PACE

Des Moines, April 19 '10

When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job--as my family referred to it, "back east in Illinois"-- I dreamed ahead to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's ark--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 in to Des Moines, with a baker's dozen of books in my seabag, BY NOW for an evening of this sort.

My job on deck here, for the next little while, is to think out loud to you about some of the makings of books--how a writer, at least this one,

tries to bring fictional characters to life on a page; how the research is gathered from the nooks and corners of history and experience; how to spend the necessary time, by yourself, to create a piece of writing; and finally some thoughts about the craft of putting words on a page.

Let's begin with the people who live within the covers of a book, the characters.

Lake Oswego, Feb. 17 '10

PACE

When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of character on display. Among his distinctive western aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder, short-order cook--my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up ranchers' hay crops.

Those small-town Montana saloons where I was lucky enough to tag along with him were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the man had ever handled the reins of workhorses, quite a ritual of sizing up went on. So, it was back there as I subversively hoped for my elder to make a rare bad guess and hire some

breezy faker whose team of horses would run away with him the instant he climbed onto the hay rake, rather than signing up a solid silent workman probably named Swede, it was back there that I developed an abiding interest in the trait called character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.

I shall always envy the advantages of imagination-stretching that my dad had by operating there in beerstool reality. There was the time he could not resist hiring a guy known as Raw Bacon Slim, just for that name--the kind of name incidentally which no editor will ever let me invent for one of my fictional beings. Nonetheless, the realm of each novel I attempt has to be populated from somewhere. By rough count, I figure I've now employed more than 500 characters in ten works of

fiction. I grant that there are scenes in *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* where there seems to be a cast that size occupying a single page--and that doesn't count the armies and the whales--but my bunch have been sorting themselves out, down through their generations and across landscapes from New Guinea to Sitka to Harlem, as steadily as I've been able to foreman them for the past three decades now. Fathering and for that matter mothering entire populations of books probably is beyond reasonable explanation even for someone who earns a living by making things up. But now that I have just done the novel-making process again--on **Work Song**, which brings back the teacher Morrie Morgan and one of the schoolkids from **The Whistling Season**--in my case I can delineate that I begin by handing out names, noises, and noses.

First, names. Or as I go about it, first names before last, way before.

What to call each of them, the sudden new citizens who need passports onto my pages? The literary slate is not permissively blank. "Ishmael" of course is taken--that name has been called. "Emma"is the shared property of the long-established firm of Austen and Flaubert; and so on up to the perils of trespassing into the spooky (Stephen) Kingdom of "Carrie." The mouth magic, though, that gives each of us identification to the rest of humankind in a single word constantly flourishes and renews there in the alphabetic combinations we are forever tinkering with, in the inexhaustible prop shop called language. And so, to an extent that seems to startle academic questioners, my characters' names tend to be determined more by linguistic chimings than, say, mythological implications or the nearest phone book.

"America. Montana. Those words with their ends open." Thus mused my narrator, Angus McCaskill, in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** as he and a lifelong chum set forth from Scotland in 1889 to take up homesteads in the American West. Not accidentally, the same aspirant vowel of promise, hope, boundless prospect, characterizes the romantic prospects whom Angus and other yearning hearts meet up with in that book and its successors in my Montana trilogy, **English Creek** and **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana**: Anna, Marcella, Leona, Lexa, and to add a slightly chestier note of unconformity, Mariah with an aitch. The men of these women's lives tend to come with conclusive consonants: Isaac, Jick, Alec, Mitch, ~~and another round of unconformity, Riley.~~

Naturally, generational attention must be paid in this naming game. The lovestruck young couple I married off beside the splashy waterfall in the lobby of the Holiday Inn in Billings, in the course of the 1989 doings of **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**, had to be Darcy and Jason--not, say, Anna and Isaac.

Except for Jick McCaskill, who narrates two of those novels and fairly cheerfully accepts having been "dubbed for the off card...the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps," nicknames are a spice cabinet in my fiction rather than a raw-bacon larder. Mostly I sprinkle them on minor characters. ~~Good Help Hebner, whom you may bet isn't.~~ Birdie Hinch, reputed chicken thief. Miles Calhoun, whose name the other kids in the Whistling Season schoolyard amend from "Hector"

because of his habit of saying "by a mile," as in "I don't believe a word you say, by a mile."

And his classmate, a favorite of mine ~~whom you are going to hear more about in the future,~~ Barbara Rellis, who turns her name pretty much backwards to become "Rabrab."

So, name affixed, what noise in the world must a character make to not only stand up over time but continue to march, cavort, and sing rowdily in the reader's mind? Which is to say, what is the voice, the characteristic sound or memorable mannerism, of the person talking on the page?

Please meet, as I did on a stroll of my imagination, Oliver Milliron, widower father of three in **The Whistling Season**. All I knew of him,

back then, was what my narrator tells me on the second page of manuscript: "Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first." That's a start, though, in giving readers something to remember Oliver by.

Occasionally all the organ stops can be pulled out: ~~the aforementioned Good Help Hebner~~ has a braying way of speaking that "would blow a crowbar out of your hand." But generally small auditory touches count most effectively toward larger character dimension, I believe. Perhaps a word that a character owns, unobtrusively but consistently, throughout the story. Damon Milliron in **The Whistling Season** gets all the disgust a boy possibly can into the word "old"--"(Aunt Eunice) and her old taffy--be lucky if we don't break our teeth on

it." And "Pretty good chance old Eddie won't have brains enough to figure it out for himself first."

If a character's manner comes out on the page as vocals, physical appearance perhaps presents the melody line. As the example of Oliver indicates, problematic as they are for the novelist who has already reached into that bin of characteristics for several books' worth, things such as noses have to be faced. Also eyes, ears, hairline, the whole physiognomy, and beyond that, lo, the soul.

Sheer economy is sometimes best. In **Typhoon**, all we ever know or need to know about the waiting wife of the magnificently phlegmatic sea skipper MacWhirr is when Joseph Conrad tells us: "The only secret

of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good."

SHORT, CHOPPY

Conversely, in **The All of It**, Jeannette Haien's compact marvel of storytelling, the fullness of description is glorious:

"Kevin: with his straight, light, soft hair (the merest breeze would randomly part it); his blue eyes that tended easily to water over; the mould of his features expressive more of determination than of intelligence; his nimble-jointed body (he could go up a ladder and come down it with a crazy ease that drew smiles)..." That's only half of the descriptive paragraph, but already you feel you've known this loosemade Irish farmer for, well, half your life.

Call me analog, but I believe memorable fictional creation is usually best served by physical magnitudes rather than minimalist digits of dis and data. Archival photos, DESCRIPTIVE turns of phrase that simply pop to mind (in **The Whistling Season** and again when he reappears in **Work Song** two months from now, the unconventional schoolteacher Morrie Morgan's mustache in the style of Rudyard Kipling is "a soup strainer and a lady tickler and a fashion show, all in one"), revelatory glimpses across a room--the supply of characteristics leading toward character is as broad as a writer's experience and as deep as he cares to delve. Of course, some rules or at least strictures of common sense apply. I never use my friends as models for my fictional people; and relatives, I say, are best saved for memoirs. Nor, except in minor roles, do I employ actual historical personalities--in most cases, they carry too many awkward

truths to wear a fictional guise convincingly. But virtually all else is fair game. Case in point: I was in a small-town saloon not unlike those my father frequented on his hiring forays, when in came a [redacted] long-faced leathery rancher. As soon as I was decently out of sight of him, that face entered my notebook: "wrinkles running down cheeks; like a copper coin a bit melted." And then and there, Oliver Milliron acquired a face to go with his discriminating nose.

That, then, is a sampling of the population of a novelist's head, at least this one's, and I should move along now to where the imagination meets the laws of historical gravity--the territory there on the page where the writer has to persuade the reader this made-up stuff is somewhat

believable, or at least entitled to that other alibi writers count on-- "the willing suspension of disbelief."

How do you go about it? As a writer, the constant question I have to ask myself is, how do I get from here to there. From names, noses, and noises to completed characters who will have lasting lives there in the pages. How do I get from messy rough-draft manuscript pages to those neatly bound pages that go to bookstore shelves throughout the land to take their place in high-class alphabetical company--~~Doctorow~~, Doig, Dostoevsky?

When someone says to me that they want to write--or skipping the hard part, just want to be a writer--I always ask them if they can stand to be by themselves for hours and days and weeks and months at a time.

One of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out--was that a bat that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Shakespeare? As a writer you have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from much of anybody else, at least in the course of the day--long enough to figure out those shadowy patterns in the mental cave.

Life has become so interactive that we live in an age of blurt, e-mailed or tweeted or twittered or texted or Blackberried. But if you're going to have the thinking time necessary to write a book, you'd better ward off some of the interruptions as much as you can. Multi-tasking doesn't always get the one big job done, does it.

But modern society isn't really set up for hermits, is it. Back there in the early years when I was a freelance magazine journalist and incipient book writer--a state of being that a friend of mine once called self-**un**employed--I had to wonder sometimes about the aptness of my chosen existence as something like a suburban druid: solitary, all day

long, just me and the words and the commas and the white space on paper, while my wife went off to her college teaching job to support us. There's always been that One Big Saying that lone-wolf writers try to cling to--naturally it was by another writer, Edward Gibbon, who probably thought it up in self-defense when he was holed up for all those years while working on **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire**: "Solitude is the school of genius," said Gibbon. Gibbon's saying has never convinced everyone. One time when he did venture out after having completed another book, he was greeted by the Duke of Gloucester with: "Scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?"

I wasn't scribbling, but I was certainly doing a lot of typing to which I was the only witness. Then one day while I was at the library doing

research I wandered past the shelf of "new releases" and stopped to take a look. Amid those new books was one titled, lo and behold, **Solitude**.

The dust jacket described the author--Anthony Storr-- as Clinical Lecturer in Psychiatry at Oxford University--and while I wasn't sure that I wanted to read anything that might put me in the category of "clinical," the question of working alone for what was looking like the rest of my life interested me enough that I checked out the book. And in its pages came across this:

"What takes place in the circuitry of the brain is a mystery; but it can be confidently asserted that these processes require time, passivity, and preferably solitude."

"Some of the people who have contributed most to the enrichment of human experience have contributed little to the welfare of human beings in particular," the book went on. "It can be argued that some of the great thinkers listed above"--(that list included Descartes, Newton, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard)--"were more preoccupied with what went on in their own minds than with the welfare of other people. The same is true of many writers"--uh oh-- "composers and painters. The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own validity. His most significant moments are those in

EMPHASIS

which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are, chiefly, if not invariably those in which he is alone."

Imagine my surprise and pleasure. Talk about showing the dukes of the world that we're not just bashful scribblers--it was all right to be alone! Maybe it's even creatively healthy. Those years ago, I came away from Anthony Storr's book with the understanding that work itself can be a legitimate companion. It's amazing how much less anti-social you feel after seeing that written in a book.

And so, when I'm asked, at booksignings and readings, what my working habits are, I proudly say something like"pathological diligence." The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of

the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works. Flannery O'Connor was TERRIBLY ill, most of her short writing life, but her collection of letters show her to have been a dedicated sardonic professional, as when she gave this unbeatable version of the experience of looking over one's own writing: "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting 'seems' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog."

This is what she had to say about a writer's necessary state of patience:

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be

assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away... Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted.... The fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Ultimately, Flannery O'Connor's advice does add up, I believe. In my case, I began as a journalist, and so from the start did not believe in that malady called "writer's block"--I never did meet a newspaper or

magazine editor who would say, "Oh, that's all right, we'll just run a blank space there where you can't think of anything to say." The point always is to get something down on paper: describe a character, make up dialogue, dig something out of your pocket notebook or laptop. I write a given number of words a day on a manuscript, a given number of days a week, a given number of weeks a year. This varies from book to book, so that the job isn't a permanent assembly line --on novels such as **The Whistling Season** and **The Eleventh Man** it's been four hundred words a day. That's two triple-spaced typed pages--it may not sound like much, but trust me, it's a day's work.

Validated by a clinical psychiatrist or not, then, we have reached the point where the writer has to face the work. To perform, to the best of

his or her ability, there in the making of pages that will become a book. How do you go about that?

There's the story that is told about Vladimir Nabokov when he was teaching his course on the novel, at Cornell. (Back there in the Eisenhower years, that course of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!)

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic-alphabet equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in the classroom, but it all came by way of a heavy Russian accent. There was the time he had to hand back the test papers on which most of the class blithely discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style--with a "D"--when Nabokov all semester had actually been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of "Lolita" and "Pale Fire" and "Speak, Memory" and other linguistically highly-honed books peers over the rims of his glasses at the class and cries out his summary of the writing life: "You must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

The class, of course, thinks to itself, Yeah, right, the old boy has got it backwards again and they all get busy writing down the proper version-- "the precision of the scientist and the passion of the artist"--in ~~the~~ self-defense for the next test. They get this done and look up and Nabokov is still ~~looking~~ at them over the rims of those glasses, and says: "I repeat: you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

Let's take those one by one, beginning with passion, which often gets things started. Passionate investigation, as Nabokov meant--the search and research that goes into a piece of writing. 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 interiorly lit 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

GESTURE

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--and we listen there with him ever after.

REPEAT GESTURE

In my own case, the crystalizing details I seek are often in some obscure record of the past--where Google doesn't go, YET, or at least hadn't gone ~~yet~~ when I was doing my research. Let me give you the freshest possible example--I have spent the past couple of years in the company of Morrie, the schoolteacher, for the sake of **Work Song**, the novel that's being published in ~~July~~ JUNE. Morrie--and I--alit into Butte, Montana, because 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, from books and photographs. My wife 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 bland modern building. The first library was a wonderful architectural show-off--a gray granite extravaganza with arched doorways and a balcony and a peaked tower

Morrie - acid of boredom

AND PASSIONATELY,

LIKE A CASTLE.

Just the kind of place Morrie would go to consult the city directory for some job worthy of his unique talents, as he now tells us about:

IN THIS EXCERPT FROM WORK SONG:

SLOW & DELIBERATE

"There is an old story that any Londoners with a madman in the family would drop him off at the library of the British Museum for the day. I was given a searching look as if I might be the Butte version when I presented myself at the desk of the public library that next morning and requested both the *City Directory* and Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* in the original Latin.

"The stout woman I took to be the head librarian--she had eyeglasses enchained around her neck commandingly enough for it--scrutinized me some moments more, then marched off into the maze of shelves while I found a seat at a broad oaken table. Everything was substantial, the

brass-banistered stairway up to the mezzanine of books in tall rows, the green-shaded electrical lights hanging down from the high ceiling like watchfobs of the gods. I have always felt at home among books, so when the woman from the desk plopped my requested two in front of me, they seemed like old friends dropping by.

Aware that I should get down to business, I instead drew the *Gallic Wars* to me first, unable to resist. I had ordered it up by habit, as a test. To me, a repository of books is not a library without that volume in the mother of languages. Handling the book fondly as I was, I became aware of its own touch: tanned leather, not the more common calfskin cover put on for show. I examined the binding: sewn rather than glued. On the pages, lovely to finger, the sentences practically rose from the paper in a

strong clear Caslon typeface. What I was holding was an exceptionally fine copy, so much so that I momentarily found myself envious of the Butte Public Library.

Morrie reluctantly puts Caesar aside and tries to tend to business in the city directory.

But something about the *Gallic Wars* at my elbow kept diverting me. Even when they are closed, some books do not shut up. Why was this beautifully sewn leather edition, a collector's item if I had ever seen one, spending its existence on a public shelf in a none too fastidious mining town? Once more I peered at those tiers of shelves on the mezzanine, and if I was not severely mistaken, many other handsome volumes sat there

P. 29A follows

beckoning in bindings of royal reds and greens and blues and buffs. Curiosity got the better of me. Up the stairwell I went.

I think you can see the story taking a certain turn here. And what leads Morrie, and us as readers, to that turn, are certain crystalizing details--the sumptuous oak table, the reading lights hanging down like the watchfobs of the gods, and most of all, the feel of that tanned leather cover when Morrie picks up that volume of Caesar. I'm not a rare book expert myself, but I know one--Sandy Kroupa, the rare book curator at the University of Washington, and Sandy took me through all the details--that cover; that sewn binding; that Caslon typeface that practically rises from the page--that would come up through Morrie the booklover's hands, and into our imaginations.

Now to that second part of Nabokov's acrobatic trick of writerly performance, doing it with the precision of the artist. This gets to be tricky indeed, because it pretty quickly leads to the proposition of trying to tell a truth by making something up. Shakespeare long ago showed us the alchemy involved--just think of that scene in "Two Gentlemen of Verona" set in "Bohemia, a desert country near the sea"--which would be a surprise to the Bohemian citizens of landlocked Czechoslovakia, wouldn't it. My own approach, as a novelist, is that my works of fiction are often keyed to historical actuality--although I don't hesitate to make up my characters' personal circumstances as needed; "making stuff up" is the basic job description of the writer of fiction, after all--because I

think it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is contained within that most generous other word, "history."

History, looked at closely, provides ingredients of validity that can season the literary recipe of a novel. Those small particulars, again, used with as much precision as possible. Remembering a certain late afternoon in the one-room schoolhouse he attended, a time of day when the autumn light of the prairie was drawing down into dusk, my narrator of **The Whistling Season** reflects on what he calls "the Rembrandt light of memory, finicky and magical and faithful at the same time, as the cheaper tint of nostalgia never is."

Back when I was working on the Montana trilogy--**English Creek** and **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** in particular--I had the good fortune to

interview quite a number of people who went back into history for me, to the time when they were horseback kids attending a one-room school. To rinse away any of that tint of nostalgia--to try to live up to that Rembrandt light of faithful memory--I had a set of precise questions I put to each of them. For example, I asked each one what they carried their lunch in, when they rode those miles. The most enduring answer was a TIN lard pail--a handy size, big enough to carry your own drinking cup in along with the homemade-bread sandwiches and any other goodies put together by your mother, with a good tight lid and a handle easily tied to saddle strings. Those lard pail lunch buckets never did make it into the Montana trilogy, but you can bet they did, a good many years later, in THE

particular scene in **The Whistling Season** where I needed a turn marker in a horse race built out of something prominent and shiny.

Similarly, that race itself crystalized in my imagination in, shall we say, a roundabout way from something I asked about the daily ride to school, and the answer that a clear-eyed lady well into her eighties gave me: it could get kind of boring, she said smiling at me from her rocking chair, so sometimes she and her sister would sit backwards in their saddles and race home from school that way--"Just anything for excitement," as she put it. Several books beyond the one I was working on then, that kind of race, wrong end to, came back to mind when I needed a contest of some kind between schoolkids of **The Whistling Season.**

These, then, are some of the ingredients that a writer spends all that solo time gathering. But what do you do with them then? If you are a fiction writer, you have to ask yourself one big question all the time: what if?

If you're a writer like Charles Dickens, you think "What if Scrooge doesn't just say 'Humbug' about Christmas, but 'Bah, humbug!' I think I'll dab that in and see if it works." If you're one like Tolstoy, you think "What if I turn Napoleon's invasion of Russia into a longish story?"

Well, "what if" the writer at this microphone now heads us back to shore, from this brief excursion on Shakespeare's ark, with a final story about this writerly process of sitting around in your own head, trying to tell a truth by making things up. This one not coincidentally occurs in a

library, one of those invaluable pantries of inspiration like our co-host here tonight, the Des Moines Public Library.

Among the countless colored coats that story can wear, this particular time it was dressed old-fashioned--black and white and "red" (read) all over, that old pun--remember?--about newspapers before they became such an endangered species. The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of the small Montana town of Choteau--it is spelled like the French word "chateau" except with an O, but Montanans have never met a French word they couldn't pound flat, as any of you may know who have ever been to Havre--H-A-V-R-E--the hundred years of the Choteau newspaper actually was in red protective binders in the public library there. I was there in that small town near the foot of the

Rockies on the magic carpet of "what if," which is both exhilarating and dizzying when you look down. My premise as a novelist was simple but sizable: what if I spent most of the next decade writing three books about one western family across a century, from immigration inspired by homesteading, to subsequent life on the land, as two World Wars and the Spanish flu epidemic and the Depression and the forces of modern life cascade through the four generations. In short, I was beginning the Montana trilogy--**English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair,** and **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana.** For a writerly reason as well as a personal one, I had chosen Choteau as the stand-in for the fictional town I was creating for the three books--Gros Ventre, another flattened French product--spelled G-R-O-S V-E-N-T-R-E, but with about half of those

letters ignored in good Montana style--because Choteau is a goodlooking town with its grove of big cottonwood trees along its streets. In transplanting some of its features to my imaginary Gros Ventre, I've had a place with a deep past--as William Faulkner had his Yoknapatawpha County, as Thomas Hardy had his Wessex country--to served through continuous books, most recently in the World War Two novel **The Eleventh Man**, which has this opening sentence:

"Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, suppertime lights coming on here and there beneath its roof of trees."

My personal reason for selecting Choteau as a starting point that it was a part of my own past. It was the town where I and the high school

buddy I lived with would drive to for a movie, thirty twisty miles down Highway 89 from Dupuyer, that wide spot in the road where we lived. I had played football in Choteau, and lost; but dare I say here at the home of the Drake Relays, I had also thrown the javelin in track meets there and done well enough to qualify for the state meet. All in all, it was the nearest serious town to the Two Medicine country where I grew to young manhood on sheep ranches and farms, and where I now was trying to imagine my way back to an even earlier time, where story lives within history.

And so, this becomes a Thursday, the evening the Choteau Public library stays open past suppertime, and I am sitting there, as I have sat in front of so many dusty troves of research, at a table on the library's little

mezzanine, going through old newsprint to hear into that area of Montana during the Depression years, the drought years. In mid-February of 1939, the homespun local columnist reports that there had been a heavy fog, unusual to that climate and time of year. A stirring begins on the library stair, and up comes a group of women from a Hutterite colony on the benchland east of town. In their long skirts and patterned aprons and kerchiefs, these religious communal dwellers might have just stepped out of the pages of Tolstoy, a visit that jogs the imagination of any modern writer a little. Downstairs, the bearded Hutterite elder who is escorting the women to town is asked by the librarian how the grain crop is. "It's a dandy," he says, "if the white combine don't get it." By habit, that phrase for a hailstorm goes into my

notebook immediately. The deckhands of Shakespeare's ark know how to invent language too, we must never forget.

I open the next red binder, the columnist is saying in the issue of May 18, 1939, "if the adage of rain 90 days after a fog holds good," a heavy soaking rain will come to the Choetau country on the 21st. Steps on the mezzanine stairs again, a ranch wife appears and begins browsing forcefully through the fiction shelves, no nonsense about it as she flips open novels and takes or rejects them on the basis of their opening sentence. This, too, gets the attention of the novelist sitting there. The league of memorable first lines is tough competition:

SLOW, DRAMATIC

"Call me Ishmael."

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

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91 days after that fog

close up now. I close the red binder on the 1939 newspapers, go out into the summer night, there under the northern Rockies. A couple of years later when my novel **English Creek** is published, there in my fictional version of the summer of 1939 a forceful ranch-born woman named Beth McCaskill shows up almost immediately, and the book's opening sentence--which has been met with apparent approval by many thousands of Beth's counterparts across the past twenty-six years--reads: "That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country."

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literature: to relieve the soul of incoherence. The impulse to do so I think is the one that has been in us ever since art began to dance off the cave walls to us--storytelling, writing, literature, perhaps begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think stories still can be our way of sharing light, whether it's the white sheen of a page in a book or the nebulae of cyberspace--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us. I believe it is worth the passion and precision, the solitude, the long devotion of the fingers to the keys that each book takes, it is worth it all to sail on that magical ocean of words where Shakespeare launched us.

Thank you for listening. (And I'll be glad to take your questions.)

Morrie reluctantly puts Caesar aside and tries to tend to business in the city directory.

"But something about the *Gallic Wars* at my elbow kept diverting me. Even when they are closed, some books do not shut up. Why was this beautifully sewn leather edition, a collector's item if I had ever seen one, spending its existence on a public shelf in a none too fastidious mining town? Once more I peered at those tiers on the mezzanine, and if I was not severely mistaken, many other handsome volumes sat there beckoning in bindings of royal reds and greens and blues and buffs. Curiosity got the better of me. Up the stairwell I went."

I think you can see the story taking a certain turn here. And what leads Morrie, and us as readers, to that turn, are certain crystalizing details--the sumptuous oak table, the reading lights hanging down like the watchfobs of the gods, and most of all, the feel of that tanned leather cover when Morrie picks up that volume of Caesar. I'm not a rare book expert myself, but I know one--Sandy Kroupa, the rare book curator at the University of Washington, and Sandy took me through all the details--that cover; that sewn binding; that Caslon typeface that practically rises from the page--that would come up through Morrie the booklover's hands, and into our imaginations.

Now to that second part of Nabokov's acrobatic trick of writerly performance, doing it with the precision of the artist. This gets to be tricky indeed, because it pretty quickly leads to the proposition of trying to tell a truth by making something up. Shakespeare long ago showed us the alchemy involved--just think of that scene in "Two Gentlemen of Verona" set in "Bohemia, a desert country near the sea"--which would be a surprise to the Bohemian citizens of the landlocked Czech Republic, wouldn't it. My own approach, as a novelist, is that my works of fiction are often keyed to historical actuality--although I don't hesitate to make up my characters' personal circumstances as needed; "making stuff up" is the basic job description of the writer of fiction, after all--because I think it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is contained within that most generous other word, "history."

History, looked at closely, provides ingredients of validity that can season the literary recipe of a novel. Those small particulars, again, used with as much precision as possible. Remembering a certain late afternoon in the one-room schoolhouse he attended, a time

of day when the autumn light of the prairie was drawing down into dusk, my narrator of **The Whistling Season** reflects on what he calls "the Rembrandt light of memory, finicky and magical and faithful at the same time, as the cheaper tint of nostalgia never is."

Back when I was working on the Montana trilogy--**English Creek** and **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** in particular--I had the good fortune to interview quite a number of people who went back into history for me, to the time when they were horseback kids attending a one-room school. To rinse away any of that tint of nostalgia--to try to live up to that Rembrandt light of faithful memory--I had a set of precise questions I put to each of them. For example, I asked each one what they carried their lunch in, when they rode those miles. The most enduring answer was a tin lard pail--a handy size, big enough to carry your own drinking cup in along with the homemade-bread sandwiches and any other goodies put together by your mother, with a good tight lid and a handle easily tied to saddle strings. Those lard pail lunch buckets never did make it into the Montana trilogy, but you can bet they did, a good many years later, in the particular scene in **The Whistling Season** where I needed a turn marker in a horse race built out of something prominent and shiny.

Similarly, that race itself crystalized in my imagination in, shall we say, a roundabout way from something I asked about the daily ride to school, and the answer that a clear-eyed lady well into her eighties gave me: it could get kind of boring, she said smiling at me from her rocking chair, so sometimes she and her sister would sit backwards in their saddles and race home from school that way--"Just anything for excitement," as she put it. Several books beyond the one I was working on then, that kind of race, wrong end to, came back to mind when I needed a contest of some kind between schoolkids of **The Whistling Season.**

These, then, are some of the ingredients that a writer spends all that solo time gathering. But what do you do with them then? If you are a fiction writer, you have to ask yourself one big question all the time: what if?

If you're a writer like Charles Dickens, you think "What if Scrooge doesn't just say 'Humbug' about Christmas, but 'Bah, humbug!' I think I'll dab that in and see if it works." If you're one like Tolstoy, you think "What if I turn Napoleon's invasion of Russia into a longish story?"

Well, "what if" the writer at this microphone now heads us back to shore, from this brief excursion on Shakespeare's ark, with a final story about this writerly process of sitting around in your own head, trying to tell a truth by making things up. This one not coincidentally occurs in a library, one of those invaluable pantries of inspiration like our co-host here tonight, the Des Moines Public Library.

Among the countless colored coats that story can wear, this particular time it was dressed old-fashioned--black and white and "red" (read) all over, that old pun--remember?--about newspapers before they became such an endangered species. The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of the small Montana town of Choteau--it is spelled like the French word "chateau" except with an O, but Montanans have never met a French word they couldn't pound flat, as any of you may know who have ever been to Havre--H-A-V-R-E--the hundred years of the Choteau newspaper actually was in red protective binders in the public library there. I was there in that small town near the foot of the Rockies on the magic carpet of "what if," which is both exhilarating and dizzying when you look down. My premise as a novelist was simple but sizable: what if I spent most of the next decade writing three books about one western family across a century, from immigration inspired by homesteading, to subsequent life on the land, as two World Wars and the Spanish flu epidemic and the Depression and the forces of modern life cascade through the four generations. In short, I was beginning the Montana trilogy--**English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair,** and **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana.** For a writerly reason as well as a personal one, I had chosen Choteau as the stand-in for the fictional town I was creating for the three books--Gros Ventre, another flattened French product--spelled G-R-O-S V-E-N-T-R-E, but with about half of those letters ignored in good Montana style--because Choteau is a goodlooking town with its grove of big cottonwood trees along its streets. In transplanting some of its features to my imaginary Gros Ventre, I've had a place with a deep past--as William Faulkner had his Yoknapatawpha County, as Thomas Hardy had his Wessex country--to served through continuous books, most recently in the World War Two novel **The Eleventh Man**, which has this opening sentence:

"Never much of a town for showing off, Gros Ventre waited around one last bend in the road, suppertime lights coming on here and there beneath its roof of trees."

My personal reason for selecting Choteau as a starting point that it was a part of my own past. It was the town where I and the high school buddy I lived with would drive to for a movie, thirty twisty miles down Highway 89 from Dupuyer, that wide spot in the road where we lived. I had played football in Choteau, and lost; but dare I say here at the home of the Drake Relays, I had also thrown the javelin in track meets there and done well enough to qualify for the state meet. All in all, it was the nearest serious town to the Two Medicine country where I grew to young manhood on sheep ranches and farms, and where I now was trying to imagine my way back to an even earlier time, where story lives within history.

And so, this becomes a Thursday, the evening the Choteau Public library stays open past suppertime, and I am sitting there, as I have sat in front of so many dusty troves of research, at a table on the library's little mezzanine, going through old newsprint to hear into that area of Montana during the Depression years, the drought years. In mid-February of 1939, the homespun local columnist reports that there had been a heavy fog, unusual to that climate and time of year. A stirring begins on the library stair, and up comes a group of women from a Hutterite colony on the benchland east of town. In their long skirts and patterned aprons and kerchiefs, these religious communal dwellers might have just stepped out of the pages of Tolstoy, a visit that jogs the imagination of any modern writer a little. Downstairs, the bearded Hutterite elder who is escorting the women to town is asked by the librarian how the grain crop is. "It's a dandy," he says, "if the white combine don't get it." By habit, that phrase for a hailstorm goes into my notebook immediately. The deckhands of Shakespeare's ark know how to invent language too, we must never forget.

I open the next red binder, the columnist is saying in the issue of May 18, 1939, "if the adage of rain 90 days after a fog holds good," a heavy soaking rain will come to the Choetau country on the 21st. Steps on the mezzanine stairs again, a ranch wife appears and begins browsing forcefully through the fiction shelves, no nonsense about it as she flips open novels and takes or rejects them on the basis of their opening sentence. This, too, gets the attention of the novelist sitting there. The league of memorable first lines is tough competition:

"Call me Ishmael."

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

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Des Moines, April 19 '10

When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job--as my family referred to it, "back east in Illinois"-- I dreamed ahead to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's ark--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 in to Des Moines, with a baker's dozen of books in my seabag, for an evening of this sort.

My job on deck here, for the next little while, is to think out loud to you about some of the makings of books--how a writer, at least this one, tries to bring fictional characters to life on a page; how the research is gathered from the nooks and corners of history and experience; how to spend the necessary time, by yourself, to create a piece of writing; and finally some thoughts about the craft of putting words on a page.

Let's begin with the people who live within the covers of a book, the characters.

When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of character on display. Among his distinctive western aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder, short-order cook--my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up ranchers' hay crops.

Those small-town Montana saloons where I was lucky enough to tag along with him were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the man had ever handled the reins of workhorses, quite a ritual of sizing up went on. So, it was back there as I subversively hoped for my elder to make a rare bad guess and hire some breezy faker whose team of horses would run away with him the instant he climbed onto the hay rake, rather than signing up a solid silent workman probably named Swede, it was back there that I developed an abiding interest in the trait called character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.

I shall always envy the advantages of imagination-stretching that my dad had by operating there in beerstool reality. There was the time he could not resist hiring a guy known as Raw Bacon Slim, just for that name--the kind of name incidentally which no editor

will ever let me invent for one of my fictional beings. Nonetheless, the realm of each novel I attempt has to be populated from somewhere. By rough count, I figure I've now employed more than 500 characters in ten works of fiction. I grant that there are scenes in *War and Peace* and *Moby Dick* where there seems to be a cast that size occupying a single page--and that doesn't count the armies and the whales--but my bunch have been sorting themselves out, down through their generations and across landscapes from New Guinea to Sitka to Harlem, as steadily as I've been able to foreman them for the past three decades now. Fathering and for that matter mothering entire populations of books probably is beyond reasonable explanation even for someone who earns a living by making things up. But now that I have just done the novel-making process again--on **Work Song**, which brings back the teacher Morrie Morgan and one of the schoolkids from **The Whistling Season**--in my case I can delineate that I begin by handing out names, noises, and noses.

First, names. Or as I go about it, first names before last, way before.

What to call each of them, the sudden new citizens who need passports onto my pages? The literary slate is not permissively blank. "Ishmael" of course is taken--that name has been called. "Emma"is the shared property of the long-established firm of Austen and Flaubert; and so on up to the perils of trespassing into the spooky (Stephen) Kingdom of "Carrie." The mouth magic, though, that gives each of us identification to the rest of humankind in a single word constantly flourishes and renews there in the alphabetic combinations we are forever tinkering with, in the inexhaustible prop shop called language. And so, to an extent that seems to startle academic questioners, my characters' names tend to be determined more by linguistic chimings than, say, mythological implications or the nearest phone book.

"America. Montana. Those words with their ends open." Thus mused my narrator, Angus McCaskill, in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** as he and a lifelong chum set forth from Scotland in 1889 to take up homesteads in the American West. Not accidentally, the same aspirant vowel of promise, hope, boundless prospect, characterizes the romantic prospects whom Angus and other yearning hearts meet up with in that book and its successors in my Montana trilogy, **English Creek** and **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana**: Anna, Marcella, Leona, Lexa, and to add a slightly chestier note of unconformity, Mariah with an aitch. The men of these women's lives tend to come with conclusive consonants: Isaac, Jick, Alec, Mitch, and another round of unconformity, Riley.

Naturally, generational attention must be paid in this naming game. The lovestruck young couple I married off beside the splashy waterfall in the lobby of the Holiday Inn in Billings, in the course of the 1989 doings of **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**, had to be Darcy and Jason--not, say, Anna and Isaac.

Except for Jick McCaskill, who narrates two of those novels and fairly cheerfully accepts having been "dubbed for the off card...the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps," nicknames are a spice cabinet in my fiction rather than a raw-bacon larder. Mostly I sprinkle them on minor characters. Good Help Hebner, whom you may bet isn't. Birdie Hinch, reputed chicken thief. Miles Calhoun, whose name the other kids in the Whistling Season schoolyard amend from "Hector" because of his habit of saying "by a mile," as in "I don't believe a word you say, by a mile."

And his classmate, a favorite of mine whom you are going to hear more about in the future, Barbara Rellis, who turns her name pretty much backwards to become "Rabrab."

So, name affixed, what noise in the world must a character make to not only stand up over time but continue to march, cavort, and sing rowdily in the reader's mind? Which is to say, what is the voice, the characteristic sound or memorable mannerism, of the person talking on the page?

Please meet, as I did on a stroll of my imagination, Oliver Milliron, widower father of three in **The Whistling Season**. All I knew of him, back then, was what my narrator tells me on the second page of manuscript: "Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first." That's a start, though, in giving readers something to remember Oliver by.

Occasionally all the organ stops can be pulled out: the aforementioned Good Help Hebner has a braying way speaking that "would blow a crowbar out of your hand." But generally small auditory touches count most effectively toward larger character dimension, I believe. Perhaps a word that a character owns, unobtrusively but consistently, throughout the story. Damon Milliron in **The Whistling Season** gets all the disgust a boy possibly can into the word "old"--"(Aunt Eunice) and her old taffy--be lucky if we don't break our teeth on it." And "Pretty good chance old Eddie won't have brains enough to figure it out for himself first."

If a character's manner comes out on the page as vocals, physical appearance perhaps presents the melody line. As the example of Oliver indicates, problematic as they are for the novelist who has already reached into that bin of characteristics for several books' worth, things such as noses have to be faced. Also eyes, ears, hairline, the whole physiognomy, and beyond that, lo, the soul.

Sheer economy is sometimes best. In **Typhoon**, all we ever know or need to know about the waiting wife of the magnificently phlegmatic sea skipper MacWhirr is when Joseph Conrad tells us: "The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good."

Conversely, in **The All of It**, Jeannette Haien's compact marvel of storytelling, the fullness of description is glorious:

"Kevin: with his straight, light, soft hair (the merest breeze would randomly part it); his blue eyes that tended easily to water over; the mould of his features expressive more of determination than of intelligence; his nimble-jointed body (he could go up a ladder and come down it with a crazy ease that drew smiles)..." That's only half of the descriptive paragraph, but already you feel you've known this loosemade Irish farmer for, well, half your life.

Call me analog, but I believe memorable fictional creation is usually best served by physical magnitudes rather than minimalist digits of dis and data. Archival photos, turns of phrase that simply pop to mind (in **The Whistling Season** and again when he reappears in **Work Song** two months from now, the unconventional schoolteacher Morrie Morgan's mustache in the style of Rudyard Kipling is "a soup strainer and a lady tickler and a fashion show, all in one"), revelatory glimpses across a room--the supply of characteristics leading toward character is as broad as a writer's experience and as deep as he cares to delve. Of course, some rules or at least strictures of common sense apply. I never use my friends as models for my fictional people; and relatives, I say, are best saved for memoirs. Nor, except in minor roles, do I employ actual historical personalities--in most cases, they carry too many awkward truths to wear a fictional guise convincingly. But virtually all else is fair game. Case in point: I was in a small-town saloon not unlike those my father frequented on his hiring forays, when in came a startlingly long-faced leathery rancher. As soon as I was decently out of sight of him, that face entered my notebook: "wrinkles running down cheeks; like a copper coin a bit melted." And then and there, Oliver Milliron acquired a face to go with his discriminating nose.

That, then, is a sampling of the population of a novelist's head, at least this one's, and I should move along now to where the imagination meets the laws of historical gravity--the territory there on the page where the writer has to persuade the reader this made-up stuff is somewhat believable, or at least entitled to that other alibi writers count on-- "the willing suspension of disbelief."

How do you go about it? As a writer, the constant question I have to ask myself is, how do I get from here to there. From names, noses, and noises to completed characters who will have lasting lives there in the pages. How do I get from messy rough draft manuscript pages to those neatly bound pages that go to bookstore shelves throughout the land to take their place in high-class alphabetical company--Doctorow, Doig, Dostoevsky?

When someone says to me that they want to write--or skipping the hard part, just want to be a writer--I always ask them if they can stand to be by themselves for hours and days and weeks and months at a time. One of the oddest aspects of being a writer is having to sit around in your own head all the time, watching things flit through the twilight of the mind as you try to figure out--was that a bat that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Shakespeare? As a writer you have to be able to stand your own company--and not need company from much of anybody else, at least in the course of the day--long enough to figure out those shadowy patterns in the mental cave.

But modern society isn't really set up for hermits, is it. Back there in the early years when I was a freelance magazine journalist and incipient book writer--a state of being that a friend of mine once called self-**un**employed--I had to wonder sometimes about the aptness of my chosen existence as something like a suburban druid: solitary, all day long, just me and the words and the commas and the white space on paper, while my wife went off to her college teaching job to support us. There's always been that One Big Saying that lone-wolf writers try to cling to--naturally it was by another writer, Edward Gibbon, who probably thought it up in self-defense when he was holed up for all those years while working on **The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire**: "Solitude is the school of genius." Gibbon's saying has never convinced everyone. One time when he did venture out after having completed another book, he was greeted by the Duke of Gloucester with: "Scribble, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?"

I wasn't scribbling, but I was certainly doing a lot of typing to which I was the only witness. Then one day while I was at the library doing research I wandered past the shelf of "new releases" and stopped to take a look. Amid those new books was one titled, lo and behold, **Solitude**.

The dust jacket described the author--Anthony Storr-- as Clinical Lecturer in Psychiatry at Oxford University--and while I wasn't sure that I wanted to read anything that might put me in the category of "clinical," the question of working alone for what was looking like the rest of my life interested me enough that I checked out the book. And in its pages came across this:

"What takes place in the circuitry of the brain is a mystery; but it can be confidently asserted that these processes require time, passivity, and preferably solitude."

"Some of the people who have contributed most to the enrichment of human experience have contributed little to the welfare of human beings in particular," the book went on. "It can be argued that some of the great thinkers listed above"--(that list included Descartes, Newton, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard)--"were more preoccupied with what went on in their own minds that with the welfare of other people. The same is true of many writers"--uh oh-- "composers and painters. The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process which, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own validity. His most significant moments are those in which he attains some new insight, or makes some new discovery; and these moments are, chiefly, if not invariably those in which he is alone."

Imagine my surprise and pleasure. Talk about showing the dukes of the world that we're not just bashful scribblers--it was all right to be alone! Maybe it's even creatively healthy. Those years ago, I came away from Anthony Storr's book with the understanding that work itself can be a legitimate companion. It's amazing how much less anti-social you feel after seeing that written in a book.

And so, when I'm askedwhat my working habits are, I proudly say something like "pathological diligence." The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works. Flannery O'Connor was terribly ill, most of her short writing life, but her collection

of letters show her to have been a dedicated sardonic professional, as when she gave this unbeatable version of the experience of looking over one's own writing: "I have just corrected the page proofs and I spent a lot of time getting 'seems' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It was like getting ticks off a dog."

This is what she had to say about a writer's necessary state of patience:

"I'm a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away... Of course you have to make your habits in this conform to what you can do. I write only about two hours every day because that's all the energy I have, but I don't let anything interfere with those two hours, at the same time and the same place. This doesn't mean I produce much out of the two hours. Sometimes I work for months and have to throw everything away, but I don't think any of that was time wasted.... The fact is that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."

Ultimately, Flannery O'Connor's advice does add up, I believe. In my case, I began as a journalist, and so from the start did not believe in that malady called "writer's block"--I never did meet a newspaper or magazine editor who would say, "Oh, that's all right, we'll just run a blank space there where you can't think of anything to say." The point always is to get something down on paper: describe a character, make up dialogue, dig something out of your pocket notebook or laptop. I write a given number of words a day on a manuscript, a given number of days a week, a given number of weeks a year. This varies from book to book, so that the job isn't a permanent assembly line --on novels such as **The Whistling Season** and **The Eleventh Man** it's been four hundred words a day. That's two triple-spaced typed pages--it may not sound like much, but trust me, it's a day's work.

So, we have reached the point where the writer has to perform, to the best of his or her ability, there in the making of pages that will become a book. How do you go about that?

There's the story that is told about Vladimir Nabokov when he was teaching his course on the novel, at Cornell. (Back there in the Eisenhower years, that course of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!)

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic-alphabet equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in the classroom, but it all came by way of a heavy Russian accent. There was the time he had to hand back the test papers on which most of the class blithely discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style--with a "D"--when Nabokov all semester had actually been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of "Lolita" and "Pale Fire" and "Speak, Memory" and other linguistically highly-honed books peers over the rims of his glasses at the class and cries out his summary of the writing life: "You must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

The class, of course, thinks to itself, Yeah, right, the old boy has got it backwards again and they all get busy writing down the proper version-- "the precision of the scientist and the passion of the artist"--in the self-defense for the next test. They get this done and look up and Nabokov is still peering at them over the rims of those glasses, and says: "I repeat: you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

Let's take those one by one, beginning with passion, which often gets things started. Passionate investigation, as Nabokov meant--the search and research that goes into a piece of writing. 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--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. Let me give you the freshest possible example--I have spent the past couple of years in the company of Morrie, the schoolteacher, for the sake of **Work Song**, the novel that's being published in June. Morrie--and I--alit into Butte, Montana, because 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. My wife 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 bland modern building. The first library was a wonderful architectural show-off--a gray granite extravaganza with arched doorways and a balcony and a peaked tower like a castle. Just the kind of place Morrie would go to consult the city directory for some job worthy of his unique talents, as he now tells us about in this excerpt from **Work Song**:

"There is an old story that any Londoners with a madman in the family would drop him off at the library of the British Museum for the day. I was given a searching look as if I might be the Butte version when I presented myself at the desk of the public library that next morning and requested both the *City Directory* and Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* in the original Latin.

"The stout woman I took to be the head librarian--she had eyeglasses enchained around her neck commandingly enough for it--scrutinized me some moments more, then marched off into the maze of shelves while I found a seat at a broad oaken table. Everything was substantial, the brass-banistered stairway up to the mezzanine of books in tall rows, the green-shaded electrical lights hanging down from the high ceiling like watchfobs of the gods. I have always felt at home among books, so when the woman from the desk plopped my requested two in front of me, they seemed like old friends dropping by.

"Aware that I should get down to business, I instead drew the *Gallic Wars* to me first, unable to resist. I had ordered it up by habit, as a test. To me, a repository of books is not a library without that volume in the mother of languages. Handling the book fondly as I was, I became aware of its own touch: tanned leather, not the more common calfskin cover put on for show. I examined the binding: sewn rather than glued. On the pages, lovely to finger, the sentences practically rose from the paper in a strong clear Caslon typeface. What I was holding was an exceptionally fine copy, so much so that I momentarily found myself envious of the Butte Public Library."