

Pine Butte reading

One restless dusk, when I was a wet-behind-the-ears hired hand on a farm just north of here in the Dupuyer country, I squinted across this land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had translated itself into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but in the sudden shadow-play of my mind, I could see that the

combine, with its running lights ² just flicked on, was a ship bound through the night. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond-~~oceanic~~-to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of such remembered moments is indelible. I was seventeen, a restless kid-farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now with my whiskers gone white I still write about both the green jigsawed Pacific

Northwest coastline where I live now and the rim-of-the-prairie
along this glorious mountain chain here where I grew up.


So I come back to this country, for this weekend of celebrating
the Rocky Mountain Front and the Montana Conservancy's
faithful effort to preserve such natural wonders, I come back as a
longtime practitioner of forms of memory. Written pages--mine
now add up to nine books, very soon to be ten, and an appalling
number of shorter pieces--such written pages are a form of word-
memory that we call "literature." And within my books, memory
and the past is often a character unto itself, or at least a presence

within the people I write about, as intrinsic to them as their bloodstream.

I think there are a couple of basic writerly reasons for that.

One is that memories are the stories we tell ourselves. Therefore, what steps out to the front of the mind and sings forth when we think back, those are the plots and subplots and the dialogue and the laughtrack of our personal dramas and comedies--“the time thus and such happened,” or “back when I was a kid...” To have a character reacting to the past gives me a very natural way into storytelling-- “memory, the near-neighborhood of dream,” as I called it in **This House of Sky**, and of course, fiction is a kind

of believable dream, a try at telling some kind of truth by making stuff up.

The second writerly reason for consciously working with  memory comes from none less that Richard White, probably the finest historian of the American West there has ever been.

Richard White is both a prodigious researcher and voluminous thinker, and once when I reviewed for the Los Angeles Times something he'd written I just said "when White goes over the ground with his encyclopedic artillery, a piece of historical territory never quite looks the same afterward." Yet even Richard White has come around to the view in his most recent book that

“there are regions of the past that only memory knows. If historians wish to go into this dense and tangled terrain,” he says, “they must accept memory as a guide.”

So, wouldn't you think it's pretty straightforward, that a scribbler like me, working along the margins of my own memory and those of hundreds of people I've interviewed down through the years--about how to put up hay the old way with teams of horses, or what it was like to get on at the Fort Peck dam project during the Depression, or to be a smokejumper or a laundrywoman, on and on across topics of trying to make a living out here--wouldn't it just make all kinds of critical sense to call

me a writer who delves into music of memory, its endless symphonic variations as well as its ditties? But I'm seldom seen that way by reviewers or English profs, and instead am chronically described as/a writer with a sense of place.

Thank goodness, that term usually means this place, the country along the Rocky Mountain Front, from roughly here at Pine Butte and Choteau, up through the heartland of many of my characters along Dupuyer Creek, north to the Two Medicine River and the Blackfoot Reservation. If I have to be labeled I couldn't ask for better. But it still takes me aback sometimes, when I've spent a solid week imagining how a young soldier would behave

on a battlefield half a world from here or how a photographer I've invented, Mariah McCaskill, would react in the Stone Age caves of Spain where the painted bison are running forever in the tunnels of time, to know that somebody somewhere will eventually put in that book review, "Doig, in writing about his familiar Two Medicine country..." The settings of my books have, in fact, ranged from Phoenix to Sitka, with sidetrips to Sweden and New Zealand and World War Two New Guinea--and the one coming out in a couple of months takes place in Helena, and up here in the Two Medicine country I've written about before, and in France and Edinburgh, Scotland, and New York City.

How does it come to be, then, that a literary dabbler across the face of the earth like me is so often called a writer of place? I believe it is because many of my pages deal with what might be called world-memory--the earth's own memory, the topographical testimony of the planet's processes. I think it can be argued that nature is an ultimate form of memory--different from our human sort; it's the universe's sort, the cells of memory ticking away in tree rings and geological strata and the beaks of finches and glaciated valleys--and that, left to itself as best we can manage to do that, nature the rememberer imitates art in finding ways to tell its story, again and again, over and over but never quite the same

twice, in the long devotion of the seasons and the mountains and the prairie and the sky.

THIS EVENING

So, let me see, ~~tonight~~, if I can make these various forms of memory mesh into words for us for a little while, in a couple of short reading selections that have to do with the country that has brought us all here, along the Rockies.

The first tells just a bit of my own coming into the country here, which occurred in about the worst way--at night, when I was a dodgy high school freshman, knowing only that I was on my way into some new veer of life in a part of the state where none of my family had ever set foot. My father and my grandmother had

taken on a sheep deal, which was landing us onto a small leased ranch fifteen miles north of here, but getting in to the place, particularly in the dark along roads that dwindled and dwindled from gravel to ruts, was alarming. As was the ranch itself when we got there. The sheep owner my dad was going to run the sheep for--we were the western version of sharecroppers--either hadn't known or hadn't bothered to tell us that the ranch family had retained half the house to store its belongings in, and so we were to live in one big room which served as kitchen, living room, and everything else, and a tiny bedroom for my dad and me to share, and an even tinier one for my grandmother. The place was on the

sidehill of a coulee--no view of the mountains; two trees on the whole damn ranch, both of them--as I write in the book--"hunched low in front of the house, evidently trying to cower in out of the wind." Came the morning though, and my dad figured we'd better go up on the ridge and take a look around, see what else we had gotten ourselves into. So, from **This House of Sky**: (4 min.)

Sometime this fall, that will have been--I hesitate to count--half a century ago. But one thing about hanging around with mountains like these, our personal amount of years doesn't look so dire in comparison, does it. The country stayed with me, as I

went on to become a writer, and this next selection, once again,
brings a young man into this part of the world. But he's a very
different young man from me, his name is Angus McCaskill, and
he has come from Scotland in 1889 with his lifelong friend Rob
Barclay to homestead in Montana. At the point of the book I'm
going to read from, Angus and Rob are, as Angus narrates in the
book, "both of us nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon
and trying our double damnedest not to show it." They have
come by boat, train, stagecoach, and lastly, freight wagon and
shoe leather from Augusta past this exact Pine Butte country on
up to my fictional town of Gros Ventre, which is on the site of

Dupuyer. Angus becomes the landseeker of the pair, with the advice and guidance of Rob's uncle Lucas, who runs the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre. Angus seeks north, south, and east of town, but for one reason or another, none of those directions appealed to him as a place to establish a homestead. And so, at this point in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair:**