

I'm honored to be here on an evening when the State of Oregon becomes a state of literary exultation, THE "REGION IN TRANSITION" CONFERENCE a place where ~~we~~ celebrates that strange tapping behavior which somehow turns the keyboard's scrambled alphabet into a book, and a place where we declare ourselves a Northwest <sup>literary</sup> community with-- in the wise words of our late great laureates, the poet William Stafford--"a one-word constitution: Patience."

As a resident of the state to the north of here, I particularly feel I and my chosen profession have come quite a ways since the bookly beginnings out here. It was in 1875 that the Washington Territory Board of Immigration put together a guidebook on Washington--"Its Soil, Climate, Productions and General Resources"--and included the warning:



“Literary men and loiterers are not wanted, and had better keep away.”

I’m not the only one here tonight whose general reputation seems to be on the mend. It was in 1978 <sup>WE KNOW</sup> when a western history professor at Yale--~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> is not necessarily an oxymoron, ~~incidentally~~--this professor of western history at the old frontier town of New Haven, let us say, put together the first edition of “The Reader’s Encyclopedia of the American West.”

When a reporter from the New York Times went up to behold ~~this~~ <sup>THAT</sup> book, the professor felt it necessary to apologize a bit for the lack of computers <sup>-GENERATED RESEARCH</sup> and other sophisticated techniques in Western history,

compared to practitioners of colonial history and Civil War history, <sup>AS HE PUT IT,</sup> “where all the brains are.” <sup>OUR YALE MAN</sup> He then stepped in it deeper by saying to the busily



jotting reporter: "Don't say that, <sup>THOUGH,</sup> All my friends are Western historians."

Well, some of my best friends are Western historians too, and I'm glad to say I didn't hear any similar complaint about your EVIDENTLY IMPROVED collective IQ when he brought out the second edition of "The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West" recently.

The godfather of this conference, Bill Robbins, once wrote an article about me and the ingredients of my writing--talked <sup>↑</sup> <sup>→</sup> to me, to actually see what I thought some of those ingredients were, of all things--and I have a hunch he asked me here tonight to see if I remember what those were. Mostly I want to read from new work--a novel called Mountain Time, which will be published this August by Scribner--and let you judge for yourselves how some flavors of the



Northwest show up in it. But just in case Bill has a snap quiz lying in wait for me, let me just briefly remark on some of the things about the northern West that I try to use in my writing--eight books' worth now, soon to be nine.

To start with, if I read my own books right, it is the working west--and northwest--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."

/The language of the West, I've also often cited as something I consciously draw on. I spent the 1980's writing the Two Medicine trilogy, in which not only is a family followed through four generations but their language evolves, too, from their Scottish lowland origins to their late 20th century mouth music.

/The landscape--of course, the landscape. My books have gone back and forth between the two polar pulls of my imagination, the Coast<sup>al</sup> country where I live now and the Rockies where I grew up. I have argued--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 recipe. Why not equally cite the spine of character in



Western work? Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of *A River Runs 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. Ken Kesey's Stamper family of loggers, down here, never giving an inch. Jim Welch's men of the Reservations. Mary Clearman Blew's ranch women. Craig Lesley's gallantly patched-together family of Danny and Jack, in *Winterkill*. 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."

To mention a few other makings that go into the stuff of stories: the weather of the West, always something to write about there. And another of the fuels of my writing is... food. It keeps showing up in my scenes, at a forest fire cook camp or, as you'll hear shortly, 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.



literary

The ingredients list probably could go on, but I think it's time to make the main regional point, at least in my case, that the tradition of Northwest coastal art has shown me the way in much of what I'm trying to do.

In thinking about the power of the art of the Northwest coastal tribes, I've wished that writing could truly capture that transformative magic that the carvers of cedar are able to do visually. Every so often, wouldn't you just like to re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill? Shakespeare, for instance, to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War One. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the ocean of space. Jonathan



Swift, perhaps, to do satiric justice to ~~this~~ <sup>THE</sup> impeachment episode. (THAT ENDED TODAY)

When I began working on "Winter Brothers," I at least had in the pioneer diarist James Swan a middleman of art, a translator between some of the cultures of this Coast. To try to savvy the art that Swan was doing some dealing in, when he was collecting pieces from out here for the Smithsonian Institution, I read Bill Holm's analysis of form in his book "Northwest Coast Indian Art," and got lessons there in the immense sophistication of that artwork. I learned that there was painstaking use of standard design elements in that coastal art, yet as Bill Holm put it, there was "easy transition from form to form" within an individual piece of art. There was flow, connection, relation, double meaning, curvaceousness,



in the work of those tribal carvers. Something was always happening in that art, any design element was on its way to add meaning to all the other elements.

And I came across sentences there from Bill Reid, himself a magnificent carver from the Haida<sup>TRIBE</sup> of the Queen Charlotte Islands. (Bill Reid, who died last year, gave our part of the world at least two masterpieces--Raven Discovering Mankind in a Clam Shell, and the stunning canoeload of mythology called The Spirit of Haida Gwai.) These sentences from Bill Reid:

“In Northwest coast art, perhaps more than in any other art, there’s an impulse to push things as far as possible.”

And:



“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.”

And yet again from Bill Reid:

“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 any character born before him, that last sentence is particularly the sort of thing you like to hear. I’d say, too, that the way my scenes sometimes switch back and forth in time--sometimes turning on a single word or its resonance--derives from that overlapping, <sup>THAT</sup> sharing of space. And, who knows, maybe I’ve even tried to out-crazy, now and then.



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What this all comes down to, I believe, is what I say over and over again on occasions such as this-- that I'm convinced that writers of calibre can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life.

Well, now let's see if my next piece of work has any of that life. I thought I would read three not very long pieces of Mountain Time, each starring one of the main characters, and so let us begin with this book, as they say, at the beginning. The opening scene of Mountain Time: