"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—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 begin 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... Donald and Robert as poets, John and Susan and I as literary story-tellers... I think stories and their singing teachers, poems, 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. In my case, I probably reveal something in *Bucking the Sun* when I have the Fort Peck taxi-dancer Proxy Shannon ask her new companion of the night about his suspicious political background: "**Don't** if they pin something on you, will any get on me?"

(as a writer)

In my everyday work, I see it as my job to try to get poetry and literature on people.

On my characters, first. People who are poor in all else
are often rich in language. (My god, the history of the Irish!) The everyday-ness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around must have drilled that into me, because 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, its "poetry beneath the prose," and people are dauntingly at making up a language about what they do.
Trying to learn the lingo of damworkers of the 1930's, I showed one of them a picture by Margaret Bourke-White in her famous photo-essay of Fort Peck Dam and its boomtowns in the first issue of LIFE magazine—the photo showed one of the dam's tunnel liners, a steel culvert thirty 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?"
MY ELDERLY DAM WORKER

Well, as 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 everyday poetry and/or literature, I don't know what is.

But do people in the larger sum of their lives, American peasant stock such as my pagefuls of Duffs and McCaskills
and Doigs, really make use of literary analogies and poetic urges, of all things?

I'm here to tell you they do. Literally here, beside this lake, where I  \underline{\text{CAME TO GO}}  \underline{\text{went}} to college, and tapped out my first writing tries—where Carol and I met and courted and were married, 31 years north of here at Northwestern—\underline{\text{I think it's not mere coincidence that after those Great Lake years, of winters beside frozen shores and with the thaw called love arriving with Carol and lakeside spring, I think}}
it cannot be just coincidental that the story that ultimately fascinated me was of the creation of an inland sea, Montana's Fort Peck Dam and its mammoth manmade lake, and its Depression-driven damworkers and taxi-dancers and their lives and loves on that created shore.

Another Montanan who was led here, young, to this lakeside—Norman Maclean of the University of Chicago—chose as the final words of *A river Runs through It* the sentence, "I am haunted by waters." Many of us from the West, where
water so often has been made to flow uphill toward money, hear the course of our lives in that most literary of sentences.

When readers imbibe our writing—and we as the brewers and you as the bartenders of the stuff have to hope they positively swim in it, don't we—when readers take in, I believe they have to know at first glance and steadily from then on that what they're seeing is not only the work of the head, but of more than one heart.

One of those is the heart of the language, the sounds
that come off the page.

The other/vital/pulse/on the page I don't know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which/Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, has somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking
"the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his upper-crust nose, somehow—somehow—could see deeply to "where all ladders start/in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Here in this convention cavern, full of all of us for whom poetry and literature are everyday life, we are happily haunted by words and what they can do. Art is never "for its own sake," so long as there is any other set of eyes to take it in. Robert Pinsky has said of poetry:
"The poem, new or old, should be able to help us, if only to help us by delivering the relief that something has been understood, or even seen, well."

As a practitioner of novels, I think the same aim must be set for fiction. Poetry and literary prose, those echoes around the fire—at their best, they are also heartbeats of the world.
21 June '96

    fax (202) 334-5059

Dear Marie--

Here's the copy of my ABA luncheon talk that you asked to see. You'll find spots where it's written for the ear, and for the specific ABA site and audience, but if the rest of the piece looks good to you I can amend or substitute for those. I have ample material about either "the poetry under the prose" (back to my own sometimes-published poetic efforts which began when I was a Ph.D. student in history, and the writerly resonance I find in narrative poetry such as Andrew Hugins' "After the Lost War" and Linda Bierds' "Heart and Perimeter") or the eloquence of the vernacular that I try to capture in my characters' dialogue, whichever you would like to see expanded a bit.

I'll be away on the Montana bookstore tour June 21-July 10, but Erin Marut in the Simon & Schuster publicity department will have my whereabouts. Erin's phone number is (212) 698-7528; fax, (212) 698-7336. But after mid-July, Marie, you can reach me directly by phone here at (206) 542-6658; afternoons are best, as I usually have the phone machine on during my morning writing hours.

If you'd be so kind, please pass word to Nina and/or Michael that Reed Beddow makes his appearance as a 1930's movie actor declaiming "Pilots, to your machines!" on p. 63 of Bucking the Sun. Might tell them, too, that the Book World review of Bucking helped to make June 16 my ideal day as a writer—that review, the ABA speech, and the news that I've outsold John Grisham on two Seattle bestseller lists and one in Denver.

regards,
Dear Ivan -

I realize so late that I never sent you my thanks for reading at the Mt. Baker in May! I'm so sorry for my negligence and hope you do not think ill of me or Village Books.

Your Bucking the Sun has taken the region by storm - your words move many people want to discuss. Thank you for sharing those words with the Bellingham readers!

Also I did enjoy your "speech" at ABA. Might Village Books be able to reprint it in our holiday Chuckanut Reader? Do let me know.

My regards - Alainé Borges, Events Coord.
Dear Alaine--

This is hasty, as I'm about to go out of town until the 16th, but sure, go ahead and run my ABA remarks in the Chuckanut Reader. Please put my copyright line on it, okay?--

Copyright © 1996 by Ivan Doig

Regards to Chuck and Dee and the rest of the gang.
Marie A. Ward 7/12/96
- need to be translated, but not run as it is
- needs focus to 2000 or so on
- write abt. vernacular?
- will call w/ all info by Aug. 19

334-748-
ACCORDION CRIMES
By E. Annie Proulx
Scribner. 361 pp. $25
By Michael Dirda

ANNIE PROULX'S first two novels—Postcards (1992) and The Shipping News (1993)—walked away with virtually all the most glittering literary prizes, including the PEN-Faulkner, the National Book Award, the Pulitzer and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize (big bucks). You would think Proulx would have the simple decency to make her third novel merely so-so, if only to let someone else grab a little limelight. No such luck. Born in 1935, Annie Proulx spent a lot of years learning her craft, selling articles to regional magazines, working on gardening books for Rodale, producing short stories (gathered in Heart Songs), as well as raising three sons. She now seems to know everything about writing. And a fair amount about life, too. After all, a young author may be accomplished, witty or technically innovative, but no kid can ever match a middle-aged novelist for insight into everyone's favorite tragicomedy, the ravages of time and fate.

In Accordion Crimes, a group of eight linked stories, Proulx takes us on a panoramic tour (A Horizon and de force) of America's ethnic past. To accomplish this he creates a green button accordion—that most insulted and injured of musical instruments—which comes to be owned by a score or so working-class people during the hundred years of its knockabout existence. For these various family mini-sagas, set in Louisiana, Maine, Chicago,

the West and other regions, Proulx mimics perfectly the broken English, characteristic idioms, and keenly expressed prejudices of Italians, blacks, Poles, French Canadians, Germans, Cajuns and Hispanics. She vividly evokes, again and again, the exhausting lives and desperate pleasures of the poor: 'He made her pregnant on their wedding night, and his life slipped into the ancient human groove of procreation, work, cooking, children's sicknesses and their little talents and possibilities. For the first time he saw he was no different than anyone else.'

Many stories about immigrants in 20th-century America tend to be uplifting, but not Proulx's. If one may criticize Accordion Crimes ever so mildly, it is only for its relentless existential bleakness. No one here gets out alive. Imagine the folksy tales of Lake Wobegon, retold by Dreiser or Richard Wright. An innocent Italian accordionmaker is shot to death by an angry racist mob. A young girl lifts up her arms and has them sheared off above the elbow by a flying piece of scrap metal. A wheelchair-bound man is miraculously cured, then commits suicide.

Yet grim as these events are, Proulx's sentences invest them with a sardonic lilt, like items from News of the Weird. 'A month later word came from Texas that Messermacher had dropped dead at his mailbox, the new Sears catalog open on his breast at the pages showing a selection of women's hair nets.' A young Cajun girl watches her father almost burn her mother to a crisp: 'The child directed a savage thought at her father, that he become small and weak. That night her father began to shrink. The process was agonizingly slow, but in ten years he was the height of a child, withered and tiny, his arms like hollow stalks, and when he finally died he was no larger than a loaf of bread. His scarred and ruined wife threw him into the yard for the hens to peck.' Another character actually finds 'a job for a few

—Continued on page 8

THE WRITING LIFE
Where Have All the Fathers Gone?
By Christopher Tilghman

IN 1994 I had the privilege—as well as the task—of reading more than 15,000 pages of fiction manuscripts submitted as grant applications to the National Endowment of the Arts. One of the least recognized benefits of this worthy program—perhaps overlooked because the number of beneficiaries is so small—is the opportunity for the panel judges to review annually the state and trends of American fiction, as represented by a wide cross section of publishing writers.

The news, I would say quickly, is generally good: Our national fiction is driven by worthwhile ambitions and by high ideals; the stories were sometimes unpretty but were generally ethically engaged and morally bound. But here's the rub. Where were the fathers? Where, in all the blessed diversity of individuals and families so well captured in these thousands of pages, was Dad, the co-creator?

I'll tell you where he was. He had split but often not before inflicting terrible abuse. He had killed himself or died suddenly, usually in some way to make maximum mess for the survivors. He was out on literately endless walks with the dog, the only creature to which he could be completely truthful. He was present but so unengaged, so ill-equipped to minister to the sick or bring relief to pain, as to merit little more than a footnote.

Or he never existed at all. Not in memory, not in word or deed. Just as a momentary pinprick in time and then gone missing, leaving an entire society of mothers and grandmothers and aunts and friends to carry on, and better for it.

This absence of fathers, by the way, did not seem to have much to do with gender—as well as the gender could be inferred in the anonymous manuscripts—of the authors. It didn't have much to do with sexual orientation. Gay male writers were more sympathetic to men, generally, not to fathers. It didn't have that much to do with race and culture, even though the traditional roles of fathers could vary significantly.

In other words, the absent father is a broad-based literary trend. The Bad Dad fiction of the '80s has been replaced by the No Dad of the '90s. It's a fashion that young fiction writers are following without, I suspect, real

—Continued on page 10

INSIDE

PARTNERS IN POWER:
THE CLINTONS AND THEIR AMERICA

MORAL POLITICS

JAMES CARROLL'S MEMOIR
By Robert Hass

PROBABLY the best-known poem about fathers is Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.” It is a little too long to print here, and it is not altogether friendly toward the male parent. I recommend that you look it up. It ends, to give you the flavor:

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.

Another well-known poem is “My Papa’s Waltz,” by Theodore Roethke. Roethke was born in 1908 in upper Michigan, where his father had a greenhouse and a wholesale florist business. So this poem must remember evenings after work in about 1916:

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such dancing was not easy.
We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother’s countenance
Could not unfrown itself.
The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.
You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard with dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

A waltz rhythm, and a poem poised, as I read it, between love and terror.
And then there is Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays.” Hayden was also born in Michigan, in Detroit, in 1913. He was adopted by a couple in his neighborhood at the age of 2 when his mother had to give him up. His adoptive father was a laborer and a stern Baptist. Hayden went on to become the first African-American Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. Here is how he remembers his father and those winter Sundays:

Sundays too my father got up early
And put his clothes on in the blackblue cold,
Then with cracked hands that ached
From labor in the weekday weather made
Banked fires blaze.
No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,
And slowly I would rise and dress,
Fearing the chronic angers of that house,
Speaking indifferently to him,
Who had driven out the cold
And polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
Of love’s austere and lonely offices?

“My Father’s Waltz” is from “The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke” (Doubleday), reprinted by permission of the publisher. Robert Hayden’s poem is reprinted by permission of the publisher from his “Collected Poems” (Liveright/Norton).

Robert Hass, the current U.S. poet laureate, introduces and discusses a poem a week in “Poet’s Choice.”

The sequel to The New York Times Bestseller LORD OF CHAOS

Robert Jordan

Book Seven of the WHEEL OF TIME

A CROWN OF SWORDS

The writing life: Where Have All the Fathers Gone?
By Christopher Tilghman

POET’S CHOICE. By Robert Hass

DAILY BOOK WORLD

FICTION. Reviewed by James Polk

BOOK BAG CONTEST

NEW IN PAPERBACK

PAPERBACK BESTSELLERS

HARDCOVER BESTSELLERS

HARDCOVERS IN BRIEF

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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HORIZON

THE LEARNING SECTION

Find it behind the Food section on the second Wednesday of every month.

ENOWI
When Values Collide

THE POLITICS OF MEANING
Restoring Hope and Possibility
In an Age of Cynicism
By Michael Lerner
Addison Wesley. 355 pp. $24

MORAL POLITICS
What Conservatives Know
That Liberals Don’t
By George Lakoff
University of Chicago Press. 413 pp. $24.95

By Robert Royal

SINCE at least Aristotle, politics in the West have been thought of as a branch of ethics. Even notorious figures like Machiavelli did not deny this connection so much as argue that a purely moral politics leads to a kind of immorality. The American Founders saw themselves in this tradition. Hence Madison’s remark that government is “the greatest of all reflections on human nature,” and our belief that politics must be limited and mediated by the ethics of the Constitution. Many people today emphasize moral and even spiritual issues in politics. In public debates, both sides typically begin with professions of common ethical concerns before arguing for particular policies.

Michael Lerner, editor of the liberal journal Tikkun and inspirer of Hillary Clinton’s brief flirtation with the politics of meaning, does not like the way this is going; however, conservatives got a head start in the re-moralization. And liberals accept too much of the status quo, especially the greed, selfishness and materialism of capitalism. A market mentality has blocked radically progressive politics, allegedly by inducing despair, cynicism and feelings of powerlessness among the people.

What capitalism does to character is a serious and complicated question—one that cannot be reduced to a simple morality tale. Some of Lerner’s remedies have a touching simplicity. For example, he would like Congress, the courts, corporations and city councils to include “ethical impact reports” in proposals. Allowing people to have input in various social institutions, he believes, will break down our current separation: A politics-of-meaning society will be “one in which people will be so excited to be meeting one another and having the opportunity to spend time together, that we will resemble playful puppies, joyfully exploring and celebrating one another’s existence.” To be fair, Lerner rarely indulges in such language, but the substance of his thought never strays far from this vision.

His biggest problem here is that, once he has urged moral and spiritual activism, he has too small an argument for a full-sized book. Any 30-page portion of his text contains all his basic arguments, which he then repeats with little variation over 10 times as many pages. Particular failings aside, the generally cramped feeling this gives undermines any notions a reader might have that this is a fertile, expansive vision.

George Lakoff, too, recognizes that current politics is often about morals. “What conservatives know that liberals don’t” in his subtitle refers to how we all now employ family metaphors to recommend policies. Conservatives, he believes, consciously exploit family metaphors in a way that liberals need to imitate for quite different ends. A professor of linguistics and cognitive science at the University of California, Berkeley, Lakoff examines these questions with much sophistication. In two lengthy chapters, he traces out two large meaning systems—radial categories in the terminology of cognitive science—used in public moral debate. Strict Father Morality underlies conservative positions and Nurturant Parent Morality underlies liberal positions (hereafter SFM and NPM).

PERHAPS the most interesting question raised by Lakoff’s book, however, is whether the metaphorical shorthand that leads us to think of the Nation As Family is a good way to do politics. Perhaps inevitably, we all filter our policy judgments through the religious and moral elements dominant in our thinking. But John Locke, the American Founders and many other seminal modern thinkers considered limited government with carefully spelled out powers a moral desideratum for political morality. A nation is not and cannot be one big family. We may decide by proper legislation to be more strict or more nurturing as political circumstances demand. But if we expect the federal government to “care” or to become surrogate for Mom or Dad, perhaps we will be making the biggest political mistake of all.
Two lovely and heartbreakingly new books illustrate the point. Mary Gordon's The Shadow Man: A Daughter's Search for her Father is a story driven by that most powerful kind of love, the love that resides in the soul of one who lost a parent in childhood. The Gordon relationship was a loving father and an intellectual turns out—her horror—to have been a liar, an anti-Semite, a man destroyed by his confusions. Yet in the end, what seems natural and essential to Gordon, as it does to me, is that she has no choice but to embrace whatever she finds. Putting to rest the man that cast the shadow, at last, comes with a strangely wonderful wholeness of spirit.

JAMES CARROLL'S An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War That Came Between Us [see review, page 11], is a passionate story of his relationship with his father, an Air Force general responsible for picking targets in Vietnam, winds through his own journey as he enters the priesthood, becomes radicalized against the war, leaves the priesthood and marries, writes fiction and fathers three children of his own. The story of his rupture with his father, never healed, is perhaps the moving drama of fathers and sons that I have ever read.

Carroll's book ends with the confession, "I had broken his heart. And the final truth will be, how the skill of ending with uplift yet eludes me— he had broken mine." Gordon and Carroll have both written splendid novels about fathers fed with the emotions and material contained in these memoirs. I'm sure they will do so again. But this time, they had a story to tell that would not permit the indirection of fiction. Why?

One can acknowledge, and then perhaps put aside, the occasional laps in the memoir writers' of just once-speaking truths and naming names. One can as well understand that, in many cases, the memoirists are making public their love or their anger for their fathers, living or dead, as a ritual of remembrance or healing.

There is more to it than that. As the 20th century draws to a close, we are clearly perplexed about fathers. We don't know what we want them to be or, indeed, to have been. Male values and virtues have been roundly thrashed in recent years and are now beginning to recover some lustre, but a cultural, comfort-level with man at his most male—father as patriarch, as a man raising children—seems, yet to come.

This is the kind of context in which fiction writers tend to have trouble. Fiction as an art form is composed of a set of variations on concrete reality, a set of particularizations constructed in opposition to generally agreed upon types. Our characters, however, much drawn from life, are primarily understood by virtue of the role they play in the story. What role to give Dad? In this situation, it is clearly easier to portray a bad father than one that we are willing to hold up frankly as a good man; easier still to portray no father at all.

As a fiction writer who has just published a novel about a quite bad father, I understand the temptation. But as a man with a living father to whom I owe great debts and to whom I hold a healthy and deep regard, I can't let go. As a man with three sons, I find the perplexity about fathers to be deeply unfair, the joys too deep for me to contain. As a father who doesn't really care what role I play in my family just so long as it's positive, I'll be happy enough to let my characters struggle in print. I, along with—let's be fair, now that the point is made—plenty of wonderful contemporary writers, will keep peppering my fiction with dads at their best and worst, in the hope that I will someday arrive at something resembling a useful truth.

And in the meantime, let's be grateful for those memoirs. They will not, as some have said, replace the novel; they will show the way to better novels. The writers are doing the work that must be done, adding their own testimony to the myriad explanations about fatherhood. Better than a greeting card, a weed trimmer, or breakfast in bed, these honest, painful and true stories should be the Father's Day gift of choice in 1996.

Christopher Tighman

"Grew up surrounded by a sense of family and history," says Christopher Tighman, whose roots in Maryland's Eastern Shore date to 1657. "But my heritage came with a mixed message. My father would always say, 'Take pleasure and meaning from this place and these people. Take as much of pride. But don't get trapped by a feeling of privilege. Don't let it get ugly and social. Know its worth.'"

The film appears to have applied those words directly to his life as a writer. Although he has been writing for a living since 1971, he has never felt complacent about his craft nor allowed his career to get ugly and social. He has always seemed to know the meaning of word. Much of the film he has written in those past 25 years has not seen the light of day. A willow of life, he has one collection of stories and one novel to show. In My Father's Place and Mason's Retreat. It is a small portfolio. But it is choice.

He was born in Boston, the middle son of a Boston police officer. His youngest brother, Michael, is a Mifflin executive. Books were always a huge attraction," he says. "As a child I used to visit the Houghton plant. I came to love books as artifacts. I would hang up my own and play games making them. And I followed publishers the way kids follow baseball teams. I knew logos. I could recite bestseller lists.

Writers were always passing through his boy's comfortable house in Dover—ever," Tighman says, "but I banked on that validation for a decade." He took on freelance jobs writing brochures and annual reports. Meanwhile he decided to build a house in the most forbidding landscape of northern Vermont. "I pulled trees out of the forest myself to do it. When the house was up, the marriage was over."

He moved back to Cambridge and remarried in 1990, continuing his lucrative corporate writing and selling a short story about the Navy to the Virginia Quarterly Review. Fifteen years after his decision to write, it was his first published work.

But it was enough. He began setting up at 5 a.m., working on stories until 8, then feeding his three little sons breakfast, getting them off to school, and returning to work on contract assignments.

In 1990 when In My Father's Place was published, he received the Whiting Award, then a Guggenheim, and an Ingram Merrill Fellowship. Just this April he published Mason's Retreat, a space novel about a father, a family and the Eastern Shore.

"Poets are the happiest of writers," he says, "because they have no readers left. They are the painful downsizing of ambition and reward. You have to let go of the notion that you want your name on the spine of a book or on the pages of a splashing mag%

"I never met Lawrence. Not then, not

—Mary Anne-Ward
Remarks by Ivan Doig

"Poetry and Literature in Everyday Life"

American Booksellers Association luncheon,
June 16, 1996

"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—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 eight-grade education, would ask, "Have they taught ye this one yet" and begin 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... Donald and Robert as poets, John and Susan and I as literary story-tellers... I think stories and their singing teachers, poems, 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, 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. In my case, I probably reveal something in Bucking the Sun when I have the Fort Peck taxi-dancer Proxy Shannon ask her new companion of the night about his suspicious political background: "Darius, if they pin something on you, will any get on me?"

In my everyday work, I see it as my job to try to get poetry and literature on people.

On my characters, first. People who are poor in all else are often rich in language. (My god, the history of the Irish!) The everyday-ness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around must have drilled that into me, because 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, literary and people are dauntingly good at making up a language about what they do.
Trying to learn the lingo of damworkers of the 1930's, I showed one of them a picture by Margaret Bourke-White in her famous photo-essay of Fort Peck Dam and its boomtowns in the first issue of LIFE magazine—the photo showed one of the dam's tunnel liners, a steel culvert thirty 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?"

*My elderly damworker*

Well, as 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 everyday poetry and/or literature, I don't know what is.

But do people in the larger sum of their lives, American peasant stock such as my pagefuls of Duffs and McCaskills
and Doigs, really make use of literary analogies and poetic urges, of all things?

I'm here to tell you they do. Literally here, beside this lake, where I went to college, and tapped out my first writing tries—where Carol and I met and courted and were married, 31 years north of here at Northwestern—I think it's not mere coincidence that after those Great Lake years, of winters beside frozen shores and with the thaw called love arriving with Carol and lakeside spring, I think it cannot be just coincidental that the story that ultimately fascinated me was of the creation of an inland sea, Montana's Fort Peck Dam and its mammoth marmade lake, and its Depression-driven damworkers and taxi-dancers and their lives and loves on that created shore.

Another Montanan who was led here, young, to this lakeside—Norman Maclean of the University of Chicago—chose as the final words of A river Runs through It the sentence, "I am haunted by waters." Many of us from the West, where
the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-
nez eyeglasses perched on his upper-crust nose, somehow--
somehow--could see deeply to "where all ladders start/ in
the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Here in this convention cavern, full of all of us for
whom poetry and literature are everyday life, we are happily
haunted by words and what they can do. Art is never "for
its own sake," so long as there is any other set of eyes
to take it in. Robert Pinsky has said of poetry:

"The poem, new or old, should be able to help us, if only to
help us by delivering the relief that something has been
understood, or even seen, well."

As a practitioner of novels, I think the same aim must be
set for fiction. Poetry and literary prose, those echoes
around the fire--at their best, they are also heartbeats
of the world.

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Remarks by Ivan Doig

"Poetry and Literature in Everyday Life"

American Booksellers Association luncheon,

June 16, 1996
"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—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 eight-grade education, would ask, "Have they taught ye this one yet" and begin reciting, to my dropped jaw, "Hiswatha".

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... Donald and Robert as poets, John and Susan and I as literary story-tellers... I think stories and their singing teachers, poems, 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. In my case, I probably reveal something in Bucking the Sun when I have the Fort Peck taxi-dancer Proxy Shannon ask her new companion of the night about his suspicious political background: "Darius, if they pin something on you, will any get on me?"

In my everyday work, I see it as my job to try to get poetry and literature on people.

On my characters, first. People who are poor in all else
are often rich in language. (My god, the history of the Irish!) The everyday-ness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around must have drilled that into me, because 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.
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water so often has been made to flow uphill toward money, 
hear the course of our lives in that most literary of sentences.

When readers imbibe our writing—and we as the brewers 
and you as the bartenders of the stuff have to hope they 
positively swim in it, don't we—when readers take it in, 
I believe they have to know at first glance and steadily 
from then on that what they're seeing is not only the work of 
the head, but of more than one heart.

One of those is the heart of the language, the sounds
that come off the page.

The other vital pulse on the page I don't know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer writes better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, has somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking
the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his upper-crust nose, somehow—somehow—could see deeply to "where all ladders start/in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

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