PNBA, March 17 ‘06:

This is always like a good visit home. Not the Hilton—the PNBA.

It has been more years than I am going to count out loud to you since I first turned up at a PNBA show with a book called This House of Sky. If I have learned anything in the book business, it is to expect something unexpected. This time, when I looked up from the past couple of years of herding commas and cultivating metaphors, I suddenly realized I had not just one fresh book but half a dozen.
No, I haven't been taking night classes from Joyce Carol Oates or Stephen King—it's a matter of nice new paperbacks. The Montana Trilogy, now in a uniform set, under one imprint—the blessed house of Scribner—and from my original and current publisher, the blessed house of Harcourt, new editions of *Heart Earth* and *The Sea Runners*, to go along with this about-to-be-published hardback.

Now, you folks handle a lot of books, all the time. But let me tell you—and I think Bill and Terry will bear me out on this—for a writer who sits around alone in his or her head for a couple of years, the notion of half a dozen books with new covers and your
same old name on them is like hitting a jackpot you didn’t know you were playing.

But I do know, believe me, where a good many of those books and my other five, all still healthily in print, were sold, down through the years. In PNBA stores. Or happily returning to Harcourt and my cherished editor who is the new editor-in-chief there, I had to fill out one of those dreaded author’s questionnaires of many pages, and this one actually asked something sensible—what are the sales totals of your other books? I started adding, as the numbers grew, it dawned on me that sometime in this book season—and if there is any cosmic justice, this will happen in one

(I only share this with you as a fellow member of this book-selling organization, and because your stores account for so much of the arithmetic of my books.)
of your stores—the millionth copy of my books will be sold. I know that a few writers make that figure with one book—and there are three of us deserving of that divine lightning right here in this room this morning—but I’m just as glad to have that number with a family of books.

Now to the newcomer book that you’ve invited me here for.

All of us who are in this business of what my trusty agent of the past twenty-five years calls “peddling literature” know that we need a certain quality of understanding in our society, or our little magic boxes of words will go ignored. We need readers, buyers of books, citizens who treasure the miraculous workings of
stories. But since our role is to peddle literature rather than phonics, we have to put our faith in the hope that there will be intelligent eyes out there, ready for our books.

The book that brings me here today, *The Whistling Season*, led me to go back to school—at least in my imagination, which can always use some schooling—and spend some time thinking about the formative years that lead to a healthy love (I guess Nancy Pearl would outright say LUST—for language and literature, or that at least should.) My narrator in the novel, Paul Milliron, who learns a lot about the passions and compassions of
life while evolving from rural schoolboy to the leading light of the state school system, says early on in the book:

"If I have learned anything in a lifetime spent overseeing schools, it is that childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul."

Paul's story, of some devilish horseback riding on the way to school in 1910 and what happens when his family takes on a mail-order housekeeper whose ad in the weekly newspaper read "Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite" and the high jinks of three dozen restless schoolkids and the love interest among the oft-time baffling grownups over their heads—all that is in the Whistling Season
reading copies that Harcourt is showering the world with, I hope told more winsomely there than I could possibly manage in my handful of minutes up here.

In any case, all that is waiting for you in the pages, and on Thom Chambliss's customary urging on these occasions to share some of the thinking behind the book, I had perhaps best use my minutes here to take you through the "what if" I learned by inventing a school--it's called the Marias Coulee school--and a school-centered community of characters to spend the past few years in.
"No child left behind." What if a society, our society, actually lived up to that kind of wise and noble commitment to our very youngest citizens instead of relegating it to a political slogan perpetually spun over us from the general direction of Texas.

If this wing of the American dream--an attentive nurturing education for every kid (every potential reader)--were to be lived up to, what might it look like? What would it take to do that? Education philosophy and common sense alike tell us some rock-bottom basics, don't they:
--A steady source of funding for public education. In front of some group, years ago, I proposed that we transfer the Pentagon budget to education and let the generals and admirals hold a bake sale when they want a new weapons system. That hasn’t taken hold, but the point is still there, that need for a steady unpolicitized source of school funds.

--Committed parents, in fact a committed community; a feeling by everybody in the neighborhood, whether you have kids or not, that you have a stake in that local school.

--Schools and classes of sensible size, so that the students receive some individual attention, don’t get lost in the crowd; as
all of who are former children know, childhood is enough of a crowd as it is.

If, like me, you have rolled your eyes until they rattle in your head at the failure of our government to live up to "No child left behind"—particularly back there at that basic funding question—it may surprise you a little that this country at one time, at least in one section of the country, did its gallant damnedest to make those words ring true. It did so with an institution that has been pretty much relegated to the nostalgia niche of the past—the one-room school. But as I have my narrator, Paul, say in The Whistling Season as he ponders the thousand one-room schools
he is in charge of as state superintendent of instruction in Montana, in what he knows is going to be a hysterical clamor for change following the Russian launch of the satellite Sputnik, nostalgia and real memory are quite different things: "The Rembrandt light of memory, finicky and magical and faithful at the same time, as the cheaper tint of nostalgia never is."

So, to share with you where a novel that revolves around a one-room school of a century ago reflects on the outlines of our society today, let me first try to throw a little light, Rembrandt or not, on the makings of what we might call one-room America.
By now many of you know that this is a literary theme born and bred into me. My own family line, through my homesteading grandparents and my homestead-born parents, inadvertently crosses paths with some of the great shaping forces of Western white settlement. The first is that compression of unruly landscape into arithmetic—the rectangular survey system which survives to this day. Our checkerboard land system goes back to before there even was a United States of America. The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for the surveying of the westward lands. This was more consequential than you might think, because around that time Virginia was claiming that its territory extended with its plantation-based land system.
beyond the Appalachian Mountains, to the Pacific Coast. When Thomas Jefferson was auditioning an earlier explorer to do a reverse Lewis-and-Clark by somehow getting out here to the Pacific and then exploring the continent from west to east, that would-be explorer kept referring to the American West as "the back side of Virginia." And so from that consequential law four years before the Constitutional Convention, those of us beyond Ohio got this non-Virginian comprehensive theoretical overlay of square miles of 640 acres each, townships six miles square, and so on.

One historian put it nicely:
"Most Americans and Canadians accept the survey system that so strongly affects their lives and perceptions of the landscape in the same way that they accept a week of seven days, a decimal numerical system, or an alphabet of twenty-six letters—as natural, inevitable, or perhaps in some inscrutable way, divinely ordained."

The divine origins of the rectangular survey may be highly arguable, but its arithmetic isn’t, and that’s its point. In essence, it put a gigantic street grid onto a majority of the American landscape—prairie, mountain, desert, wandering watershed, it didn’t matter, here came the square miles. That’s where we get
those section-line roads from, the gyration of travel we've all experienced in agricultural areas of driving a mile and taking a right-angle turn, and driving another mile and taking another right-angle turn, on and on. It's also why we have a street named Meridian, as in a surveyor's section line, running smack-dab north-south in Seattle. And, most piquantly, it's where the one-room schools came from.

In rural areas, a school section—a mile-square chunk of land, two of them in each thirty-six-square mile township, was set aside to help fund the one-room schools; that holy grail of firm unpolicitized funding, remember. When the homesteaders began
their nearly sixty-year migration to the West after the signing of the Homestead Act in 1862, those school sections became part and parcel of their settlement pattern: parts of the language, parts of the neighborhood soul.

In essence, those school sections became navigation points on our western sea of prairie, and in more ways than one. Most vitally, they helped to provide the educational effort that I believe was the most lasting beneficial mark of the homesteading era. One-room schools could have problems as any institution can—

I’ve given Marias Coulee School an eighth grade of universally dreaded over-age boys, some with fuzz on their upper lip as if
they're growing moss from having been in that grade for so long--but there seems to have been a saving grace that modern schools, forced to work with much greater numbers of students per school, perhaps chronically lack. Call it a porosity of the classroom lessons. Everyone I've ever talked to who attended a one-room school (and by now that's plenty of people) mentions that experience, of being around, seeing, overhearing, subliminally sensing what the older grades were learning--and that seems to pile up usefully in a schoolchild. Remember what Eudora Welty once discerned in schoolchildren: "Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world." She added: "Then artists..."
come along and discover it the same way, all over again"--and I think that's true, too. In any case, the record, anecdotal and otherwise, indicates that back there in the one-room schools, the school, more than the specific grade the kid is in, became the learning experience.

There were other indelible patterns that grew up out of that checkerboard system beneath homesteading. A lot of us born in that homesteaded country owe our origins not only to Cupid, but to school sections and their flirtatious schoolhouses with those Saturday night dances. Those one-room schools in fact filled many niches in the hearts and minds of rural communities--so
many that they overwhelm my narrator Paul when he is faced with the prospect of doing away with those schools in the educational frenzy after Sputnik: "No schoolhouse for Election Day; for the Grange meeting; for the 4-H Club; for the quilting bee; for the pinochle tournament; for the reading group; for any of the gatherings that are the bloodstream of community."

As that worst understatement in the English language puts it, times change. The erosion of rural population, and the coming of paved roads and schoolbusses--and most of all, centralized budgeting of school systems--have taken us away from what the one-room schools represented. And I don't say that there's a way
to get back to something equivalent. But I did come out of this book oddly heartened, that our often fumbling or misguided national policies can produce pockets of success. The Whistling Season has a lot of light in the sky. In fact, there's a phrase that's on Paul Milliron's mind through the last half of the novel--it's an ancient saying, that I made up: "Light is the desire of the universe." The imminent cause for Paul to be thinking along this line is the coming of Halley's Comet, making its once-in-a-lifetime appearance to those skywatching schoolkids back there in 1910. But he senses there is a more general truth there too, in the odd grandeur of that sentence "Light is the desire of the
universe." Whatever little else we know about the properties of existence, within which our blue marble of a planet spins as if on a cosmic roulette wheel, we map our days and nights by the fires in the heavens, those visual expressions of obstinate energy, don't we. Threads of light traveling to us across colossal time show us that the stars hang there, beyond high. Sunlight grants us sustenance of life as we know it, moonlight clothes us in our own particular fabrics of desire called dreams. So it is probably more than coincidence, that I have given the voice of this book--a man who really believes no child should be left behind--a sense that
schools such as his in Marias Coulee were, for a time, an illumination amid the dark.

Thanks for listening.