One-Room School
Also One-Student School

By JIM ROBBINS
GREENOUGH, Mont. — At a time when many schools are
called about overcrowded class-
rooms, the Sunset school in this
ranching community has a differ-
ent problem — keeping its lone
student at her desk so it can re-
main open.

There are other schools in re-
 mote rural areas around the West
that have only one teacher and
one student, but the situation is
even starker here. Amber Leetch,
age 11, makes up the entire Sun-
set School District 30.

And while many one-student
schools elsewhere in the West
are in far-flung, impoverished
areas, the Sunset district —
whose entire annual budget is
about $83,000 — is in a prosper-
ous, ranching corner of the state.
One of the reasons there is only
one student is that the cost of the
scenic landscape here has risen
so high that young, aspiring
ranchers, the kind who would be
likely to have school-age chil-
dren, cannot afford to buy the
land.

Amber, a cheerful sixth grader,
attended the historic Sunset
school last year by herself and
most of this year as well, though
she had a first grader for com-
pany for a few weeks. Once that
first grader left, though, it was
just Amber again and her teach-
er, Toni Hatten.

"The hardest part is getting
through the day without feeling
too lonely," said Amber, as she
drew on a computerized white
board.

One way of fighting the loneli-
ness is with Baylee, a 3-month-
old husky mix that recently be-
came the new school dog.

The one-on-one situation is
challenging for both teacher and
student, says Ms. Hatten, 45, who
began teaching this year. There is
little escape for either: no group-
ing students to work together on
their own for a while, and the stu-
dent cannot disappear for a
while, while the teacher works
with someone else. It is Amber
and Toni together all day long.

"You're their lunch buddy,
their P.E. buddy, their recess bud-
ny," Ms. Hatten said. "You're
their everything."

The school is isolated as well as
small. The town of Sunset was
once the center of industrial-
scale logging for copper mines at
Butte, but that is long gone and
now the economy is ranching and
the region is known as Green-
ough. The town that once stood
here is gone, the general store
and post office vanished and only
the school remains and an out-
door bank of mailboxes. The
nearest town is about 20 miles
away. The city of Missoula is 35
miles to the west.

The isolation is offset some-
what by the beauty of the land-
scape. Sunset sits in a valley
surrounded by rolling hills and
mountains, with a blanket of tow-
ering ponderosa pines. The
Blackfoot River, a famous fishing
stream, flows near here.

Sunset is the smallest one-
room school in Montana (a sec-
ond room was added, but it is
only used for physical education
and storage), which has 62 of
them, ranging from one to 18 stu-
dents. It is the only one-room
school in the state with a lone stu-
dent, though there are some with
two or three. About 20 small
schools have closed in the last
decade in the state.

Claudette Morton, who retired
in 2010 as director of the Montana
Small School Association, and
still researches rural education,
thinks that is a loss. "Teachers in
rural schools don't make a lot
of money," she said, "It is a labor
of love in many respects. The teach-
ers love the independence and
there aren't a lot of rules." There
are advantages for the
student, as well.

"If she doesn't get something,
we'll work on it longer," Ms. Hat-
ten said. "That's the beauty of
one student."

Amber went here in kinder-
garten, then attended a school eight
miles away. But she moved back
here in the fifth grade. "She dealt
with a lot of bullying and the
school wouldn't address it," said
her mother, Wendy Leetch.

Not everyone thinks keeping a
school open with one student
makes sense. "It ruffles some
feathers with other districts who
say it's a lot of money for one stu-
dent," said Darlene Troutwine,
the Sunset district clerk. But
while the Sunset district seems to
be teetering on the edge of disap-
ppearing, perhaps when Amber
decamps for high school in two
years, it is not the typical rural
community in decline. The school
sits on land owned by the Resort
at Paws Up, a guest ranch that
features high-end accommoda-
tions. Last summer Daniel Craig

Amber Leetch, 11, returning to the one-room school where she is the only student after recess. Left, she reacted to a question from her teacher, Toni Hatten, while identifying rocks.

and Harrison Ford were at the
Paws Up promoting their film
"Cowboys and Aliens." An owner
of the ranch, Nadine Lipson, is on
the Sunset school board.

Built in 1917, the Sunset school
is historic on the outside, with ar-
tique playground equipment and
a bell in a tower that does not
ring. It is not an old-fashioned
schoolhouse on the inside. In-
stead of dusty chalkboards and
pull-down maps there is a Smart-
board, a kind of electronic white
board, that is synchronized with
Ms. Hatten's computer, and there
are three computers.

Theater productions at Sunset
pose some problems. "We have to
take multiple parts," Ms. Hatten
said. For the Christmas pageant
they drove 22 miles each day for
a month to the Ovando school.
Amber also played volleyball at
another school, Seeley Lake Ele-
mentary, 21 miles away.

As recently as 2001 there were
20 students at the school, but es-
calating land prices here mean
young ranch families must get
out of the business or ranch else-
where. Ms. Hatten has hopes of
more students in the future — at
least two, or perhaps three — to
make things more interesting and
to be sure the sun doesn't set
on the little school. "The Ovando
School has 11 and feels like a fam-
ily," Ms. Hatten said. "The older
kids help the younger kids and
they all play together."

School is four days a week
here, from eight until four. When
the day ends there is no yellow
school bus to take Amber home.
She lives off the grid with her
parents and brother, near the
high-altitude ghost town of Gar-
net, once a thriving mining town.
Her mother is a tour guide there
in the summer. The only access is
by snowmobile.

On a recent school day, Amber
and her mother donned helmets
to make the five-mile trip
through the mountains to their
home, with Amber on the back of
Mrs. Leetch's vehicle. Mrs.
Leetch recently got a new snow-
mobile with heated hand rests,
which makes a big difference on
the trip, especially when tem-
peratures drop to below zero.
They waved as they departed,
then roared off, leaving a cloud of
blue exhaust hanging in the air.
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**, 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
Dowagiac, May 16 '08

When I was about nine years of age, I heard him say, "Now let me get you around to the elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of the town, I saw a lot of character on display."

Among his distinctive western aspects—shepherd, broncbuster, 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 450 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 done 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.
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. Let me give you the freshest possible example--I have been living the past couple of years in 1943 and 1944, the World War Two period of my novel that's being published this fall, titled The Eleventh Man. It's a big work of fiction about a number of men and women, too, swept into uniform in wartime, and to particularize it to the homeland of so much of my fiction--the Two Medicine country of northern Montana--I knew that I had to learn about another piece of geography that haunts that one: New Guinea. Many of those young men
from the prairies of Montana and their allies from the outback of Australia found themselves in jungle combat on New Guinea, in terrible terrain—beachheads backed by a few miles of jungle backed by a colossal mountain range where the Japanese forces were dug in. Some of my characters simply have to be there—it was a generation-marking experience much the way the combat in Iraq leaves its imprint on those serving there and their small towns and families back home.

So, at the state Historical Society library in Helena, there I was going through World War Two letters, diaries, oral histories, battle reports. Library cartloads of these, because that Montana military unit—the 163rd Regiment of the 41st Infantry Division—had a pathologically diligent newsletter editor after the war, who for decades prodded reminiscences
and details out of those New Guinea veterans. Deep in one of the days of plowing through all this material, I came onto a letter by one of those ex-soldiers which did not begin very promisingly:

“A story of my life as a chaplain’s assistant would be dull reading, I’m afraid.”

Well, dull or not, my job of searching out those crystals of detail requires the passion to keep reading, even when it’s a tired passion. The letter got a little better:

“I don’t know that I was truly able to assist the Chaplain very much during the Salamaua campaign”—one of the New Guinea beachhead landings—“except to be near him much of the time... Was I supposed to be his bodyguard? He never said so, but he did manage to scrounge a
very old .45 automatic pistol for me to tote in addition to my M-1 rifle.
You ask how I got the job and I must say that I got it for Fort Lewis the
day the firing range officer reported to the chaplain that I was high scorer
on the pistol range--and he knew I could play the piano or organ for his
services."

Some personality begins to come out there, doesn't it. In my own
time in the military, I'm pretty sure I never met a Holy Joe who played
the organ in chapel and was also a pistol sharpshooter. I read on,
though, to find that the letter-writer had never actually been in any
combat, had never even seen an enemy soldier except dead ones. But
then he remembered coming ashore before dawn in the beach landing at
Salamaua and seeing this:
“Our boat landed just after the first assault troops... My next memory is the sight of a magnificent Australian soldier standing on the shore with his guide light, stark naked except for his beat-up old Digger hat.”

Now that’s what I mean by a crystalizing detail.

One of the wisest ranch women I’ve ever known once said to me, you can tell a lot about a man by the way he wears his hat. She happened to be talking about my father, who always wore his Stetson cocked. But that image in that old letter, of that bold Australian soldier who swam behind enemy lines to light that beach ahead of the assault and then shucked off all of his cold wet clothing except for his defiantly-worn Aussie hat—that tells me to put that guy in the book.
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: it 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.
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?”

“What if?” can lead a writer any number of places. There’s one instance in which I dearly wish I’d had the wit to try out a major “what if” on my friend and fellow writer, Norman Maclean. In *A River Runs Through It*, you’ll remember, Norman from that magnificently memorable
religious fly-fishing family imagines that God is not
dry-fly fisherman as well. I regret my eternally
different ‘what if” of him--Norman, what if you
stream of Presbyterian afterlife and God is a

Well, “what if” the writer at this microphone now had sat down a
few years ago and wondered what would happen if a kid could remember
all his dreams, all his life.

“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 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 Dowagiac 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 America’s greatest homestead land-rush and interweaving its plot with affairs of the heart and wallet among the story’s grownups.

Today, the heart of this book is Paul Milliron’s lamp—center of the universe, the one-room school he attends.
I realize an amazing number of you have already read the book, thanks to the generosity of the Lake Oswego library, but for what this is worth, let me take you through some of the story from the author’s point of view, in hopes of adding some background.

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 Montana 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, within sight of the Rockies.

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 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."

When Paul's widower father hires a housekeeper/sight unseen/from Minneapolis to try to bring some upkeep to a household that has been more accustomed to downkeep, even that intrepid housekeeper, Rose Llewellynn, is a bit in awe as she arrives before dawn each morning and finds Paul reading by the kitchen lamp. The morning she finds him immersed in Robinson 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 cānes 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."

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 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."
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'Connor 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.

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 beleaguered 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 him 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 stamped 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 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 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 chorus of passion and precision to end up with, tonight.

Thank you for listening.
Dowagiac, May 16 ‘08

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, shepherder, 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, 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, the kind of name 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 450 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. 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 done 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" 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 (in The Whistling Season, 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,” isn’t it) that simply pop to mind, 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—what that a bat
that just flew past? Or the whispering ghost of Plato? 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-unemployed--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 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 asked, at book signings 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 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 pointy 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 got 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 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. Let me give you the freshest possible example--I have been living the past couple of years in 1943 and 1944, the World War Two period of my novel that's being published this fall, titled The Eleventh Man. It's a big work of fiction about a number of men and women, too, swept into uniform in wartime, and to particularize it to the homeland of so much of my fiction--the Two Medicine country of northern Montana--I knew that I had to learn about another piece of geography that haunts that one: New Guinea. Many of those young men from the prairies of Montana and their allies from the outback of Australia found themselves in jungle combat on New Guinea, in terrible terrain--beachheads backed by a few miles of jungle backed by a colossal mountain range where the Japanese forces were dug in. Some of my characters simply have to be there--it was a generation-marking experience much the way the combat in Iraq leaves its imprint on those[who]serving there and their small towns and families back home.

So, at the state Historical Society library in Helena, there I was going through World War Two letters, diaries, oral histories, battle reports. Library cartloads of these, because that Montana military unit--the 163rd Regiment of the 41st Infantry Division--had a pathologically diligent newsletter editor after the war, who for decades prodded reminiscences and details out of those New Guinea veterans. Deep in one of the days of plowing through all this material, I came onto a letter by one of those ex-soldiers which did not begin very promisingly:
"A story of my life as a chaplain's assistant would be dull reading, I'm afraid."

Well, dull or not, my job of searching out those crystals of detail requires the passion to keep reading, even when it's a tired passion. The letter got a little better:

"I don't know that I was truly able to assist the Chaplain very much during the Salamaua campaign"--one of the New Guinea beachhead landings--"except to be near him much of the time... Was I supposed to be his bodyguard? He never said so, but he did manage to scrounge a very old .45 automatic pistol for me to tote in addition to my M-1 rifle. You ask how I got the job and I must say that I got it at Fort Lewis the day the firing range officer reported to the chaplain that I was high scorer on the pistol range--and he knew I could play the piano or organ for his services."

Some personality begins to come out there, doesn't it. In my own time in the military, I'm pretty sure I never met a Holy Joe who played the organ in chapel and was also a pistol sharpshooter. I read on, though, to find that the letter-writer had never actually been in any combat, had never even seen an enemy soldier except dead ones. But then he remembered coming ashore before dawn in the beach landing at Salamaua and seeing this:

"Our boat landed just after the first assault troops... My next memory is the sight of a magnificent Australian soldier standing on the shore with his guide light, stark naked except for his beat-up old Digger hat."

Now that's what I mean by a crystalizing detail.

One of the wisest ranch women I've ever known once said to me, you can tell a lot about a man by the way he wears his hat. She happened to be talking about my father, who always wore his Stetson cocked. But that image in that old letter, of that bold Australian soldier who swam behind enemy lines to light that beach ahead of the assault and then shucked off all of his cold wet clothing except for his defiantly-worn Aussie hat--that tells me to put that guy in the book.

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 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 crystallized 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: it 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.
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?”

“What if?” can lead a writer any number of places. There’s one instance in which I dearly wish I’d had the wit to try out a major “what if” on my friend and fellow writer, Norman Maclean. In *A River Runs through It*, you’ll remember, Norman from that magnificently memorable perspective of his religious fly-fishing family imagines that God is not only a fisherman but a dry-fly fisherman as well. I regret my eternally missed chance to ask a different ‘what if’ of him--Norman, what if you get up there in the trout stream of Presbyterian afterlife and God is a fish?

Well, “what if” the writer at this microphone now had sat down a few years ago and wondered what would happen if a kid could remember all his dreams, all his life.

“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 *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 Dowagiac 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 America’s greatest 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 Montana 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, within sight of the Rockies.

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 a 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 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.”

When Paul’s widower father hires a housekeeper sight unseen from Minneapolis to try to bring some upkeep to a household that has been more accustomed to downkeep, even that intrepid housekeeper, Rose Llewelynn, is a bit in awe as she arrives before dawn each morning and finds Paul reading by the kitchen lamp. The morning she finds him immersed in Robinson 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.”

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 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.

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 beleaguered 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 him 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 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 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 chorus of passion and precision to end up with, tonight.

Thank you for listening.