

PNBA OCT. 8 '15:

I'm pleased and honored to be here again with my fellow PNBA members. You and your stores have been the magic carpet on which my books first took off, all the way back to **This House of Sky**, and the ride of **The Bartenders Tale** onto the Indie bestseller list and the New York Times ^{EXTENDED} ~~long~~ list and the top of the PNBA list and ^{SEVERAL} ~~some~~ others is about as exhilarating as it gets. Those of you in the business of what my agent calls "peddling quality literature" have carried me to that high point, that Promised Land happily shared with Jonathan and Rosemary and Laini, where the writing life actually turns into a living.

Here among you usual suspects, I want to take just a moment to cite the slightly graying eminence in the background, the guy

Shirley
Hazzard -
to relieve
soul
of
circumference

~~chosen through the years~~

who has to do a lot of his own plotting and handling of disparate characters in creating shows like this for the rest of us PNBA book peddlers--and that's Thom Chambliss, ~~the best friend the book biz could ask for all these years.~~

Having said what good buddies you independents are, I'm hoping you have short memories because two years ago I was standing up here describing to you a novel ^{I was working on at the time} that begins, "My father was the best bartender who ever lived"--telling you it's a story set in 1960, of the Sixties meeting the Thirties, the Woodstock generation colliding with the Depression generation, in the form of Tom Harry, who tended bar in his idiosyncratic style in several of my previous novels and now has been given a kid, a twelve-year-old bundle of curiosity named Rusty to raise by himself, and finally proudly ^{SHARING WITH YOU} declaring ^{going to be} that this latest opus pocus of mine was titled... **Miss You When I'm Gone.**

Well, what happened with that? ³ To put it bluntly, I was beaten to the punch when a novel called **Miss Me When I'm Gone** appeared. Which as you can guess meant that my title was gone. So, I flummoxed around-- although a lot of things have happened in the title of my 14 books, this was the first time one was yanked out from under me, which maybe indicates the law of averages was just catching up with me with a vengeance--and since the story has a place with the name "Rainbow" on it, I finally came up with a substitute title employing that word. My editor liked it, but it felt kind of second-rate to me--I still missed Miss You **When I'm Gone**--until one day my wife Carol and I were walking our neighborhood as we do every morning and I was noodling in my head as usual and ^{all at once} said, "How about **The Bartender's Tale**?" She

immediately liked it--we both felt better to be in the company of
Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** and Isak Dinesen's **Winter Tales** and
Dickens' **A Tale of Two Cities**--but my usually astute editor still liked
the earlier substitute title. She had her reason--the Young Adult market,
where I woke up like someone transported to the land of milk and honey
~~in a dream~~ when **The Whistling Season**, ^{absolutely} with no forethought from me,
won an Alex Award from the ALA as one of the best Young Adult
novels of that year--but she agreed to take the title with the suspect word
Bartender into the big editorial meeting that does a lot to decide a
book's fate and present it, as she said, without prejudice. Lo and behold,
everyone there seemed to like ^{The Bartender's Tale} it, and the Young Adult editor-in-chief
asked to see the manuscript. And among the glowing reviews this book

has had from sources as varied as The Daily Beast and the Associated Press, the one that particularly makes me grin is from the School Library Journal in which the high school librarian doing the reviewing concludes about the sometimes beleaguered father behind the bar of the Medicine Lodge saloon and his sometimes pesky son and the other characters of **The Bartender's Tale**, "there is much to love here." Including, it seems like, the title!

So the title is vital, I'd say. Think what we would be missing if William Faulkner, and no doubt his editor, had stuck with **Twilight** for that tale of Benjy and the other Compsons more properly and immortally called, **The Sound and the Fury**.

Or if Tolstoy hadn't come to his senses and and gone the other direction, forsaking a Shakespearean phrase, and retitled his doorstopper

from **All's Well That Ends Well** to the classic simplicity of **War and Peace**.

Then there's the famous example of Ernest Hemingway, who

encountered plenty of disasters in his time on earth and came perilously close to one with what turned out to be his career-making novel.

Hemingway was noted for keeping an exact count of how many words he wrote day by day, but he was way off on the one word he intended to title his first big novel with--**Fiesta**: doesn't do much but rhyme with "Siesta," does it; a sitting duck for a snotty book reviewer, isn't it--when his story of the Lost Generation of the 1920's actually needed four words--**The Sun Also Rises**.

Before what turns out to be the fortunate accident of **Miss You When I'm Gone** being snatched from me and **The Bartender's Tale**

miraculously appearing, I've had generally good luck with titles. That luck begins with being married to Carol, who has named three of my novels--**English Creek**, **Mountain Time**, and my personal favorite, **Prairie Nocturne**. A longtime friend came up with **Work Song**. The others I've been forced to think up myself, sometimes as the first thing done--**The Sea Runners** and **Heart Earth** and **The Eleventh Man**--and sometimes as the absolute last, about the time a desperate author thinks this is going to be the first book in history with a blank cover.

Back when you all first got to know me, it was for a memoir that started off perilously close to fitting that description. After the manuscript was accepted for publication, and the publisher, Harcourt, was gearing up to put it into print, my editor, the blessed Carol Hill--not

only was she the prototype of the New York editor with a thousand-watt personality, she also exuded the extra verve and slant on life that came from being married to the guy who owned ~~all~~ the roller coasters at Coney Island-- Carol Hill called me to say we really didn't have a satisfactory title for the book. Its working title, I'm reluctant to confess in public, had been **Half-Life**--I had a phrase in there 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 really 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 Carol even polled her community college classes for suggestions--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 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. 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 shepherd'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."

So, it was the long way around to that title, but it seems to have been worth it. I think there's a country western song, or at least there should be, that it's the rocks in the stream that make the water sing. →

My other instance, to conclude here, of a title and its justification showing up without premeditation came when I was working on the chronological first of my Two Medicine trilogy of novels, constructing the story of Angus McCaskill and his chum, Robert Burns Barclay, leaving Scotland to take up homesteads in the American West.

"America. Montana. Those words with their ends open," Angus tells us of that allure of so-called free land. Indeed, as far as I knew, the title of that book was going to refer to the valley beneath the rise of the Rockies

Skipped
ham
here
to p. 17

from the plains, like a wrinkle in the apron of the continent, where they end up--**Scotch Heaven**. First, though, I wanted to make sure their story was genuinely Scotch--Scottish--by going to the auld country and finding a place for them to be from, and their path from ^{my} ~~the~~ fictional town of Nethermuir to the America ship. Accordingly, Carol and I spent a summer in Scotland tracking down emigrants' letters home in the archives of St. Andrews, going through old census records and newspapers in Edinburgh, and finally coming to the River Clyde, as Angus and Rob did, to stand on same dock in Grinnock, downstream from Glasgow, where they boarded the steamship in 1889. Along with that ocular research, I was digging into the Mitchell Library in Glasgow which had, among other things, blueprints of the emigrant ships, so that I could imagine my young America-goers experiencing what Angus calls "that iron ship." While I was at that, Carol was scouting the

Glaswegian bookstores for any old books that might be helpful to me-- you'd be surprised what a writer can mine out of a collection of 19th century Scotch jokes, for instance. But then came the day when we arrived back at our flat from our respective investigations and she handed me this highly academic little tome, saying she thought I ought to take a look at it.

Talk about a catchy title, huh?

Social Class in Scotland...Past and Present. I'm guessing probably not a bestseller in any of your stores. But in here, in the essay "Class and Culture Among Farm Servants in the Northeast," as I read along through the dry descriptions of what the author called "horticultural expertise"--i.e., farm labor, or hired hands as it was called when I ^A was a teenager on a ^{FARMING} tractor in Montana--two words stood out to me. There were hiring fairs, a hiring day, when farmers and laborers would gather in the marketplace and negotiate jobs and wages. But the tough bargainers,

SHOW BOOK

the hard cases, farmers who hadn't been able to hire anybody and workers who hadn't found any wages to their liking, needed to come back a week later, to deal with one another as what was called "the rascal fair." Reading through this dry-as-dust essay, on page 111, I underlined those three words and put an asterisk in the margin, and literally woke up the next morning and told Carol, "The book is going to be called **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**."

And then, of course, I had to write the old Scotch ballad that justifies the title:

"Dancing at the rascal fair,
devils and angels all were there,
heel and toe, pair by pair,
dancing at the rascal fair."

Well, that's where titles come from, at least in my case, and I'm sure Laini and Rosemary and Jonathan have their own experiences of finding that final bit of legerdemain to fit on the magic box that it is a book. **The Bartender's Tale** and I feel lucky to have made it into your stores and your hands. I've known some of you for thirty years, ^{selling books together,} and while I don't doubt that booksellers have their own secrets, I'm absolutely sure that those of you across the counter in the peddling of literature share with us writers the sense that every book, whatever its title, carries another heading, pulsing with hope, shimmering just there behind the book's actual name on the cover--**Great Expectations**.

^{the pleasure of being here}
Thank you for ~~this invitation~~, one more time.