

“You’re not sugar nor salt/nor nobody’s honey, so the rain will never hurt you,” she crooned to me.

“That one/goes around looking like she’s been yanked through a knothole backwards,” she huffed about our worst-dressed neighbor.

And, she confided about the couple dallying together in our wide-eyed little town, “Those two are as close as three in a bed with one kicked out.”

Into my life had come that river of proverbs, my grandmother. I was ten years of age, but my ears were as old as sin. All of a

sudden I knew I was in new territory of life, something like honorary adulthood. Now, besides my Scots-burr storytelling widower father, here was my mother's mother in this reluctant knot of bloodline they had made, to raise me.

So, you bet, my ears were busy from then on, with the picture-play of words from my grandmother^(look up)-whose formal education had broken off at the third grade/-whenever the prairie wind would swirl up her dress and she would announce, "balloon ascension!" Or with the bloodstream music of rhyme when my father, from the heights of his eighth-grade education, would ask, "Have they

taught ye this one yet?" and begin³ reciting, to my dropped jaw,
"Hiawatha."

// It lasts.

We've known so ever since art began to dance off the cave walls to us--literature perhaps begins there, in the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still → → up to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace... I think stories still can be our way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

Our work, our words, of course have to start on the cave walls between our own ears--the everyday life of the writer, if that's what you can call sitting around in your own head all the time. With Port Orchard reading **This House of Sky** in copious numbers these past weeks, while I tried in the meanwhile to get ready for this event tonight, I certainly did plenty of wondering about what was going to be left over for the writer when the book already has been, as my dad would have said, cussed and discussed. I do want to thank you all for putting up with me as homework. And we'll see what I can come up with to say, in self-diagnosis.

I decided I would talk briefly about a few aspects of working on **This House of Sky** from a professional writer's point of view, and read a few examples along the way, as a kind of show-and-tell of what I thought I was up to as a writer; then try to field any questions you might have--which is usually the part where I at least learn something about my books.

In the beginning is the language. That's what stories are ultimately about, whether they're in the form of a book, or television, or film, or now on computer. We live by stories--our own memories are the stories we tell ourselves--and what's magical about stories is the way they're told, about the language

6
always trying to excel itself, say something in a new way, say
“hey, listen to this!”

Looking back at the diary I kept during the writing of **This House of Sky**, I find that I was determined to make the language dance, in the book. In those diary pages are musings and urgings to myself to always push the language toward unexpected beauty--as I said to myself at one point, to try to make each sentence have “a trap of poetry” within it. The opening page of **This House of Sky**, not coincidentally, shows this--I wanted the book off to a fast stylistic start, and so, for example, there is this description of a Montana creek: (“The single sound... (30 seconds)

7
Okay, a few of the things that I hope are going on in those three sentences:

--The verbs are out of the ordinary. “The stream flees... the meadow makes the riffled water curl wide...

And then an innovation which has won me a lot of admiration and condemnation, the use of a noun as a verb: “A low rumple of the mountain knolls itself up...” As if the mountain terrain itself were a living part of this story, as I wanted to imply.

A couple of other things that aren't there by accident: The modifiers, the adjectives in particular, aren't bashful. “...willow-masked gulch...” “fir-dark flanks...” “...the riffled water...” “the

sly creek and the prodding meadow...” This is not your stripped-
(OF SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT)
down Hemingway style, which was the expected mode in writing
about the American West back in the 1970’s, when I was putting
this book together.

LASTLY


~~Finally~~, a dab of rhythm, there on the page: “The single
sound is hidden water...” I can’t remember how deliberate that
was, but certainly semi-consciously there’s a familiar rhythm
from poetry: “The single sound is hidden water...” Of a certain
generation, we probably all learned that rhythm best from Robert
Frost: “Whose woods these are I think I know.”

This poetic urge that crops up in my books, particularly in my non-fiction, I should tell you--as background--caught up with me in an unexpected place--while I was working on a Ph.D. in history at the UW. What graduate school taught me, back there in the late '60s, was that I didn't have what it took to be on a university faculty. I found myself freelancing magazine articles during grad school and I also began, to my surprise, writing poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet's final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But still wanting to stretch the craft of

writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art, it was back then that I began working on what I later heard Norman Maclean call the poetry under the prose.

In my case, besides what might be called a lyrical style of my own wording in **This House of Sky**, there's also what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my characters speak on the page. People who are poor in all else are often rich in language. The everyday-ness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around, my father and my grandmother, must have drilled that into me, because starting with this book I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal,

the wonder, of the vernacular of ¹¹ people's lives coming through. Any kind of work has its own vocabulary, its "poetry under the prose," and people are dauntingly eloquent at it. I found that, / time and again, as I went around with my tape recorder when I was doing the research for **This House of Sky**. Here's a quick sample from my dad's buddy, Clifford Shearer, about the time the  two young men from Montana got it into their heads to come out here to the Coast to seek their fortunes and I think you can hear how Clifford's own words help build this little story: (pages 37 and 38) (3 min.)

One last bit of writing craft I'd like to mention:

Any of us who have ever looked closely at our family photo albums know that, genetically speaking, we are not so much ourselves but piecework of those before us. Writers too have lineage, heritage. The writing that makes books out of lore and lingo is a craft that has to be learned and worked at, and one of the ancestors I chose, upon becoming a working writer, was waiting for me there in the pages of his sea stories, Joseph Conrad.

Joseph Conrad of course is famous for the sweep of his rhetoric, the oceanic power of his sentences. Every literary critic knows that--but it seems to me what they either don't know, or

13
have't said out loud, is something else that Conrad was just at
terrific at: quick characterization.

In Conrad's great storm-at-sea story, **Typhoon**, which
features the most literal-minded, phlegmatic hero in literary
history, Captain MacWhirr--who outlasts the typhoon by not
having enough imagination to get scared--there's the one-sentence
summary of the captain's wife:

“The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time
when her husband would come home to stay for good.”

That's all we ever know about Mrs. Captain MacWhirr--but
it's an entire portrait, it's a whole life in that one sentence. Given

that kind of example, I try--with all the craft in me--to make the minor characters in my books vivid. To make them behave as memorably in my pages as Laurence Olivier once said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

Here's a quick portrait of the pair of neighbors my grandmother and I had, when we lived in that wide-eyed little town of Ringling, population about 45 then, and less now. Our house not only didn't have running water, it didn't even have a well, and so we carried all our water by bucket from next door

from the house of this memorable couple, Kate and Walter
 Badgett: (p. 134, “There were enormities...” to p. 136, “then
whunk again.”) (3½ min.)

/ Those are a few of the strategies, intuitions, exertions that
 went into the making of **This House of Sky**. There’s a last act
 to the story of the book that maybe sums up the use of these
 writer’s tools, what ultimately--I hope--makes them worthwhile to
 use. After the manuscript was accepted, and the publisher,
 Harcourt, was gearing up to publish it, my editor called me to say
 we really didn’t have a title for the book. Its working title, I’m
 reluctant to confess, had been **Half-Life**, because among other

IN PUBLIC

reasons I was about halfway through my Biblical allotment of three-score years and ten at the time I was telling this story of my family--so it wasn't news to me that we needed to do better than that. I sat and thought for a couple of days and came up with **This House of Sky**, and my editor said, that's good, now we have a title but we don't have any passage in the book that has anything to do with that title. "Okay, I'll write one," I said, without really thinking about what I was letting myself in for. The book had been a terrific amount of work--I'd been working on it across six years by then, and there were probably two and a half to three years of just sitting at the typewriter, exerting at the

language day after day, trying things out, changing them, rewriting, rewriting, rewriting: the first page of the book, where I read you the little dab about the creek, I figure I worked over at least seventy-five times in those years. And now I had promised I would go back and graft a title scene into a finished book.

I sat down to do it, not knowing how many days, weeks, I was going to have to struggle. And in an hour and a half, it was done-- as if the rhythms and the poetry under the prose and the voices of the past and all the rest had come together and said, "Here."

Here is that last piece of writing for **This House of Sky:**

2

In the night, in mid-dream, people who are entire strangers to one another sometimes will congregate atop my pillow. They file into my sleeping skull in perplexing medleys. A face from grade school may be twinned with one met a week ago on a rain-forest trail in the Olympic Mountains. A pair of friends I joked with yesterday now drift in arguing with an editor I worked for more than a thousand miles from here. How thin the brainwalls must be, so easily can acquaintanceships be struck up among these random residents of the dark.

➔
Memory, the near-neighborhood of dream, is almost as casual in its hospitality:

When I fix my sandwich lunch, in a quiet noon, I may find myself sitting down
thirty years ago in the company of the erect old cowboy from Texas, Walter Badge

Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and ^{brea} ~~and~~

which Walter first has toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bite,

it shatters and crashes in our mouths, and the more we eat, the fuller our plate

grow with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter sits back

tall as two of the ten-year-old me and asks down: "Well, reckon we can make it

➔
through till night now?"

I step to the stove for tea, and come instead onto the battered blue-enamel coffee pot in a shepherd's wagon, my father's voice saying, "Ye could float your grandma's flat-iron on the Swede's coffee." I walk back toward my typewriter, past a window framing the backyard fir trees. They are replaced by the wind-leaning jackpines of one Montana ridgeline or another. I glance higher for some hint of the weather, and the square of air broadens and broadens to become the blue expanse over Montana rangeland, so vast and vaulting that it rears, from the foundation-line of the plains horizon, to form the walls and roof of all of life's experience that my younger self could imagine, a single/great house/of sky.

3 min.