

PNBA OCT. 8 '10:

Sweet
Thunder
begins on
Not Hill
After Time
roller skaters

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I'm ostensibly here for a book that your stores already have kept on the PNBA bestseller list since July, and so the first thing for me to say is, keep up the good work. We know, though, that the holiday season is coming, and while Bonny and Jonathan and Nancy and I are working as hard as our fingers will go to create literature, we don't really mind if our masterpieces make nice Christmas gifts. Charles Dickens taught us that. So, for my turn and **Work Song**'s here at the mike, let me wrap up a few

things about the book for you, to pass along to those holiday throngs that will gladden all our hearts. While I'm at it, I may as well tackle another of those eternal questions beyond "What's the book about?" and venture into "What's next?"

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When I was out on the booktour trail for **Work Song**, I was asked time and again how much of me is in Morrie. Not much at all, alas. Morrie is slicker than I am, more dapper, more roguish, more an intellectual jack-of-all-trades. And I don't carry a set of brass knuckles.

Let me just mention two other characters from the cast of the novel that keep being singled out by reviewers and the readers I hear from. The town of Butte itself easily qualifies as a character, I think. In its 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

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town, it was the largest city of the northern Rockies, 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 ranch country, as a place as crazily off the charts as, say, Las Vegas is today. Rough, tough, known for altitude and attitude, full of foreign accents and cosmopolitan vices, the mile-high city was dominated by the Anaconda Copper

Mining Company--which in turn dominated state politics and owned all of its daily papers 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--all in all, just the kind of place a novelist is looking for, right?

So when I began thinking of another chapter of life for Morrie after **The Whistling Season**, Butte came to mind, and specifically, the year 1919. That was a tumultuous time in America (when isn't?)--a time full of trouble--another piece of catnip for a novelist. The period right after World War One was terrifically contentious in America, with labor strife, fear of domestic Bolshevism, and government and Wall Street

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Looking back at Butte in that year so full of events it had to be numbered twice, I saw 1919 as a time of a twofold tale of treasure--the earthheld kind and the literary sort. (As a writer, you always want to deal yourself a pair of aces whenever you can.) And so the third **Work Song** character I'll mention is the Butte city librarian and fanatic book collector, Sandy Sandison. I'm guessing that Bonny and Jonathan have the same response I do when audiences ask, "Do you ever create a

character who takes on a life of his or her own in the books?" We writers have to protect our magic powers and say, hey, we're the gods and they're the beings that sprang from our foreheads, so we're always in charge. I'm not sure Sandy Sandison would agree as to who is in charge on the page, him or me. Here is Morrie's introduction to him:

"I was stroking the rare vellum of a Jane Austen title when a loud voice made me jump.

'You look like a bookworm on a spree.'

"I am of medium height, but when I turned around, I was seeing straight into a white cloud of beard. Considerably above that, a snowy cowlick brushed against furrows of the forehead. In a suit that had gone out of fashion when the last century did, the man frowning down at me

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Confronted with this apparition in the stacks, Morrie has to reassure himself that bibliomania does not actually mean a maniac loose in a library. For the rest of the book, Sandy Sandison bellies his way in and out of Morrie's life and my imagination, to the point where Tim McNulty in the Seattle Times called him "easily the most unforgettable librarian in all of American fiction." I defer to Nancy on the score of unforgettable librarians in fiction, although I'm flattered if the one I thought up is in the same league with Martha Cooley's memorable archivist in her fine novel of that title. I mention Sandy Sandison to you

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generation meets the Depression generation, in the form of Tom Harry, who has tended bar in his idiosyncratic style in several of my previous novels, at Fort Peck and Gros Ventre. The title of this novel--again, if my luck holds--will be **Miss You When I'm Gone**. There's another world premiere. I've always liked to write Tom Harry, back there behind the bar, and now I've given him a kid, to raise by himself. That son, Rusty, tells the story starting from the time when he was about as tall as the customers bending their elbows in his father's Medicine Lodge saloon, and here's how he introduces it:

a maestro of booze

“...As peculiar a pair as we made, the bachelor saloonkeeper with a streak of frost in his black pompadour and the inquisitive boy who had been an accident between the sheets, in the end maybe I was lucky to

have my involuntary parent instead of a more standard model. It is said it takes a good storyteller to turn eyes into ears, and life itself sometimes performs that miraculous trick on us. In what became our story together, when life took me by the ears, it was fortunate my father included me in his calling. Otherwise, I'd have missed out on the best seat in the house--the joint, rather--when history came hunting for him.

(I turned twelve that year of everything, 1960. But as my father would have said, it took some real getting there first.)

Well, that's a sample of **Miss You When I'm Gone**, and beyond that, guess what--**Morrie** is coming back again. I thought I had gotten trilogy out of my blood with **English Creek**, **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**, and **Ride With Me**, **Mariah Montana**,

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