





## Columbia videoconference: Whistling Season

PACE

no audience  
reaction, no go  
slow - pause  
after "aridity"  
for ex.

By one of those strokes of luck that was entirely  
time, I happened to go to high school in a western town  
particularly dreamy boast. "Aridity is insurance against flood." That  
was what the turn-of-the-twentieth-century advertisements trumpeted 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 story of the steamshovels coming to the prairie (people sometimes would walk half a day to watch these mammoth earth-eaters at work) and the pell-mell land rush which drew in people by the boxcar-load (they would pile all their belongings and themselves into Great Northern Railway boxcars in the Midwest and be delivered to sidings on the naked earth of the West, where they would climb off and try to turn themselves into homesteaders)--a storyline of dreamers galore told by a narrator who



views it all for us through one of the most versatile lenses of the imagination, a one-room school.

The basics of homesteading were in the Homestead Act of 1862--I'll simply quote a 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 there 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 sitting 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 states of New York or Pennsylvania.

Into Montana 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 record of homestead entries, that start of paperwork such as my own grandfather's, all of a sudden looked like land hunger on steroids: in 1905, there were not quite twenty-five hundred homestead claims entered in the state of Montana that year, in the year 1910 there were twenty-two thousand--and the big numbers kept pouring in until 1919. The state's



population tripled in eighteen years, a population explosion of a magnitude that it takes a Las Vegas to produce today.

To me, that flood of people onto western acres, in the years just before and during World War One, is a great overlooked frontier. It doesn't fit readily with our other ~~western~~ <sup>FRONTIER</sup> sagas--the gold rushes, the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, the spike-by-spike drama of the building of the transcontinental railroads--because it is a twentieth century story.

And so, for a moment think of that prairie, of only about nine or ten decades ago, 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 T 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 the Doig 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, the decade I was born at the end of. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead.

So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for sixty years or more--yet it perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the ladder called America.

That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettos 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~~ <sup>HAS</sup> 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 the homestead past first hit home to me, when I was about eight years old. My father was <sup>a</sup> ~~his~~ haymaker <sup>that summer</sup> ~~rake~~, putting up the wild hay and alfalfa on the 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 ~~these nine~~ <sup>THE</sup> 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.

SLOW

So, those are some of the daubs of the past--of blood-memory, perhaps--that I had to work with in telling the story that became the book that Columbia and Fulton have read. I believe storytellers have worked at making magic out of those daubs of actuality from the very start, when



art began to dance off the cave walls to us. 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 that's what we're still up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace... I think stories still can be our way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

For those of us who wander into the almost unclassifiable profession of storytelling--a friend who has watched my writing career of the past three decades still keeps referring to me as ~~self-unemployed~~ our work, our words, of course have to start on the cave walls between our own ears. The everyday life of the writer, if that's what you can call sitting



around in your own head all the time. Herman Melville surely gave the creed of all us stay-at-homes, hunkered there trying to make books, when he let forth in Moby Dick his narrator's ever so literary yearning: "Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience!"

SLOW

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 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. *She continues:* 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.

Do I actually keep track of this daily output? You bet. I have a work calendar--just a plain one with plenty of white space for each day; it used to be given out by our fuel oil company, but now I have to go out and buy some kind of flowery variety or make my own--and I mark my total of pages on it each day and write the running total at the end of each week. I once read a sneering comment by some critic about Hemingway, to the effect that Hemingway was so insecure that he



actually counted every word he wrote every day. And I thought to myself, "Hey, that's the **best** thing I've ever heard about Hemingway."

Try as writers will, however, to turn the storytelling process into a recipe, there are always the unwritten-down ingredients--the pinch of this, the sift of that. One that particularly intrigues me in literary making-it-up, let us call the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, I owe this bit of writerly psyche to the late Richard Hugo, the bigger-than-life poet. In teaching aspiring poets at the University of Montana, Dick Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile."



Among the bites of the imagination he meant by that~~/~~are a list of pretended assumptions that Hugo would use when he set out to write a poem--as he told it in his terrific book ~~Non~~ writing, *The Triggering Town*, "Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at ~~le~~<sup>st</sup> one of the following"--and I'll give you just a few from Hugo's long list:

"I am an outcast returned to the town. Years ago the police told me to never come back but after all this time I assume that either I'll be forgiven or I will not be recognized."

"On Saturday nights everyone in town has fun but me. I sit home alone and listen to the radio. I wish I could join the others though I enjoy feeling left out."



<sup>lost</sup>  
A couple ~~more~~ <sup>of</sup> Hugo-isms that he used to inspire his town poems:

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“The annual picnic is a failure. No one has a good time.”

Or:

“The annual picnic is a huge success but it’s the only fun people have all year.”

You get the idea--Hugo’s crocodile prescription covers a lot of otherwise unexplainable wonders of prose, the go-for-broke elements that come right up off the page and get you.

Like a poet, a novelist--at least this one--has to deal in this kind of “what if.” The Whistling Season has a number of “what ifs,” starting with the one in the first few pages: what if someone ran an ad in a newspaper that read, “Can’t Cook But Doesn’t Bite”? But I think the



really unexpected crocodile making waves in the plot of the book involves the dreams of my narrator, Paul Milliron.

Paul has a very busy mind, asleep as well as awake. He has the unusual capacity of remembering all his dreams, all the details of them--all his life. It's a condition called "mnesia"--like "amnesia" without the **a**, and it's the reverse of a departure of memory--it's a protraction of recall, it takes its name from Ni-moss-uh-nee (Mnemosyne), who in Greek mythology is the goddess of memory, and the mother of the muses. As you can imagine, this is an acute psychological condition, particularly for a kid, to pack around all his dreams in his head forever, but doctors haven't studied it much--maybe because it's something I entirely made up.



In any case, Paul is chockablock with dreams, and as much as they unnerve him, he gradually manages to learn from them. His dreams suggest some answers to mystifying occurrences in everyday life; the sound of the crocodile slapping his tail in the water around the bend stirs Paul's imagination, and I hope the reader's.

So, while I generally do generate my fiction from historical set points--the biggest homesteading land rush in American history, in this case--I do absolutely make up my plots and people. And I think it's there, within the wilder bounds of "what if," that I should conclude this bit of thinking-out-loud about that vital pulse on the page, the heartbeat of imagination. I don't really know what to call <sup>it</sup> except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality



by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, had somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply "to where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."



These, then, are some of the strands that went into the weaving of the *The Whistling Season* novel, <sup>1</sup>three years in the writing and now out in the world in more than 150,000 copies and a movie script; I appreciate, more than I can say, the interest of reading communities such as this one.

Now I'll be glad to take your questions--Doyne, over to you, I believe?