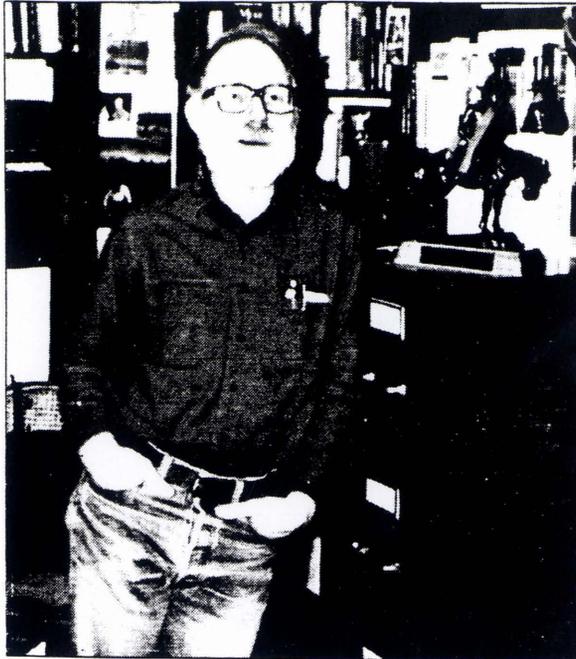
Doig's career as a writer took off a dozen years ago with "This House of Sky," reminiscences about his early life in Montana. Since then he has produced five more highly acclaimed books, including the Two Medicine trilogy (named for the river near where much of it takes place).

On Ivan Doig's sixth birthday, when he was living with his parents in a sheep-herding camp on the front range of the Rocky Mountains, where his grandfather had moved from Scotland, his father woke him to say the boy's mother had died in the night. For the next few years, father and son bounced around Western towns and ranches before settling down with Doig's maternal grandmother as homemaker.

By the time he was 16 and spending most of his summers on a horse tending sheep in the high country, Doig knew that he wanted to be a writer and that he had to get out of Montana—beautiful as it was—to succeed. He won a full scholarship to Northwestern University, worked on a newspaper in Downstate Illinois, then did magazine editing in Chicago, where he also picked up a master's degree before heading back out West.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, he earned a doctorate in history (he says graduate school cured him of any desire to teach), then spent an enjoyable but lean decade as a free-lance magazine writer while his wife, Carol, earned most of the family income teaching at a community college.

Like the fictional character who completed the gas station list of elements in "Mariah Montana," Doig found journalistic writing too limiting. But his training as a



BRAD KNICKERBOCKER / Christian Science Monitor

The sound of the language—"the shimmer behind the plot" feeding the "delicious hunger of the ear"—fascinates author Ivan Doig.

historian and newspaperman left him with the strong need to fill his fiction with accurate details from real life, including the spoken word—the earth of daily human affairs and the fire of speech.

In researching the 1889 trans-Atlantic trip of 19-year-olds Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay for "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (the first book, chronologically, in the trilogy), Ivan and Carol went to Glasgow (to the very pier from which his grandfather, Peter Doig, had departed), pored over emigrant letters at the University of St. Andrews and looked up steamship blueprints and investigative reports on the conditions poor travelers endured in steerage.

Later, he dug back into Depression-era Works Progress Administration writers' files in Montana to learn how Anaconda Copper smelters, cattle ranchers and sheep ranchers talked in the early part of the century. The sound of the spoken word is very important to him—"the shimmer behind the plot" feeding the "delicious hunger of the ear." He was careful to have the two Scotsmen gradually lose their burr over the 30 years of "Rascal Fair."

When he wanted to include scenes about fighting fires, he had four forest rangers check his manuscript for details. He photocopied old Forest Service cookbooks so he would know what it was like to cook for 75 men in the woods.

"I'm always looking for details," he says. "The details are what the skeins of life germinate out of." He loves to repeat Vladimir Nabokov's instruction to students at Cornell University that they must write "with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

In a spare bedroom office he shares with his wife at home in Seattle, Doig works at an old gray Royal typewriter. The remem-

brances of Scots ancestors are in his sandy hair and beard. Just back from 50 book readings and signings in San Francisco, Boston, Washington, Chicago and Minnesota, he relaxes in jeans, a red-striped shirt and Birkenstocks.

Shelved around him are his favorite writers, including Wallace Stegner, Nadine Gordimer, John Steinbeck, Isak Dinesen, Edward Hoagland, Robinson Jeffers, Loren Eiseley, Beryl Markham, Eudora Welty, Frank O'Connor, Joseph Conrad, Barbara Tuchman, Gretel Ehrlich and William Faulkner. Contemporary Western historians Patricia Nelson Limerick and Donald Worster are there. So is "The Songwriter's Rhyming Dictionary" by Sammy Kahn.

"I like people who dance on the page," he says, leaning back in his chair. "Anybody hip-deep in love with the language." One of his characters in "Mariah Montana" says, "Language is the light that comes out of us."

But "with nine-tenths of the ink of this century now expended," he told the Western historians in Nevada, "modern American fiction in terms of originality and staying power still adds up to 'Faulkner and the rest of us.'"

On another shelf, just next to where he writes, are his notebooks: "Comparison and Description," "Ideas," "Lingo," "Anecdotes," "Phrasing" and "Technique." Bits and pieces waiting to be worked into future projects.

His next book, which will focus on his mother (based on letters to an uncle during World War II, interviews with family members and his dim recollections as a small boy), will feature "deliberate dreams."

"It's the only way I can think of to get at what might have gone on beyond what I can hear and see," he explains. When it comes right

down to it, he admits, "a lot of style and technique is best guess." Then, too, "the alchemy of language carries with it the high probability of fizzle."

Of the growing recognition of contemporary literature coming out of the American West, he says: "I think there are enough classy writers west of St. Paul that scholars will eventually have to write about them as a group, as they did about the Southern fugitives."

The thing that connects many of these writers, he acknowledges, is love of the spectacular landscape. "But I don't agree that that's our strongest muscle," he says.

"The language, the style, the craft is of such a skill that I don't see why this kind of travelogue tag is at all justified. I mean, Louise Erdrich is a world-class writer—the equivalent of Robert Penn Warren. Jim Welch in 'Fools Crow' has produced a truly great book. Bill Kittredge has been a unique writer. I mean, this is increasingly fine stuff and, even if it appeared on a barren planet, it would be unique writing."

Yet Doig and many of his contemporaries do connect with the land and worry about what's become of it over the past century or so.

"It is saddening that a lot of what we tried in the West—with reasonably good intentions—has not worked out," he says. "Plowing the prairies was not a good idea. Pulling up the ore and running it poisonously through smelter stacks turns out not to have been a good idea. Damming up every river of any consequence except the Yellowstone hasn't been a good idea, either."

"So the stance many of us write from out here is 'Wait a minute, we'd better try something else.'" In "Mariah Montana," Jick McCaskill arranges to protect his land when he retires from sheep ranching without selling out to developers or a big agribusiness spread.

The result of Ivan Doig's passion for detail and "the lingo" is more than the sum of the parts. Much more, and it comes through most obviously in the clear personality and especially the sound character of the people we meet.

He has been described by one reviewer as "the most hopeful of writers—not blindly optimistic but deeply humanistic." A friend of mine wrote recently: "Over the past year I read most of his books and just fell in love with his characters and their goodness, and of course his descriptions of the West."

Another says she slows down when she gets near the end of a Doig novel because she doesn't want it to end. Not to worry. He's got many productive years ahead of him and plenty of history to mine—with passion and precision.

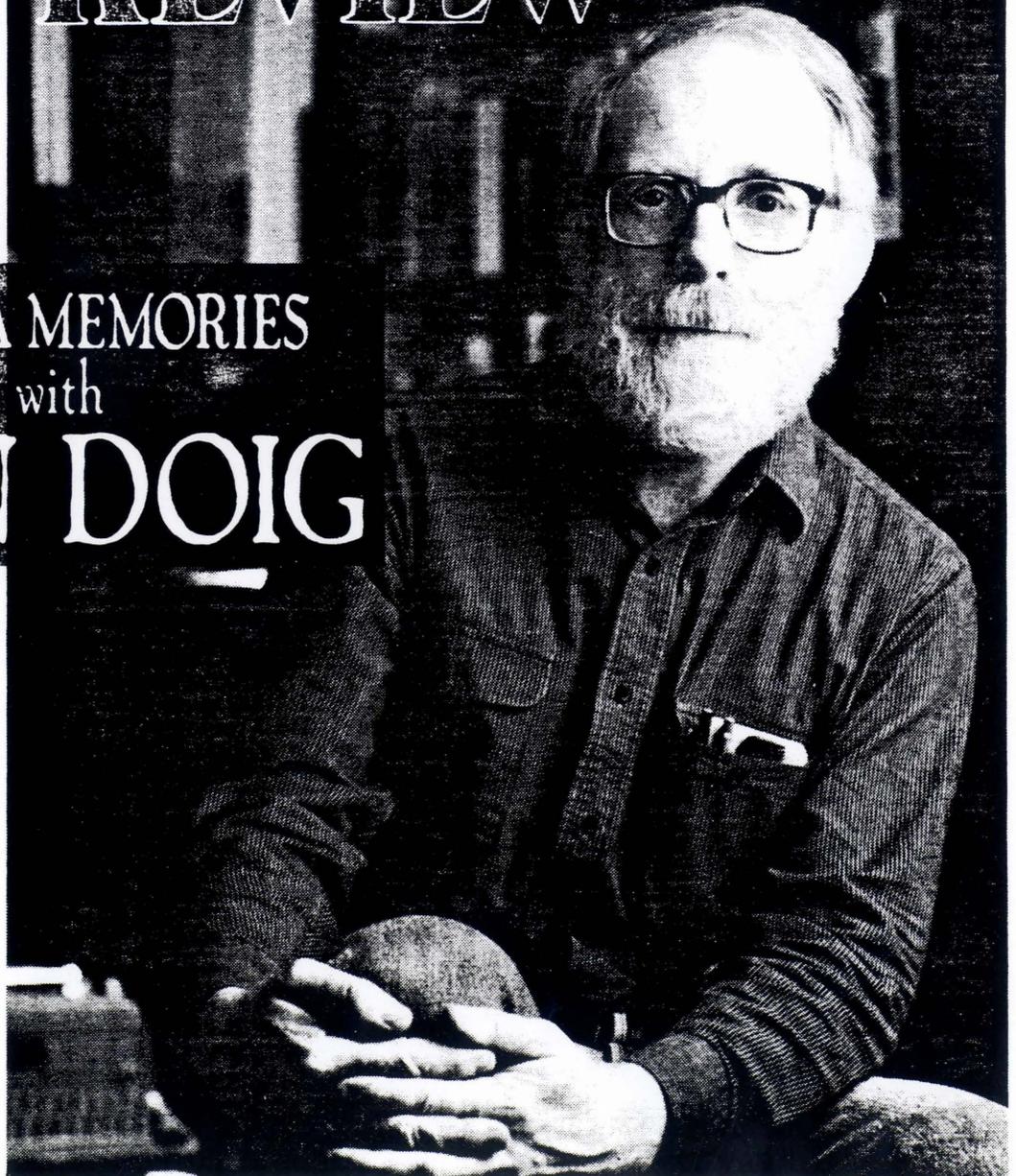
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# The BLOOMSBURY REVIEW

MONTANA MEMORIES  
An Interview with  
**IVAN DOIG**



## THE AMERICAN WEST

When *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* was published last fall, Ivan Doig no doubt breathed a deep sigh of relief. His much acclaimed Montana trilogy was complete. Ten years of research and writing about the McCaskills, a fictional family who had immigrated from Scotland to the Two Medicine Country of Montana late in the nineteenth century, had finally come to an end. His father had been a Montana homesteader, and his father's family had immigrated from Scotland to Montana. Doig labored long and hard to make his novels as realistic and true to the times as possible. He and his wife Carol traveled to Scotland, and spent months interviewing Montana homesteading families and researching homestead records in the national archives to make the novels ring true. Not coincidentally, the completion of the trilogy coincided with Montana's Centennial.

Doig has been writing about Montana for many of the twenty-one years since he left the Big Sky country, first for college, and later to pursue a career in wordsmithing, a livelihood not easily managed in his home country. Doig now lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who teaches western literature at a local college. Montana and the Pacific Northwest are deeply ingrained in his work, though his novels concern much more than geography.

After graduating from Northwestern University with a B.S. and M.S. in Journalism, and later a Ph.D. in History from the University of Washington, he set his sights on newspaper and magazine work, which he did for ten years, writing freelance pieces for a variety of publications and working for the Rotarian magazine.

Doig's trilogy may be his best known works: *English Creek* (Atheneum, 1984), *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Atheneum, 1987), and *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* (Atheneum, 1990) have all been well received by critics and readers. But his other works have also garnered some acclaim. His first book, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of the Western Mind* (Peter Smith, 1978) was nominated for a National Book Award and received a Christopher Award; *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) received a Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award and a Governor's Award; his first novel, *The Sea Runners* (Penguin, 1983), was hailed by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the notable books of that year.

The late *Los Angeles Times* critic Robert Kirsh, wrote of *This House of Sky*: "The language begins in western territory and experience but in the hands of an artist it touches all landscape and all life. Doig is such an artist."

Doig stopped by the TBR office last September, when this interview took place.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Let's start at the beginning and talk about growing up in Montana and what made you decide to write books? You majored in electronic journalism in college, didn't you?*

**Ivan Doig:** I was a radio and TV major—never used it. And seeing the way television has gone, how thankful I am that I got lured off into newspaper and magazine work, and now books.

Let's see, growing up in Montana. My people were ranch hands, my dad was sometimes cowboy, sometimes sheepherder. My mother often worked with him as a ranch cook. And my grandmother, who ended up sharing in the raising of me after my mother died, she too was a ranch cook. And we sometimes did the western equivalent of sharecropping. My folks would run sheep "on shares," as we called it, which means we'd run them year-round, do the lambing, do the herding, whatever, for a certain share of whatever profit there was. Surprising the number of times it turned out there wasn't any. It's a pretty tough life.

My dad always preached education to me—of finding a way of life so that I wouldn't have to go through some of the things he had to, and trying to muscle out a life of ranches, always working for somebody else, usually somebody big who lived in Seattle or Minneapolis or somewhere.

But I can't remember when I couldn't read. My reading goes back farther than my memory. I was reading before I ever went to grade school. And so my interest in words, combined with my dad's propulsion and my own propulsion out of that ranch, sent me off into making a living with words, one way or another.

**TBR:** *History is a big part of your writing. Is it a life-long interest?*

**ID:** I suppose it is. I wasn't all that aware of it until I got to college. I went to journalism school at Northwestern and one of the thrusts of that journalism school was a lot of liberal arts. They really like to have their students take political science or history. So I ended up with enough history credits to have been a history major, actually. There were some excellent people on the faculty at Northwestern at that time. Ironically, I didn't take his course, but the great panjandrum of the West, Ray Billington, was still teaching his cowboys and Indians course at Northwestern, the guy who wrote the standard text that Party Limerick and others are pulling to the ground now. He was on the campus all the while. I actually sat in on some of his lectures, seeing how things looked in other classrooms.

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*The Bloomsbury Review*.  
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The Writers, Issues, History, Arts, & The Environment



Montana Memories

## Ivan Doig

An Interview by Tom Auer



Probably the original impulse behind the writing, I would think, would be family storytelling. My dad was a good storyteller, and we had somewhat of a self-contained history. He was born on the homestead in 1901, and his parents had come over from Scotland no more than ten years before. And so the entire compartment of American history of the Doigs was readily available, either in his memory or what he had heard from his parents. So there was kind of an immediate feel back through three generations, the full scope of us being in America and in the West.

**TBR:** *Seems natural you would want to write about it.*

**ID:** It seemed like the thing to do. Then I made a U-turn back to history from journalism. I thought I was going to be a journalism professor, but I wanted to try and bring some historical perspective to teaching journalism. As I looked around at the graduate degrees in journalism at that time, they were either business oriented or communications theory oriented. I thought of playing on both of those houses, and I thought neither had anything to interest me at all. So it became kind of an excuse to spend three years getting the Ph.D. in history.

**TBR:** *What made you decide to switch to books? Were you tired of journalism?*

**ID:** I magazine freelanced for almost ten years after I finished the Ph.D. Even during the Ph.D., I kept on writing, one way or another, freelancing little Sunday supplement pieces. And I began writing poetry. The mind finds its own self-defenses against seminars, and so I wrote some poetry. Turned out, I did not take a journalism job, which eventually came open in Indiana. I stayed on, because my wife had her community college professorship by that point. We decided to stay on in the Northwest. And I said, "OK, I'll keep on with magazine work, and start tinkering with books at the same time," in whatever spare time I could find.

I really was infatuated or in love with magazine work. I'd wanted to do that ever since a freshman in college. I suppose, and I sold my first piece when I was a sophomore. At the time, I liked the format very much, 1,500-2,000 words, and doing something new every week or two. And so I did that for nearly ten years, a couple of hundred magazine pieces, from regional magazines in the Seattle area to short pieces for *McCall's* and a number of travel pieces for *The New York Times*, but it got more and more financially preposterous. Inflation set in. Even writing for *The New York Times*, a place where I got marvelous editing. I don't know how they managed to do it, but by telephone, they could look down their nose at you, and say, "It's a nice piece, it just needs a few fixes." And their few fixes would be three days' to a week's work of work, and by god, they would improve the piece by 30 to 50 percent. They really knew what they were doing. But, they were paying a flat fee of 250 bucks with no travel expenses, either. That's not very much money, but all the prestige you can imagine, I guess. What would have been my best market, so to speak, was an utter financial dead end.

And I had been gathering the material for *This House of Sky*, and working on it, trying things out for it, and decided in late 1976 to take a chunk of time to do a manuscript sample

of respectable length, maybe a third or a fourth of what I hoped the book would be, and really try it as a book writer.

A friend of mine in Seattle who'd been acting as my literary agent for the magazine stuff had never done any book stuff, but she undertook *This House of Sky* sample. And so in the summer of '77, Carol and I went to Montana and did the final research, went to all the places I had lived, and talked with a bunch of people and came home and wrote, finished up about the first 125 pages of manuscript in that sample. And in late '77, the agent sent them out half-a-dozen at a time to New York. We picked names out of *Literary Marketplace*, to senior editors, so it sounded like we knew what we were doing, and back began coming those remorseful, prestigious turn-downs. I've saved those letters: "This is really quite beautiful but we don't see any commercial prospect for it."

But the thirteenth editor was Carol Hale at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and she wrote back, "I like this, I have to get clearance one echelon above me, but I'll let you know within a week." And within a week, she sent us a contract for *This House of Sky*. So it only took about three months of actually sending out manuscript samples.

**TBR:** *The book was quite a remarkable success, wasn't it?*

**ID:** It was nominated for a National Book Award, won a Christopher Award and various regional awards, yeah. And its total sale is 110,000, most of it in paperback. It continues to sell about 10,000 copies a year. It's in, I think, its twelfth printing. It sells quite a lot in college courses now—western lit courses, and northwest lit courses, and some biography and autobiography courses. So *This House of Sky* really wrote my ticket for me, and it became evident even to me, even to a stubborn Scotsman, that magazines no longer were anywhere in the ballpark.

**TBR:** *Having completed the trilogy, how does that feel? Is it relief or is there another book in there somewhere you wish you'd written?*

**ID:** I don't feel any gap. I'm glad to have that amount of work behind me, a ten-year mountain of research is what it amounted to. A lot of it was fairly difficult research. I knew *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* was going to be tough, simply because the homestead period in Montana was so broad and sudden that historians really haven't managed to swim their way through the real sense of the homestead boom in Montana, which was by and large a twentieth-century phenomenon, from World War I on. Most of the real sense of that exists in the homestead papers back in the National Archives, literally hundreds of thousands of homestead entries, or in the homesteaders' reminiscences.

**TBR:** *How did you go about that research?*

**ID:** Once you have the description of the land, and the name involved, all of a sudden here it comes. My own grandfather's homestead claim is about sixty-five pages of stuff going across ten or twelve years of official wishy-washiness. A lot of other people's are somewhat similar. I started interviewing people in '83-84 for *Rascal Fair*, people who'd been kids on the homesteads around World War I or even a little before. Those people are still alive, fairly old people. And I found a surprising number of them to talk to and gathered material from them, and from a good oral history project by the Montana Historical Society, and quite a number of letter collections or people writing reminiscences for their children, particularly people who had emigrated to this country, Danes for instance. I have a Danish character, Dick, who has a Danish grandfather. And so I was able to draw on some of that for the trilogy.

**TBR:** *Idiomatic language is a very important element in your books.*

**ID:** Actually, I see it as the element. The history and the characterization and so forth, those are all fine and obviously important to me, but I think the language is the constant orbit or magnetic force that has me doing all this. That's what really interests me constantly in the writing. History and characters, sure they're interesting, but what I enjoy more are the interesting turns of language as you deal with the history and characters.

**TBR:** *What made you decide to leave Montana? Many of your books are based there. You obviously love the land. But you haven't lived there for twenty-one years.*

**ID:** By the time I left, when I got on the train to go to college, I didn't know it was going to be for good, but in a sense, it was. I was back the next five summers working ranch jobs and so forth, but once I lit into that school of journalism in Evanston, pretty promptly, inoculated with ambition and sense of craft and wanting to get out and work with words, Montana faded pretty promptly for me then. The jobs weren't there, jobs still aren't there unless you're really willing to be professionally underemployed, if you're going to work in journalism. Some people who are doing it are pretty happy, some who are doing it are only semi-happy, I've discovered in talking with them.

In essence, I went to college as an economic refugee from Montana. I had an aging and ill father and grandmother, and I was an only kid. It didn't take too many smarts to see that somebody had better get an income in this family.

A point that's often missed, and I'm going to have to kick some historians in the shins or something, is that agricultural people didn't used to be covered by social security. It wasn't until, I think, the sixties that ranch workers and farmhands were brought under social security. They

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Garland's and Sandoz' and Stegner's cases. I'm one generation away from the homestead—my dad was born on one—so in terms of kinship, I go back to that. *Old Jules* (University of Nebraska) of Sandoz, I think, is a marvelous book, one that I read and reread. Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (University of Nebraska, 1980) is probably my favorite book of his. And *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917, University of Nebraska, 1979), I think, is a very fine, neglected book by Garland.

I have a poet friend in Seattle, Madeline DeFrees, who taught with Richard Hugo at Missoula. Madeline writes poems about "imaginary ancestors" [see review, page 7]. So if I would choose imaginary ancestors, it would be that trio, I think, purely from a professional point of view, rather than from a literary theory point of view.

But the writers I think I read and look at are more writers out in, say, the old British empire. I've been reading Nadine Gordimer, for instance, and Thomas Kineally, and some of the other Australians, just to see how wild imaginations sometimes can get with the Australians. And the incredible sense of moral character that comes up off Nadine Gordimer's pages, of course. I've been reading Ismael Kadare, an Albanian writer whose work is starting to be published here. I was just knocked out by *Chronicle in Stone* (New Amsterdam, 1987), his first book. And I'm halfway through *Broken April* (New Amsterdam, 1990) right now. It's really good stuff. Language is what I'm after. Language, I think, is really the territory I read more and about. I go back and read Conrad and Faulkner.

**TBR:** *What about landscape and the elements of nature, which are also a big part of your writing? Any influences there?*

**ID:** Scholars and theorists may see more in it than I do, but I see landscape as a motherlode of metaphor for a writer. I found that in my two books set out on the Pacific Coast, that the ocean and the coast served somewhat the same way as the Rocky Mountain front in the trilogy and *This House of Sky*. There are these monumental facts of nature, weather pouring in over and around them and so forth, and it just seems to me marvelous chances to work with metaphor in describing the landscape.

I tend to preach a little bit against the notion of western writers as mainly presenting a sense of place. I think, by god, we're presenting some pretty good characters. It's true that landscape is in the work of a lot of very prominent western writers, but you get characters like Paul Maclean in Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (University of Chicago, 1976), characters such as Jim Welch's nameless narrator in *Winter in the Blood* (Penguin, 1986), and the characters in *Fool's Crow* (Viking, 1986). Louise Erdrich has communities full of some of the liveliest characters in American literature. It just seems to me that we're not writing travelogues out here, and the sense of place kind of obscures that a little bit.

**TBR:** *What are you working on next? What do we have to look forward to?*

**ID:** Well, an unexpected book back towards family territory. A book that is going to fit in ahead of the time frame of *This House of Sky*, looking at my mother's life. She died when I was six; she was thirty-two. I inquired around to what was left of the family at the time I was working on *This House of Sky*, did anyone have any letters or whatever? Nobody came up with anything. But four years ago, one of my uncles died, and I got a batch of letters from the last six months of her life, and the last six months of World War II, as well.

So here's my uncle Wally out on a destroyer in the South Pacific, and he gets these letters from my mother. There's a geographic shift down the spine of the Rockies. The letters start in Arizona, where my folks had gone in the winter of '44-45, for the sake of her asthma, and for my dad to take a job in a defense plant, an aircraft factory down there. These letters seem to me to show a family not really knowing what it's going to do, but making the decision somewhere in there against the sunbelt life. Back we go to Montana, back we go to her death as well.

What she's talking about in these letters brings up in me some half-memories, family stories and so forth that I think can make a short, intense, maybe edgy kind of book about a woman growing up in the West in the twenties and thirties, who happens to have been my mother.

**TBR:** *It must have been quite an experience to come across those letters.*

**ID:** Yes, it was pretty potent. Along with them are letters of my dad and my grandmother, after her death, as they began fighting over me. So the great sorrow of seeing what these people were going through at that time, that was pretty potent, yeah. But that's the kind of propellant that a writer wants. □

## Ivan Doig (Continued from page 9)

were deliberately excluded in the original social security act. So in essence, a lot of people, such as my family, had no pension in sight. You either had what you could save or what we used to call the poor farm, or you'd hope to have a kid with enough brains to go out and get some sort of living. That was still a factor in our lives when I went off to college in '57, that as far as we knew, no one was going to have any social security income. And that's really been overlooked, but it affected a lot of people, certainly of my parent's generation, and it affected a lot of people in my generation. One of the reasons we have these scars on our fingers is from scrambling to find jobs outside of Montana.

So I wasn't aware of all that much choice. Once I could see that I was going to make it somehow in journalism, I stayed with the jobs in newspapering and magazine work for a while. By the time we got to Seattle, my wife's job was in the picture. She's a community college professor. She's been at the same place now for more than twenty years.

**TBR:** *You dedicated your new book to Wallace Stegner. Is he a friend or an influence or both?*

**ID:** He's more influence than friend. We've only met face to face once. We correspond a bit. We have an odd loop of commonality. My primary professor in history, Vernon Carstensen, was Stegner's roommate back at Iowa State. I guess it was, in graduate school back there, and so *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* was dedicated to Carstensen. But it was primarily a matter of Stegner as being, by god, "statesman of us all" out here. He's written in so many fields, written across such a spectrum of the West, fiction and nonfiction, and has said so many of the things that we wish we could say, that somebody needed to say. And, by god, he has said them wonderfully. And I thought it kind of behooved me—as one of the rare western writers who was not a Stegner student—to stick in a dedication. It's been the most popular part of the book. A lot of people have commented on it. It's a bestselling dedication.

**TBR:** *Who are some of the writers of the American West whom you have strong feelings about?*

**ID:** Let me name a few and then say that I don't concentrate all that much on reading writers of the American West. I see myself in a kind of lineage, not literarily, but just personally, I guess, with Stegner, Mari Sandoz, and all the way back to Hamlin Garland—all of us having grown up in outback places, gotten out and become people who made a living at writing. As you know, it was homesteads in