

Thank you, Dee. And a necessary few words of gratitude to the rest of you as well, before I get into my prepared remarks. 25 years ago, around now, I first started showing up in your stores with my first book, *This House of Sky*. I've lost count of how many PNBA doings I've been in on since, and of the number of book signings I've done in PNBA stores, but in some process of evolution I find that I've turned into a dues-paying member of this outfit. (Although I do have enough common sense left that I'm not going to run a bookstore.) In any case, I am proud to say that the new Internet entity [Ivandorj.com](http://vandorj.com) does have one link, and it's to Booksense.com - and I'm honored that you've asked me back, yet again, to be on this program with Richard and Laura.

PNBA '03

PACE
MARKINGS

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When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of character on display. Among his own many western aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder, short-order cook--my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up the hay for a rancher for so much per ton. Those saloons, where I was lucky enough to tag along with him, were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the guy had ever handled workhorses and where, quite a ritual of sizing up went on.

The talk may have been of haystacks and summer wages, but the undercurrent was character--my father always having to gauge whether the man sipping beer with him was going to be reliable or a drunk, a good worker or, as was said, so lazy he would starve to death in bed in the bunkhouse. Of course, from my point of view as an eight- and nine- and ten-year-old, the more my dad made bad guesses about the character of the person on the bar stool next to him, the better. What kid wouldn't rather be around a breezy faker whose team of horses runs away with him two minutes after he climbs onto the hayrake/ than a good solid silent workman probably named Swede?

So, it was maybe back there that I began picking up a couple
of things that have brought me here in front of you this morning: a
devilish liking for stories--you should have seen that runaway
team of horses bouncing that guy across the irrigation ditches of
the Montana prairie--and an abiding interest in the trait called
character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural
form, characters. And it seems somehow fitting to muse out loud
a little to you who spend your time in bookstores, literally the
most character-haunted premises there are--characters ranging
from Captain Ahab to Madam Bovary are up there on your shelves
day and night by the thousands, aren't they, between the covers--

to muse just a little about where fictional characters come from.

The formative lives they've led before they materialize onto the pages, so to speak.

But to get there, into the company of the trio you'll be introduced to in **Prairie Nocturne**, I have to tell you that I myself am a member of a small cast of characters whose own story in life has helped to produce the made-up story that, with any luck, will outlive us real-lifers. / In **Prairie Nocturne**, one of my characters is teased a bit as an "artiste" at what he's doing, and I suppose the actual disparate quartet of us constitute the four "artistes," artistic strivers of one kind or another, ever to come out

of Meagher County, Montana, a couple of thousand square miles⁵ of mostly sagebrush, its population less than two thousand and sinking.

Two of us have been literary types--I'm not going to dwell on myself in this regard any more than I already am, but the other writer from our back corner of the West sits on your fiction shelves fairly prominently. Her name was Grace Stone Coates, and her 1929 short story, "Wild Plums", is in **The Best American Short Stories of the Century**, the Houghton Mifflin collection put together, just before the turn of the millenium, by Katrina Kenison and John Updike.

The next in our rather short but distinctive artistic rank, I can only describe to you anecdotally, as I am a very seldom visitor to the land of TV re-runs and so have to confess to never having sat down to watch Dirk Benedict in the space opus, "Battle Star Galactica" or his later role as one of "The A-Team." Dirk was the kid brother of one of my grade-school classmates, and I can attest that at least that part of his acting name, he was born with.

/ And our fourth member made it to Carnegie Hall. Taylor Gordon, singer of spirituals, a vivid minor character in the Harlem

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Renaissance following World War I. Taylor shows up in David Levering Lewis's history of that cultural explosion, **When Harlem Was In Vogue**, as, quote, "a very dark decadent....He greatly distressed respectable Harlemites. Yet they forgave him and clamored for invitations to his parties."

I find it a hugely entertaining notion that it took a guy from my nowhere hometown to show Harlem how to have a good time.

Be that as it may, Taylor Gordon had a quick blaze of career in New York--there was a night in 1928 when on the bill with him at Carnegie Hall were W.C. Handy and his orchestra to play "St. Louie Blues," and Scott Joplin to perform "Maple Leaf Rag" on

^{BUT}
the xylophone--~~and~~ ⁸by 1933, Taylor was back where he started
from in our home county, broke and herding sheep.

As far as I can tell, because of difference in ages and the
general scattered condition of life in Meagher County, the only
paths of us four local 'artistes' that ever crossed meaningfully
were Taylor's and mine. Fairly often, on Saturday nights, those
would have been literal crossings, as my father and I made the
rounds of those characterful saloons which Bill Kittredge has
enshrined by choosing my memory passage of them from **This**
House of Sky for the **Viking Portable "Western Reader"**
/and our footsteps crisscrossed those of Taylor Gordon on his way

home alone, as the only African-American man in the county.

Flip the pages of time forward now to 1968, and there I am, a

graduate-school student helplessly dabbling in non-graduate-

school kinds of writing, in Taylor's living-room ~~with my tape~~

~~recorder~~, interviewing him and his sister Rose--the only African-

American woman in the county--for a magazine article that was

destined never to appear. All afternoon Taylor told me stories of

Madame Walker and Marcus Garvey and other Harlem

Renaissance figures. Then and after Taylor's death three years

later, I followed up with some research at Yale where a portion of

Taylor's letters ended up, and the rest of his papers at the

Montana Historical Society, some of it marvelously piquant. At one of his rent parties in Harlem, among the guests kicking in a couple of dollars were Blanche and Alfred Knopf--I don't know how that would go down with Random House today--and Taylor managed to rake in a total of \$147, while having spent \$157 to throw ~~the~~ party.

If you have ventured as far as the jacket flap of **Prairie Nocturne**, you may think you can see where this is going. Here I have an actual character, hours' worth of his actual words, his letters, and I want to do a novel about an arc of artistic career from approximately nowhere to, let's say, Carnegie Hall. In the

formation of my fictional singer, Montgomery Rathbun, what do I
do with Taylor Gordon? My answer may surprise you a little: not
use him.

Why not? First of all, Taylor Gordon told his own story, at
least the upward part of it, in a 1929 book called **Born to Be**.

The much bigger 'because', to me, is that his meteoric rise
and fall is the story that we've been taught to expect in so much of
American fiction, sometimes by the gods of the genre. I'll name
one usual suspect, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald gave us an iconic book, **The Great Gatsby**, and
one of our most famous sayings, "There are no second acts in

^{LIVES}
American ~~life~~." But my personal and professional belief is that
when Fitzgerald said that, he was so full of it his eyes must have
turned instantly brown. / American life is jam-packed with second
acts, it is all second acts for the millions of people who have
-NOW AND IN THE PAST-
pulled up stakes elsewhere in the world and come to this country.
^{SADLY,}
It was F. Scott Fitzgerald's life that lacked / a second act.


And so, what if. Richard and Laura each have their own
magical workings as to how they do this on their pages, but all of
us dealing in fiction live by some kind of "what if." So, what if
Monty Rathbun is not stuck in my wide-spot-in-the-sagebrush
hometown of White Sulphur Springs but is, say, the son of an

Indian-fighting soldier in the black cavalry up in northern
 Montana, where the prairie collides with the Rockies? What if his
 yearning for a singing career is in fact his life's second act, after
 he's led a scuffed-up ~~life~~ ^{EXISTENCE} as a ranch hand? And, in terms of
 bringing ~~him~~ ^{MONTY} onto the page as a character, what if his isolation as
 the only black man for dozens of miles around is not a dead-end
 but one of history's blind curves he can't quite see around yet?

(RANCH
 HANDS ARE
 IN MY OWN
 BLOODLINE...
 I NOT
 ONLY
 GREW
 UP
 AROUND
 THEM,
 MY
 PARENTS
 &
 GRAND-
 PARENTS
 WERE
 RANCH
 WORKERS.

Here are a couple of paragraphs that introduce you to Monty.
 When he's not doing chores on the big Double W ranch, he drives
 the fancy car for the man who owns the place.

PACE "The sparkplugs lay in two rows on a clean gunnysack rag spread along the runningboard of the Duesenberg, like soldiers formed up on a tan field for the changing of the guard.

Monty fingered the new ones with respect, intrigued as he always was by the notion of bits of fire igniting gasoline in the cylinder heads. He twirled each fresh sparkplug into its place in the rank atop the engine, tightening down just so with a socket wrench. Try as he would, though, to confine himself to what his hands were doing, his mind insisted on  going like sixty. *You are stark crazy, a man your age,* ran one line of self-argument about this bright idea of trying to turn himself into a singer at this stage

of life. The other camp just as vigorously pointed out that a man gets in a rut, and the next thing you know, that rut is six feet deep and there's an epitaph over it.

So, try high or lay low. Things were going his way so far, quite the deal if he did say so himself. Hadn't the music teacher agreed to take him on? Wasn't the Major peeling off the money to cover it? But in each case, he had to wonder exactly why they were giving him a hand up like this. As he'd heard said one time in the Zanzibar Club (his favorite bar on Saturday nights in Helena), you could never be sure whether what white folks were passing you was pepper or fly grunt.

Overly [→]*picky*, his mother would have called that sort of thinking. He extracted the last grimy sparkplug and spun a fresh one in. *There. Firing on all cylinders. That's where I better get myself to.* His engine work finished, he washed up and then applied bag balm to his hands [→]to keep them nice, wishing he had something similar for his voice and for that matter the rest of the [—]inside of his head. Tomorrow already he had to start lessons from [→]the woman. Rubbing the balm in and in, he stood there beside the long yellow car for some minutes, looking off to the prairie he had been born to, and around at the Double W ranch buildings that were such home as he had ever had. The air had that spring

freshness to it, winter shaken out and packed away in last
snowdrifts far up in the Rockies along the western sky; the
mountains this day were blue, as if lightly tinted with clean pine
smoke. He loved the Two Medicine country. The question was
whether it loved him back. Except when he and Dolph were
doing chores together or he and the Major went on a car trip, a lot
of his life here was alone, dead-dog alone. Wouldn't get an echo
back if he hollered, sometimes."

Those “what ifs” shaping Monty were a kind of chain lightning to me, illuminating aspects I could put into the other two main characters. The next for you to meet ^{BRIEFLY} is Wesley Williamson, a figure from somewhere at least as remote to me personally as the Harlem Renaissance but where I’ve always wanted to explore, the baronial West--the guys with big hats and the cattle to go with them. Monty would have needed some help, certainly some financial backing, to get his voice trained and make a start on a singing career. So Wes becomes his backer, his sugar daddy--everyone’s sugar daddy, in **Prairie Nocturne**, to the point

where everyone has to wonder, what's he up to? Here comes Wes
Williamson into the story, on a night in 1924:

“He arrived on the wings of that commanding smile. *The very*
model of a modern genteel Major, a line of Susan's teased
somewhere back in her diary. The blue of his blood and the red
silver of bayonet steel, those paradoxical flying colors by which
he came through the war. Behind Wes, it was said, men would
have charged Hell; in fact, men had.

Susan sat back hard in her chair at the desk, surprised no end
to be confronted with him again after all this time. Even so she
could not help but marvel at the presence with which Wes did

most anything, as though the shadow under him were the thrust of a stage. Her emotions were more mixed about how little the years told on him. Poised there at the top of her stairs, wearing a fortune on his back--or more aptly, on the swath of chest where General Pershing himself had pinned the highest medal--as ever he looked ready to do a white-glove inspection; civilian life, now that he was tailored to it again, was a continuation of duty by other means."

/ And the third central character, Susan Duff, has to be, yes, a voice coach, a singing teacher. This book actually came to mind

for me by way of Susan. All of us went to school with some indelible kid whom we've wondered about ever since: "Whatever happened to--?" On one of my better days in the writing of what has turned out to be the best-selling of my books, **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**, I had the luck to create Susan Duff when she was at the age of nine and perch her on horseback, regally leading "the child cavalry of Scotch Heaven" from their homestead shanties to their one-room schoolhouse in 1893. Naturally I had to know what would happen when that smart, bossy, indomitable ^{SCHOOL} girl grew up.

Suffice it to say, in this process of building fictional characters from salient characteristics, Susan is often defined on the page by her voice, as when she responds to Wes's re-appearance there at the head of her stairs after all those years:

"Sit yourself down, Wes, please do. I haven't had a good look at a family man in a while."

Well, that's a bit of case history--or three case histories, if you will--of how fictional characters found breathing space in the pages of a book. But the spark^s of it all, the constellating wordfire that shapes the Montys and Weses and Susans of my booklength stories, I believe began back there in my wide-eyed watching of

my father, character-investigating tooth and nail in the Stockman

Bar and the Maverick and the seven other joints, and the

RANCH HANDS
unmoored ~~men~~ he signed onto his haying crews. In my brief

- 8 or 10 of them published in obscure journals
closet career of writing poetry, before I put that impulse to

evidently better use in working on POETIC ~~my first book~~, **This House of**

Sky, I wrote a short poem about those bunkhouse men. It's

called, "With Kings."

From waist high I could see
they were kings.

They were old

and tall

and smelled of horses

and new hay

and spat and scratched

and never made their beds.

And aren't those kings?

Jake rolled his own cigarettes
despite the flash of naked stubs
where three fingers had been.

Tony tucked snoose behind a grand lip.

Dutch John had been to Australia
or at least Albuquerque.

Evenings, rainy days,
the bunkhouse men taught me
what kings know.

How to tie a half-hitch.

To cut a willow whistle.

To swear--ah!--in Spanish
and a little Finnish.

Old voices tell that knowing kings
was a rich way to grow years.

(Thanks for ~~asking me back.~~)

UMont

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Familiar Quotations John Bartlett 16th ed Justin Kaplan ed
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p. 694 - "There are no second acts in Am'cn Lives." (Hotelbooks)