When I began in the writing trade, the workhorse harnessed to a newspaper, I somehow joined one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's ark—the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that I would go up that gangplank to end up as my own book report.
The Sno-Isle Library folks are persuasive, however, and so my assignment is to try to tell you, in about the next forty minutes, the makings of a book that took me two-and-a-half years to write. A blow-by-blow account therefore has the risk of keeping us here for years on end, doesn’t it. So, I’m going to try some shortcuts, and as you know, shortcuts sometimes run perpendicular to common sense. But it simply feels right to me to start, tonight, with some of the craft of writing that went into This House of Sky—that deliberately was flexed onto some of those pages by me, with lyrical intent premeditated—because any piece of writing that lasts casts a longer and more meaningful
shadow than its maker. Then I’ll see if I can bring up a few roots of how and why this kind of writing evolved into this kind of book. And finally, since this book and and I are now past our silver anniversary, probably some accounting of our life together is due. When I get done with talking out loud about what I thought I was up to in trying to make words speak forever on silent paper— I warned you we’re going to be out of range of common sense here—I’ll be glad try to field any questions you might have, and afterward to sign some books the estimable Windandtide bookstore has brought for the occasion.
In the beginning is the language. That's what stories are ultimately about, whether they're in the form of a book, or television, or film, or now on computer. We live by stories--our own memories are the stories we tell ourselves--and what's magical about stories is the way they're told, about the language always trying to excel itself, say something in a new way, say "hey, listen to this!"

Looking back at the diary I kept during the writing of This House of Sky, I find that I was determined to make the language dance, in this book. In those diary pages are musings and urgings to myself to always push the language toward
unexpected beauty—as I said to myself at one point, to try to make each sentence of the book have "a trap of poetry" within it. The opening page of This House of Sky, not coincidentally, shows this--I wanted the book off to a fast stylistic start, and so, for example, there is this immediate description of a Montana creek:

"The single sound is hidden water--the south fork of Sixteenmile Creek diving down its willow-masked gulch. The stream flees north through this secret and peopleless land until, under the fir-dark flanks of Hatfield Mountain, a bōw of meadow makes the riffled water curl wide to the west. At this interruption, a low rumple of the mountain knolls itself up watchfully, and atop
it, like a sentry box over the frontier between the sly creek and the
prodding meadow, perches our single-room herding cabin.”

Okay, a few of the things that I hope are going on in those
three sentences:

--The verbs are out of the ordinary. Way out. “The stream
flees... the meadow makes the riffled water curl wide...

And then a little innovation which has won me a lot of
admiration and condemnation, the use of a noun as a verb: “A low
rumple of the mountain knolls itself up...” As if the mountain
terrain itself were a living part of this story, as I wanted to imply.
A couple of other things that aren’t there by accident: The modifiers, the adjectives in particular, aren’t bashful. “...willow-masked gulch...” “fir-dark flanks...” “...the riffled water...” “the sly creek and the prodding meadow...” This is not your stripped-down Hemingway style which was the expected mode in writing about the American West back in the 1970’s, when I was putting this book together.

Finally, let me mention a dab of rhythm, there on the page: “The single sound is hidden water...” I can’t remember how deliberate that was, but certainly semi-consciously there’s a familiar rhythm from poetry: “The single sound is hidden
water...” Of a certain generation, we probably all learned something like that rhythm best from Robert Frost: “Whose woods these are I think I know.”

This poetic urge that crops up in my books, particularly in my non-fiction, is one of those roots that I’ll tenderly pull up here for a minute and try to explain. As squarely as I can look at myself and the kind of writing I’ve produced—which on the one hand relies on dogged research and on the other, fancy flights of words—I seem to be either something like a poet yearning to be a clerk or a clerk fumbling around with poetry. In either case, I can tell you poetic leanings caught up with me in an unexpected place—
while I was working on a Ph.D. in history. What graduate school taught me, back there in the late ‘60s, was that I didn’t have what it took to be on a university faculty. I found myself freelancing magazine articles during grad school at the University of Washington—just as if I didn’t have any seminar papers due—and I also began, to my complete surprise, writing poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet’s final skill, the one Yeats called/ closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But still wanting to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, it
was back then that I began working on what I later heard Norman Maclean call the poetry under the prose. And that’s what those stretching verbs and unabashed modifiers and the knoll getting up out of nounhood and doing a jig are about, there on the opening page of *This House of Sky*.

Besides what might kindly be called my own lyrical propensity, there’s also what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my characters speak on the page. Where does that come from? Well, accompany me back to age ten and listen to a voice that has never left me:
“You’re not sugar nor salt nor nobody’s honey, so the rain will never hurt you,” she croons to me.

“That one goes around looking like she’s been yanked through a knothole backwards,” she huffs about our worst-dressed neighbor.

And, she confides about the couple dallying together in our wide-eyed little town, “Those two are as close as three in a bed with one kicked out.”

Into my life had come that river of proverbs, my grandmother. I was ten years of age, but my ears were as old as sin. All of a sudden I knew I was in new territory of life, something like
honorary adulthood. Now, besides my Scots-burr storytelling widower father, here was my mother's mother in this reluctant knot of bloodline they had made, to raise me.

So, you bet, my ears were busy from then on, with the picture-play of words from my grandmother—whose formal education had broken off at the third grade—whenever the prairie wind would swirl up her dress and she would announce, "balloon ascension!" Or with the bloodstream music of rhyme when my father, from the heights of his eighth-grade education, would ask, "Have they taught ye this one yet?" and begin reciting, to my dropped jaw, "Hiawatha."
People who are poor in all else are often rich in language. The everyday-ness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around, my father and my grandmother, must have drilled that into me, because starting with this book I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of people's lives coming through. Any kind of work has its own vocabulary, its "poetry under the prose," and people are dauntingly eloquent at it.
I found that, time and again, as I went around with my tape recorder when I was doing the research for *This House of Sky*. Pete McCabe, for instance, my dad’s favorite bartender, telling me of the dying-off generation of shepherders and ranch hands who populated his Stockman bar when I used to come in there as a kid with my dad--they were “just waitin’ for the marble farm,” Pete put it, and told me about setting them up a free beer now and then-- “You know they’d like to have one and don’t have the money for it, and I never lost anything doing it for ‘em.”
The deckhands and bartenders of Shakespeare’s ark know something about making the language dance, too, we must never forget.
Any of us who have ever looked closely at our family photo albums know that, genetically speaking, we are not so much ourselves but piecework of those before us. Writers too have lineage, heritage. The writing that makes books out of lore and lingo is a craft that has to be learned and worked at, and one of the ancestors I chose, upon becoming a working writer, was waiting for me there in the pages of his sea stories, Joseph Conrad.

Joseph Conrad of course is famous for the sweep of his rhetoric, the oceanic power of his sentences. Every literary critic knows that—but it seems to me what they either don’t know, or are
too bashful to say out loud, is something else that Conrad was just as terrific at: quick characterization.

In Conrad’s great storm-at-sea story, Typhoon, which features the most literal-minded, phlegmatic hero in literary history, Captain MacWhirr—who outlasts the typhoon by not having enough imagination to get scared—there’s the one-sentence summary of the captain’s wife:

“The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good.”
That's all we ever know about Mrs. Captain MacWhirr--but it's an entire portrait, it's a whole life in that one sentence, isn't it.

Given that kind of example, I try--with all the craft in me--to make the minor characters in my books vivid. To make them behave as memorably in my pages as Laurence Olivier once said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

Here's a quick portrait of the pair of neighbors my grandmother and I had, when we lived in that wide-eyed little
town of Ringling, population about 45 then, and less now. Our house not only didn't have running water, it didn't even have a well, and so we carried all our water by bucket from next door from the house of this memorable couple, Kate and Walter Badgeutt:

"There were enormities about the Badgeッツ which somehow seemed to bolster us simply by existing so near at hand. These began with size and age, and went on through manner. Side by side, the two weathered figures loomed like barn and silo. Kate was pillowed in fat, so wide that she seemed to wedge apart the arms of the huge easy chair where she spent her days. Atop that
crate of a body was an owlish face, and a swift tongue that could
operate Walter all day long and still have time to tell what the rest
of Ringling was doing. On her desk by the front window which
looked across the tracks to the gas station and post office-store,
Kate kept her pair of binoculars. Who had come to town, for how
long and maybe even what they bought--it all came up the
magnifying tunnel of vision to Kate, then went out with new life,
as if having added to itself while re-echoing through that bulk of
body.

"Then in some midsentence of hers, Walter would appear
from one or another of his chores, in his pauseful way looming tall
as a doorway, and nearly as still—a rangy silent sentinel with great hands hung on poles of arms....”

/With Walter Badgett paused there in memory, let me just mention one further decision of craft that shaped the pages of this book, and then traipse off to dig at roots a bit. I can’t emphasize enough that the decisions of language I’ve been giving you samples of, and this next one, are the doings of a professional writer. I was thirty-nine by the time This House of Sky was published, and I had worked at the writer’s trade some twenty years by then--my byline already was on more than a hundred magazine articles, and those eight or nine fugitive poems, and my
Carol and I had written a journalism textbook together. A full-time freelance writer, as I was after leaving newspaper work and a magazine job and belated graduate school, awaits not the tides of inspiration but those of perspiration. The workaday 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. "The fact is" said Flannery O'Connor, "that if you don't sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won't be sitting there."
And so, sitting there trying to coax the past to talk, I determined that memory needed its own voice in this book. Memoirs— and I very much consider This House of Sky a memoir rather than an autobiography; as I’ll get to in just a minute, it began as a book about my father and his times—memoirs have to be the essence of a life, instead of, say, a framework as in biography. Great memoirs, such as Midnight by Vladimir Nabokov, On by V. S. Pritchett, or Bronx Primitive by Kate Simon, or Sorrowless Times by James Herndon, have never hesitated to give a version of conversations that happened decades ago. There’s no other way you can convey the sound of the people
you're writing about, the patterns of their talk, the habits of their sayings.

My training as a journalist, though, made me uneasy not to have ground-rules made plain to the reader, when I was recovering conversations from persons no longer among the living. So I put the dialogue of This House of Sky into italics instead of quote marks, to indicate that this is memory's version. That people's words were as accurately retrieved as I could possibly manage to do it across the distances of time and mortality, but necessarily not the absolute verbatim that we use quotation marks to indicate. Even the people from my family's
past who were still around to talk into my tape recorder--and there are a couple of dozen of them in the pages of the book--I italicized their spoken words to me rather than presenting their version of things as though they were not mediated by memory.

I also gave memory its own performance pieces in the book--the between-chapter bursts of language and musing about the nature of remembering. Prism pieces, as I called them, as if the spectrum of memory was being reflected through these little crystal-like sections, in speculations such as this one from the first of these prisms:
"If, somewhere beneath the blood, the past must beat in me to make a rhythm of survival for itself—to go on as this half-life which echoes as a second pulse inside the ticking moments of my existence—if this is what must be, why is the pattern of remembered instants so uneven, so gapped and rutted and plunging and soaring? I can only believe it is because memory takes its pattern from the earliest moments in the mind, from childhood."

As you can tell, not only did these prism pieces give me a chance to ruminate about memory outside the narrative pace of each chapter, they let me improvise solos in as much music of
words as I could manage. One of my favorite sayings about the creative process is from the great jazz trumpeter, Louis Armstrong: “We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the other notes for yourself.” For better or worse, the memory prism pieces sent me off looking.

Well, those are glimpses of the writer at work, if that’s what sitting around in my own head for a couple of years at a time can be called. By what routes, though, did such word-making lead to this specific book, instead of, say, a chapbook of not very good poems or one of those tremulous first novels in which actual
people are as thinly disguised as if they've fallen into a vat of
cellophane?

This House of Sky now comes with an introduction in
which I recite a lot of the chronology of how the book came to be.

It was installed when the hardback version was re-issued in a
fifteenth anniversary edition, and it's up front in the paperback as
well, any more. I have mixed emotions about it being there--
evidently for eternity, now--because I think books should just
speak for themselves, starting on page one; but the introduction,
in here, at least shows some of what I was thinking, and
publishers were thinking, as This House of Sky found its way into the world.

But there is, beyond that, at least one stray and somewhat exotic root, in the making of the book, that I can trace out for you a little.

It goes back to a time when Rotarians flocked west by the thousands.

I realize this conjures up wagon trains of guys singing the Rotary song over breakfast around the campfire on the overland trail—but that's not what I mean. No, in 1966, Rotary International chose Denver as the site of its annual world-wide --and it is a whopping worldwide organization of service clubs--
convention; and as I at the time was the only westerner on the staff of the Rotarian magazine in suburban Chicago, I was put in charge of the theme issue about the convention venue--i.e., at least as I defined it, the whole Rocky Mountain west.

For a young restless west-leaning wordsmith--my wife Carol and I were within months of lighting out for the west ourselves, in our move to Seattle--being put in charge of that special issue of The Rotarian--here it is, in its "Wandering the High West" glory--was like someone with a sweet tooth being turned loose in a candy shop. I decided we'd do a photo essay on the Rocky Mountain states, and what better way to do that than blow the
budget on a couple of Ansel Adams pictures—for Wyoming, here, "Tetons, Snake River, Thunderstorm"—can't get any more iconic than that—and for New Mexico, here, the famous "Aspens"—and pad out the other pages with free photos by Carol and state tourist bureaus. I commissioned articles right and left, including one on the historical flavor of the West from Vardis Fisher—after my original choice, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, told me he had hit writer's block on the topic.

But of course, the absolute best stuff, I assigned to myself. Those pieces seem to point, a dozen years ahead, in the general direction of This House of Sky.
First were the captions for the photo essay, which I naturally wasn't going to let anybody else get near--how many times in life do you get to write the words for the work of Ansel Adams and your own bride in the same set of pages? But those captions turned out to be not what you might expect in the pages of The Rotarian magazine, because they're a kind of secret poem. The stanza with each picture is linked to the one on the next page with a repetition of word or image or synonym or allusion--for instance, the first line of a caption about the Superstition Mountains "bespeaking Nev-IDAHO-UTAH" is followed by the first line of the next one, "The mountains walk in wind."
Only one of the other editors caught on to these linking allusions and half-rhymes and so on—he was the other closet poet on the staff, but he never broke loose from the Midwest to see where words could really take him—and so, there was this fancy piece of writing, poetry under the prosaic Rotarian approach, going out to a million Rotary Club members.

But that wasn't nearly all, as long as I had my hands on that special issue. I also assigned myself a full-length piece about rodeo—as you can tell, writer's block wasn't anything I was worried about coming down with. And in the course of that, I
wrote a few paragraphs about my father in his bronc-stomping days. Here’s one:

“Corrals, chutes, and bleachers were scarce on the Montana prairie thirty and forty years ago, so the arena was formed by a circle of autos and horsemen. While some helpful soul ‘eared down’ a bronc--holding the horse’s ears to keep his head down--the rider climbed aboard. Then the bronc was turned loose, and the contest between man and beast went on until the man stopped riding or the beast stopped bucking. Madness? Yes, but, according to the gleam in Dad’s eye when he recounts such escapades, madness of a most thrilling sort.”
Now, you'll have noticed that I have mostly spared my father and my grandmother one more elucidation by me, in this talk. I figure they exist in every page of the book, more vividly recreated there than I can do here. But I think it's significant that this rodeo piece was the first time I tried to write about my dad—whatever the Rotarians thought, he loved the piece; he about wore out the magazine passing it around among the neighbors.

After his death, five years later, the idea was more and more with me to try some sort of book about him and the times and tragedies that had shaped him, in his western generation. Right away it hit me that it would also need to be a book about my
grandmother, in that rough but magical alliance of life they made for my sake. And standing there next was the logic that I myself had better be in the book, because mine as the writerly voice was the strongest way I knew to tell the story of the three of us.

The story of Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer and yours truly as their poet and clerk did get told, emphatically I guess we have to say, since it’s still around after these twenty-five years—and let me turn toward trying to bring us home safe from the shortcuts with a few thoughts now about the apparent results of *This House of Sky* and some allied books about the West. These are other people’s thoughts, to get a little proper distance on this.
The first is that of Bill Bevis, who taught western literature at the University of Montana and was very much part of the near-legendary writing scene in Missoula. In his selection of what he saw as pivotal books about the west--Ten Tough Trips--Bevis writes:

"I was stunned when I read the opening page of This House of Sky...The style, tense and dynamic with strong verbs and nouns made into verbs"–aha! I've got him on the hook, haven't I--"that style was dramatically imaginative and anti-'western', following the lead not of John Wayne but of William Faulkner....Doig's prose declared that a Montanan could speak
any way he or she pleased, that ‘western’ writing did not have to be silence, one-liners, and grunts.”

I’d actually already heard a shorter and more profound summary of how the Missoula gang was looking at This House of Sky, at the first booksigning I ever did, which happened there in Missoula, and I looked up to find myself confronted with a barrel-chested stranger who proved to be Bill Kittredge. Bill stuck his hand out for a handshake and told me: “Read your book. I just want to say, Goddamn.” (EXULTANT CHORTLE)
as happening between the pages back there in the mid-1970s. In 1974, James Welch’s classic novel of Reservation life, *Winter in the Blood*, appeared. In 1976, *A River Runs through It*, Norman Maclean’s small but mighty book, two years later came the book we’re talking about here today, which as he put it, “reaffirmed what everybody had been hoping and thinking—that there would be a real western literature, not just shoot-em-ups.”

Of course it takes a historian to put a lasting stamp of assessment on what western-rooted writers have been trying to achieve—and let me say, western historians have been quick to
“get it” about modern western literature, while some of their cohorts in English departments are still, shall we say, trying to read the smoke signals. Patty’s presence here today speaks for itself, I think we can safely say. I know she has been keeping close track of us “writers of the purple sage,” as they get a kick out of calling us in the New York Times, ever since our first chairman of the board, Wallace Stegner.

The overall historical look that I want to cite to you is by Richard Maxwell Brown, who has discerned what he calls western “grassroots autobiography and biography” that constitutes, he says, “a meeting ground of the literary talent and
the social history of the West.” In his compendium Dick Brown discusses the role of This House of Sky and its companion Heart Earth, so I’ll blushingly skip over that part, but he lists several books of recent years where “nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty” and other “universals of human life” meet:

--Bill Kittredge’s own memoir, Hole in the Sky

--Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams

--Rain or Shine, by Cyra McFadden

--Mary Clearman Blew’s brilliant set of books, Balsamroot and All but the Waltz.

The list begun by Dick Brown keeps lengthening itself--
--Teresa Jordan's *Riding the White Horse Home*

--Kim Barnes' remembrance of coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho, *In the Wilderness*

--and the latest voice out of Missoula, Judy Blunt's last year, *Breaking Clean*.

Like all lists, this is only partial, add to it as you will, but the point is the flavor of such books that a historian such as Brown identifies: “the simple but powerful formula of the grassroots reality of our region: place, plus family...These (books) are unusually vivid in their evocation of both family and place.”
So, that is at least an early historical take on where modern western literature has been heading, and I now need to head us out of my long-way-around shortcuts.

As best I can put it together, this has been some of the craft, and the ways and by-ways, and the points of arrival of this book that we’re gathered around here today. But there's a brief last act to the story of the book which, because it is actual, maybe sums up the making of *This House of Sky* better than any of my backward glancings ever can. After the manuscript was accepted for publication, and the publisher, Harcourt, was gearing up to put it into print, my editor called me to say we really didn’t have a
title for the book. Its working title, I’m reluctant to confess in public, had been **Half-Life**—you heard the phrase there in the snippet I read about the past as a half-life echoing inside the ticking moments of existence, and I was about halfway through the Biblical allotment of three-score years and ten at the time I was working on the book, and I probably had other pallid reasons as well for resorting that as a makeshift title—so it didn’t come as news to me that we needed to do better than that.

I scrambled for a couple of days, asking friends if they had any ideas for a good title, and pawing through the dictionary of quotations, and my wife even polled her classes at the community
college where she was teaching--to our astonishment, that cutting-edge generation of students came up with things along the lines of “As the World Turns.” Finally I managed to think up In This House of Sky, which I liked the rhythm of. Shorter is better, my editor said: how about, House of Sky? I said, how about This House of Sky? Perfect, my editor said--now we have a title but we don’t have any passage in the book that has anything to do with that title. “Okay, I’ll write one,” I said, without really thinking about what I was letting myself in for. The book, as I think you’ve gathered from my comments today, had been a staggering amount of labor--I’d been working on it across six
years by then, and there were at least a thousand solid days, within that, of just sitting at the typewriter, exerting at the language hour after hour, trying things out, changing them, rewriting, rewriting, rewriting: the first page of the book, where I read you the little dab about the creek, I figure I worked over at least seventy-five times in those years. And now I had promised I would go back and graft a title scene into a finished book.

I sat down to do it, not knowing how many days, weeks, I was going to have to struggle. And in an hour and a half, it was done--as if the rhythms and the poetry under the prose and the voices of
the past and all the rest had come together and told me, "Here. Say this:"

"In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull in perplexing medleys. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends I joked with yesterday now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for more than a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can acquaintanceships be struck up among these random residents of the dark."
Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality. When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down thirty years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badgett. Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and bread which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite, it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plates grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down, "Well, reckon we can make it through till night now?"
I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel coffee pot in a shepherder’s wagon, my father’s voice saying, “Ye could float your grandma’s flat-iron on the Swede’s coffee.” I walk back toward my typewriter, past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind--leaning jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become the blue expanse over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life’s
experience that my younger self could imagine, a single great house of sky.”

THANK YOU.
Sky talk

The first words out of me tonight regarding This House of Sky need to be simply “Thank you,” to all of you who have spent time with my book for this “community read” occasion. When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job, I dreamed ahead to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare’s ark--the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of
biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that I would go up that gangplank to end up as a piece of homework.

My own assignment in all this is to try to tell you, in about the next forty-five minutes, the makings of a book that took me two-and-a-half years to write. A blow-by-blow account therefore has the risk of keeping us here for years on end. So, I'm going to try some shortcuts, and as you know, shortcuts sometimes run perpendicular to common sense. But it simply feels right to me to start, tonight, with some of the craft of writing that went into This House of Sky—that deliberately was flexed onto some of
those pages by me, with lyrical intent premeditated--because any piece of writing that lasts/casts a longer and more meaningful shadow than its maker./Then I'll see if I can bring up a few roots of how and why this kind of writing evolved into this kind of book. And finally, since this is the silver anniversary year of this book and me, probably some accounting of our life together is due. I was up to in trying to make words speak forever on silent paper--I warned you we're going to be out of range of common sense here--I'll be glad try to field any questions you might have.
any way he or she pleased, that ‘western’ writing did not have to be silence, one-liners, and grunts.’”

I’d actually already heard a shorter and more profound summary of how the Missoula gang was looking at This House of Sky, when I was signing books in the wonderful sadly-gone Fine Print bookstore here and looked up to find myself confronted with a barrel-chested figure who proved to be Bill Kittredge. Bill stuck his hand out for a handshake and told me: “Read your book. I just want to say, Goddamn.” (EXULTANT CHORTLE)

Later, Bill, his invaluable role as the circuit-riding teacher and writer about the American West put some keen
When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job, I dreamed ahead to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare’s ark—the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that I would go up that gangplank to end up as my own book report.
Betsy Lewis is persuasive, however--librarians tend to be that way--and so my assignment is to try to tell you, in about the next forty minutes, the makings of a book that took me two-and-a-half years to write. A blow-by-blow account therefore carries the risk of keeping us here for years on end, doesn’t it. So, I’m going to try some shortcuts, and as you know, shortcuts sometimes run perpendicular to common sense. But it simply feels right to me to start, tonight, with some of the craft of writing that went into This House of Sky--that deliberately was flexed onto some of those pages by me, with lyrical intent premeditated--because any piece of writing that lasts casts a longer and more meaningful
shadow than its maker. Then I’ll see if I can bring up a few roots of how and why this kind of writing evolved into this kind of book. And finally, since this is the silver anniversary year of this book and me since the joined pair of us were a finalist for National Book Award, probably some accounting of our life together is due. (When I get done with talking out loud about what I thought I was up to in trying to make words speak forever on silent paper—I warned you we’re going to be out of range of common sense here—I’ll be glad to try to field any questions you might have.)
David Guterson is persuasive, however, and so my assignment is to try to tell you, in about the next forty minutes, the makings of a book that took me two-and-a-half years to write. A blow-by-blow account therefore carries the risk of keeping us here for months on end, doesn’t it. So, I’m going to try some shortcuts, and as you know, shortcuts sometimes run perpendicular to common sense. But it simply feels right to me to start, tonight, with some of the craft of writing that went into This House of Sky—that deliberately was flexed onto some of those pages by me, with lyrical intent premeditated—because any piece of writing that lasts casts a longer and more meaningful shadow than its
maker. Then I’ll see if I can bring up a few roots of how and why this kind of writing evolved into this kind of book. And finally, since this book and I are now past our silver anniversary, probably some accounting of our life together is due. When I get done with talking out loud about what I thought I was up to in trying to make words speak forever on silent paper—I warned you we’re going to be out of range of common sense once in a while here—I’ll be glad try to field any questions you might have, and sign some books for the estimable Eagle Harbor Book Company and so on, all of it of course with an eye to the ferry schedule.