

Perhaps carried away by having an audience when I'm usually  
 sitting around peacefully in my own head, I'm going to try to take you  
 back into two historical eras simultaneously: one, the epic homestead  
 boom of roughly a century ago, and the other, the ~~era~~ of the slide  
 projector. We'll see which ~~is~~ is the more difficult to navigate.

PRE-VCR, PRE-POWERPOINT AGE OF THE BROWNIE CAMERA AND  
~~ERA~~  
~~CAROUSEL~~

What I've brought ~~today~~ TONIGHT are a couple of case histories of the effects  
 of the past--the Western past--on the so-called writerly mind. One of  
 these stories that I'll be telling and showing you with a smattering of  
 slides, eventually, is non-fiction--memoir, a best guess about myself and

the people I spring from, titled **This House of Sky**.<sup>2</sup> And the other is of the sort always alluded to in the question whenever a group of readers gets a crack at a writer: "Where do you get your ideas for your books, or do you just make them up out of your head?" Sometimes I do indeed, and of my now half dozen books of fiction, the one you'll be hearing from tonight is called **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**.

We know that stories become vital to us very early in life. The novelist Eudora Welty recalls as a small child in Mississippi she would plant herself between the grownups in the living room and urge them, "Now, talk."

And stories have carrying power. They last. They cavort on and on in us. We've known so ever since 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 writers are still <sup>↑</sup> up <sup>↑</sup> to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace... I think stories still can be our way of sharing <sup>↑</sup> light--<sup>↑</sup>of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

And so, the story that propels me up to this microphone tonight begins 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, Montana, 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, thence one-half mile east to corner Number Three; thence one-half mile south to corner Number Four; thence one-half mile west to corner Number One, the place of beginning.”

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.”

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. If the influence of the federal government that Westerners sometimes have loved to hate--the attitude so memorably summed up once by Bernard DeVoto as the rural West perpetually saying to Washington, D.C.: "Get out--and send us more money"--if that federal influence over the westward domain goes back to about as early as there was anything national about the United States of America, the checkerboard land system goes back even before that. The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for the surveying of the westward lands: "The surveyors as they are respectively qualified shall proceed to

divide the said territory into townships of six miles square," the Land Ordinance reads, "by lines running due north and south and others crossing these at right angles as near as may be....The plats of the townships respectively shall be marked by subdivisions into lots of one mile square or 640 acres..." 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, <sup>OUT WEST</sup>

*A GREAT DEAL*

What an astounding act of ingenuity and legal description--not mention <sup>hubris</sup> toward the actual contours of the earth--this numerating of the westward land has been. As one historian put it:

"Most Americans and Canadians accept the survey system that so strongly affects their lives and perceptions of the landscape in the same

way that they accept a week of seven days, a decimal numerical system, or an alphabet of twenty-six letters--as 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. As I savvy it, it was meant to do away with confusion over landmarks--in my grandfather's original claim before the surveyors reached that attic corner of Montana, his land is to be measured from the head of one branch of Spring Creek; well, there's probably a Spring Creek in every one of Montana's 56 counties--to do

away with that sort of imprecision by providing that measurable web of square miles.

The straight 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. Lines, it was thought, to pierce the problems nature inconveniently insists on.

And in a number of ways the rectangular survey system on those available acres did give us routes of habit made indelible. At the University of Washington in the 1960's was a western historian named Vernon Carstensen who was much interested in what he called "patterns on the land." I wandered into Carstensen's graduate seminar from ~~Montana~~ ranch jobs and journalism in a Chicago suburb, and a few years

after me Richard White arrived into that same Carstensen seminar (with the iron will and sure sense of purpose of a UC Santa Cruz grad.

Richard of course went on to make Carstensen proud, and I just...went

on. But I did think Carstensen had something in his notion that the

patterns we put on the land reach back out and touch our lives. As a

writer, I'm interested in small details of this sort, everyday details, and

one that quickly came to mind, from my having grown up on and around

Montana ranches and farms, was of having to dig postholes for

fencelines that run through some of the earth's rockiest patches just

because that's where the surveyor's damnable straight line reaches.

Section-line roads, would be another consequence of those 1785

orders to turn the land into squares--the gyration of travel that any of you

probably have experienced in agricultural areas of driving a mile and <sup>10</sup> taking a right-angle turn, and driving another mile and <sup>IT TAKES</sup> taking another right-angle turn, on and on.

In rural areas, the school section--a mile-square chunk of land, a pair of them in each thirty-six-square mile township set aside to help fund the one-room rural schools--those school sections became local reference points; in the way, say, that in downtown Chicago you'd arrange to meet with someone under the clock of the Marshall Field store. The cave walls of my memory, from growing up in that country of my grandfather's, echo with my father and others saying:

“The cattle are in there north of the school section.”

Or: "Tell you what, I'll catch up with you at the gate to the school section."

And, other habits of the tongue and heart, those one-room schoolhouses--which the school sections helped to maintain--became the social centers for those homesteading communities, the places where dances were held and courtships were initiated. A lot of us born in that homesteaded country owe our origins not only to THE EXISTENCE OF Cupid, but to those school sections and their flirtatious schoolhouses.

That's a bit of the flavor, then, a little feel of the patterns, of that long effort to square the land into dreamscape. / And along with the arrival of the rectangular survey into his obscure neck of the Montana woods back there in 1903, my grandfather also unknowingly was being

ushered into one of the biggest pell-mell agriculture-based migrations in our history--the northern plains homestead boom of the early twentieth century.

The basics of homesteading were in the Homestead Act of 1862--I'll simply quote Richard'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 <sup>A LOT OF</sup> later pieces of legislation ~~intended~~ tinkering with that, but there was the basic proposition--the federal government betting you <sup>SOME</sup> ~~five~~ years of your life for a piece of land. The American Dream, with that one little catch to it.

Into Montana in roughly the first twenty years of the twentieth century came a half 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 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. Montana's population tripled in eighteen years--I know you're used to population explosion here in California, but <sup>↑</sup>three <sup>↑</sup>people wherever there had been only one <sup>↑</sup>before? This had Malthus vibrating in his grave.

(IT LOOKED LIKE THE HOUSING MARKET, DOWN HERE.)

/So, for a moment /think of that prairie 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 **MONTGOMERY WARD** ~~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.

Those homesteaders came on various wings and prayers:

Good weather--Montana, and the Dakotas, which shared in this avalanche of land-seekers, had unusually good farming weather during much of that era.

Bad advice from railroads and other land promoters. The town where I went to high school, Valier, was based on drawing people in to farm what had been buffalo prairie and then cattle range, and I have a piece of promotional material from the time meant to assuage any neophyte farmer's concern that it's an area which historically averages only about 14 inches of rainfall a year. The pamphlet soothingly states: "Aridity is insurance against loss by flood."

Avenues of immigration also wafted these people to that prairie--an entire neighborhood from Belgium, eighty people in one bunch, packed up everything and came to settle in the Valier area, and fifty years later I was still going to school with kids from "the Belgian colony." On the football team, they were always the linemen--slow, squat guys built like Belgian bricks--and as a running back on our frequently overwhelmed team, I wondered why couldn't a race of <sup>BIG</sup> giant Swedes have settled around here? **WHERE ARE "GIANTS IN THE EARTH" WHEN YOU NEED 'EM AS BLOCKERS?**

Urges to leave the old country, misconceptions about the new country--those are just a handful of many, many reasons behind that extraordinary homestead influx, but I'm going to stop with only that many because they're probably the main ones which magnetized my

people, the Doigs, to that land on Spring Creek. The geographical  
 “neighborhood” there where my grandfather and his brother took up  
 side-by-side homestead claims is called the Sixteen country--a larger  
 creek, Sixteenmile Creek, snakes through the Big Belt Mountains and  
 feeds into the Missouri River, just below the Missouri headwaters, and  
 some thirty families that I've been able to identify--”mostly Scotch,” as  
 a census taker of the time laconically put it--lit in there to homestead.

**SCOTCH PEASANTS TURNING THEMSELVES INTO AMERICAN PEASANTS -  
 NOT NECESSARILY DRIVEN BY ANY GREATER VISION THAN TO GET ONTO ONE  
 OF THE FIRST RUNGS OF THE AMERICAN LADDER OF LIFE - IN THIS CASE,  
 A HOMESTEAD.**

Periodically, Peter Doig attests on one federal form or another about  
 expenditures in proving up on his land claim--building three-quarters of  
 a mile of wire fence, digging ditches and planting wheat and rye. (His  
 land claim was made under the Desert Land Acts of 1877 and 1891, and

so the nurturing of amber waves of grain in the Big Belt Mountains, well over a mile above sea level, was part of the land-taking process.) In 1906 came the amenity of a cattle shed, 38 feet by 75 feet, as the words on his "Claimants Testimony" document say a little proudly, "constructed of lumber"--that is, not of logs or poles, but the civilized commerce of sawmills. The Doigs, at least on that ever-growing paperwork file, sounded as if they were getting somewhere.

/That's some of the backdrop, then, the personal history and the propwash of larger historical developments, which ~~rooted~~ <sup>DEPOSITED</sup> my family line into a high, harshly beautiful basin there in the Big Belt Mountains ~~of~~ ~~Montana~~. The Doigs clung there until finally the Depression of the

1930s overwhelmed even their stubbornness and that of the other  
 cockleburr Scotch families of the Sixteen country.

And I was to find, growing up on the memory-edges of this family  
 story, that the homestead experience never entirely let go of my father,  
 and therefore of me, even long after the homestead itself was gone from  
 us. Let me now show you a little of that haunting country, and us in it.

Slide 1: This is the Sixteen Canyon, looking west. Even today it's a  
 remote, stubborn back-corner of geography, about 55 air-miles southeast  
 of Helena. As you'll shortly see, there was an actual little town back in  
 here called Sixteen, but it's literally fading off the map, because the  
 Montana Department of Transportation in a mad fit of bureaucratic  
 tidiness decided to purge some of these abandoned towns, and the back

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roads to them, off the state highway maps. / The only long-lived attention this canyon has had was when the electrified Milwaukee Railroad was built through, starting in 1908--which provided my Scotch homesteading forebears the unanticipated amenity of whiskey by train.

Slide 2: This how the land looks in the area around the canyon, hogback ridges, basin-like valleys between; the dots of buildings down there at the middle bottom of the picture (**use pointer**) are my great-uncle's homestead.

click TWICE?

Slide 3: A view from the ground, the landmark Wall Mountain--you see it there in the middle with its tilted rimrock--which is the Eiffel Tower of the Sixteen country, you ~~see it from everywhere~~ there.

CAN'T GET AWAY FROM IT ANYWHERE

You can imagine what winter is like back in there beyond Wall Mountain, in the canyon country--it's about thirty-five miles to the nearest town of any size, most of that over unpaved roads. **EVEN YET** When Annick Smith and Beth Chadwick were looking for somewhere to film their movie **Heartland**, which turned out to be a fine film based on Elinore Pruitt Stewart's **Letters of a Woman Homesteader**, they phoned me in Seattle and asked if I thought the Doig place would be a suitable ~~place~~ **SITE** to shoot the movie. I told them I didn't know--the site is awfully remote and high and winterish, and they were calling late in the year--but if they wanted to take a look, they should get in touch with one of my father's cousins, who I knew still went fishing back in there.

Annick and Beth got hold of him and started fighting their way in over

the flanks of Wall Mountain there, only to give up when their four-wheel-drive started bulldozing snow over the top of its radiator. Not for the first time, the Doig place missed its date with destiny.

Slide 4: These are the buildings of the Peter Doig homestead, and their residents at the time Carol and I were in there in 1977 researching **This House of Sky--cows.**

Slide 5: It's sagebrush country--it'll swat the legs off you if you don't wear heavy chaps when you're on horseback. In the family photos there's a terrific wardrobe of chaps of different styles for different seasons--batwing chaps to really cover the legs in heaviest brush, wooly chaps for winter--and some just for dressing up. There's one pair of Doig family chaps my mother liked to pose in, which I just find

irresistable-- spelled out down each leg in fancy rivets is M-O-N-T-A-N-A and then at the bottom there's a riveted heart with initials in it.

Slide 6: Wall Mountain, angling up over the homestead.

Slide 7: The house, where the six Doig boys, as they were called well into their twenties, lived in a dorm-style room and their mother and ~~kid sister~~ kid sister shared the other bedroom. Eight people, coming and going, in this T-shaped place not much bigger than a cabin, for thirty years.

Slide 8: This is a significantly younger me--or as I like to think of it, an insignificantly younger me--pondering into my notebook while my wife Carol does the actual work of capturing the scene. All these color slides, tonight, are Carol's pictures. Without her and her camera, in all these years and now nine books, I am one-eyed and pencil-bound.

Slide 9: The view from the kitchen--again, Wall Mountain dominating. As I later had one of my <sup>FICTIONAL</sup> characters remark about trying to make a living on beautiful but hostile land such as this, you can't get a fork into scenery.

That's the quick tour of the Doig place, as the homestead was called. And here, courtesy of the Brownie box camera and the family photo albums, are glimpses of its people:

Slide 10: My father--here in the middle, in the light striped shirt--and three of his brothers; the gent on the right is one of their riding buddies. The Doig boys, here in their twenties and the nineteen-twenties, the Doig boys had been born and raised on the homestead and still were living there with their widowed mother, but they don't look much like the

homesteaders we see in the traditional sod-hut pictures, with the sewing machine and the canary cage and the family Bible out on display and everyone sitting ~~stolidly~~ around in solid Sunday clothes posing for the traveling photographer, do they. It gets even more incongruous than that, because these were these young men's Sunday clothes, when they would spend the Sabbath holding bronc-riding contests at the homestead, ribbing each other in Scotch accents wrapped around ranch lingo.

Slide 11: My father at his office.

Slide 12: Here the Brownie is in the admiring hands of my mother, a frequent visitor to the Doig homestead in the courtship years, and across the top of this dual portrait of my father, on the left, and his brother

Angus on the right, in their go-to-town finery, she wrote "Ready for the  big day."

Slide 13: And here they are in the rodeo arena on the big day, the Fourth of July, 1928. This is closely followed in her photo album by a  picture of my father, standing as if caught in mid-strut in his leather chaps, on which she has written: "My Cowboy."

Slide 14:  This picture--again, surely taken by a Brownie box camera with only one lens speed, but panned just right--is of a horse race through the little railroad town of Sixteen. Look at how they're going,  full-tilt,  reckless,  got a dog running there amid the horses' hooves (**use pointer**). Having seen how these young men cowboyed-up in the earlier pictures, this is about the kind of behavior you'd expect from them,

wouldn't you. You'd be only about half-right. Because, in this bunch riding like bats out of hell through the uncertain civic boundaries of the railroad village of Sixteen are <sup>ALSO</sup> the young women of the homesteads. The horse in third place here--**use pointer**--is ridden by my aunt Anna, a teenager at the time, in the biggest hat of anybody in the bunch, and there's another young woman riding double, behind Anna's saddle, hanging on around Anna's waist, and Angus's girlfriend of the moment is also somewhere in this cavalry charge. According to a lot of photos and a lot of stories, girls such as Anna, growing up on these homesteads, leapt into a mobility their mothers hadn't had--riding horseback to dances fifteen or twenty miles away, with their good dresses tied behind their saddle.

Anna did recount for me the mixed blessing at those dances of having six big brothers looking after her virtue.

Slide 15: Here, on the left, is Anna in another homestead moment a few years later--the other flapper is my mother.

Slide 16: For the Doigs, who actually lasted at this way of life quite a while longer than most, the homestead fell prey to the Depression and to tugs of the heart, as one by one the Doig boys and Anna migrated out into marriage. Here are my father and mother in their honeymoon summer of 1934, herding sheep on a mountain named Grassy.

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Where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill to a ranch where my newly-married parents soon began

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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. (THAT SUMMER) My father was a haymaker, a hay contractor, on this ranch, and I have two distinct memories.

One is of the day a hay rake broke down, and my dad remembered there was a similar rake back at the Doig place 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 back of the barn.

Off we went, my father and I, ~~to the 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 the Doig place. 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 who ran the roulette wheel in White Sulphur Springs do, 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.

Well, let me now read a short sample of the book that grew out of all this background, and some years of research and tape-recording people out of my family's past and, not least, that hefty paperwork file of Peter

Doig's homestead claim with its inadvertant bit of poetry, "the place of beginning." These pages, from **This House of Sky:**

"By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a *place*. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside--just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of

sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, *place....*

“The homestead sites my father could point out to me by the dozen--place upon place, and our own family soil among them--in almost all cases turned out to be not the seed acres for yeoman farms amid the sage, nor the first pastures of tidy family ranches. Not that at all. They turned out to be landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else. Quarters, it could be said, that did for that region of rural America what the tenements of the immigrant ghettos did for city America.

“But that is my telling of it, across the gulf of a second generation after Peter and annie Doig took up land in the Basin. They had other things in their heads than the years beyond tomorrow. The young wife from Perthshire could hear the howling of wolves and coyotes--and worse, the splitting cracks of thunder when lightning storms cut down on the Big Belts. To the end of her life, she claimed she never could forget those unruly sounds of the Basin, nor its isolation. The young husband was more the one for staying....Over the next dozen years, the couple managed to double their owned acreage and to make a start in the sheep business, then used the profits to buy cattle, the easier livestock to pasture. As well, they added to the first son five more, until the names in the family began to resound like the roll call of a kilted regiment: Edwin

Charles, Varick John, Charles Campbell, James Stuart, Angus McKinnon, Claude Spencer.

“Then, on a September day in 1910, a little past noon, Peter Doig stepped outside the log house. He had been spending time on errands--to the county fair the day before, where he had won prizes for his chickens and dry-land potatoes and treated himself to a fine rewardful drunk, this morning to his nearest neighbor’s house on some small matter--and the ranch chores were piling up. He strode down the path to the garden to begin digging the rest of the prize potato crop. Going through the gate, he clutched at his heart, fell sideways, and died. He was four months short of his thirty-seventh birthday.

“A few mornings later, a lumber wagon with a casket roped in place jolted out of the Basin and set off on the day-long trip to the cemetery at White Sulphur Springs. Behind the rough hearse coiled a dusty column of riders on horseback and families on spring wagons, neighbors and kin. They buried Peter Doig, tailor’s helper in Scotland and homesteader in Montana, and rode their long ride home into the hills.

“Charles Campbell Doig was nine when his father died, made old enough in that instant to help his mother and his brothers carry the body in from the dark garden dirt. It must have been the first time he touched against death. And touched ahead, too, somewhere in his scaredness, to the life he was going to have from then on in that lamed family, on that flinty Basin homestead.”

The homestead story of my family has plenty of company on the bookshelf--I'm not nearly the only writer who has looked back and seen homesteads as literary makings. Wallace Stegner, in my favorite book of his, Wolf Willow, deals splendidly with his boyhood years on a Saskatchewan homestead. Mari Sandoz in the 1930's gave us what I think is another classic, **Old Jules**, a kind of composite memoir of homesteaders in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. I've already mentioned **Letters of a Woman Homesteader**, by Elinore Pruitt Stewart. A work of fiction I've always liked is Molly Gloss's novel about a single woman homesteading in Oregon's Blue Mountains, **The Jump-Off Creek**. Some of the work of Willa Cather and O.E. Rolvaag's Norwegian-

American epic, **Giants in the Earth**, of course are standard citations in this field. Well, these are just a taste, the list of homestead-based books is considerable, and from my point of view, those attempts to give the homesteaders, on their inadequate acres, their place in the larger western story are quite evocative--I think, a more telling portrait of pieces of the West than we've had from, say, cowboys' memoirs or for that matter, cowboy fiction.

Sometime in 1981, with one piece of fiction to my name--the novel **The Sea Runners**-- I made one of those writerly decisions that cause people to ask that question about things done out of my head: I sat down one day and decided to spend the rest of that decade writing three novels that would follow a Montana family across their first hundred years in

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the American West. For one of those books, I was naturally drawn back to the homesteading history--that prairie archipelago of shanties, out there amid hard water and harder weather, all those theatrical stages 160 acres in size upon which lives were played out, under the spell of land-seeking.

I wanted the setting to be different, more provocative to the imagination, from the one that had drawn the Doigs, but one I knew something about from having spent my high school years in it--the country in northern Montana along the Rocky Mountain Front from roughly Bynum to Browning (I'm sure that locates it for you): the Two Medicine country of this trilogy. So, in this strange literary business of

trying to get at some truths by making stuff up, let me take you briefly--

pictorially--into the makings of **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**.

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Slide 17: Imagine this as the portrait of the author thinking for a couple of years, although actually I was merely sensibly bundled up as I stood around while Carol and her camera started to do my work for me again, capturing the country.

We were tracing out a route for the pair of young Scotchmen I was inventing, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill--no connection to Angus Doig back there rodeoing with my dad, I deliberately assigned any of my family members' Scotch first names to characters they had absolutely nothing in common with-- a route for Rob and Angus to travel by freight wagon in early spring (Slide 18:)--or late winter, depending on what

tricks the weather has up its sleeve--traveling into their American dreamscape, the Two Medicine country of northern Montana. (Slide 19) (JACK STAYS)

Here we were about ten miles north of the Missouri River and the little town of Craig which was a stage stop at the time of the novel, 1889, when Carol's camera and my notebook both began to notice the silver wash of light. Carol kept clicking, and these scenes came into words in the book this way, in Angus's narration:

(SHOW) "The light of this ghostly day became like no other I had ever seen, a silver clarity that made the stone spines of ridges (COTTONWOODS) (Slide 20) and an occasional few cottonwood trees stand out like engravings in book pages. Any outline that showed itself looked strangely singular, as if it existed only right then, never before. (Slide 21) I seemed to be existing

differently myself. Again as it had happened on that first full Atlantic morning of mine when I watched and watched the ocean, I could feel a slowing of the day; a shadowless truce while light speaks to time.”

While Angus and Rob are suspended this way, in that gossamer of weather and imagination in the foothills of the Rocky Mountain Front, let's remember where they came from. “The past is another country, they do things differently there,” runs that wonderful line in **The Go-  
Between**, and that other country these two young Scotchmen had only recently come from was a past of roundheaded stone walls (Slide 22)...

...and a sky of chimney pots (Slide 23)...

...and the streetlights (Slide 24:) of Victorian Britain...

...which they departed by way of the Albert Harbor in the port city of Greenock... (Slide 25)

...hard beside the <sup>SHIP-BUILDING</sup> River Clyde (Slide 26)...

...with its packet steamers (Slide 27) busy as water-going beetles.

This, then, was the bric-a-brac of original home and journey that Angus and Rob carried in their heads, and the country they were coming into was vague to them, shrouded by that weather and the contours of the benchlands (Slide 28) they soon found themselves wending through.

I'm always interested in trying to get into writing how humans and land meet, and in my first novel, **The Sea Runners**, I have a figure of speech where, as the clouds suddenly lift, an Alaskan mountain "steps into view." (Sea Runners, p. 134.) I was scolded by a literary critic who

informed me that kind of usage is called "a pathetic fallacy"--attributing  
human characteristics or emotions to inanimate things--and they had  
 been warned against that sort of fancifulness at the UNIVERSITY OF Iowa writers' school  
 where she had been trained. Ever since that scolding I have made sure  
 to maintain my membership in the non-Iowa school of writing and let the  
land move whenever it damn well wants to, in my pages. These next ~~FINAL~~ THREE  
 shots are the visual equivalent of that, a sensation I have Angus and Rob  
 go through as they approach the Two Medicine country and as I've had  
 for the past forty-five years since I first went into that country as a high  
 school kid--a sense of the land coming nearer.

Slide 29:

Slide 30:

Slide 31:

(CLICK TWICE)<sup>45</sup>

(LIGHTS ON, ONE LAST TIME, PLEASE.) (CHECK TIME)

Now that I finally have landed these young Scotchmen into the territory of my heart and theirs, here are the <sup>BRIEF</sup> passages in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** where Angus has ridden out of the rough-hewn little town of Gros Ventre, looking for a homestead site. He's already looked north, east, and south, prospects which didn't suit him, so there's just one direction left.

I sat transfixed in the saddle and slowly tutored myself about the join of this tremendous western attic to the rest of the Two Medicine country.

No human sign was anywhere around, except for the tiny pair of

homesteads just above the mouth of the North Fork, one of them undoubtedly that of the old Bible-banger Whoojamadinger who had been mentioned to me in town. Other than those, wherever I looked was pure planet. There from the knob I was on I could see eastward down the creek to where Gros Ventre was tucked away; for that matter, I could see all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, what, more than eighty miles distant... By the holy, this was as if stepping up onto the hill above the Greenock dock and being magically able to gaze across all of Scotland to Edinburgh. My eyes reluctant to leave one direction for the next, nonetheless I twisted to scan each of them over and over: north, the broad patient benchland... southward, the throng of big dry-grass ridges shouldering between this creek branch and the South Fork...

West. West, the mountains as steady as a sea wall.... Close as I was to these promontories, which was still far, for the first time since Rob and I came to Gros Ventre these seemed to me local mountains. They were my guide now, even the wind fell from mind in their favor. Seeing them carving their canyons of stone into the sky edge, scarps and peaks deep up into the blue, a person could have no doubt where he was. The poor old rest of the earth could hold to whatever habit of axis it wished, but this Two Medicine country answered to a West Pole, its own magnetic world top here along its wildest horizon. (STOP HERE, BECAUSE OF TIME?)

Someway in the midst of all my gawking I began to feel watched myself. Maybe by someone at either of the homesteads along the creek, but no one was in view. By the cows then? No, they seemed all to have

their noses down in their daydream fashion of eating. Nothing else, nobody, anywhere that I could find.

As much as I tried to dismiss the feeling, though, the touch of eyes would not leave me. Who knew, probably these seven-league mountains were capable of gazing back at me. Nonetheless I cast a glance behind me for surety's sake.

PACE On a blood bay horse not much farther away than a strong spit sat a colossaly bearded figure.

He was loose-made--tall, thin, mostly legs and elbows, a stick man. And that beard was a dark-brown feedbag of whiskers halfway down his chest. He also had one of those alarming foreheads you sometimes see

on the most Scottish of Scots, a kind of sheer stark cliff from the eyes up.

As if the skull was making itself known under there.

All of this was regarding me in a blinkless way. I gaped back at the whiskers and forehead, only gradually noticing that the horseman's hands were either side of his saddle horn, holding another lengthy stick of some sort across there and pointing it mostly towards me. Then I realized that stick was a rifle.

"You have business here, do you?" this apparition asked.

"I hope to," I answered, more carefully that I had ever said anything before. From the looks of him, the lightest wrong word and I was a gone geezer. "I'm, I'm looking for homestead land to take up."

“Ay, every man who can walk, crawl or ride is looking for that. But not many of them find here.”

“That’s their loss, I would say. This country”--I nodded my head cautiously to the North Fork--”is the picture of what I’d hoped for.”

“Pictures are hard to eat,” he gave me for that. Maybe I was hoping too much, but I thought his stare had softened a bit as he heard more of my voice. At least the rifle hadn’t turned any farther in my direction.

Any mercy to this situation, I would devoutly accept. He levied his next words: “You are new to here?”

“As the dew,” I admitted, and told him in general about Rob and myself and our homesteading intention...

He slid the rifle into its scabbard. “My name is Duff.”

I introduced myself and we had a handshake, more or less. Ninian Duff immediately turned to inquisition.

“You are from?”

“Nethermuir, in Forfar.”

“Ay, I know of your town. Flora and I are East Neuk of Fife folk. As are Donald and Jen Erskine, next along the creek here. We made the journey together, three years since.” People were leaving even the fat farms of Fife, were they? Old Scotland was becoming a bare cupboard.

As if he had run through his supply of words for this hour, Ninian Duff was now gazing the length of the valley to where the far shoulder of a butte angled down to the North Fork. I kept a sideways eye on him as much as I dared. Ninian Biblical Rifleman Duff, scarecrow on a glorious

horse. Was there no one in this Two medicine country as normal as me? He sat silently studying the calm swale of green beneath us as if making certain every blade of grass was in place, as if tallying the logs in the two lonely homestead houses. Abruptly:

“You are not afraid of work?”

“None that I’ve met yet.”

The whiskers of Ninian Duff twitched a bit at that. “Homesteading has brands of it the rest of the world never heard of. But that is a thing you will need to learn for yourself. Were I you”--a hypothesis I wasn’t particularly comfortable with--“I’d have a look at the patch of land there aneath Breed Butte, along the top of the creek. Then you can dinner with us and we will talk.” Ninian Duff started his powerful red-brown

PACE

horse down off the knob. “We eat at noon,” he declared over his shoulder in a way that told me he did not mean the first minute beyond twelve o’clock.

PACE When I rode back into Gros Ventre it was nearly suppertime. I was

vastly saddle-tired... but could feel the North Fork, the future, like music  
→  
under my skin.

Thanks for listening, and I’ll be glad to try to field any of your questions.