

PNBA, Oct. 6, '13

There's a delicious line in the play Boz, about James Boswell, the Boswell of Dr. Samuel Johnson. When he wasn't busy scribbling down the great man's utterances, Boz liked to party. Trying to recover from another night of too much wining, dining, and wenching, it occurs to him maybe he had better say his prayers, just to be on the safe side. Looking heavenward, he ducks his head a little and begins, "Paradoxical as it may sound, Lord--"

That classic expression of a contradictory state of affairs came to mind when Thom Chambliss asked me to reflect on how and

why I came to be in the good company of Jane and Barry as a
“backlist” in your bookstores. We’ve each reached that status
by individual routes, but in thinking how to mentally map out to
you the ~~trajectory~~ ^{PATH} by which at least some of my fifteen books are
always sitting on your shelves in that blessed alphabetical
company--Dickens, Doig, Dostoevsky--in my experience, two
quite different sets of directions have guided me to that holy land
of the backlist.

First, the writing must speak for itself, lift its voice in that
siren song as old as humanity, “I have a story to tell you.” But

paradoxically, the writer also must speak for it, just to be on the safe side.

To take each of those for a few minutes apiece:

Ever since I emerged from the University of Washington at the age of thirty with a Ph.D. in history—[who's counting, but that was 44 years ago]—into the somewhat paradoxical occupation of a magazine freelance—[one friend called me self-unemployed]—I have dedicated myself to being a professional writer. Not someone who has a yen to write and sometimes does, but someone who writes. Treats it like a job with regular hours, office, letterheads. Never misses a deadline. Never suffers a twinge of

writer's block--if you're stumped, describe some character's nose and eyes and hair. Produces printed words, and therefore those old settlers on the "D" shelf of your fiction sections, on a regular, reliable, professional basis.

Doing the chores of creation this way, every one of my books has taken me two to three years. And here's a key point, none of them has taken any longer than that. Again, professionalism, writing as well as you can in a given amount of time. If Joseph Conrad could handwrite **Lord Jim**, **Heart of Darkness** and **Typhoon** all within about a year and a half, that's proof enough that a pro can turn out quality along with quantity.

For me, a vital part of that professional steadiness has been a long devotion to the place and people of my imagination--the Two Medicine country, along the Rocky Mountain Front of northern Montana, which has been the setting of several of my novels, and the fictional population of ranchers and forest rangers and bartenders and taxi dancers and many, many others who live on those pages. That comes from a decision, long ago but still echoing in my work, about investment of my time. Call it confidence, boldness, stubbornness, the kind of gamble known as going for broke, but with two prize-winning nonfiction books behind me by the turn of 1980's, I determined I would spend the

rest of the decade doing ⁶ three linked novels, which would follow
the fictional McCaskill family through four generations and the
first century of Montana's ^{Tumultuous} statehood. *One answer, then, to how do you
become a backlist fixture - write a
trilogy!*

Second, paradox once more, during that commitment of a
major chunk of my professional and personal life--sentencing
myself to a solitude of research and writing for those years--the
population of my imagination drew adoring crowds of bookbuyers
and, if I may say, booksellers. **English Creek** and **Dancing at
the Rascal Fair** both brought me cherished PNBA awards, and
Ride With Me, Mariah Montana was serialized in a national

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newspaper--and to this day, readers ask me if there will be more books about the McCaskills. I never say "Never," to that.

The larger point, again tinged with paradox, is that although I'm often seen by reviewers as a "historical novelist"/or a "western writer," actual readers tell me over and over that when they pluck one of my novels off your shelves, they do so because of the characters and their stories. They never say, "Boy, that was great history!" or "Good scenery!" No, it's the contents of imagination, not of history books or maps, that has made readers' devotion match my own and kept that backlist alive and well.

I'll just add that, similarly, the several years, more recently, that I've chosen to spend with my character, Morrie Morgan, in **The Whistling Season**, **Work Song** and now **Sweet Thunder** have brought a fresh reward to me, and I hope to your cash registers. My backlist caught a second wind particularly with the national bestselling success of **The Whistling Season** and **The Bartender's Tale**. I shall never forget the professional assessment by my beloved editor--"There aren't many writers your age whose sales figures go up, Ivan."

5 1/2 min.

I have a few more minutes of thoughts on the other half of the backlister's paradox, speaking up for the already expressive book, but mindful of my time allotment, I could come back to that later--I don't want to have the long vaudeville hook come out and drag me off the stage by my neck.

6 1/2
min.
to
here

6 1/2 min.

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All right, onward to speaking up for one's book--or as the letterhead of my prized agent's notepad says, "Peddling quality literature"--as all of us in this room are trying to do, right?

I won't speak for my youthful companions on the panel, but I am pre-social media, so quite a lot of what I have to say on this topic is hands-on, as in handselling, handsigning. The Harcourt Brace Jovanovich took the manuscript of of Sky in 1978, my wife Carol and I realized that selling the book to the publisher was only half the battle. Now for selling it to the reading public. Both of us were journalists, by education and newspaper and magazine jobs, so we operated by Writer's

Trilogy
- Stagner:
write 3 books

Rule Number One: No one is getting ¹⁰ paid to read your stuff. To the contrary--as we all too well know, they somehow have to be persuaded to make a financial transaction for those black marks ^{we make} on white paper.

We headed for Montana, armed with blue galleys of **This House of Sky** about as big as the lid of a shoebox, to call on bookstores. Back then, department stores still were often the biggest bookstore in town, ~~and~~ and in Billings, we went in to the venerable Hart Albin store, explained ourselves, and were immediately told by the tough old sister, as my old-school Montanan dad would have called her, running the book

department that she no longer did signings because the last author
had been so drunk he fell out of his chair. I assured her I wouldn't
do that. Nevertheless, she said. No booksignings, ever again.

We got her grudgingly to take the galley anyway, and off we went
to Bozeman and Great Falls and Helena and Missoula to see if our
luck would be any better.

Carol and I got home to Seattle still not having much of a feel
for how a ^{House of Sky}booktour would do, until the phone practically turned
hot from ringing, from Montana booksellers. The very first call
was from the Hart Albin department store, the tough old sister,

saying she'd read that galley and demanding that I get myself back to Billings as soon as ^{*The House of Sky*} ~~the book~~ came out to do a signing.

For me, the backlist life begins ^{*a*} back there, on the road. Feet on the ground, elbow on the table, pen in hand. Since then, as probably most of you know, I have done several hundred bookstore events, as many as forty to fifty per booktour for the majority of my books--and I'd still be doing them for you at that same pace, except parts of my body simply say huh-uh, to that much travel, any more. The I-5 corridor to here and a plane ride or two, we can manage, and have done so ^{*WITH SWEET THUNDER,*} for the sake of the usual suspects ^{*stores*} "peddling quality literature" PNBA style.

Much has changed in the book business since Carol and I walked into that Billings department store. Not many years later, a guy named Rick Simonson tells me he wants to try out something called a "reading" at Elliott Bay, am I up for that? Yeah, I have been, hundreds deep by now.

Up in Bellingham, Chuck Robinson, the mover and shaker at Village Books, has put me on the store's radio show, and in a downtown theater, and a high school auditorium, and even outside in that winsome Fairhaven park behind the store. Chuck and I have also stuck to the tried and true as we did a few weeks ago-- let people pour into the store until there's standing room only, and

we have a jumpacked, sweaty, funky gathering where people get in the mood and buy books hand over fist.

Chuck has not yet proposed that I do what he once let Tom Robbins do--have backup singers. But I don't write off the possibility of having a group behind me like Ray Charles' SET OF darlings, going "So fine, so fine."

Also along the booktour path of the last thirty-plus years, spoiling my reputation as pre-social media, I became one of the early writers to have a website, ^{ivandoig.com} up-to-date to this very minute--and a couple of weeks ago, I did my first Skype book event. And some of you may have seen the Shelf Awareness piece about what might be called--the words of my beloved editor again--an old Doig learning new tricks. The centerpiece of that story was my

decision to launch **Sweet Thunder** at the small but enduring independent store in Edmonds, timing it to the Saturday farmers' market there and working with the owner, Mary Kay, to run an ad on-screen in the local vintage but first-run movie house. See Cate Blanchet in the new Woody Allen flick--and have Doig sign up your book.

That's at least some of my backlist story--paradoxically trying out new ways to speak up for my books, whenever not keeping my head over the keyboard--professional eavesdropper--to listen to the whispers between my fingers and the words on the page.