Reading here tonight, within a dissertation's throw of Suzzallo Library and the archives over there, all this 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. It was in 1966 that I came to this campus, and within minutes of that, to the University Book Store, as a graduate student in history. In one of the very first seminars I took from Vernon Carstensen, in his field of history of the American West, Vernon sized me up--with my knockabout past of growing up as the offspring of ranch hands and ranch cooks in the sagebrush of Montana--and strongly advised me to take a look at a book written

ANOTHER KNOCKABOUT WESTERN KID,

by his old college roomate--the title was **Wolf Willow**, and of course that roommate of his was Wallace Stegner. Ultimately, with some hauling and tugging and gritted teeth by both of us, Vernon Carstensen did manage to turn the restless young journalist that was me into a Ph.D.--only to see me promptly fall off the wagon again, to the writing life. Eventually, when I reached the stage of books, Vernon came to savor my WORDLY doings, and ended up with one of my novels dedicated to him. But just recently came that cosmic click that I think would have particularly delighted Vernon. The San Francisco Chronicle, this spring, took notice of that FAMOUS INFAMOUS Modern Library list of 100 "best books"

written in English this century, and pointed out that the list looks as if America "ran westward from New York to the Rockies and then stopped, like a dog at the end of a leash." That East Coast-centric list would have been raw intellectual meat for Vernon Carstensen, as an example of--in one of those great antique words he so loved--"mumpsimus": an idea firmly and wrongly held. The San Francisco Chronicle, perhaps goaded by the ghost of Vernon, got up its own list of the 100 best books by writers in the western United States--and there among the top four vote-getters is the old Carstensen roommate, Stegner, and the old Carstensen student, yours truly. In all the echoes this campus holds for me, I now

hear Vernon chortling that the San Francisco Chronicle produced a temporary cure for Eastern mumpsimus.

Well, now to the current word output of yours truly, and tonight I want to read you a pair of selections from **Mountain Time**. These two selections are held together by rocks. One of the angles of wordplay in the title of this novel is meant to invoke geological time, the clock of earth, and its manifestations to us in its most lasting forms of mountains and stone. In these two scenes, as you'll hear, the rocks take a particular familiar and evocative form to me and my characters--they stand in cairns, along the grazing-land shoulders of the Rockies, and on up into

those mountains. They are sheepherders' monuments--and this first short scene I think will show what they are and how they came to be.

~~A few words about the characters:~~

This little scene involves Mariah McCaskill, a highly intense photographer for a Montana newspaper. Mariah is newly back in the West, having won a Fuji Fellowship to travel the world and take pictures for a year. Mariah is also licking her wounds from a failed love affair, with a New Zealand glacier guide named Colin. Colin, much younger than her, wore his total philosophy of life on

his Mount Cook Guide Service sweatshirt--"Glaciers are a kick in the ice."

We meet Mariah here as she is trying to shoot a feature photo--up along the Rocky Mountain Front in northern Montana--for her Sunday paper. She's been trying to get an artistic shot of glacier leavings called "erratic boulders," which sometimes are wonderfully rouged with orange lichens--but so far, she has not found the right rock:

good storytelling. I had an unexpected lesson in this when I was working on my first novel, The Sea Runners, In trying to write about New Archangel in the time when Alaska still was Russian America, I wanted to know what kind of wood, in the ship timbers and lumber piles, my characters would be seeing and smelling as they walked along the New Archangel waterfront in the 1850s. I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, as New Archangel has become; an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding during the period of Russian America. The ranger gave me not only the working details I needed--yellow cedar was the distinctive smell that I put into the book--but he also wrote out for me a quote from William Blake: "Art cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars."

When I'd finished blinking over the literary and philosophical bent of park rangers at the time--this ranger in Sitka I saw that told me something I already believed but hadn't known how to say. That when craft--craftsmanship--is done well enough, it begins to be art.

A quick example: at one turn of the plot in my novel Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, the three main characters visit the family ranch that one of them, Riley Wright, turned his back on for a newspaper life instead. Riley's rancher brother Morgan Wright shows up briefly to confront Riley--and here is Morgan's appearance:

"Morgan stood spraddled, thumbs alone showing from the weather-worn hands parked in his front pockets, as though it might take all the time in the universe to hear this matter out."

Billings reading, June 23 '89

On Tuesday, I will celebrate a half centennial of my own. What a delight, and an honor, to have this early fiftieth birthday gift--of being here tonight with Louise and Michael / and with Gretel / and with all of you.

~~Overture~~

Depending on how wound up I get, I have about a half an hour of reading--and in what I hope is the spirit of the centennial, I'm going to mix the past, present, and future by reading from a couple of different pieces of work. This first scene is from my novel English Crick. It takes place, coincidentally, fifty years ago as my narrator, Jick McCaskill--not quite fifteen years old, with all the perplexities about life and family that young age entails--is at the rodeo in the fictitious Montana town of Gros Ventre, impatiently waiting for his best friend to show up to watch the rodeo with.

I was to meet Ray Heaney on the corral alongside the bucking chutes, the best seats in the arena if you didn't mind perching on a fence pole. Again this year my father drilled home to me his one point of rodeo ~~protocol~~ etiquette. "Just so you stay up on that fence," he stipulated. "I don't want to see you down in there with the chute society." By which he meant the clump of fifteen or twenty hangers-on who always clustered around the gates of the bucking chutes, visiting and gossiping and looking generally important, and who regularly were cleared out of there two or three times every rodeo by rampaging broncs. When that happened, up onto anything climbable they all would scoot to roost, like hens with a weasel in their midst, and a minute or so after the bronc's passage they'd be right back in front of the chutes, preening and yakking again. I suppose the chute society offended my father's precept that a horse was nothing to be careless around. In any case, during the housecleanings when a bronc sent them scrambling for the fence it was my father's habit to cheer loudly for the bronc.

No Ray yet, at our fence perch. So I ~~stayed atop~~ just ~~House and~~ watched the world. In the pens behind the chutes the usual kind of before-rodeo confusion was going on, guys hassling ~~broncs~~ horses here and calves there, the air full to capacity with dust and bawling and whinnying. Out front, about half the chute society was already planted in place, tag-ends of their conversations mingling. "That SOB is so tight he wouldn't give ten cents to see Christ ride a bicycle backwards. ~~Oh hell yes, I'll take a quarter horse over a Morgan horse any time. Them Morgans are so damn hot-blooded.~~ With haying coming and one thing and another, I don't see how I'm ever going to catch up with myself--"

"Hi, Jick," Ray greeted as he climbed onto the arena fence beside me. "What've you been up to?"

He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinched the way you do to thread a needle. And curved over with eyebrows which wouldn't needed to have been much thicker to make a couple of respectable blonde mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it. When Ray really grinned ~~—I didn't see that this first day, although~~ I was to see ~~it~~ thousands of times ~~in the years ahead~~—deep slice-lines cut his cheeks, out opposite the corners of his mouth. Like a big set of parentheses around the grin. His lower lip was so full that it too had a slice-line under it. This kid looked more as if he'd been carved out of a pumpkin than born. Also, even more so than a lot of us at that age, his front teeth were far ahead of the rest of him in size. In any school yard there always were a lot of traded jibes of "Beaver tooth!" but Ray's frontals really did seem as if they'd been made for toppling willows.

"Alec's bringing his horse in," Ray reported from his sphere of the arena. "Guess he's roping in this section."

"So's everybody else in the world, it looks like." Horsemen and hemp, hemp and horsemen. It was a wonder the combined swishing of the ropes of all the would-be calf ropers now assembling didn't lift the rodeo arena off the ground like an autogyro.

Calf roping I nominate as an event the spectators ought to be paid for sitting through. I mean, here'll come one ~~yahoo~~ yayhoo out after the calf swinging a community loop an elephant could trot through, and the next guy will pitch a loop so teeny that it bounces off the back of the calf's neck like a spitwad. Whiff whiff whiff, and then a burst of cussing as the rope-flinger's throw misses its mark: there is the essence of rodeo calf roping. If I ran the world there'd be standards, such as making any calf roping entrant dab onto a fencepost twenty feet away, just to prove he knows how to build a decent loop.

As you maybe can tell, my emotions about having ~~a~~ my brother Alec forthcoming into this event

were strictly mixed. Naturally I was pulling for Alec to win. Brotherly blood is at least that thick. Yet a corner of me was shadowed with doubt as to whether victory was really such a good idea for Alec. Did he need any more confirming in his cowboy mode? Especially in this dubious talent of hanging rope necklaces onto slobbering calves?

This first section of the calf roping now proceeded about as I could have foretold, a lot of air fanned with rope but damn few calves collared. One surprise was produced, though. After a first catch Bruno Martin of Augusta missed his tie, the calf kicking free ~~before its required six seconds flat on the ground were up~~. If words could be seen in the air, some blue dandies accompanied Martin out of the arena.

The other strong roper, Vern Crosby, snagged his calf neatly, suffered a little trouble throwing him down for the tie, but then niftily gathered the calf's legs and wrapped the pigging string around them, as ~~Tollie~~ the announcer spelled out for us, "faster than Houdini can tie his shoe laces!"

So when the moment came for Alec to guide the blood bay roping horse into the break-out area beside the calf chute, the situation was as evident as ~~Tollie's~~ the announcer's voice bleating from that tin bouquet of 'glory horns:

"Nineteen seconds by Vern Crosby is still the time to beat. It'll take some fancy twirling by this next young ~~buckaroo~~ roper. One of the hands out at

Alec McCaskill is

the Double W, ~~he's~~ getting hisself squared away and ~~—~~ will be ready in just--"

The calf chute and the break-out area where each roper and his horse burst out after the creature were at the far end of the bucking chutes from us. Ray cupped his hands and called across to there: "Wrap him up pretty, Alec!"

Across there, Alec appeared a little nervous, dandling his rope around more than was necessary as he and the bay horse waited for their calf to emerge. But then I discovered I was half-nervous myself, jiggling my foot on its corral pole, and I had no excuse whatsoever. You wouldn't catch me out there trying to snare a ~~75-pound animal~~ big calf running full tilt.

The starter's little red flag whipped down, and the calf catapulted from the chute into the expanse of the arena.

Alec's luck. Sometimes you had to think he held the patent on four-leaf clovers and rabbit's feet. The calf he drew was a straight runner instead of a dodger. Up the middle of the arena that calf galloped as if he was on rails, the big horse gaining ground on him for Alec every hoofbeat. And I believe that if you could have pulled the truth from my father and mother right then, even they would have said that Alec looked the way a calf roper ought to. Leaning forward but still as firm in his stirrups as if socketed into them, swinging the loop of the lariat around and around his head strongly enough to give it a good fling but not overdoing it. Evidently there had been much practice performed on Double W calves as Alec rode the coulees

these past weeks.

"Dab it on him!" I heard loudly, and realized the yell had been by me.

Quicker than it can be told Alec made his catch. A good one, where all the significant actions erupt together: the rope straightening into a tan line in the air, the calf gargling out a bleahh as the loop choked its neck and yanked it backward, Alec evacuating from the stirrups in his dismount. Within a blink he was in front of the tall bay horse and scampering beside the stripe of rope the bay was holding taut as fishline, and now Alec was upending the calf into the arena dust and now gathering calf legs and now whipping the pigging string around them and now done.

"The time for Alec McCaskill" -- I thought I could hear remorse inside the tinny blare of Tollie's voice, and so knew the report was going to be good -- "seventeen and a half seconds."

The crowd whooped and clapped. Over at the far fence Leona was beaming as if she might ignite, and down at the end of the grandstand my parents were glumly accepting congratulations on Alec. Beside me Ray was as surprised as I was by Alec's first-rate showing, and his delight didn't have the conditions attached that mine did. "How much is up?" he wondered. I wasn't sure of the roping prize myself, so I asked the question to the booth, and Bill Reinking leaned out and informed us, "Thirty dollars, and supper for two at the Sedgwick House."

"Pretty slick," Ray admired. I had to think so myself. Performance is performance, whatever my opinion of Alec's venue of it. Later in the

pause

In those days, that time was good enough for Alec McCaskill to win the calf roping. And so, after the rodeo, with his older brother now the calf roping champion of the Two Medicine country, Jick is in a reflective mood about the way Alec has fallen away from their parents that summer and about much else of the past that seems to be riling the McCaskill family's existence right then.

"Right," I affirmed. "And like I say, I, uh, got to go."

What made me add to the total of my footprints already in my mouth, I can't truly account for. Maybe the blockade I had hit again in wanting to ask all the questions of Stanley. In any case, the parting I now blurted out was:

"You two in a dancing mood tonight? What I mean, see you at the dance, will I?"

Stanley simply passed that inquiry to Velma with a look. In theory, Velma then spoke her answer to me, although she didn't unlock her gaze from him at all as she said it: "Stanley and I will have to see whether we have any spare time."

So. One more topic clambering aboard my already bent-over brain. Stanley Meixell and Velma Croake Bogan Sutter Simms.

"Ray? What kind of a summer are you having?"

We were up in the double window of his bedroom, each of us propped within the sill. A nice breeze came in on us there, the leaves of the big cottonwood in the Heaneys' front yard seeming to flutter the air our way. Downstairs the radio had just been turned on by Ed Heaney, so it was 7 o'clock. The dance wouldn't get underway for an hour or so yet, and as long as Ray and I were going to be window sitting anyway for the next while, I figured I'd broach to him some of all that was on my mind.

Ray answered.

"Didn't I tell you? I'm a pilot. My dad points to a ~~pile~~ bunch of lumber and tell me to pile it here, pile it there."

"No, I don't mean that. What it is--do things seem to you kind of

unsettled?"

"How?"

"Well, Christ, I don't know. Just in general. People behaving like they don't know whether to include you in or out of things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things that went on years ago. Say there was an argument or a fight or something, people fell out over it. Why can't they just say, here's what it was about, it's over and done with? Get it out of their systems?"

"That's just grown-ups. They're not going to let a kid in on anything, until they figure it's too late to do him any good."

"But why is that? What is it that's so goddamn important back there that they have to keep it to themselves?"

"Jick, sometimes--"

"What?"

"Sometimes maybe you think too much."

I thought that over briefly. "What am I supposed to do about that? Christ, Ray, it's not like poking your finger up your nose in public, some kind of habit you can remind yourself not to do. Thinking is thinking. It happens in spite of a person."

"Yeah, but you maybe encourage it more than it needs."

"I what?"

"See, maybe it's like this." Ray's eyes squinched more than ever as he worked on his notion, and the big front teeth nipped his lower lip in concentration. Then: "Maybe, let's say maybe a thought comes

into your head, it's only about what you're going to do next. Saddle up your horse and take a ride, say. That's all the thought it really needs, then put on the saddle and climb on. But the mood you're in, Jick, you'd stop first and think some more. 'But if I go for a ride, where am I going to go?'" Ray here went into one of his radio voices, the words coming clippity-clippity old like Kaltenborn's. "'What is it I'll see when I get there? Did anybody else ever see it? And if anybody did, is it going to look the same to me as it did to them? And this horse here, is it going to look the same to the horse as it does to me?'"

Raymond Edmund Heaney Von Kaltenborn broke off, and it was just Ray again. "On and on that way, Jick. If you think too much, you make it into a whole dictionary of going for a ride. Instead of just going. See what I'm saying?"

"Goddamn it now, Ray, what I mean is more important than goddamn riding a horse."

"It's the same with anything, Jick. It'll get to you if you think about it too much, Jick."

"But what I'm telling you is, I don't have any choice. This stuff I'm talking about is on my mind whether or not I want it to be."

Ray took a look at me as if I had some sort of brain fever that might be read in my face. Then in another of his radio voices intoned: "Have you tried Vick's VapoRub? It soooooothes as it woooooorks."

There it lay. Even Ray had no more idea than the man in the moon about my perplexity. This house where we sat tucked in blue-painted

sills, above its broad lawned yard and under its high cottonwoods, this almost second home of mine: it ticked to an entirely different time than the summer that was coursing through me. The Heaney family was in place in the world. ~~Ed~~ Ray's father was going to go on exiting the door of his lumber yard at 6 every evening and picking up his supper fork at 10 after 6 and clicking on that ~~Philco~~ Silvertone radio at 7, on into eternity. ~~Genevieve~~ His mother would go on keeping this house shining and discovering new sites for doilies. His little sister Mary Ellen would grow up and learn nursing at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls. Ray would grow up and take a year of business college at Missoula and then join his father in the lumber yard. Life under this roof had the rhythm of the begattings in the Bible. The Heaneys were not the McCaskills, not even anywhere similar, and I lacked the language to talk about any of the difference, even to my closest friend.

pause

And now to proceed out of the past, 1939, into what is about to be a book--the third novel in the trilogy that begins with Dancing at the Rascal Fair and goes on to English Crick--a book that'll be published a little more than a year from now. This is the opening scene of that next novel--it takes place eleven days from now, on the Fourth of July, 1989.

Mariah section taken for use at '90 ABA

p. 6 borrowed from ms and replaced

"Like hell you will. Listen, petunia--if it was just you involved, I'd maybe see this different. But goddamn it, you know I don't even want to be in the same vicinity as that Missoula whistledick, let alone go chasing around the whole state of Montana with him."

"Jick. If I can put up with Riley for a couple of months, it shouldn't be that big a deal for you to."

She had me there. Of all the people in Montana who'd gladly buy a ticket to Riley Wright's funeral when the time came, Mariah was entitled to the head of the line.

"You and him, that's up to you," I answered as I had any number of times before.

That dipstick Riley Wright really was notorious for that newspaper column of his. Just the other day, he'd written that people in Montana are as proud of Charlie Russell as if the guy had been Bertrand or Jane.

"Though for the life of me," I went on, "I can't see why you'd hang around that joker Riley any longer than it takes to cuss him out, let alone all the way from now to Centennial Day, ~~as you call it.~~" The rest of July, August, September, October, the first week of November: four entire months, Mariah's version of "a couple".

"Because this centennial series is a chance that'll never come again." She still was working me over with those digging gray eyes. "Or anyway not for another hundred years, and I'm not particularly famous for waiting, am I?"

exasperated

"Christamighty, Mariah." How many ways did I have to say no to this woman? "Just take the rig yourself, why don't you?" I fished into my pocket for the Winnebago keys and held them out to her. "Here. The Bago is yours for however long

you want it and I don't give a good goddamn how poor a specimen of mankind you take along with you. Okay?"

She didn't take the keys, she didn't even answer my offer of them. No, all she did was that little toss of her head again, as if clearing her firecloud of hair out of the way would clarify me somehow too. People either side of us on their perches of bumpers and fenders were watching the pair of us more than the rodeo. Swell. ~~Wonderful.~~ See the world champion moper Jick McCaskill and his girl while they duke it out on the glorious Fourth; we ought to be selling ringside tickets. I started to turn away and do what I should have done long since, stick the key in the ignition of the Winnebago and head home to the ranch. Try that, though, when the next thing you hear is Mariah saying ever so slowly, in a voice not her usual bulletproof one:

"Jick. Jick, I need to have you along."

~~It stopped me. It would anybody, wouldn't it?~~

(pause)

Damn. Double damn. Going Winnebagoing around the countryside with her and the other one was still the last thing on this earth I wanted to do. But need instead of want. Do people really know what they are trying to reach for with that word? I wasn't sure I could tell, anymore.

I scrutinized Mariah. Her, too? Her own wound not yet scarred over, either? I had to ask her the outright truth, about need. "You're not just saying that, are you?"

Our eyes held each other for a considerable moment.

Elliott Bay Dec. 1 '92

Rick and I thought this could be a celebration of the flow of rivers and of words. Elliott Bay Book Store as the delta of it all.

Well, This House of Sky--back again, telling me it's been fifteen years since we started meeting this way. Getting myself together for tonight, I thought a lot about what to read from Sky--its descriptions of the Montana I grew up in, its anthems of memory, its boy's-eye tour of the nine saloons in White Sulphur Springs when I was a kid there? But no--~~am I the only one remembering~~ I think tonight is one to go to the heart of the matter, and read a couple of sections about the coming together of my grandmother and my father, in the bargain they made to raise me. In one of the "memory" sections of Sky, I wrote of that central situation of the book this way:

"Here is a man, and here a woman. In the coming light of one June morning, the same piece of life is axed away from each of them. Wounded hard, they go off to their private ways. Until at last the wifeless man offers across to the daughter-robbed woman. And I am the agreed barter between them."

Here's ~~how~~ SOME OF they got there:

This next section takes place some years later--you maybe won't be surprised to hear that by now my grandmother had left my grandfather.

SKY

The resentment between Dad and my grandmother must have circled in darkly from the past, all the way from his earliest courting of my mother. Lessons of lineage were not something Bessie Ringer ordinarily gave much thought to. But as she watched this only daughter, her first child and the ill one NAMED CHARLIE DOIG, and the favored, being wooed by a showy young cowboy, surely her own too-young marriage to Tom Ringer came to mind, and probably too her mother's too-young marriage to the stern silent John Glun.

~~But~~ after my mother's death, something quickly hung in the air between my father and my grandmother, like the first blazing word of a secret and no more. She made a few uneasy visits to us at our first ranch in the valley. But ~~she and Ruth were enemies almost at sight, and when Dad married Ruth,~~ THEN we abruptly were visited by my grandmother no more. ~~Instead, a reversal of sorts began, as if something were being acted~~

~~Beyond that visiting maneuver,~~ Dad began to try to talk me--and himself--into forgetting Bessie Ringer. And at the same time, I suppose, to chant himself into a rightness about what he was doing, for along with all else borne in him since my mother's death, he had been living with twin fears. The first, that he would lose me, somehow be unable to keep me with him and raise me amid his zigzagging ranch life. Second and worse, that if he was forced to give me up, it would have to be to the mother-in-law he had been at spearpoint with so much of the past.

It must have represented the last loss possible to his life: that his one son would be made a stranger to him. Dad He tried to twine his other bereavement onto that one, as if he could knot together from the two a talisman of some sort: Your mother would of wanted me to raise you instead of your Grandma doing it, I can tell ye that. She said . . . she said just as much. She talked about it sometimes, after she'd had one of her bad spells. We always knew she might go during one of those spells--Christamighty, how she suffered with those. Times I would drive her to the hospital in Townsend

thinking every breath was gonna be her last. She went through hell on this earth, your mother. And she never would want me to give you up, I'm here to tell you. Silence from him, then the next veer from fear to spite: Hell, we'll get by somehow, son. We don't need that old woman running our lives. Look at her there, where she's cooking on that ranch, living with old Magnusson that way and never marrying him. She needs to run her own life more pert, I'd say.

Then this, the rest of the secret told. She'd take you from me in a minute if she could. But there's no way on this green earth I'm gonna let her.

But there was a way, and it came with a slow fierce sear inside him during our summer of 1950 at the cattle camp along Sixteenmile Creek. Dad began to suspect that he might be dying. For several years he had been contending with a fitful stomach ulcer; ~~during Ruth's years~~ it embered more often in him, NOW, ~~and now~~ had glowed itself into a steady burn. It became a rare day when he didn't throw up at least one meal. He lost

weight, his nerves jumped. Everything the doctors prescribed seemed to make the stomach worse, and their obvious bafflement gave off the fear that this finally was more than an ulcer on a rampage. For the first time, mortality was crowding Charlie Doig slowly enough that he could think it through, and across that charring summer it brought him to the greatest change of mind he could make. He needed someone in readiness to step into his place in my life, and the readiest person on the face of the planet was the one who had loomed in his dark

musings all this while.

// My father ~~Dad~~ had everything to gulp back, then, when he set out to make truce with this phantom grandmother of mine. I can hear, as if in a single clear echo, the pivoting of our lives right there: Dad beginning his desperate phone call in the lobby of the Sherman Hotel, spelling out her name in an embarrassed half-shout to the operator, staring miserably at the cars nosing off around the prow of the hotel as the

long-distance line hummed and howled in his ear. Then:

Ah. // Hullo, Bessie, This is Charlie. // Charlie, Charlie Doig. No, Ivan's fine, fine, he's right here. // Ah. Say, // would ye gonna be home on Sunday? We could, ah, come over maybe // and see ~~ye~~ YOU. # ~~All right. All right, then. G'bye.~~

TRYING TO PLACE IT

MOST likely I shouldn't admit this until I have the honorary degree safely in hand tomorrow, but part of the plot of *English Creek,* my novel that will be published this fall, involves a Montana family of the 1930s, who badly want their son to go to Bozeman to college—and he just as badly doesn't want to go. Had I known I was going to be asked here for this commencement weekend, I might have made that boy more reasonable toward this place.

Place is in fact what I want to talk about here tonight—a Western writer's sense of place, in the literary currents of the world; and my own sense of place from having been born and raised in Montana.

Fairly often these days, contemporary writing about the West of America is called a literature of place. A literature, I suppose that means, which focuses on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: *The Big Sky. . . Wolf Willow. . . Winds of Morning. . . A River Runs Through It.* (Put them together right, you could make a kind of sagebrush haiku out of these titles of Western literature.) The critical notion, as I savvy it, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in this country—these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.

"Place," in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and of plain and of hard weather, *does* figure large in the work of a lot of us who are trying to write about the West. But I don't particularly think it's at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the Westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books. 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, beautiful cast. Ellen Webb of Mildred Walker's novel *Winter Wheat,* stepping straight from a wheatfield to a university campus. Jim Welch's men of the reservations, Jim Loney and Myron Pretty Weasel, and Lame Bull, and the never-named narrator of *Winter in the Blood.* I hope, maybe also on the list, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of *This House of Sky*—all of them, characters of modern Western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in Western literature, but let's don't think it's the whole supper.

For there are other senses of place than the merely geographic. A bunch of them. The word *place* has so many meanings it takes up about three-and-a-half pages in the Oxford English Dictionary—and in my own American Heritage Dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of *place* as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place—which is a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

So, I have my own senses of place, as a writer with a Montana upbringing. Let me try to bring out three of them, and to think out loud at you about how they seem to affect me.

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific Montana sense of the word—another usage which doesn't seem to have reached the dictionary-makers of Oxford and Boston. Place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920s or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

I tried to explain this locally prevalent use in this passage of *House of Sky:*

> By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside—just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place.

The Doig place, in the Big Belt Mountains not all that many miles north of here, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, *all* were born on that homestead—the last of them in 1910—and being careful, slow-marrying Scots,

most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for forty years or more—yet it perseveres in us. When Annick Smith and Beth Chadwick were looking for somewhere to film their movie *Heartland,* they phoned me in Seattle and asked if I thought the Doig place would be suitable. I told them I didn't know—the house was still standing, but the site is awful damn remote and high and winterish, and they were calling late in the year—but if they wanted to take a look, they should get in touch with my Dad's cousin, Walter Doig, who I knew still went fishing back in there. They did, and Walter tried to take Annick and Beth in there, but had to give up when their four-wheel-drive started bulldozing snow over the top of its radiator. A homestead over by Harlowton was chosen instead for *Heartland*—the Doig place not for the first time missed its date with destiny—but as Beth Chadwick wrote me in a Christmas card, "I want to thank you for leading us to Walter Doig, who although he couldn't show us the old homestead, was full of wonderful words and stories, some of which I couldn't resist sticking in the script."

So, there is in me *this* sense of place—an awareness of that homestead, that Doig place, as my family's first footprint in America—and that though it leads away from that snow-catching basin high in the Big Belt Mountains, we've been busy ever since with words and stories of it.

A second sense of place, this one from my *own* growing-up years in the West, rather than my family's. Which place is mine? Any of you who have worked on a ranch or farm crew may recognize this one. The first day on the job, the first meal you go to there, breakfast most likely, you are fifteen or sixteen or seventeen, plenty big enough to hire out to pile bales of hay or pick rock or summer fallow, but awfully young socially, and you troop in with the rest of the crew, who begin seating themselves along the twenty-foot table, and you stand there with your face hanging out, until the cook or the boss's wife finally points to a certain plate and set of utensils, and says, "Why don't you take that place, there?" And you do, you go ahead and sit down, and it's yours for the summer, unless somebody gets thirsty and quits, and you are moved up into that place. The places, of course, get more and more permanent toward the head of the table. The cook's place, the choreboy's place—you would have to go to the Holy Land to find more sacred spots than those.

And then came the years when I was twenty and twenty-one, and coming home from college to a ranch where I had a different place at the table every time. My father and my grandmother were hired hands on that ranch—my grandmother was the cook, they lived in half of the cookhouse—and so I would come to stay with them between quarters at college, and work there in the summers. I

never liked that ranch, didn't like the way it was run, didn't like being around purebred cattle that were worth more than my father and grandmother and I were being paid in a year, didn't even like that part of Montana after having lived my high school years up in the Dupuyer country. And as a summer hand there I was a bit of a perplexity. Whenever we were rained out of haying, for instance, I'd head on into the cookhouse and read a book, instead of standing around in the machine shop watching it rain. But the rancher put up with me, for the sake of my father and grandmother, and he granted that I did have enough common sense to be able to pile bales of hay.

Through all this, the visits and the summer jobs, I was pretty much a floater at meal times. It was a kind of a hectic ranch, there seldom were the same number of people at any two meals—the rancher himself ate breakfast with us, maybe he and his wife would come down from the big house for supper or dinner and maybe they wouldn't, there might be truck drivers or cattle buyers or mechanics on hand. And so it helped my grandmother to cope with all this by me fitting in at the table wherever there was a place left, after everybody else got sat. I didn't mind—I'd been to college, I knew what the word "peripatetic" meant. And I found it kind of interesting, to have so many different places at that table—to be switched around at random that way. Wondering before each meal, which would be my place?

Then I was twenty-two, home from Northwestern University with my master's degree in journalism, with about a month to spend before going into six months' active duty in the Air Force. My folks were still working at that ranch, so there I lit once again, and this time there was a field of oats to bind. I was given the job of sitting on the binder and tripping a lever to make the bundles fall in a decent row—the rancher himself was driving the tractor pulling the binder. And at one of the first meal times, somebody said to me, "Well, you're doing pretty good on the binder with that master's degree of yours. Maybe if you go get a Ph.D., you can get to drive the tractor." At the time, I laughed with everybody else. (And none of us even knew that someday I'd be over here getting a degree we'd never *heard* of.) But I know now what was happening, in those meal times at that ranch, with the constant question—which place is mine? I *did* get a Ph.D.—but I did *not* go back and ask to drive that tractor. Those places among the hired hands at that table—none of them were mine, or ever going to be, if I could possibly find any way to be on my own in life.

Now to the third and last sense of place I'm aware of in myself, the one that has been making itself known to me ever since I sat down, more than ten years ago, to write something I called my Montana book, which turned out to be *This House of Sky*.

Trying to place it. To place it, first in the sense of identifying—as my dictionary helps out here, "to recollect clearly the circumstances or context of." As

in the phrase, one that I myself have to resort to often, "I remember your face but I can't place you."

That's the first side, of trying to place it. And then the next, trying to place it in the sense of putting something into place. Setting. Arranging. Making it be where it ought to be.

This is the carpentry part of writing. Building a book the reader will want to live in. Hammering together a solid basic structure, then taking care with the finishing-work, making sure you've got the details right.

Time and again in the past couple of years, as I've worked to create a fictional ranching valley called English Creek, up in the Two Medicine country, I've sat at my typewriter trying "to recollect clearly the circumstances of" portions of my Montana past. Some comes easily enough. I haven't been around sheep full-time for twenty-five years and yet when I start to write about how sheep ranching was, I know at once—who can ever forget?—what a sheep rancher's mood was, late in lambing, when his feet were aching from all those weeks of living in overshoes.

But memory is not always enough. In fact, pretty damn seldom is your own memory enough when you're trying to write accurately. I make it a habit to try to check details with people who know more than I do. Two quick examples, again from the carpentry on this English Creek novel. In my own Montana life, I have definitely eaten cake at a Fourth of July picnic, and on other occasions I definitely have had to skin dead sheep. Yet in writing this novel which takes place about the time I was born, I found I had no idea what kind of a cake that might be at a Fourth of July picnic in that part of Montana, back then; and I wasn't dead-sure about the sheep-skinning any more, either. So I wrote to one friend, a ranch wife now living in Great Falls, whom I knew would have been a teenager in the late 1930s and asked her what kind of cake her mother brought to the Fourth of July picnic—and I wrote to another friend, Horace Morgan, who's been a sheep rancher out here by Maudlow, and asked him to give me step-by-step directions for skinning a sheep. The cake turned out to be a chocolate sour cream one, and the details of sheep skinning, you don't want to hear about this soon after supper.

In the arranging that goes on in the writing of a book—the process of trying to put things into place, make them be where they ought to be—I think a writer's main tool is his eyesight. At least I've always found it a good idea when I'm attempting to write about something to do with the American West, to go out and take a look at it. For my novel of a couple of years ago, *The Sea Runners,* the story of a long water journey from Alaska to the Columbia River, I bummed a ride down as much of that coast as I could, aboard the University of Alaska oceanography ship. The captain let me stand beside him in the wheelhouse—right under the big red sign that said "Crew members only allowed in the wheelhouse"—and from an hour before dawn until after dark, from Juneau to Seattle, day after day I stood and looked at that coast and water, and made notes about it.

For this Montana novel, Carol and I have been back here the past three sum-

mers. Part of that research has been to wander around various towns and choose buildings for my fictional place of Gros Ventre—Carol taking photos for me while I made notes about our home-made town. Gros Ventre, Montana, as we've created it, has the mercantile store from Augusta, the creamery from Conrad, the library from Lewistown, a bar from Choteau, and so on.

So those are a few of the notions that come to mind in me, when "a sense of place" is mentioned. Not just geography, unmatchable as so much of the Montana landscape is. But "place" as something to work from, and work on, and work toward. In a forthcoming manuscript I've just read, a book called *Sky People* by a north-of-Spokane writer named Jack Nisbet, there is a story about one of his neighbors, a wiry rancher in years-old blue jeans, sitting around the kitchen with his hat on, drinking coffee, and the rancher says something like, "I haven't been all that many places. But I've seen things where I've been." Do I even need to add, that rancher was a Montanan?

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 Badgett. Forever the same is the meal with Walter: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and bread 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 plates 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 sheepherder'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.

Those words--the title section of my first book, This House of Sky--I suppose began my career, of being freighted in for occasions like this, to spout words about words. I take it that the only conceivable reason for asking a writer to talk out loud is to try find out what he has on his mind. In-so-far as I know what I have on my mind, I'll concentrate--for the rest of my twenty minute-slot here--on some of the ingredients of my work: how a writer, or at least this writer, makes books.

The makings of a book--and so far I've made five more, since This House of Sky, and have a couple of others wanting to happen--I'm sorry to say (the makings of a book) have more salt of perspiration than inspiration.

For me, the sweatwork starts with thinking up the situation for a book. The job description is maybe a little odd—staring holes into the trees outside your window while you think... "what if?" What if... two people had been in love... had a war of the heart and snapped apart... but still had to work... in the same office? What if it was a really small office, the size of a... motorhome? Three years of what-iffing, and here is this book--what if I called it, Ride with Me, Mariah Montana--featuring a newspaper photographer named Mariah, her emphatically ex-husband Riley Wright the reporter assigned with her to do a series of stories for Montana's centennial--being driven around the state (by Mariah's father Jick, who's mad at both of them) in his Winnebago. newly-widowed father, Jick McCaskill,

As the characters themselves find, ~~the real trick to life is getting from here to there~~. if you don't watch out, life turns out to be what's happened to you while you were busy making other plans.

The writer, or at least this writer, has to make the words and sentences add up day by day--the arithmetic of creation. Along with the daily woodpile of words, though, the carvings of craft have to add up, too. In the course of my first novel, The Sea Runners, I got in touch with a park ranger up at Sitka, in Alaska who was an expert on the carpentry and shipbuilding that went on there when Alaska still was Russian America. He gave me not only the working details I needed, for some scenes in The Sea Runners, but he 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 literary and philosophical bent of park rangers these days--~~probably something he had needed to get through the era of James Watt~~--it occurred to me that the quote explains much of the craft that I believe has to go into the writing of a book.

An example: at one turn of the plot in Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, the three main characters visit the family ranch that the reporter, Riley Wright, turned his back on for a newspaper life instead. Riley's rancher brother Morgan Wright shows up briefly to confront Riley-- and here is Morgan's appearance:

8

"Morgan stood spraddled, thumbs alone showing from the weather-worn hands parked in his front pockets, as though it might take all the time in the universe to hear this matter out."

The vital word, what is sometimes called the crystalizing detail, in that sentence is the verb "parked"--those hands "parked" in the front pockets of Morgan's bluejeans, habitually, naturally, not stuck in his pockets, jammed in his pockets, but just by God parked. And I only worked about half a day to come up with that one precise word--that minute particular.

possible insert into
"In the night" speech: min.

Atop our own shoulders we all carry our own cabinet of minute particulars, the details held by our own memory. And so it is, I think, that his or her own childhood is often such a surprising source for a writer. Some years ago when I first read Janet Frame's book To the Is-land, her autobiography of growing up in a railway family, I could recognize there on the page an exact color activating her memory, and bringing with it the larger general scene:

"It was late summer when we shifted into our rebuilt house at Edendale, into the heart of our railway country--beside the railway line and the goods shed and the engine shed and the turntable and the points and the water tank painted railway hut red on its railway-hut-red stand beside the railway line and the spindly red-painted little house high up where the signalman lived and hung out his signals..."

In my own case, half a world away in a tiny Montana community named Ringling, where we called railways railroads, the color was different but the remembered magic details of childhood trains was just as strong:--this passage from my first book, This House of Sky--

"Exactly through the middle of town, the railroad tracks glinted and fled instantly in both directions."

Mornings, an eastbound passenger train tornadoed through, then came on tearing westward; afternoons, as people said, it was the same except opposite. My first days there I wondered about the travelers seen as tiny cutouts against the pullman windows--what they were saying when they looked out at us and our patchy, sprawled town-that-was-less-than-a-town. If they looked out. Those orange-and-black passenger trains whipped in and went off like kings and queens, potent and unfussed, on the dot. But freight trains banged around at all hours, and for a few weeks in autumn, Ringling made its own clamoring rail traffic as boxcars of sheep and cattle trundled back and forth from the loading pens at the edge of town."

possible insert into
"In the night... speech
min.

Another of the writer's advantages, as a former child, is remembering how to make use of the wiles and guiles of getting stories told to us. We know that stories become vital to us, very early. The novelist Eudora Welty recalls, as a small child in Mississippi she would plant herself between the grownups in the living room and urge them, "Now, talk."

Looking back on that, she thinks her hunger to hear those grownups talk was her origin as a writer. "Children, like animals, use all their senses to discover the world," Eudora Welty says. "Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again."

The book I'm working on now came out of an unexpected chance to hear back into the talk of my parents, with the discovery of my mother's letters to her brother--a young sailor in the U.S. Navy, in the South Pacific--the last year of World War Two, which was also the last year of her life. Lines from her letters are triggering scenes for me, as the then-five-year-old I was. For instance, from her letter of April 16, 1945, this sentence:

"Winona and I spent Saturday making formals and catching mice."

And from that sentence, this re-created scene:

I can hear that day of mice and thread.

The needle of Winona's portable sewing machine sings over the material to the treadlebeat of her foot, our kitchen table is gowned with the chiffon she is coaxing to behave into hem. This way and that and the other, she jigsaws the pattern pieces she and my mother have scissored out. My mother is no bigger than a minute in build and Winona minuter yet, so they are resorting to a lot in these prom dresses. The latest nomination has been ruffles.

"I think ruffles would go okay, Nonie, don't you? Give us a little something to sashay?"

"What the hey, we'll ruffle a bunch up and see," pronounces Winona.

Her voice is bigger than she is, deep, next thing to gruff. "If I can find my cussed ruffler." The sewing machine treadle halts while Winona conducts a clinking search through her attachments box. "Did you have the radio on, Berneta, the other day? I didn't know a thing about it until the kiddos told me the next morning. I about dropped my teeth." (The death of President Franklin Roosevelt had been the radio bulletin.)

"I wish I hadn't heard, but I did. I had it on while I was in here trying to scrub up--"

Where I am holed up behind the couch in the living room, as usual overhearing for all I am worth, comes the somersault snap of another mousetrap going off.

"My turn at the little devils?" Winona volunteers.

"I'll fling this one," says my mother, "you're doing so good on the dresses."

"I thought Ringling has mice something fierce," Winona gives out with. "But jeepers, this place!"

"We tried a cat, did I tell you?" An old marmalade stray one, half its tail gone, who my mother nonetheless cooed kitten-katten to. "He only lasted two days," my mother reported. "Charlie claims the mice ran the cat out of town." Both women laugh and laugh, until I hear my mother putting on overshoes to take

The details that make a book sound believable--the write stuff, the W-R-I-T-E stuff--do not just stroll up to a writer and volunteer themselves. They have to be located, coaxed, tracked down, spied at, eavesdropped on--whatever it takes. In the middle book of this trilogy I've just done, for instance, English Creek, I needed to know the details of a haying season in Montana in the 1930's, when the haying machinery still was run mostly by horses instead of horsepower, so that my narrator would have that experience--the memory in him, of "the leather reins in my hands like great kite lines to the pair of rhythmically tugging horse outlines in front of me." When I was a ~~kid~~ boy just after World War Two, my dad was a haying contractor every summer, and his crews largely put up hay in that old workhorse way. So I did have my own memories to bring in and use. But, I had to admit to myself, those days when I was a red-headed ~~kid~~ boy in a hayfield are getting to be a long time ago, [in a galaxy far away.]

So to add other memories to my own, I ran little classified ads in weekly newspapers in Montana, asking to hear from anybody who had worked on a haying crew there in the late 1930's. I heard from about a dozen people, and in corresponding with them or talking to them, I captured the details I needed.

But it doesn't stop even there, the writer's quest, job of enlisting the right details onto the waiting white space of paper. Because, sometimes those details have to be heard with the eye, and seen with the ear. Among the people I heard from, in echo from those little newspaper ads I'd run, was a woman who took in laundry from hay crews. I wanted details, did I? The laundry lady had them, in her letter to me. The only problem was, in an already crowded book there was no room to bring in a character just to do the laundry.

But those passionately precise details she had written to me kept on humming to my eye every time I re-read the rhythms of her sentences, they kept showing themselves in my ear as a unique and valid performance. And so, not in English Creek, and not even in the next book I wrote, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, but in this book, those details of hers finally danced onto the page--not in haying country at all, but in this quite different vignette written by the reporter in Ride with Me, Mariah Montana--himself a fictional character:

"Age is humped on her small back. It began to descend there in 1936 in daily hours over a washboard, scrubbing at the Missouri-mudded clothing of the men at labor on the biggest earthen dam in the world, Fort Peck. "We went there with just nothing, and J.L. got on as a roustabout. I wanted to find some way of earning, too, so I put up a sign LAUNDRY DONE HERE. I charged 15¢ for shirts--and that was washed, ironed, mended and loose buttons sewed on--and 10¢ for a pair of shorts, another 10¢ for an undervest, 5¢ for a handkerchief, and 10¢ for a pair of socks. Any kind of pants was 25¢ for washing and pressing. I had the business, don't think I didn't. Those three years at Fort Peck, I always had six lines of clothes hanging in the yard."

I don't know--maybe that soliloquy on hand laundry registered on me so powerfully because writing seems ~~kind of~~ like that: hanging out sentence after sentence, hoping each one will dance on the wind, yet stay pinned to some visible means of support.

And as with any chore, it's useful to be reminded that we're not the first ones who've ever had to do it... and who've managed to do it, maybe even have shown us how to do it with a little distinction.

Any of us who have ever looked in 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 haven't said, is something else that Conrad was just as terrific at--quick characterization.

For instance, in Conrad's great storm-at-sea story, Typhoon, the central figure is the most literal-minded phlegmatic character in literary history, Captain MacWhirr, who simply outlasts the typhoon by having about as much imagination as a box of rocks. But--there's also the one-sentence--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."

So. The heritage of craftsmanship I see in Conrad is to make the minor characters of a book vivid. To make them behave as importantly in my pages as Laurence Olivier said each actor in a play must contribute to the play as a whole--"the third spear carrier ~~fxx~~ on the left should believe that the play is all about the third spear carrier on the left."

Here's one of my spear carriers, who doesn't even have a name in Ride with Me, Mariah Montana--she's simply the lead singer in a country-and-western band called The Roadkill Angels, but here she comes:

"The woman singer didn't look like much--chunky, in an old gray gabardine cattledealer suit, her blond hair cut in an approximate fringe--but her voice made maximum appearance, so to speak. She sang, my God, she sang with a power and a timbre that pulled at us just short of touch, as when static electricity makes the hair on an arm stand straight when a hand moves just above it. Holding the microphone like she was sipping from it, she sent that voice surging and tremoring, letting it ride and fall with the cascades of the instruments but always atop, always reaching the words out and out to the crowd of us."

possible insert into
"In the night..." speech
min.

Among the literary gifts that New Zealand has given to the world is Katherine Mansfield's open confession of having "a passion for technique. I have a passion for making the thing into a whole (an entirety), if you know what I mean. Out of technique is born real style, I believe."

And so, in a book such as SSpinster by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, which seems so rampant in mood and language, I believe there's actually extraordinary technique, literary craft, underneath the passionate narrative. The way, for instance, Ashton-Warner uses a single paragraph about a rainy Thursday when the spinster teacher is ostensibly simply comforting her infant-room students--uses the rain to draw together the plotlines of the book:

"I sit on my low chair with my back to the stove and with tiny Lotus and trashy Patchy in the crook of each of my arms, since they are afraid of the recurring thunder. The rain is heavy on the low roof. I wonder what my flowers are thinking about it. It'll be heavy over there, too. Everywhere, for that matter. On the high pointed roof of the big school..., drowning the singing in Paul's room, on the church in town, on my house where Eugene's photo waits in my secluded room... Everywhere. That is what I like about the rain: it unites all the divisions of my life into one, as nothing else and nobody can."

Before I ever knew I was coming to New Zealand, I was asked by the New York Times to review Maurice's novel, Monday's Warriors. The Times, as with all publications that regard themselves as "the times," prefers reviews in which the reviewer gets to show off everything he knows that the mere novelist doesn't. That seems to me an odd way to go about things--after all, the reader is supposed to be interested in taking home the book, not in taking home the reviewer--and so I began by suggesting that "the best thing to do is just listen to the page," and then quoted what a Times scoldingly editor told me was "a very long quote" from Monday's Warriors.

But by showing Maurice's actual wordwork--letting him show it--there on the page, I believe the point was made, once again, that out of technique, maybe many techniques, is born real literary style. Just in case the point wasn't registering on Times readers unaccustomed to this sort of thing, I concluded with what Anais Nin once said on behalf of all writers:

"The fear of using the full span of language would be like denying ourselves the use of an orchestra for a symphony."

So, those are at least a handful of the makings of books ~~such as mine, and doubtless of many other writers as well.~~ The what-ifs which, after enough staring, come down out of the forest of the mind ~~with the liquid hops of a squirrel.~~ The minute particulars that are the molecules of literary creation. The lineage of craftsmanship that a writer tries to live up to, as he chores away at the lifting of words onto paper. The determination to do orchestral work.

All in all, it's a job description which it has taken the Internal Revenue Service, in its omniscience, to do justice to. In the IRS four-digit codes for self-employed business or professional people, the writer looks in vain down the pageful of numerals for beauticians and undertakers--and even used car salesmen--to find that his occupation is left to that last lonely line down in the corner--"unable to classify."

Maybe, though, we must hope that writing is always beyond the grasp of governments.

Our best guarantee of that, I suppose, is to keep our work on the frontiers of imagination. That, indeed, might even be in the novelist's job description. Fiction is a deliberate dream. Probably any writing--done with passion--is. At least so it seems, in the daily surprise, when you are a writer, and you sit down to a keyboard, to see what the fingers have to say to you. . . and they begin, "In the night, in mid-dream. . ."