

*in  
Readings*

## Northern California Booksellers, Oct. 4, '13

First of all, let me say how glad I am to be back in the Northern California world of bookstores, with a novel that luckily opens on Nob Hill--more than that, on a cable car. My temporarily globe-trotting characters, Morrie and Grace, soon are summoned back to another earth--Butte, Montana--but the touch of San Francisco very much felt right to me as I wrote the opening of **Sweet Thunder**. One of my favorite scenes in the list of my novels is the rollerblading <sup>episode</sup> ~~scene~~ in **Mountain Time** back in 1999, where my beleaguered <sup>middle-aged</sup> protagonist Mitch tries to keep up with his San Francisco daughter on the Friday night skating



extravaganza out to the Palace of Fine Arts--as daughter and father get ready to go, "The horde on wheels kept thickening as more skaters pumped across the Embarcadero and glissaded onto the sidewalk in front of the Ferry Building. Several hundred, Friday-nighted to their pierced eyebrows and gaudy fingernails, already had congregated beneath the building's clock tower and were milling around in various states of balance..." / The skate wheels of destiny turn more slowly than those of that bunch of recreational outlaws on rollerblades, but they sometimes do complete the circle with a kind of mischievous satisfaction, bringing me to my inaugural appearance tonight, reading and *at the Ferry Building,*

LOOK  
UP



signing at ~~the~~ Book Passage, <sup>3</sup> ~~in the Ferry Building~~. Not on rollerblades.

SHAKE  
HEAD

Well, onward to the current book, **Sweet Thunder**, the third novel with its central character, the genie in the bottle, once again none other than Morrie. Morris Morgan, the shall we say “inventive” teacher in the one-room school in **The Whistling Season**, and the fortune-seeker at that Richest Hill on Earth, the copper mines of Butte, ~~Montana~~, in **Work Song**. With his golden tongue and quicksilver mind, Morrie has turned out to be such a treasure as a character that I figured it would be a mistake



not to welcome him back onto the page, and let him take over the telling of this story.

I've always thought that what writers are doing when we sit around in our own heads all the time is trying to figure out how to write better than we know how, and if we're lucky, one of the results can be a character whom readers love more than we could ever have hoped for. Right now, Morrie is that for me, with this book and its predecessor, **Work Song**, getting the most uniformly good reviews any of mine has ever had. Back in **Work Song**, when Morrie first alights into Butte, the Associated Press reviewer made one of those leaps of the imagination that gladden



a writer's heart, saying he could picture the movie some day, with  
Johnny Depp as Morrie and Nicole Kidman as Grace, ~~his Butte~~  
~~landlady of the time.~~ But they seem to be pretty slow about  
reading Associated Press dispatches in Hollywood, proving once  
again that literary IQ rises as you come north in California.

In any case, with **Sweet Thunder**, Morrie and the  
predicaments that seek him out now add up to a kind of  
unintentional trilogy, as I've kept going back--with other books  
like last year's **Bartender's Tale** in between--to plots back  
there in the old days of robber barons and Wall Street run amuck.  
Those were the old days, weren't they?

SHOW  
DOWN

LOOK  
UP



Like probably all writers since Shakespeare, I'm often asked that hard-to-answer question which I'm sure Kim and Wally get a lot of, "Where do you get your ideas?"

"Out of my head" is an answer that could be misinterpreted. But with this particular book, I finally have a more classy response as to where I got the stuff of inspiration. From Shakespeare!

In limited quantities, I should add. The first is the title, taken from **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, the scene in which Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, harks back to hunting bear in



the company of the strongest man in the world and a certain slayer  
of dragons:

“I was with Hercules and Cadmus once,

When in a wood of Crete they bay'd the bear

With hounds of Sparta...I never heard

So musical a discord, such sweet thunder.”

Hopefully I'll connect that title to the book in a minute here,  
but the second debt to Shakespeare, because he pretty much owns  
the property, is the bedrock idea under the story. For each novel  
as I work on it, usually across a couple of years, I try to keep in  
mind ~~one~~ ~~single~~ ~~word~~ that the book is <sup>mainly</sup> about. Its theme, its plot



cut →

mechanism, its personality, so to speak. <sup>8</sup> [For example, I believe **The Whistling Season** was fundamentally about compassion, or forgiveness; and **Work Song** about redemption, atoning for earlier sins; and **The Bartender's Tale** perhaps is about conscience, what people do or don't do according to their sense of right and wrong. / At that same level, the pulse under the skin of the book, **Sweet Thunder** is deliberately about identity-- personal identity, mistaken identity (although not to the merry-go-round whirls of confusion Shakespeare conjured in some of his plays), finding identity, choosing identity.



The new book takes place about a year after Morrie and his dimpled bride, Grace, set off on their honeymoon, as orchestrated in **Work Song**. The holiday season of 1920 finds them, by way of Nob Hill, landed back in Butte because of a highly unusual gift, and in no time Morrie is drawn right back into the central conflict of that copper-rich, copper-cursed city--the miners versus the Anaconda Company. This time, Morrie enlists as an editorial writer for the union-backed newspaper that is taking on the Anaconda corporate colossus--the company owns all the other daily newspapers in Montana, including its local mouthpiece, the Butte Daily Post. And it's Morrie, ever the wordslinger, who



names the feisty journalistic newcomer from that bit of Shakespeare--the Butte *Thunder*.

I should say at this point that among Morrie's almost magical abilities has been the levitation of his author onto bestseller lists not seen for a while. As my beloved editor said in celebrating the national bestselling success of **The Whistling Season**, "There aren't many writers your age whose sales figures go up, Ivan." They've kept going up with **The Bartender's Tale**, putting me in the distinguished company of Wally--and I'll bet, Kim--on the ~~the~~ New York Times bestseller list and of course, the Indie list--and for a brief shining moment, your own NCIBA list. Morrie's mojo



~~STILL~~ ~~SELL~~ seems to be ~~still~~ working, as **Sweet Thunder** recently has been to the top of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers list. I like to think, with the holidays coming, there may continue to be replenishment of Morrie and his doings and my other casts of characters there on your shelves in that blessed alphabetical company--Dickens, Doig, Dostoevsky.

While Morrie, as narrator and lightning rod for trouble, inevitably is my current star performer, I don't like for my characters to be lonely there on the page--and according to the reviews and readers' comments, a couple of others seem to stand out in ways pertinent to you and your customers:



--The first is the Butte city librarian and fanatic book collector, Sandy Sandison. With his white cloud of beard and "practically geographic" spread of torso, Sandison is a former cattle rancher and vigilante--one of his nicknames is the Earl of Hell--and most of all, a booklover determined to provide his Butte Public Library with "the finest collection west of Chicago."

[So determined, in fact, that when Morrie first is confronted with this apparition in the stacks in **Work Song**, he has to reassure himself that bibliomania does not actually mean a maniac loose in a library.]

cut?



Once again, here in **Sweet Thunder**, Sandy Sandison bellies his way in and out of Morrie's life and my imagination, to the point where one reviewer called him "easily the most unforgettable librarian in all of American fiction." I'm glad to have the most unforgettable anything in my fiction, but I mention Sandy Sandison to you because although he is maybe a little farther around the bend, he is like all of us in this room and we hope like the buying public there on the other side of the counter, in being someway crazy about books.

--The other "character" that seems to have caught on is Butte itself. The town easily qualifies as a personality all its own, I



think. In its <sup>mining</sup>~~copper~~ heyday--by the turn of the twentieth century it was providing half of America's copper and a quarter of the entire world's supply--Butte and its "richest hill on earth" were one of a kind. More than just a mining town getting a little big for its britches, it was the largest city of the northern Rockies, <sup>between Seattle and Minneapolis</sup> straining to be cosmopolitan--Charlie Chaplin and Sarah Bernhardt and Clark Gable all appeared onstage there--meanwhile with ten thousand hard-rock miners working mile-deep mineshafts directly beneath its busy streets, earning some of the best wages in America in some of the most dangerous diggings.



I'm from the other Montana, the one of wide open spaces and communities too small to be called towns, let alone cities--and Butte was known to us, when I was growing up out there in in the lariat proletariat of ranch hands and cowboys and sheepherders, as a place as wildly off the charts as, say, Las Vegas in modern times. Writers endlessly have called Butte in its smoky industrial heyday "the Pittsburgh of the West," but Morrie and I prefer to dub it "the Constantinople of the Rockies" because it was such an international mix of peoples. Hard-rock miners from countries all over Europe came seeking some of the best wages in the world on that "richest hill"--the saying was, "Don't even stop in America,



just come to Butte--and in blood-bound habit they formed their own neighborhoods--Dublin Gulch for the Irish, Finntown self-explanatory, and so on. This simmer of nationalities inevitably added to the heated labor atmosphere of the time--during the contentions between rival miners' unions and the constant struggle against the monopolistic Anaconda Company, between 1914 and 1920 Butte was occupied by the National Guard or Army units six times./ Drama like that, of course, is catnip for the novelist.

History has a long reach, and while Butte battled away in its near-war between labor and corporation, consequences did reach us in the rest of Montana. Because while the Anaconda Company



city and the world's <sup>17</sup> richest deposit of copper  
dominated the ~~mile high copper-rich, copper-cursed city~~, it also  
did its Wall Street damndest to dominate the politics and the  
press of the state. Through a Delaware puppet company,  
Anaconda owned all the daily papers in Montana but one--helping  
to send ambitious young wordsmiths like A.B. Guthrie and  
Norman Maclean and yours truly out of state so we didn't have to  
"wear the copper collar" as we pursued careers in journalism and  
literature. I look back and find it entirely possible that if  
Anaconda had not been such an impossible employer for an  
idealistic young journalist, I might not have gravitated elsewhere



and ultimately into writing books. Strokes of luck are sometimes really disguised at the time.

This kind of picture of Butte--as Morrie says in a moment of exasperation, "This tortured, boastful, inventive, grudge-ridden, wisecracking city built not upon bedrock but copper ore was impossible to banish, like some wayward family member you can't help but keep in touch with"--<sup>this civic portrait</sup> may not sound like any ton of fun, but I've tried to be fair to Butte by capturing the wit and humor of that <sup>terrific</sup> mix of people as well. So it is that on Morrie's editorial page of the *Thunder*, he runs contributions from the



mineworkers themselves as bottom-of-the-page as fillers, such as  
this ditty from a musically inclined Irish miner:

“My sweetheart’s a mule in the mine,  
I drive her with only one line.  
On the ore car I sit,  
While tobacco I spit,  
All over my sweetheart’s behind.”

Two last things, I’d like to leave you with, about this book and  
this author. The first is that **Sweet Thunder**, in the heart of its  
hearts, is a book/about books/and booklovers. Morrie of course  
says it best: “What an achievement a book is, a magic box  
simultaneously holding the presence of the author and the wonders

slow



of the world....What a wealth we are granted, in the books that carry the best in us through time."

And lastly, I have felt very lucky, as a novelist for the dozenth time now, to carry a little of that wealth in my weathered seabag crammed with words, in the company 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. We voyage on, knowing there is safe harbor in the hands of booksellers and booklovers.

*I thank you for inviting me today.*