Edmonds, Oct. 3 '08:

PACE

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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 400 characters in nine 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 quarter century 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 everything up. But now that I have just finished the novel-making process for the ninth time--on a World War Two novel which demanded, yes, an army of characters--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" the shared property of the long-established firm of Austen and Flaubert; and so on up to the perils of trespassing into the spooky 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 the Two Medicine trilogy: 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. And a particular favorite of mine, the sassy girl in **The Whistling Season** schoolroom, 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 told 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."

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 (it is said of Morrie in **The Whistling Season** that "an extraordinary amount of him was mustache"), 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: ~~Recently~~ I was in a ~~Montana establishment~~ SMALL-TOWN BAR 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.

QUICK

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 the personal territory where the feet meet the ground. The background I come out of as a

westerner who spends his time trying to corral stories of our part of the world.

In my case, it's no coincidence that the wonderfully beckoning word "story" is contained within that most generous other word, "history." While 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--my works of fiction are often keyed to historical actuality, for at least two reasons.

The first is that history, looked at closely, provides ingredients of validity that can season the literary recipe of a novel. The small particulars which creatively get added into the story to give it a kind of majestic fidelity. 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 westerners 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, I had a set of specific questions I put to each of them, seeking what I only know to call crystalizing details. That is, the kind of 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. For example, I asked each one what they carried their lunch in, when they rode those miles. The most enduring answer was a 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 a 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 named Florence Friedt gave me: THAT RIDE could get kind of boring, Florence said, 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. The movie rights to **The Whistling Season** have been optioned, and if Hollywood ever does make the movie, I can't wait to see how they cope with that saddle situation so magically provided by ex-schoolgirl Florence Friedt.

The second, of the pair of reasons that lures me into seeking the "story" within "history," is that history provides some of the best plots. And history that twines into a writer's own DNA perhaps leaves an inherited propensity for storytelling based on the Rembrandt light from the past.

The basic story that propels me up to this microphone tonight, on behalf of my tale about a homestead family and its one-room school and a now very distant "whistling season" of childhood, began to become words on June 16, 1903. That day, a fairly young bearded man--built about like me--filed with the U.S. Land Office in Helena, [redacted], his declaration of intention to homestead "the following described tract of land, viz: 160 acres of unsurveyed land in Meagher County, Montana.... Beginning at the southwest corner Number One, which is about one-and-a-half miles in a northeasterly direction from the source of the west branch of Spring Creek; ~~thence one-half mile~~ north to corner ~~Number~~ Two" and so on, corner to corner from one landmark to the next, until the description comes around to what it calls "the place of beginning."

MONTANA

poetically, I THINK

BRISK

Across the next fourteen years of paperwork concerning that land claim by Peter Scott Doig, my grandfather, the description of that land changed in some intriguing ways. Surveyors with their theodolites and jake staffs eventually reached that obscure nook of creek valley that he had his heart set on and transformed that original paragraph of pacing off from this landmark to the next one, into simply: "Northeast quarter, Section 8, Township 5 North, Range 5 East."

FLAT

My family line thus inadvertantly crosses paths with a couple of the great shaping forces of Western white settlement. The first is that compression of unruly landscape into arithmetic by those surveyors--the

rectangular survey system that has given us the checkerboard land pattern of the West. In essence, putting a gigantic street grid onto most of the American landscape--prairie, mountain, desert, wandering watershed, it all got this theoretical overlay of square miles. For better or worse, it has given our part of the nation the reputation that Thomas Wolfe, lusting for travel, dreamt of in **Of Time and the River**: "I will go up and down the country, and back and forth across the country on the great trains that thunder over America. I will go out West where states are square."

When you think about it, what an astounding act of ingenuity and legal description--not mention hubris toward the actual contours of the

(HYOO-BRIS)
(overbearing presumption)

earth--this numerating of the westward land has been. As one historian put it:

"Most Americans and Canadians accept the surve y system that so strongly affects their lives and perceptions of the land cape in the same way that they accept a week of seven days, a decimal numerical system, or an alphabet of twenty-six letters--a natural, inevitable, or perhaps in some inscrutable way, divinely ordained." (Hildegard Binder Johnson, **Order Upon the Land: The U.S. rectangular Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country.**

The divine origins of the rectangular survey may be arguable, but its arithmetic isn't, and that's its point. The straight property lines of simplicity, the idea was. Lines knifing the sod of the prairie into crops.

Town outlines, squaring our habitational energy into streets, lots, plots, paths. Section-line roads--the gyration of travel that we have all experienced in agricultural areas of driving a mile and taking a right-angle turn, and driving another mile and taking another right-angle turn, on and on. Here again, something mammoth out of history provides the fiction writer--at least, this one--with a crystal of detail when needed: if my schoolkids are going to stage a peculiar horserace that they do not want parents to see, they are going to need a nice out-of-the-way stretch of road that is also straight as a ruler, aren't they, and the West has those.

Along with the arrival of the rectangular survey into his obscure neck of the woods back there in 1903, my grandfather and the family he and my grandmother were industriously creating, that crammed log-built household up a remote Montana sagebrush coulee also was unknowingly being ushered into one of the biggest pell-mell migrations in our history --the homestead boom of the early twentieth century.

Just a few quick dabs of background here:

The basics of homesteading were in the Homestead Act of 1862--I'll simply quote the historian Richard White's textbook description of it, to keep myself in the clear:

"The law provided 160 acres of free land to any settler who paid a small filing fee and resided on and improved the land for five years."

There were later pieces of legislation tinkering with that, but that was the basic proposition--the federal government betting you five years of your life for a piece of land. The American Dream, with that one little catch in it.

You may not be surprised to hear, considering who is up here saying it, that Montana turned out to be the foremost homestead state. Settlers took up more than thirty-two million acres of homesteads there--more land than is to be found in, say, the entire state of Pennsylvania.

Nebraska and Colorado became second and third in homestead acreage, with more than twenty-two million acres each.

INTENSE

Translate those dry numbers into flesh and blood, and into my home state in roughly the first twenty years of the twentieth century came a

quarter of a million ~~people~~, many of them snapping up that bet with the government, homesteading tooth and nail. The state's population tripled in eighteen years, a population explosion of a magnitude that it takes a Las Vegas to produce today.

So, for a moment think of that prairie of as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims, dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns, most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows,

their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck catalogues, their buckboards and their Model A Fords. There they all are, around roughly the time of World War I, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth, and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table: some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

My grandfather's land claim, in the Big Belt mountains of south-central Montana, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--the last of them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, when I was born. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead.

That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettoes did for city America--provided landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else --that particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of thousands of others in the West, have given me impetus for much of my writing.

To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other empty homesteads where families hung their names on the wind of time.

Well, where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill from that homestead where he was born, to a ranch where my newly-married parents in the 1930s began their years as the western equivalent of sharecroppers--we even called the arrangement by which my father would take charge of a herd of cattle or a band of sheep

from their owner and graze them until shipping time for a portion of the profit, we called that doing it "on shares."

It was there that the homestead past first hit home to me, when I was about eight years old. My father was in his haymaker role, hiring those piquantly named crews, putting up the wild hay and alfalfa on this ranch, and I have two distinct memories of all that.

One is of the day a hay rake broke down, and my dad remembered there was a similar rake back at the Doig homestead where he could get the part he needed to fix it, in that backyard scatter of old equipment that used to accumulate on so many western ranches and farms for precisely that purpose--rustyparts.com, out there behind the barn.

Off we went, my father and I, to the old Doig place for our rake part, and to this day, I remember my shock at what happened when we set foot into the weedy yard of that empty homestead. My father broke down. Broke down and wept. His tears, that day, must have come from the flood of memories. The stories, still powerful to him, of all those lives around him in his younger years, in that mountain basin where his and mine were now the only human eyes, and the sockets of windowframes of the abandoned houses stared blind, all around us.

--My other homestead memory is luckily more cheerful. On the ranch where my dad was putting up the hay was another abandoned homestead, the Keith place, near enough for me to go and play in the old buildings. For whatever reason, among the delightful trash of the Keith

place was that long-gone family's bank statements, which of course included canceled checks; sheafs of them, a Fort Knox of them. My imagination had just come into a fortune! I pretended they were money, I riffled them as I'd seen the guy do who ran the roulette wheel in one of those nine taverns of our town, I fanned them out like playing cards, millionaire-like I made paper airplanes of them... The currency of history, waving in my ignorant eight-year-old hands, is my personal homestead portrait, I suppose.

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul." Those are the words of my narrator of **The Whistling Season**, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that serves as the readiest answer, in this case, to that toughest question

a writer ever gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy answered when asked that about ~~Anna Karenina~~ WAR AND PEACE?) It is true that a novel needs to be somewhat longer than a single sentence such as "Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul," and this 130,000-word novel of mine that you have been so generously reading here in ~~Loveland~~ EDMONDS conforms to that by taking in a span of time from the coming of Halley's Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957, and involving its characters in that great homestead land-rush and interweaving its plot with affairs of the heart and wallet among the story's grownups. But for our purpose tonight, the heart of this book is Paul Milliron's lamp-lit center of the universe, the one-room school he attends.

This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, the soul of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a western locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it would be way up north there near where the Marias River flows into the Missouri in north-central Montana.

It is country I have known myself from the soles of my shoes upward. By one of those strokes of luck that was entirely disguised at the time, I happened to go to high school in that prairie part of the world in a town built on a particularly dreamy boast. "Aridity is insurance against flood!" trumpeted the turn-of-the-twentieth-century advertisements for land around Valier, an indeed arid spot on the ~~Montana~~ prairie chosen for a gargantuan irrigation project, a manmade

lake three miles long, and the exuberant plat of a town to hold ten thousand people.

But by the time I put in my four years of school there just after mid-century, Valier had peaked at a population of only a thousand, and, having waned to half of that since, it is ending up as a slow-motion ghost town. The irrigation project, however, continues to make the prairie bloom, and that ungainly small-town school, with its sprinkling of idiosyncratic scintillating teachers, gave me some roots as a wordsmith who looks back at boom-and-bust places such as Valier. I saw a natural work of fiction waiting there in the storyline of homestead dreamers galore told by a narrator who would view it all for us through one of the most versatile lenses of the American experience, a one-room school.

And so, Paul Milliron in my novel is a western kid head over heels in love with words and those magic boxes of pages they come in. As Paul puts it, "My books already threatened to take over my part of the bedroom and keep on going. Mother's old ones, subscription sets Father had not been able to resist, coverless winnowings from the schoolhouse shelf--whatever cargoes of words I could lay my hands on I gave safe harbor."

Whe hires a housekeeper sight unseen from Minneap upkeep to a household that has been more ac even that intrepid housekeeper, Rose Llewely arrives before dawn each morning and finds Pa lamp. The morning she finds him

obinson Crusoe, she remarks a bit mournfully: "I always have to think twice whether that's about the opera singer or the shipwrecked sailor."

So passionately interested is Paul in the world of books and language that the teacher--and librarian and janitor and all else at that one-room schoolhouse--decides one language can't hold Paul. He starts being tutored in Latin, after school, by that imaginative teacher whose lofty flights of thought Paul can only compare to balloon ascensions. Paul himself is drastically down to earth in his Latin translations; to him, *Noli excitare canes dormientes,* quite plainly means *Do not disturb the canines that are asleep* , until his teacher shrinks it to *Let sleeping dogs lie.*

Highly literal as this schoolboy character is, it gives him one great advantage in the exploration of language. Whenever he is stumped by some fresh swatch of vocabulary or labyrinthine conjugation, Paul hears the echo of that long-suffering patient teacher telling him, "Look to the root, you must always look to the root of the word." As Paul puts it:

"It caused me to see into two languages at once. *Fabula*, story; and I gaped at the birth of *fabulous* and *fable*. Similarly *school* from *schola*, *recess* from *recedere*--suddenly everything I read was wearing a toga."

And of course, we are here tonight, under the sponsorship of THAT invaluable civic enterprise that is called a "library"because of one of those noble roots: "liber," the Latin noun for "book," and not

coincidentally, the same Latin word as an adjective, meaning "free, open, unrestricted"--the root of "liberty."

Back there in Paul Milliron's time, his peculiarly erudite teacher, Morrie Morgan, insists that Paul--with the intellectual liberation those schoolhouse books in two languages are giving him--must passionately put his imagination to a particularly pertinent translation:

"Here's one for you," Morrie tells him, and Paul goes on: "I thought I caught an impish gleam in him as he stepped to the blackboard and wrote it out. *Lux desiderium universitatis.* It did not look hard, which made me suspicious. "It is one of my favorites," Morrie was saying. (An authorial aside here: *Lux desiderium universitatis*, as you may or may not recognize, is a traditional Latin saying, that I made up.)

Paul again: Morrie looked at me sternly. "A hint. It does not have to be translated into precisely three words, nor does it need to be cumbered up with passive verbs and whatnot into a dozen or more. There's a lovely balance in the middle, to this one. Translate away, discipule."

I worked on it for some while. Knots of language entranced me even then, even through my fumbling and bad splices and hauling in heavy bowlines where I should have been threading slipknots. Finally, I cleared my throat and spoke:

"'Everything wants to have light.'"

Morrie pursed his lips, lifted his eyebrows, and eventually shook his head.

"Uh, 'wishes' to have light," I backpedaled, "'is homesick for' light --"

"Latin is the subject you are purportedly studying at this moment, I believe, Paul, not guesswork," he closed me off. "I want you to keep at this line, it will do you good."

Ultimately, the meaning that Morrie wants to kindle in Paul's young mind does reach him, in two different ways. The first is from on high, with the appearance in the western sky of Halley's Comet, making its once-every-seventy-five years visit to our earthly night sky:

"As soon as our eyes had night sight, we could pick out the faint trailing smudge of light, like the here-and gone strike of a match, that marked the visitor amid the standing clusters in that corner of the sky.

The tail of the comet would grow and grow as it neared, Morrie had told us in school. Each night would add to its paradoxical cloud of brightness. I already was dazzled that the nature of things could be vast enough to cast a stray diamond of light across the spaces of night probably just once in our lifetimes, yet one so legible that the blink of an eye brought this single migratory glow home to us out of all the glimmers held by the sky."

~~Ultimately~~ that magical comet brings with it what Morrie the teacher has sought from Paul the pupil, the eloquent translation of *Lux desiderium universitatis*-- "Light is the desire of the universe."

Comets come and go, however, and Paul and the other characters of **The Whistling Season** must find earthbound enlightenment as they

continue on through life, mustn't they. I mentioned earlier the writer's desire to provide that "majestic fidelity" of made-up things living true on the page for the reader, the craft side of writing. Sometimes the crafty side. Writers aren't always up to all the tricks that critics think they're catching us at as we carpenter our books. Flannery O'Conner was asked once if she had put a black hat on a farmer in one of her Georgia stories to symbolize how mean he was, and she said no, she did it because Georgia farmers wear black hats.

ANIMATED

Sometimes, though, in the making of a book, yes, the writer consciously resorts to some literary device or another that best seems to do the job for a particular scene, and for our last few minutes here I'm going to share with you a writerly trade secret, worth about as much as

the air it is written on--but here it is: one thing writers sometimes do, there on the page, is to bring the emotional and the physical actuality together in a scene.

How to do that with my character Paul Milliron, back there in 1910 looking for places his thirteen-year-old mind can go? Paul at the time has no idea that, by 1957--Sputnik's year--when he is telling this story to himself and us, he will be Montana's state superintendent of schools, with a thousand suddenly beleagured one-room schools under his jurisdiction. At this point of the book, Paul is looking back to that magical school year when he is a seventh-grader, and he and the other homestead kids daily ride horseback to the Marias Coulee school and picket their horses to graze during the schoolday. That lofty-thinking

male schoolmarm, Morrie Morgan, has just arrived, and Paul's family is pitching in to ready up the teacherage, out back of the school, for Morrie to live in. Paul as always is assigned to pump and carry water, and here he has just been sent off to fill the mop bucket at the pump in the schoolyard.

"It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last of my water errands, shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I watched. From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost. The schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could distinctly hear my lone soft footsteps on ground that was stampeded across at each recess.

Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the pump handle just yet.

"I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy, that set me aware of everything around, as though Marias Coulee school and its height of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of all that was in sight. I remember thinking if I wanted this moment for myself I had better use my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the dwindling light of the afternoon I tried to take in that world between the manageable horizons. The cutaway bluffs where the Marias River lay low and hidden were the limit of field of vision in one direction. In the other, the edge of the

smooth-buttered plain leading to the town of Westwater. Closer, though, was where I found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play area, there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot where I stood unnaturally alone."

I think perhaps there, with that inquisitive western kid reading the patterns in the prairie that lead to that solitary schoolhouse, where the love of books and other learning whispers everlastingly to him in a duet

of languages that "light is the desire of the universe," may be the melodic note to end up on.

Thank you for listening.