

Kelowna, June 26 '06:

PACE

Like many another traveler in our shared past, I am glad to have made my way across the Medicine Line from the south.

I began peering wistfully north across the 49th parallel when I was a teenage hired hand. I was sixteen, working on a ranch that CANADA WAS butted up against the border north of Cut Bank, Montana--the AT THE FENCELINE OF THE NORTH PASTURE. entry port there is Del Bonita. The downside of that ranch job

was that I had to sleep in a converted chicken coop--but the

benefit of it was that before bedtime, I was allowed in the house

with the ranch family to sit and watch Lethbridge television. One

REGULARLY

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of the shows (I think called Lollytoodum?) featured a young

Whom even I could tell were pretty good

singing couple called Ian and Sylvia. "Four Strong Winds"

swiftly entered the young years of my life, along with a melodic

headful of other Ian Tyson compositions ever since. Little did I

know then, working for wages on that borderland ranch, that the

day would come when I would be able to state unequivocally in

PAGES OF the New York Times that Ian Tyson wrote (QUOTE) "the best working-stiff
song ever"-- "Summer Wages."

There have been times in my life when I was out of sight and
hearing of the Canadian West--mostly when I was a young
journalist, as my folks said, "back east in Illinois"--but not many.

To this day, Carol and I run our household on rhythms from this side of the border. We can't quite see to this country from our home above Puget Sound, although we don't have to go very far north before the ^{WHITE-TIPPED} mountains in back of Vancouver show up, and the CBC comes in beautifully over the water from Victoria. So, when I wander upstairs from herding commas and cultivating metaphors, Carol in the morning is listening to Tom Allen's ^{ON CBC 2} classical selections and then Disk Drive in the afternoon, and we settle into our evening with the dulcet tones of Danielle Charbonneau ^{PROMISING} ~~offering~~ us "Music for A While." We've even sat up to hear your election returns, a not infrequent event, right?

Your political system does have the advantage of a clearance sale fairly often; when we elect somebody in the U.S., we're stuck with them for years on end.

Mellifluous as the music and news is from your airwaves, the greatest debt I owe up here is an artistic one of a different sort. It dates back to my second book, **Winter Brothers**, in which I tracked around in the words and footsteps of a Strait of Juan de Fuca pioneer named James Gilchrist Swan. Swan, besides being a demon diarist--forty years' worth--was an inspired dabbler in coastal Indian art; among other things, he made a ^{MONUMENTAL} collecting trip to the Queen Charlottes for the Smithsonian Institution. I figured

I had better try to learn to look at that art myself and to study up
on what I still think is one of the ~~greatest~~ ^{FINEST} collaborations ever
between our two countries, the brilliant analytical ^{ART} books by Bill
Holm and Bill Reid. Bill Holm, a long-time ~~art~~ curator at the
University of Washington, ^{IN SEATTLE} is the expert on form and technique in
the native art of the coast--I like it that Bill, who lives in my own
shoreline neighborhood north of Seattle, started off in a small
town in Montana, like me, and was drawn to water.

The late great Bill Reid--what can I say? The Michaelangelo
of our coast. Reid hadn't done his great piece of canoe artistry,
"The Spirit of Haida Gwaii," yet, but he had carved "Raven

Discovering Mankind in a Clam ⁶Shell," and when I saw it at UBC
it knocked me out. It still does: that clever bird poised atop,
wings cupped out in shelter--or is it advantage?--while tiny
mankind squirms to escape the birth-shell, pop forth from the sea-
gut of the planet.

So it came to be that in reading **Indian Art of the**
Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and
Aesthetics between Holm and Reid, three quotes from Bill Reid
burned themselves into me:

HE SAID PACE
"In Northwest coast art, perhaps more than in any other art,
there's an impulse to push things as far as possible."

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Next quote: "Haida artists worked mostly within a rigid, formal system, but occasionally burst out and did crazy, wild things which out-crazied the other people of the coast."

Final quote: "They weren't bound by the silly feeling that it's impossible for two figures to occupy the same space at the same time."

For a writer trying to imagine himself back into the life of someone born a dozen decades before him--as I was with James Gilchrist Swan--that last and wildest sentence by Bill Reid --that's particularly the sort of thing you like to hear.

But the other couple of sentences have stayed with me, too, as inspiration to push things as far as I can reach in the territory a novelist always has to operate in, that atmosphere of "what if?"

The Whistling Season, ~~this 130,000-word novel~~ which involves the U.S.'s biggest single land-rush (the Montana homesteading boom early in the 20th Century), and a one-room school with three dozen kids pushing at the boundaries of childhood, and affairs of the heart and wallet among the grownups, ~~and wily political maneuvering by a state superintendent of schools~~ -- it all comes out of a handful of what-ifs: ^{AND} Those seem to me to derive from the

underlying fact that I and my books are progeny of the borderland,
with Chief Mountain and the ~~peaks~~ ^{CANADIAN ROCKIES} above Waterton at the western
corner of my formative years and the Sweetgrass Hills as far as I
could see to the ^{PRAIRIE} east, and in all these years of wordworking, Bill
Reid gracing my Pacific mental horizon, and Norman Maclean
and Wallace Stegner showing me how to do the literary chores
there in the shade of the ^{MONTANA} Rockies. Here's a quick do-re-mi of the
kind of "what ifs" that those influences have pushed me toward
this time:

--What if a beleaguered homesteader, newly a widower and
with three sons to raise and a household that is perpetually a mess,

happened to ^{SPOT}~~see in~~ a newspaper ¹⁰~~the~~ advertisement by a
housekeeper back east in Minneapolis, headlined **Can't Cook**
but Doesn't Bite?

--What if my main character's life had as its cosmic
parentheses those two far-apart events in the sky, the magical
reappearance of Halley's Comet in 1910, coming out of nowhere
once every seventy-five years to fill half the night sky with its
bright cloud, and then that bit of technical magic, Sputnik,
whirling above the earth 47 years later? Here is my narrator, Paul
Milliron, reflecting on the first of those events:

“I have thought back most of a lifetime on how Halley’s
Comet arrived to our world--and have come under its aura again
time after time in dreams--and the course of it through the
atmosphere here below makes me emotional even yet. By the
earthly order of things, Marias Coulee and its scattered
antecedents through history were granted the visiting star ahead of
the populous parts of the world. Goatherds and keepers of sheep
and camel drovers and stalkers of hoofed game at pre-dawn
waterholes, the rural earth’s earliest risers--theirs always would
have been the first eyes to find the arriving comet. Those and the
dream-tossed; others on this planet may have seen the coming of

the fresh star earlier than I did ¹² that sleep-short morning, but they were not many. Then, having made itself known to the prairies and savannahs and deserts, the fiery traveler showered portent in past the walls of the greatest of cities. Soothsayers prospered.

Beggars did better. Crowned heads grew uneasy; Halley's Comet was known to carry off kings. Harold, King of England, perished to the Norman invaders following the comet's passage in 1066.


Edward VII, King of England, was laid in his bulky casket our spring of 1910."

/ And lastly, what if a bright kid in a one-room school could remember his dreams--all his dreams, their details vivid as if they

were murals on the chambers of his mind, all his life? Here's a
one-minute dream excursion from Paul. He's sawing wood with a
citified newcomer to homestead country--they've both messed up
one way or another and been sentenced to the woodpile:

“Morrie looked across at me as we pushed and pulled and asked:

“What do you dream of, Paul?”

Was it possible? Did I dare believe my ears? A grownup was asking about my rampaging nocturnal mind. And if ever a dream  needed a broader audience, it was this recurrent one of mine.

Each stroke of the saw bit with more ferocity as I divulged to

Morrie the nightly trance in which I would be walking along a road/when a commotion kicked up behind a mudstone formation off to one side,/and when I reached there the eroded hill was being circled by a couple of people and a pack of wolves--sometimes the people chased the wolves, then the wolves would chase the people, I took care to explain--and no matter how hard I tried to find a stick to throw at the wolves there never was any stick, and things went on like that until on one pass the wolves and the pair of people vanished around the hill together and when I shouted that I was going to come around there with a stick if all of them

didn't quit this, someone's ¹⁵ head/rolled out from behind the hill, at which point I always woke up.

I looked across the sawhorse expectantly.

Morrie appeared boggled. "All I meant, Paul, was what do you dream of becoming when you grow up?"

/So, those are samples of the melody of this book that has brought me here today, and I can't tell you how pleased I am that

The Whistling Season has wafted across the border like this.

A word in parting: a bonus of my being here is ~~that it is a kind of~~ *to be in the library*
~~brotherhood of Steve and Rob and Jack this morning,~~
~~reunion with Bill Gaston, whom I last saw at the Pacific~~

~~Northwest Booksellers show in Seattle last spring.~~ I don't know

ANY OF US

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that ~~Bill and I~~ have ever thought of ourselves as cultural exchanges--I think that our hope would be that the kind of western North American writing we do translates fluently past the political medicine line between our countries. I see no good reason why the people I'm crammed in with on airplanes on the booktour across the U.S. shouldn't be reading ~~Soientula~~ and the work of Rob and Steve and Jack--instead of everlastingly **The DaVinci Code**. Our back-and-forth journeys, across that pesky invisible line with our little magic boxes of words, maybe are one small common-sense reminder of that greatest borderland we all share, life.