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MSU Friends of the Library, Oct. 14, 2010

I'm glad to be back here. MSU is a particular favorite among my alma maters--it gave me a degree without ~~my~~ ever ^{MAKING ME} ~~having to~~ take a test.

There won't be any tests tonight either as I explore with you ~~tonight~~ what might dryly be described as research and more imaginatively as listening for voices in the quiet of the past.

The magical site where this happens is of course a library--such as the MSU library, which you will hear a good deal more about as I go along--and in the course of this talk I hope to show you how so much of the makings of my books have come from beloved libraries.

If you are a fiction writer--as I seem to have turned into, with ten novels now--you have to ask yourself one big question all the time: what if?

-- What if there were a shepherd saying to a teenage boy, "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid--We've got all these dead sheep to skin." That became **English Creek**.

-- What if there were a valley of homesteaders' cabins vest-pocketed in the Rockies, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of those glorious mountains, where life turned out much the way my father described the homestead life where he grew up, in the Tierney

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Basin of the Sixteen country: "Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out." That became **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**.

-- What if there were a beautiful red-haired woman with a camera and an attitude, and a pesty ex-husband working for the same newspaper she does. That became **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**.

It starts to sound like the list for a literary scavenger hunt, doesn't it. It is. These kinds of notions--some with a bit of actuality behind them and some purely imagination-induced--are the first footsteps in the mind toward my novels, and in this case toward what would become my Montana trilogy, the three novels covering the first hundred years of Montana's statehood and the four generations of the fictional McCaskill

family. Then the clock takes over--for each book, the two or three years' worth of crafting those pieces of idea into fullness of stories, dimensions of characters, and galaxies of language.

Each time, I have to create a world, ^{FROM} the search and research that goes into a book's setting. The makings that I've never known what to call except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars which creatively gets added up into story and gives it a kind of majestic fidelity. Or as it's sometimes called, crystalizing detail, which leaves in the reader's mind a crystal of beguiling but valid scene--a memory waiting to happen, there in the pages of a book

In my own case, the crystalizing details I seek are often in some obscure record of the past--where Google doesn't go, or at least hadn't

gone yet when I was doing my research. We all know the world is going on-line, pell-mell, but I don't see that as a total substitute for libraries, which serve their own communities, scholarly and civic, and as you'll see, gather otherwise lost voices of the past in a humanly-inspired way rather than the gargantuan vacuum cleaner of on-line sites. At least

that's my view of it--let me propound to you Doig's Law, which has not been tested quite as many times as Murphy's, but pretty close. Doig's Law, briefly put, is this: the more obscure the book or archival scrap of record, and the longer it has been taking up shelf space, and the less it has been used--the more valuable it is to a writer named Doig. Financial

bean counters are never going to be fond of Doig's Law, because the kind of materials I'm speaking of usually require specialized caretaking

just short of black magic, and that means librarians and archivists, living human beings, actual brains on the premises. Let me take you on a brief tour, in the makings of the trio of novels that became known as the Montana trilogy, to illustrate the essential role of actual libraries and actual librarians in creating the world of each of those books.

English Creek was written first, even though it's the chronological middle of the trilogy--writers don't always believe the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The book is set in 1939--which happens to be the year I was born, so memory wasn't going to be any help to me in creating the world of that time, was it. I knew, though, from earlier research for **This House of Sky** and other pieces of writing that a lot of everyday life of that time--those crystalizing details--had been

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captured during the Depression by the Federal Writers Project under the Works Progress Administration. Nationally, six thousand out-of-work writers--newspaper reporters, playwrights, poets, novelists--were employed during some years of the 1930s in chronicling American life by interviewing ordinary people. Some of the best talent this country has ever produced was put on that job--Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Vardis Fisher, John Cheever, many others; in this state, the star performer probably was William Allen Burke, the main brains and probably typing fingers too of the famous volume of Butte stories, **Copper Camp**. All in all, the Federal Writers Project was an almost miraculous gathering of American folklore as well as producing the famous state guidebooks and other publications, and as

part of that New Deal project, local people also were put to work gathering local lore, often from their neighbors, sometimes even from themselves. Here in Montana, that gathering was done in every county, the material accumulated, and files of it ended up in Helena at the state Historical Society. And so I show up there, to transport myself back into that small-town world of the 1930s, and as I worked my way through the material, I remarked to the Historical Society librarians I'd expected there to be a lot more of it. Well, there is, they said, a whole batch of it ended up in Bozeman.

It did? Onward to Bozeman. I came to the Special Collections at the MSU library--Ilah Shriver and Minnie Paugh practically rolled out a red carpet of welcome for me--and here was the good stuff, for my

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Mike Malone, his anointed successor in the history department who had that same brimming energy, that Mike was built on springs--and I thought to myself, "Merrill, it takes one to know one."

So, when I was here in Special Collections making such great use of the WPA Writers Project files, out of curiosity I asked Ilah and Minnie, How come all this ended up here rather than with the stuff in Helena? They proudly answered, "Dr. Burlingame rescued it from the dump."

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Deliberate / The novel after **English Creek** in this trio of bookmakings I'm sketchily taking you through stretched beyond Montana to the territory a lot of Montanans in the early days started out in, the old country. In this case, Scotland, where my characters Angus McCaskill and Robert Burns

Barclay emigrate from in 1889 to take up homesteads ~~in Montana~~.

Carol and I went to Scotland to find out where these characters of my imagination would have come from, and what their journey would have been like.

So, let me now take you "dancing at the rascal fair"--a wallflower researcher's idea of a good time--and now it is high summer, July, and this is Scotland. St. Andrews. The oldest university in Scotland, one of the most venerable in all of Great Britain.

Be that as it may, the St. Andrews library turns out to be a modern one only a few years old, and so imagine my surprise when I try to learn the catalogue system. Its basic fact is that all books before 1906, whatever their topic, are in the basement. I venture down, and immediately learn that the basement is a good ten degrees cooler than the floors above; so ^{midsummer or not,} whenever I want a book that was published before 1906, it's a signal I had better put my coat on.

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Eventually, perseverance and a saintly librarian did help me track down the books I was after, and next, in this Scottish dance of research, down to the St. Andrews archives, in another part of the basement--I put my coat on--in search of letters of working class emigrants who left that region of Scotland in the late 1880s, as Angus and Rob have to do in my novel. The archivist produces some letter collections for me, leads me into the reading room, and as I begin to sit down at a capacious table nicely lit by a window, he says: "Eh--there's the matter of the airrr."

The airrr, in his thick Fifeshire burr. Does he mean "error," is this some Scotch Calvinist probing of my scholarly soul? Can he somehow mean the Scottish town Ayr, A-Y-R, that Robert Burns wrote of--"Old Ayr, whom never a town surpasses, /for honest men and bonnie lasses"? That's cryptic, even from an archivist.

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“During the storm our ship swung like a cork. The screaming of the bosun’s whistle, the yells of women and children when she swung over on her side, and tins, trunks, barrels, everything movable flew from side to side...We poor human things held on to the bedside like grim death.”

David McNeil, that voice, writing to his family in Scotland about his voyage to America as a steerage passenger in 1889. Another letter, McNeil so wonderfully described the impromptu shipboard bazaar when the ship pulled in to the Irish harbor of Cork and a fleet of Irishwomen in small boats clambered aboard with foodstuffs and other wares to sell, I was moved to put the title scene of my book there. It is there, thanks to

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“Dancing at the rascal fair,
Devils and angels all were there,
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// Book number three, in this chronicle of an increasingly involved love affair with libraries, is that one with the beautiful red-haired woman with a camera and an attitude, **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**. I'll just say two things about it. Newspaper photographer Mariah McCaskill is the one character I've ever created who has a following of plainly

eligible young men who for all these years now have edged up to me at booksignings and bashfully asked, "Uhm, do you have a daughter named Mariah?" Only literarily, I have to tell them. The other thing is that there's a scene where Mariah's father, Jick McCaskill, finds in the Historical Society library in Helena a transforming batch of his homesteader grandfather Isaac Reese's letters translated from Danish, courtesy of a Centennial Ethnicity Study Project I made up, funded of course by the Montana Committee for the Humanities--a fiction writer is supposed to make things up, after all-- and that ultimately brought me an accolade from the magnificent Margaret Kingsland, the longtime Humanities director, "Ivan! It's the only novel with the Montana Committee for the Humanities in it!"

So that is the tour of libraries and one writer's imagination in the course of that triplet set of novels, and if you see a trend there, it may not surprise you that I've reached the point in my latest book, **Work Song**, where a library pretty much becomes one of the characters.

In this instance, it's the original Butte Public Library, for reasons which I hope will become clear as I wrap this up. In **Work Song**, Morrie Morgan, the teacher in the one-room school of **The Whistling Season** of a few years ago, alights into Butte because, as we all know, that mining city boasted of itself as The Richest Hill on Earth, back in the days when its copper fed the world's hunger for electricity. It's 1919, ten years after you first met Morrie in **The Whistling Season**, and he is, shall we say, between careers, and searching for the kind of employment that will

make him perhaps whistle a work song. In going through many, many historical photos, my imagination was caught by a picture of the original Butte ~~Public~~ Library. Butte had turned down a Carnegie library, determined to build something that would show the effete East we have culture out here, and so by the early 1890s the money was raised and a wonderful architectural show-off library was built --a Gothic extravaganza with a peaked tower like a castle and arched doorways and a balcony. It's just the kind of place that suits Morrie, and to give away a smidgin of the plot, he lands a job there. And falls in love with the Butte Public Library and its wondrous book collection. When Morrie reaches a turning point in his life in Butte and must find his way out of

the predicament his author has put him in, he returns to the library after it has closed for the night.

“I switched on the mezzanine lights. The Reading Room below was as dark and hushed as the audience portion of a theater. Up on stage, so to speak, the books waited in titled ranks, and in their reassuring company I moved idly along the laden shelves, running the tips of my fingers over the exquisite spines, taking down an old loved volume every so often and opening it to the stored glory of words. Around me was the wealth of minds down through all of recorded time....

“In such company, you wonder about your own tale in the long book of life. What would they have made of me, these grandmasters of storytelling?... No matter how I looked at it, my story lacked conclusion.

"Suddenly I knew what to do. Can inspiration come off on the fingers? I rubbed my hands together appreciatively, there among the literary classics. It was as if the risk-taking lifetimes of composition, the reckless romances with language, the tricky business of plots stealing onto pages, all the wiles of the glorious books answered to my touch.

Dramatic There was no mistaking their message: sometimes/you must set sail/on the winds of chance."

I think that says it for all of us, writers and readers alike, who are voyagers traveling on the timeless winds of literary adventure, into the quiet library latitudes/where the voices await.

Thank you for listening.

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So that is the tour of libraries and one writer’s imagination in the course of that triplet set of novels, and if you see a trend there, it may not surprise you that I’ve reached the point in my latest book, **Work Song**, where a library pretty much becomes one of the characters.

In this instance, it’s the original Butte Public Library, for reasons which I hope will become clear as I wrap this up. In **Work Song**, Morrie Morgan, the teacher in the one-room school of **The Whistling Season** of a few years ago, alights into Butte because, as we all know, that mining city boasted of itself as The Richest Hill on Earth, back in the days when its copper fed the world’s hunger for electricity. It’s 1919, ten years after you first met Morrie in **The Whistling Season**, and he is, shall we say, between careers, and searching for the kind of employment that will make him perhaps whistle a work song. In going through many, many historical photos, my imagination was caught by a picture of the original Butte Public Library. Butte had turned down a Carnegie library, determined to build something that would show the effete East we have culture out here, and so by the early 1890s the money was raised and a wonderful architectural show-off library was built --a Gothic extravaganza with a peaked tower like a castle and arched doorways and a balcony. It’s just the kind of place that suits Morrie, and to give away a smidgin of the plot, he lands a job there. And falls in love with

the Butte Public Library and its wondrous book collection. When Morrie reaches a turning point in his life in Butte and must find his way out of the predicament his author has put him in, he returns to the library after it has closed for the night.

"I switched on the mezzanine lights. The Reading Room below was as dark and hushed as the audience portion of a theater. Up on stage, so to speak, the books waited in titled ranks, and in their reassuring company I moved idly along the laden shelves, running the tips of my fingers over the exquisite spines, taking down an old loved volume every so often and opening it to the stored glory of words. Around me was the wealth of minds down through all of recorded time....

"In such company, you wonder about your own tale in the long book of life. What would they have made of me, these grandmasters of storytelling?... No matter how I looked at it, my story lacked conclusion.

"Suddenly I knew what to do. Can inspiration come off on the fingers? I rubbed my hands together appreciatively, there among the literary classics. It was as if the risk-taking lifetimes of composition, the reckless romances with language, the tricky business of plots stealing onto pages, all the wiles of the glorious books answered to my touch. There was no mistaking their message: sometimes you must set sail on the winds of chance."

I think that says it for all of us, writers and readers alike, who are voyagers traveling on the timeless winds of literary adventure, into the quiet library latitudes where the voices await.

Thank you for listening.

MSU Friends of the Library, Oct. 14, 2010¹

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When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job--as my folks said, back east in Illinois--I dreamed ahead to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's and the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that going up that gangplank would have me voyaging back to Montana, with my thirteen books in my seabag, for an event like this.

Coming back to Bozeman and the Gallatin Valley and the Bridgers is always an occasion that warms me from the ring of history that is being forged. From the time when my grandparents came from Scotland to homestead in the Sixteen country north of here, the Gallatin has been close to the lives of the Doig family. We have our sweat in Gallatin soil--my father as a young ranch hand used to come down here to work during harvest, at the outskirts of town here where motels are now the crop. The opening pages of my first book, *This House of Sky*, are set in a sheepcamp cabin up here in the Bridgers, and my subsequent book about my mother's last short season of life there among the high spilling slopes of these mountains, *Heart Earth*, is even more a remembrance of this area. The book business and the business of making books have brought my wife Carol and me to Bozeman many times, most memorably while Mount St. Helens was blowing its top in 1980 and we came awake at four the next morning to the squall-like sound of the ash hitting the windows of the house we were staying in, out in the middle of the valley toward Manhattan. And to this day, I am forever reaching to my shelf of reference books to check something in that peerless historical volume, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, which Mike Malone and Rich Roeder, the Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid of the MSU history department in the 1980s, adroitly co-authored. So, this is territory that has meant a lot to me in quite a number of ways, and the one I'd like to explore with you tonight is what might dryly be described as research and more imaginatively as listening for voices in the quiet of the past.

The magical site where this happens is of course a library--such as the MSU library, which you will hear a good deal more about as I go along--and in the course of this talk I hope to show you how so much of the makings of my books have come from beloved libraries, but first you should know the beginnings of this romance with buildings full of paper and ink.

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

I think what he really didn't like about it, though, was that Deering Library so much resembled a cathedral. And there's where the modernist architect Mr. Wright was wrong. There was nothing inappropriate about that resemblance, that library was a kind of cathedral, in several ways it behaved like a cathedral. You step now into the reading room of that library, you find that the banks of lights hang just above the tables, they hang all the way from the vaulted ceiling, they hang down what seems to be an infinite distance just for your reading convenience. You sit with your book there in the golden pool of reflection, the lens of light brings the printed words up into your eyes. The diarist Bruce Frederick Cummings has written of "the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come into being in somebody's mind." Passing by out there, Frank Lloyd Wright is not listening to the desires of the books. But you are there in the great and quiet reading room, with your heart beating with the knowledge that for the next four years all this is yours, and you do listen to that desire.

The clock of earth now spins a goodly number of years, and that college kid from Dupuyer and Ringling has become the writer at this microphone, here to share with you a few tales of how libraries and librarians have guided my writing hand, and one story of a local hero.

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Let me start, though, as writers are supposed to start, at some kind of a beginning: let's take on the Big One, that eternal audience question: "Where do you get your ideas?" Always a good question, but the answer is always tough. It's not as if writers live in an aquarium--the writer floating dreamily all day long in the fluid of thought and word, and at suppertime the figure of God--in the unlikely disguise of a literary critic--drops in the fish food. No, the writer has to get out and hunt, beyond the glass bowl of everyday.

If you are a fiction writer--as I seem to have turned into, with ten novels now--you have to ask yourself one big question all the time: what if?

-- What if there were a shepherd saying to a teenage boy, "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid--We've got all these dead sheep to skin." That became **English Creek**.

-- What if there were a valley of homesteaders' cabins vest-pocketed in the Rockies, regularly put upon by tough weather barreling down out of those glorious mountains, where life turned out much the way my father described the homestead life where he grew up, in the Tierney Basin of the Sixteen country: "Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out." That became **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**.

-- What if there were a beautiful red-haired woman with a camera and an attitude, and a pesty ex-husband working for the same newspaper she does. That became **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**.

It starts to sound like the list for a literary scavenger hunt, doesn't it. It is. These kinds of notions--some with a bit of actuality behind them and some purely imagination-induced--are the first footsteps in the mind toward my novels, and in this case toward what would become my Montana trilogy, the three novels covering the first hundred years of Montana's statehood and the four generations of the fictional McCaskill family. Then the clock takes over--for each book, the two or three years' worth of crafting those pieces of idea into fullness of stories, dimensions of characters, and galaxies of language.

Each time, I have to create a world. the search and research that goes into a book's setting. The makings that I've never known what to call except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars which creatively gets added up into story and gives it a kind of majestic fidelity. Or as it's sometimes called, crystalizing detail, which leaves in the reader's mind a crystal of beguiling but valid scene--

a memory waiting to happen, there in the pages of a book. Think of that moment in **Madame Bovary** when Flaubert sends notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other end of the village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in decorated slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and so from that one sentence we fully picture that music-struck clerk--bareheaded, in nice slippers, sheet of paper in hand--in that provincial French village of the 1850s and we listen there with him ever after.

In my own case, the crystalizing details I seek are often in some obscure record of the past--where Google doesn't go, or at least hadn't gone yet when I was doing my research. We all know the world is going on-line, pell-mell, but I don't see that as a total substitute for libraries, which serve their own communities, scholarly and civic, and as you'll see, gather otherwise lost voices of the past in a humanly-inspired way rather than the gargantuan vacuum cleaner of on-line sites. At least that's my view of it--let me propound to you Doig's Law, which has not been tested quite as many times as Murphy's, but pretty close. Doig's Law, briefly put, is this: the more obscure the book or archival scrap of record, and the longer it has been taking up shelf space, and the less it has been used--the more valuable it is to a writer named Doig. Financial beancounters are never going to be fond of Doig's Law, because the kind of materials I'm speaking of usually require specialized caretaking just short of black magic, and that means librarians and archivists, living human beings, actual brains on the premises. Let me take you on a brief tour, in the makings of the trio of novels that became known as the Montana trilogy, to illustrate the essential role of actual libraries and actual librarians in creating the world of each of those books.

English Creek was written first, even though it's the chronological middle of the trilogy--writers don't always believe the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The book is set in 1939--which happens to be the year I was born, so memory wasn't going to be any help to me in creating the world of that time, was it. I knew, though, from earlier research for **This House of Sky** and other pieces of writing that a lot of everyday life of that time--those crystalizing details--had been captured during the Depression by the Federal Writers Project under the Works Progress Administration. Nationally, six thousand out-of-work writers--newspaper reporters, playwrights, poets, novelists--were employed during some years of the 1930s in chronicling American life by interviewing ordinary people. Some of the best talent this country has every produced was put on that job--Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison,

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Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Vardis Fisher, John Cheever, many others; in this state, the star performer probably was William Allen Burke, the main brains and probably typing fingers too of the famous volume of Butte stories, **Copper Camp**. All in all, the Federal Writers Project was an almost miraculous gathering of American folklore as well as producing the famous state guidebooks and other publications, and as part of that New Deal project, local people also were put to work gathering local lore, often from their neighbors, sometimes even from themselves. Here in Montana, that gathering was done in every county, the material accumulated, and files of it ended up in Helena at the state Historical Society. And so I show up there, to transport myself back into that small-town world of the 1930s, and as I worked my way through the material, I remarked to the Historical Society librarians I'd expected there to be a lot more of it. Well, there is, they said, a whole batch of it ended up in Bozeman.

It did? Onward to Bozeman. I came to the Special Collections at the MSU library--Ilah Shriver and Minnie Paugh practically rolled out a red carpet of welcome for me--and here was the good stuff, for my purposes. I merrily ransacked those invaluable first-hand accounts of life during the Depression: my people of **English Creek** dance to a square dance call out of those WPA files, they remember roundups recounted therein, they enjoy at their Fourth of July picnic the spring fryers menued there. And that brings us to the story I promised you, of the local hero.

Do some of you remember Merrill Burlingame?

Merrill was a long-time historian here at MSU--or MSC as it was back when he arrived on the faculty in 1929, a month before the Depression began--and I knew him only long after he had retired, late in his life. I remember him as being about nose-high on me, and I'm all of five-foot-nine, but with gigantic enthusiasm for Montana history. He once said to me about Mike Malone, his anointed successor in the history department who had that same brimming energy, that Mike was built on springs--and I thought to myself, "Merrill, it takes one to know one." The long and short of it was, even though Merrill was retired by the time I showed up on the scene with **This House of Sky** and my first few books after that, he was wonderfully generous and enthusiastic toward my work, and we corresponded a little. And so it came about that when I was here in Special Collections making such great use of the WPA Writers Project files, out of curiosity I asked Ilah and Minnie, How come all this ended up here rather than with the stuff in Helena, and they

proudly answered, "Dr. Burlingame rescued it from the dump." It may come as no surprise to you that I asked Merrill what the story was, and here it is from his letter to me. This was in 1943 when, as Merrill explained, the WPA was winding down and one of his faculty colleagues named Lyman was about to make a trip to the agency headquarters in Butte for some agriculture-related files MSU had been involved in. Merrill writes:

"I apparently thought up some reason for going along... One of Lyman's quests was to check on an extensive water study, which was then filed in some eight or ten four-drawer cases. This took us eventually to the warehouse where they were stored, and other materials were being readied for Washington, D.C., and other places.

"We found the water files near the loading door. Even closer were six or eight file cases marked Writers' Project. I investigated ever so lightly and began to drool. At that moment a big raw-boned determined woman, who appeared to be in charge, appeared. We questioned her about the destination of these files, and she informed us that they would go to the Butte City Dump in the morning. We backed her into whatever corner was available and told her she could not do that. She assured us in unprintable, but perfectly clear English that she could and would.

"She told us that in an early stage of closing the records she had sent a portion of these records to the Montana Historical Society, which was the approved depository. There, numerous writers of sorts, largely of the newspaper variety seemingly, had used generous portions of the materials without giving the WPA the least credit. She didn't approve of that, and she would make sure that the Society did not get another folder.

"We assured the good lady that nothing of that kind would happen at Montana State, and that we would take special care that WPA did get credit. It was getting late in the afternoon, and about 4:30 we got her permission to take them, but we were sure that speed was of the essence. Since we would need transportation for the water study files, and the Writers' files would complete a solid load, we telephoned the College Physical Plant office, and pressured them to provide a truck and driver to arrive in Butte as early as possible the following morning."

Merrill Burlingame was there at that early hour, making sure those Writers Project file cabinets were loaded and headed for their new home at MSU.

Merrill's heroic rescue of that material--those "voices in the quiet" that would have vanished into the Butte dump without him--was not the first time the MSU library was essential to me as a writer; it began to be so, in fact, with my first book, **This House of Sky**, a nonfiction book about my family, and I should pause a bit here to make the point that library holdings can provide connections out into the world that a person simply hadn't thought of, without the evidence there on the paper, suggestive in the very best sense of the word. To me, library holdings are something like constellations in the night sky--pattern imposed across unimaginable expanse--with specific scintillations of outline if you search long enough.

In this case, like the rescued Writers' Project files, we are in Bozeman -- on a fine blue June day in 1977 when the mountain ranges around the Gallatin Valley all stand up into the clear sky. In the MSU library's archives, I am going through a box of payroll records of the Castle Mountain Cattle and Sheep Company--the Dogie ranch, as it's called in Meagher County, the spread where my father worked for some years in the 1930s as a ranch hand and eventually foreman, and where my mother was the cook during lambing seasons. I find their names on the payroll records, and other names as well, one I recognize dimly -- an old man who is now a swamper, the guy who sweeps the floor, at a grocery store in my hometown of White Sulphur Springs. The next day too is bright blue, and I am talking to the old man, Tony Hunolt, in his dark bachelor room in White Sulphur Springs. Yeah, Tony tells me in his Missourian voice, "Knowed your daddy since I landed into this country in '36, at shearing time at the Dogie. He staked me for my bedroll, I was so dead busted. Didn't have to do it neither, but he done 'er." And even though Tony Hunolt has passed away by the time **This House of Sky** is published the next year, those words of his speak in its pages and carry with them the sound of that time and place. A voice from the quiet of the past, and it didn't cease with merely that bit of lore from the Dogie. Tony had told me too that I ought to go talk to so-and-so about some ranch topic -- "He knows A to Why about that" -- and that line eventually speaks in the pages of **English Creek**, from the mouth of one of my fictional characters. And Tony had said to me, about another man he and my father worked with there on the Dogie, "He was an SOB on six wheels" --and that line showed up nearly twenty years later in my Fort Peck novel, **Bucking the**

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Sun. There is simply no telling how long a voice such as that of Tony Hunolt will go on, speaking in my pages, thanks to that constellation of suggestion in the MSU library holdings.

The novel after **English Creek** in this trio of bookmakings I'm sketchily taking you through stretched beyond Montana to the territory a lot of Montanans in the early days started out in, the old country. In this case, Scotland, where my characters Angus McCaskill and Robert Burns Barclay--as Angus's voice tells us in the book, Both of us nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double damndest not to show it--emigrate from in 1889 to take up homesteads in that next great grain garden of the world, Montana. Carol and I went to Scotland to find out where these characters of my imagination would have come from, and what their journey would have been like.

So, let me now take you "dancing at the rascal fair"--a wallflower researcher's idea of a good time--and now it is high summer, July, and this is Scotland. St. Andrews. The oldest university in Scotland, one of the most venerable in all of Great Britain, so venerable, we find upon arrival, it takes a couple of days to do a graduation ceremony, with all the customs and the tented, champagne-fueled traditions to be observed.

Be that as it may, the St. Andrews library turns out to be a modern one only a few years old and going through a summer of teething pains. I walk in the first morning and on floor after floor, I pass white-haired maintenance men in blue dustcoats, staring silently forlornly down at the electrical trenches in the floor, into the mysterious entrails of wiring to which they are going to have to figure out how to hook up the new computer terminals.

I step over to learn the catalogue system. Its basic fact is that all books before 1906, whatever their topic, are in the basement. I venture down, and immediately learn that the basement is a good ten degrees cooler than the floors above; so whenever I want a book that was published before 1906, it's a signal I had better put my coat on.

I return to the catalogue system. There is a set of bound volumes which catalogues some books. There is horizontal microfiche which catalogues other books. There is vertical microfiche cataloguing still others.

The back-and-forthing between the fiches soon has my eyes swimming. In none of the systems can I deduce how to find what I am after, material about the Scottish working class in western Scotland in the late 19th century. Somehow I stumble onto a promising book with "toil" in its title. Ahah! There is a catalogue computer terminal by now, added atop the three prior systems, though I have been warned that only a fraction of the library's holdings are in it yet. But at least I have the magic word "toil," and at the punch of a few buttons I'll get every title about the Scottish working class in whatever holdings have been computerized.

I punch those buttons, and the screen fills, with the promise of more screenfuls to come. I begin joyfully to take down the titles--"Technology and Toil in 19th Century Britain"; "Toilers of the Linen Trade."

But the third title--the third title is "The Lady at Her Toilet"--and it is all toiletry, cosmetic and other modes, after that.

Eventually, perseverance and a saintly librarian did help me track down the books I was after, and next, in this Scottish dance of research, down to the St. Andrews archives, in another part of the basement--I put my coat on--in search of letters of working class emigrants who left that region of Scotland in the late 1880s, as Angus and Rob have to do in my novel. The archivist produces some letter collections for me, leads me into the reading room, and as I begin to sit down at a capacious table nicely lit by a window, he says: "Eh--there's the matter of the airrr."

The airrr, in his thick Fifeshire burr. Does he mean "error," is this some Scotch Calvinist probing of my scholarly soul? Can he somehow mean the Scottish town Ayr, A-Y-R, that Robert Burns wrote of--"Old Ayr, whom never a town surpasses, /for honest men and bonnie lasses"? That's cryptic, even from an archivist.

But no, the airrr proved to be the air conditioning, which was blowing a gale at the end of the room I had contemplated sitting at. I took the archivist's point, and established myself at the opposite end of the room, noticing as I did that there was a heavy tartan lap robe in the chair beside me. Within minutes I was using that lap robe, and at lunch time I went home and--despite the fact that Scotland was sweltering under its hottest summer in a century--I put on a sweater under my sport jacket, came back and got under the lap robe again. All the while cursing the St. Andrews theory that the best method of preserving archives is to refrigerate them.

But all the while, too, beginning to hear. Hearing the letters in front of me:

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"During the storm our ship swung like a cork. The screaming of the bosun's whistle, the yells of women and children when she swung over on her side, and tins, trunks, barrels, everything movable flew from side to side...We poor human things held on to the bedside like grim death."

David McNeil, that voice, writing to his family in Scotland about his voyage to America as a steerage passenger in 1889. Another letter, McNeil so wonderfully described the impromptu shipboard bazaar when the ship pulled in to the Irish harbor of Cork and a fleet of Irishwomen in small boats clambered aboard with foodstuffs and other wares to sell, I was moved to put the title scene of my book there. It is there, thanks to that well-chilled correspondence in the St. Andrews archives, that my narrator, Angus McCaskill, sings the old traditional Scottish song that I made up for the occasion:

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

Book number three, in this chronicle of an increasingly involved love affair with libraries, is that one with the beautiful red-haired woman with a camera and an attitude, **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**. Newspaper photographer Mariah McCaskill is the one character I've ever created who has a following of plainly eligible young men who for all these years now have edged up to me at booksignings and bashfully asked, "Uhm, do you have a daughter named Mariah?" Only literarily, I have to tell them, but the plot of the novel involves Mariah's father, Jick McCaskill, whom she inveigles into chauffeuring her and that pesty ex-husband, the newspaper's star columnist Riley Wright, around the state in his Winnebago while they do a series for Montana's centennial year. I've taken a look back at the book to see what might have changed in the fingersnap of time since 1989--Mariah is shooting film instead of digitally, Riley does have a laptop but of course they don't have cellphones--but I did come across one thing that's very much the same, these twenty-one years later. Mariah's sister, Lexa, is living in Alaska, where the Exxon Valdez oilspill has just happened. With the gunk spreading

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over Prince William Sound killing wildlife right and left, Lexa sounds pretty much like an embittered Gulf Coast resident might today, I think, when she says in a phone call to her father: "Know what you get when you cross an oil executive and a pig?"

"No, what?"

"Nothing. There are some things a pig won't do."

The novel's predictive capacities aside, in the storyline Jick, a sixty-five-year old rancher from up along the Rocky Mountain Front and newly a widower, has a lot of time to kill as Mariah and Riley delve into old photos at the state Historical Society in Helena, and in what might be my escalating infatuation with libraries, I have him wander in to the Historical Society library to sit and wait for them. Here, in his voice, is what happens:

"Yet sitting doing nothing is not my best pastime. Particularly not in a library, for it brought to mind Marcella"--the wife he has recently lost to cancer--"the winter we started going together when she was the librarian in Gros Ventre and I was conspicuously her most frequent patron.

"No, I told myself, don't let it happen, don't get yourself swept up in one of those memory storms. My mind determinedly in neutral, I watched the library traffic. Over behind the librarian's desk was a distinguished guy wearing a tie and a mustache both, and though he was no Marcella he looked more or less civil." This guy with the tie and the mustache was Dave Walter, if any of you knew that remarkable human storehouse of Montana history. Dave in this scene is, I believe, the only real living person I ever put into my fiction, and given how invaluable he had been in the research for my books, I figured he deserved the honor. Jick goes on with the story:

"People came up to ask him various things, but I could hear that about every second one of them was pursuing genealogy. Which set me to thinking. Family tree is nothing it ever occurred to me to shinny up very far, but with time to spend anyhow, why shouldn't I? Maybe that was the way: see what our past looked like in an official place such as this, instead of letting it ambush me barehanded as it kept doing. Of course, not even try to trace back more than the couple of generations to the other side of the Atlantic,

that risky hidden territory of distant ancestors; just see what I could find of the Montana McCaskills and my mother's side of the family, the Reeses...

I stepped over to the librarian, and in gentlemanly fashion he gave me what must have been his patented short course in ancestor-seeking, which card catalogue to use when looking for what, and so on.

"Any luck?" the library man asked on his next errand past me.

None. I told him I guessed I wasn't really surprised, as we're not particularly a famous family. Actually it is somewhat spooky to learn that so far as the world at large knows, your people are nonexistent.

"You might try over here." He ushered me to what he called the Small Collections shelf. "To be honest with you, this category is holdings we don't quite know what else to do with. Reminiscences people have written for their grandkids, and short batches of letters, and so on."

It makes you wonder, whether you really want to find anything about your family in the stray stuff. But I plucked out the thick name index binder and took a look..."

I won't give away what Jick finds, there in a batch of his homesteader grandfather Isaac Reese's letters translated from Danish, except that I can't resist sharing with you that I made up a Centennial Ethnicity Study Project funded by the Montana Committee for the Humanities--a fiction writer is supposed to make things up, after all--to account for the translation of these family letters; and that ultimately brought me an accolade from the magnificent Margaret Kingsland, the longtime Humanities director, "Ivan! It's the only novel with the Montana Committee for the Humanities in it!"

Jick's family letters are, powerfully, voices from the quiet of the past, things he had never known, and they overcome him:

"I right then laid forward into my arms on the library table and cradled my head. I did not know the tears were coming until I felt the seep of them at my eyelids, the wet paths being traced over my cheekbones....I wept for them all, us all.

A hand cupped my shoulder. "Sir? Are you all right?" The library man was squatting down beside me, trying to peer in through my pillow of arms.

I lifted my head and wiped my eyes with both hands. Gaggles of genealogists around the room had put aside their volumes to watch me. "Uhm. I forgot...forgot where I was." Blew my nose. Tred to clear my throat. "Some things kind of got pent up in me. The stuff in these..." I indicated Isaac's letters.

"At least they mean something to you," the librarian said gently.

"Yeah. Yeah, they do."

So that is the tour of libraries and one writer's imagination in the course of that triplet set of novels, and if you see a trend there, it may not surprise you that I've reached the point in my latest book, **Work Song**, where a library pretty much becomes one of the characters.

In this instance, it's the original Butte Public Library, for reasons which I hope will become clear as I wrap this up. In **Work Song**, Morrie Morgan, the teacher in the one-room school of **The Whistling Season** of a few years ago, alights into Butte because, as we all know, that mining city boasted of itself as The Richest Hill on Earth, back in the days when its copper fed the world's hunger for electricity. It's 1919, ten years after you first met Morrie in **The Whistling Season**, and he is, shall we say, between careers, and searching for the kind of employment that will make him perhaps whistle a work song. In dropping Morrie into Butte, I knew I would have to take a look at what's left of the old city and old mining equipment, and study it historically and passionately, from books and photographs. Carol and I went through many, many photos at the state Historical Society library in Helena, showing miners at work and people of the time in their downtown clothes, but one picture with nobody in it caught my imagination. It showed the Butte Public Library of the time. The current Butte library is efficient and wonderfully helpful, but it's also a fairly bland modern building. The first library was a wonderful architectural show-off--a Gothic extravaganza with a peaked tower like a castle and arched doorways and a balcony. Butte had turned down a Carnegie library, determined to build something that would show the effete East we have culture out here, and so by the early 1890s the money was raised and the fancy library was built.

It's just the kind of place that suits Morrie, and to give away a smidgin of the plot, he lands a job there. And falls in love with the Butte Public Library and its wondrous book collection, as he tells us:

“Walking up to it each fresh morning, its Gothic turret like the drawbridge tower into the castle, I warmed to the treasures within those softly gray granite walls....The nooks and crannies and grandiosities of the old building intrigued me, like an ancient mansion labyrinth leading back to Gutenberg’s printing press and the start of everything, and always, always, there were the lovely classic books tucked away here and there for stolen snatches of reading. Down any aisle, Stendhal or Blake or Wharton or Cather or Shakespeare or Homer or any of the Russians waited to share words with me, their classic sentences in richly inked typefaces as if rising from the paper.”

When Morrie reaches a turning point in his life in Butte and must find his way out of the predicament his author has put him in, he returns to the library after it has closed for the night.

“I switched on the mezzanine lights. The Reading Room below was as dark and hushed as the audience portion of a theater. Up on stage, so to speak, the books waited in titled ranks, and in their reassuring company I moved idly along the laden shelves, running the tips of my fingers over the exquisite spines, taking down an old loved volume every so often and opening it to the stored glory of words. Around me was the wealth of minds down through all of recorded time. The dramatic capacities of Shakespeare, as all-seeing in his foolscap scripts as in the sagacious portrait above the doorway to reading. The gallant confabulations of Cervantes, showing us the universal meaning of quixotic. The Russian army of impossible geniuses, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov. Mark Twain, as fresh on the page as a comet inscribing the dark. Robert Louis Stevenson, master of tales goldenly told. And my ever familiar exemplar of classic Latin and daring generalship, Caesar in tanned leather and impeccable threading. These and the hundreds upon hundreds of others.... Valued treasures, in more ways than one.

In such company, you wonder about your own tale in the long book of life. What would they have made of me, these grandmasters of storytelling?... No matter how I looked at it, my story lacked conclusion.

Suddenly I knew what to do. Can inspiration come off on the fingers? I rubbed my hands together appreciatively, there among the literary classics. It was as if the risk-taking lifetimes of composition, the reckless romances with language, the tricky business of

plots stealing onto pages, all the wiles of the glorious books answered to my touch. There was no mistaking their message: sometimes you must set sail on the winds of chance."

I think that says it for all of us who are voyagers on Shakespeare's ark, writers and readers alike, traveling on the timeless winds of literary adventure.

Thank you for listening.

library
as port
of call