

Good to be here. Coming back to Montana, with this particular book in hand, brings around in me one of those circumferences of life that clasp together the way Yeats said a poem ought to end-- with the click of a well-made box.

As a youngster, up in the Dupuyer country, one dusk I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had changed into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean,

but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked² on, was a freighter bound through the night for Singapore. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen, a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the Pacific Northwest coastline where I ~~have spent the majority of my years.~~ ^{LIVE NOW}

I feel lucky to have dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and

handsome territories, and I'm here tonight to talk a bit, and read quite a bit, about this new novel which has been in both of these literary homes of mine.

WARNING
LABEL

The reading will of course concentrate on the Montana side of things, but before we get to that, I've been asked to think out loud to you a little about the ingredients of my writing--some of the things about ~~the northern West~~ ^{MONTANA AND THE WEST} that I try to sprinkle into my pages, nine books' worth now.

To start with, if I read my own books right, it is the working west that first of all interests me. In some of the books that has been people who are full-time on the land, but the everyday craft

of making a living in whatever field transfixes me--Mountain Time has in it my imagined version of Seattle's latest software bigfoot--a character I named Aaron Frelinghuysen--with this description:

“...The guy had more money than most nations.

Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food-chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him.”

Well, nice work if you can get it, I suppose. My more usual characters have been forest rangers, damworkers, cooks, ranchers, newspaper people--I find an oxygen, a breath of life for me as a

writer, when I get involved in gathering lore about how jobs are done. When I was working on my very first novel, *The Sea Runners*, I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, Alaska, who was an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding that went on there when Alaska ~~is~~ still was Russian America. He gave me not only the working details I needed about wood, but also wrote out for me a quote from the English poet William Blake: "Art cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

When I'd finished blinking over the philosophical bent of park rangers, it occurred to me that the quote explains much of what I like about certain books set in the West.

There's the line in Jim Welch's immortal novel, **Winter in the Blood**--the description of a lazy bale piler the narrator is working with in a hay field:

"He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on."

Now, I've worked with that guy, up on the High Line.

Anybody who's ever been on a bale-piling job ^{MAYBE} ~~probably~~ has. The ~~artistic~~ exactness in that--the minutely organized particulars, those unearned beads of sweat--radiates right out.

On this matter of workgloves, **Mountain Time** has in it considerable rockpicking--perhaps the only modern novel that can

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make that claim--and I found myself focusing first of all on the remembered hands of kids picking rocks in the fields of northern Montana:

“...Two boys on each side of the blue truck, ranging out to pick up rocks from the size of softballs on up. They began brighthanded, wearing cheap white cotton work gloves which by the end of the first day would be irredeemably soiled and by noon of the second day would be worn out. Every farmer whose field they worked pointed out that leather gloves might cost more but would last longer, and every boy resented laying out his own money and went on buying the cheap ones.”

// The language of the West is also something I consciously draw on. I spent the 1980's writing the Two Medicine trilogy, in which not only is a ^{MONTANA} family followed through four generations but their language evolves, too, from their Scottish lowland origins to their late 20th century mouth music. Even what they say when they hoist a drink changes with the generations from Lucas Barclay in **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** proclaiming in his Scottish burr as he lifts a glass, "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame," to Jick McCaskill in **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana** offhandedly ordering "another round of jelly sandwiches."

From my very start as a book writer with **This House of Sky**, I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of people's lives coming through. Any kind of work has its own vocabulary, and people are dauntingly good at making up a language about what they do.

Trying to learn the lingo of Fort Peck damworkers of the 1930's when I was writing **Bucking the Sun**, I showed a guy who'd been on the dam crew a picture by Margaret Bourke-White in her famous photo-essay of Fort Peck and its boomtowns in that first issue of LIFE magazine--the photo showed one of the dam's

tunnel liners, a steel culvert ¹⁰thirty feet in diameter, cobwebbed inside with crisscross support rods bolted to collars in the middle of this colossal tube, and a bunch of damworkers 15 feet in the air, in there, climbing on these skinny rods--and I asked, "What;s going on here?"

Well, he said, those rods and collars keep the tension on the shape of the tunnel liner until it can be put in place, so they're called "tension spiders"--and when you're up there in mid-air working on them, naturally that's called "riding the tension spiders."

If that's not poetry of the working class, I don't know what is.

Another ingredient for books such as mine, the landscape--of course, the landscape. My books have gone back and forth between those two polar pulls of my imagination, the Coast country where I live now and the Rockies where I grew up, and you'll hear ~~in~~ ^{SOME OF THAT IN} tonight's excerpt ~~the use of a remembered spot on my horizon of memory, the Sweetgrass Hills.~~

But I have argued a number of times--mildly, of course--that "the sense of place" which we writers in the West are always said to have, is a seasoning in our work, it isn't the whole ^{DAMN} recipe. Why not equally cite the spine of character in Western ^{LITERARY} work? Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of A River Runs ^{through} through It--no one

who has read that story and has any imagination at all, can wet a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful cast. Jim Welch's ^{UNFORGETTABLE HARD-USED} men of the Reservations. Mary Clearman Blew's ^{BONE-HONEST} ranch women. I hope, maybe also on the list, the real people of This House of Sky, and the fictional ones of Dancing at the Rascal Fair, my two best-selling books because their characters seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, on this matter of place, I would argue that we're not just writing travelogues out here, we're trying to use all the tools of our trade to live up to what William Carlos Williams observed:

“The classic is the local fully realized--words marked by a place.”

BLIZZARDS -
30-YR WINTERS
DROUGHT
LTNG STRIKE
SNOWSTORM
DERING
LABLING--

To mention a few other makings that go into the stuff of
 es: the weather of the West, always something to write about
 e, right? And another of the fuels of my writing is... food. It
 keeps showing up in my scenes, at a forest fire cook camp or
 among the Yuppie grazers of present-day Seattle; maybe implying
 something about a character--here in Mountain Time, one of my
 descriptions of the male protagonist is that he can put up with just
 about anything if food is attached.

The ingredients list probably could go on, but I think it's time to make the main regional point, that I ~~think~~^{BELIEVE} quite a number of us writing here in the West are simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place in our words. We're not the first to sit around inside our heads all the time and monkey away at that. I've always liked Paul Horgan's saying whenever he'd get too tired of always getting called a **Southwestern** writer--

"Everybody is a regionalist," he replied. "Tolstoy was a regionalist."

It's time now to let my written words speak, I think. piece from **Mountain Time** involves Mitch Rozier, one of the

THE BOB
READING

Miles City, Aug. 23 '99

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I'm startled to find that it's been ten years since I was here. Like the sheepherders I grew up around, I'm not getting to town nearly often enough, am I.

The book I bring with me this time has a character named Mariah McCaskill, and I would remind you that Mariah was here in my novel about the centennial year, **Ride with Me, Mariah Montana**. Then she was traveling with another writer, Riley Wright, who was somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job, and when the book's entourage was pulling out of Miles City in a Winnebago, Riley pops his head out during a

service station stop and sees, over there beyond the gas pumps, the usual sign **Air** and **Water**.

Before he can stop himself, Riley is out of the motorhome and over at that sign--and in the ancient passionate compulsion to expand the story, he adds beneath in precise lettering: **Earth** and **Fire**.

AND BASIC ELEMENTS

Writerly compulsions ^{are} my topic here for the next little while, as I'm here tonight to talk a bit, and read quite a bit, about this new novel. I've been asked to think out loud to you a little about the ingredients of my writing--some of the things about the

~~northern~~³ West that I try to sprinkle into my pages, nine books' worth now.

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