I was born not many weeks before Hitler's jackboots tramped into Poland at the start of Sept. 1939. As a small boy I fought WWII in the gulches and coulees of Montana ranches, and in the backyards of the Alzona Housing Defense Project in Phoenix. I imagined myself out there with my naval uncle Wally on his destroyer, or with my army uncle Paul in Australia.

I then grew up in the post-war Rocky Mountain west in Montana, while A.B. Guthrie was writing *The Big Sky, The Way West, These Thousand Hills*, winning a Pulitzer. Wallace Stegner was writing books about the west and teaching writing at Stanford. Norman Maclean was professoring literature tooth and nail at the University of Chicago. Dorothy Johnson, in Missoula, was writing western books which were being made into such movies as *The Hanging Tree, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, and A Man Called Horse*. So I suppose it would be appropriate to say, being in this setting, that all these made me see the light in the western sky and turned me into the writer I am. That might be appropriate, but I think it would be grievously wrong.

The west, after WWII, perhaps shaped me personally, but by and large, mine is the old ranch story--getting run off the place by a bunch of machines. And professionally, as best I can find it in myself, the writers I looked to, the books on my college desk at Northwestern University and later, were Isak Dinesen, William Faulkner, George Orwell, Antoine de Saint Exupery, Turgenev. And again in professional terms, I spent years--about ten, as a professional free-lance magazine writer. There the people I looked to, again, were not westerners. They were the new journalists, so-called, of the 1960's and 1970's, mixing some of the techniques of fiction in with those of journalistic prose; and so I paid great attention to the technique involved there, until the "new" journalists got terminally "new" and forgot that journalism should have some fact in it,
somewhere. So, socially and culturally, I am aware of living part of a lineage, a family tree of western writers: Wallace Stegner, Marie Sandoz, Hamlin Garland,—to put it into generational terms. Writers who grew up on farms, ranches, homesteads. And also I'm aware of being part of the tree, another contemporary branch of the tree, of my friends and writer contemporaries: Jim Welch, Bill Kittredge, Craig Lesley, Mary Clearman Blew, Norman Maclean—somewhat an honorary member of our generation, because he started writing about the same time we did although he was thirty years older.

But again, professionally, what has more interested me is to hearken to something I haven't entirely known what to call, except the eloquence of the edge of the world. I think we've been seeing this more and more strongly in the universe of fiction, writer after writer whose work at first glance seems to be far away from the self-appointed literary capitals such as New York, London, Paris,—the usual old suspects. But, in fact, these writers have moved the central power of fiction to where they are in the world. Writers who have originated in what the major metropolitan conglomerations of the world would consider to be the outback, the far corners, the back pockets of the planet:

Nadine Gordimer, South Africa; V.S. Naipaul, Trinidad; Salman Rushdie, India; Keri Hulme, New Zealand; Wole Soyinka, Nigeria—who has the first Nobel prize among this group. Younger newcomers such as Timothy Mo from Hong Kong; Australians—my God, the Australians—David Malouf, Tim Winton, Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley, Rodney Hall, Thomas Keneally, Robert Drewe, to name just a sample. In the north of England: Pat Barker; over in Ireland: Roddy Doyle. For that matter, my hunch is that the leading Canadian writers, such as Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, have more in common with this literary foreign legion than with the main literary camps down here on our side of the border.
The arrival of this new world class of writers out in the back pockets of the world, who in my opinion are proving that contemporary fiction can have character as well as characters, I think has some significant reverberations for those of us trying to write about the reaches of the American west. There’s the always useful reminder that we are not alone, that others, too, have faced landscapes dauntingly bigger than themselves; have come to terms with remoteness; have been tempered instead of broken by hard times.

It’s notable, too, to me, that so many of these strong, new outback writers come from former outposts of the British Empire—another of the casualties of WWII, that empire—and that their novels are sceptical of governance from afar, of the tendencies for those on the geographical fringes to also end up with the thinnest shares of the society’s wealth.

So, specific geographies—but galaxies of imaginative expression. It is my conviction that writers can, yes, ground ourselves in specific land and lingo, and yet be writing of that larger country—life! I’m reminded of what another writer who lived and worked far from the supposed literary centers of the world once said about what he hoped was the worth of his own writing. He was an African novelist named Camara Laye. Born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in exile in Senegal where he died in 1980. An interviewer asked how it was to work so far away from other writers, away from the literary power centers: the Parises, the New Yorks, the Londons. Camara Laye responded that he thought the cultures of the world as expressed in their writers were all participating in one vast dance. Each with its own special movement. Each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm.
I can hear that in our own western pages. The jukebox, saloon tunes in the background; the prose of William Kittredge; the kitchen-sung songs wafting out of the storywork of Barbara Kingsolver; the anthems of small places and family niches in the writings of Mary Clearman Blew, Craig Lesley, and Theresa Jordan; the tribal rhythms of the reservation behind the words of James Welch and Sherman Alexie, Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich; the poetic balladry under Rudolfo Anaya’s words, Norman Maclean’s words, and Wallace Stegner’s words—and I hope maybe some of my own. If we are doing them right, they are something more than words about the west. They’re heartbeats—of the world.
I've long been interested, as a writer and a reader, in something I haven't known what to call except the eloquence of the edge of the world. I find it represented not in the supposed literary capitals--New York, London, Paris, the tired old usual suspects--but in the work of writers, say, from the old British Empire, the edges of the maps. Nadine Gordimer of South Africa, Writers who push the language into odd, eloquent corners.

who became one of the most potent writers extant by showing the awful naked Down Under skin under that apartheid society. A slew of Australian novelists--DM, Tk, RH, TW--who write about inhabiting that ultimate back pocket of the planet, the eerie landscape of Australia.

The uncountable stories within American homesteading

I think
My thanks, again, to those indefatigable readers, the judges-- and to this state's tradition of honoring those of us who try to make words dance. It's a particular pleasure, this time around, to be at this occasion when it's graced by my great friend Ruth Kirk, the heart and soul of professional wordworking at this corner of the country.
When Charlotte Bronte lifted her pen from *Jane Eyre* and bequeathed us that shortest and sweetest of plot summaries—"Reader, I married him"—she also was saying what writers always must to the eyes on our pages: "Reader, my story is flirting with you; please love it back." Where, though, do these suitors in their printed jackets and composed pages come from?

With *Bucking the Sun* my list of literary "begats" has reached eight books, and a biographical browsing of me customarily brings up phrases such as these:
"...grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana where much of his writing takes place...Governor's Writers Award and National Book Award finalist for his first book This House of Sky ...former ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor" ...as well as such unprinted notices as when a woman at the first book group I ever talked to came up to me afterward and said, "I thought you’d look tougher!"

Taking apart a career in such summary sentences always seems to me a bit like
dissecting a frog—some of the life inevitably goes out of it—and so I think the more pertinent Ivan Doig for you, Readers, is the red-headed only child, son of ranch hand Charlie Doig and grandson of ranch cook Bessie Ringer, who in his junior year in a prairie-becalmed high school made up his mind to be a writer of some kind.

At the time, my motivation seemed to be simply to go away to college to break out of a not very promising ranchwork future. Jobs in journalism followed—as an editorial writer in downstate Illinois (where I truly grasped Keats' meaning of "amid the alien
corn”) and as assistant editor of The Rotarian magazine in a Chicago suburb. Then, starved as we were for mountains and saltwater, Carol and I left the Chicago area in 1966 and came to Seattle, with the notion that I would get a Ph.D. in history as background to bring to journalism teaching.

What graduate school taught me, though, was that I wasn’t cut out to be on a university faculty. All during grad school at the U Dub I kept on with the bad habit of writing free-lance magazine articles and I also began, to my surprise, writing poetry,
which I had never even dreamed of attempting before.

My handful of published poems were as instructive to me, in their way, as grad school was—they showed me that I lacked a poet’s final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But, still wanting to work at stretching the craft of writing, I began working on what I would eventually hear Norman Maclean call “the poetry under the prose”—a lyrical language, with what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my
characters speak on the page. (In Bucking the Sun, for instance a character thinks to himself, "The weight of life is what holds us to this world, eh?") One of my diary entries, early in my work on This House of Sky, reveals me trying "to write it all as highly charged as poetry." A quarter of a century later, Readers, I'm still wedded to that intention.

Thank you.
For my part, to close this out with somebody whose motives I'm supposed little
to know something about, I've been trying to run a typographical crocodile farm
within the Two Medicine trilogy. In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, there not only
was an illustration showing how the 36 sections of a township are numbered--
perhaps the only modern novel to be able to make that claim—but also the handwritten
word that my hero's object of affection had put on her schoolroom blackboard as
the day's spelling lesson: Angus McCaskill cherished that word, even though it was
"chilblain." In English Creek, over the almost-dead body of my publisher's
production chief, I managed to get onto the page moments of white space amid
the Gros Ventre rodeo announcer's spiel, so that it would sound sappily to
the reading eye as it did coming out of the old glory-horn speaking apparatus of
1939. And this finale novel probably not coincidentally opens with the word
click of an unwelcome camera snapping, and has another chapter that begins
with the ringing of a phone, brrik brrik.
As you may recognize, it's a traditional old Scottish song/that I made up. (We practitioners call this the "New Scotch" history.) David McNeil's usefulness to me as a desriber didn't quit there, as he went on to tell about a storm at sea, which I also used, and his vividness didn't even quit when he reached shore—he came on West, to Colorado, and reported about Denver: "Denver looks as if it commenced last week and might be moved somewhere else next."

Perspective is everything, isn't it.
I seem to have been brought here to think out loud a little—instead of sitting staring at my keyboard and waiting for it to tell me what to think, as I do on ordinary days—to think out loud about stories, and what they mean to us.

Myself, I'm in the business of catching stories. Hunting them, corralling them, looking them over—trying to pick out the next likely one, the best of the bunch. It's a strange occupation, a pre-occupation, some people would say—but at least it deals in one of humankind's best urges instead of the wide market of humanity's worst urges. The urge to know all the shapes and sizes and colors life comes in; that, I think, is why stories are told, and get listened to.

We know that stories become vital to us, very early.

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." (emphasis added)

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," she says. "Then artists come along and discover it the same way, all over again."

The best description of stories as handled by writers—that I've been able to find—is the one by the poet Randall Jarrell—whose poem, The Woman at the Washington Zoo, is in itself one of the most magnificently done American stories. Randall Jarrell said,

"A story is a chain of events. Since the stories that we know are told by humans, the events of the story happen to human or anthropomorphic beings—gods, beasts, and devils, and are related in such a way that the story seems to begin at one place and to end at a very different place, without any essential interruption to its progress. The poet or storyteller, so to speak, writes numbers on a blackboard, draws a line under them, and adds them into their true but unsuspected sum."
Those "true but unsuspected sums" occur not only on the blackboards of literature and poetry and drama, of speech and folklore. They are writ large in other great areas of learning as well. One of the best workers of story we had in America in this century was an anthropologist—the late Loren Eiseley. The opening story in Eiseley’s book, The Immense Journey, tells of a day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America when he went down into a crack in the earth—a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had inserted himself into it, “was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time.” An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley writes next: “I hoped to find at least a bone.” What he found instead was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human—some creature pre-human: with, Eiseley says, “a low, pinched brain case... and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small.

Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged.” Under the prairie sky, Loren Eiseley stares down at the skull. The skull stares, sightless, up at him. And Eiseley writes of that moment: “This creature had never lived to see a man—and I; what was it I was never going to see?”

It seems to me that in that single sentence, Loren Eiseley managed to write the immense story of humankind. (Pause)

I’ve spent some time—I guess, quite a lot of my adult life—trying to figure out what it is, within stories and the telling of them, that is as valid and vital for an anthropologist as it is for a poet or novelist. The best I can come up with, and more and more I think it may be enough, is craft. The craftsmanship intrinsic to
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. 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. He 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 by Blake 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 at the time—probably something needed to get through the era of James Watt—

I saw that he'd 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 sprawled, 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 crystallizing 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 suppose I only worked about half a day to come up with that one precise word—that minute particular.

In my own case as a writer, not only am I believer in Eudora Welty's demand to her grownups, "Now, talk," but my characters usually believe it, too. English Creek, the middle novel of my Montana trilogy, I think was a try at catching a story by having a narrator who is, himself, a storycatcher. The novel is about a Montana family trying to pull itself from the effects of the Depression, in the 1930's—and trying not to pull itself to pieces in the process—and the narrator is a fourteen-year-old boy named Jick McCaskill. Jick likes to hear about the family's past. And his mother, in that way that parents and grownups have, generally thinks she has better things to do than cater to his curiosity. Here is a brief scene where the boy's quest for story is launched. The small-town weekly newspaper has come, this day, and Jick notices that in the 25-years-ago column, there is a reprinted item about a wagon trip his mother and her brother and their mother—Jick's grandmother—had taken, to St. Mary lake in Glacier National Park, where Jick's grandfather was providing the

at the time, workhorses for road-building. Jick's mother then would have been about his age, by wagon, alone, now, fourteen or so, and he's curious about that journey, a woman and two children, in the early years of this century. After supper, he starts in on his mother:
"Where'd you sleep?"

She was going through the newspaper. "Sleep when?"

"That time. When you all went up to St. Mary."

She glanced over at me, then said: "Under the wagon."

"Really? You?" Which drew me more of her attention than I was bargaining for.

"Uh, how many nights?"

"Jick, what's got your curiosity bump up?"

"I'm just interested, is all. Interested in, uh, old times."

"All right. That wagon trip to St. Mary. What is it you want to know about it?"

"Well, just--why was it you went?"

"Father took the notion. My father had been away, up there, for some weeks. He often was, contracting horses like that."

"How long did that trip take then?" Now, in a car, it was a matter of a couple or three hours.

She had to think about that. After a minute: "Two and a half days. Two nights," she underscored for my benefit, "under the wagon. One at the Two Medicine River and one at Cut Bank Creek."

"How come Cut Bank Creek? Why not in Browning?"

"My father held the opinion that the prairie was a more civilized place than Browning."
"Were you the only ones on the road?"

"Pretty much, yes. The mail stage still was running then. Somewhere along the way I guess we met it."

This mother of mine could nail questions shut faster than I could think them up. That was just the way she was. A person who put no particular importance on having made a prairie trek and seen a stagecoach in the process.

"What about the road-building camp?" I resorted to next. "What do you remember about that?" The St. Mary area is one of the most beautiful ones, with the mountains of Glacier Park sheering up beyond the lake. The world looks to be all stone and ice and water there. Even my mother might have noticed some of that glory.

Here she found a small smile. "Just that when we pulled in, Pete"—her brother, Jick's uncle—"Pete began holloing all the horses."

She saw that didn't register with me.

"Calling out hello to the workhorses in the various teams," she explained. "He hadn't seen them for awhile, after all. 'Hello, Woodrow! Hello, Sneezer! Methusaleh! Runt! Copenhagen! Mother let him go on with it until he came to a big gray mare called Second Wife. She never thought the name of that one was as funny as Father did."

My guess is that my story-catching young character Jick believes, as I do, that... stories can be our way of sharing light—of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us. Which may be how stories began in the first place—and then somebody went back in the cave and drew on the wall the hunting escape they had just been talking about, and the written versions began. Often we tell stories to share. To say, we are in this, together. My wife Carol's mother used to tell a friend of mine, now in her eighties, remember that when she was a young grade school teacher all those decades ago, the teachers developed a code to use whenever their principal began one of his surprise inspection sweeps through their classrooms.
The first teacher on whom he descended would immediately send a student around to all the other classrooms, to knock on the door, poke a head in and ask each teacher, "Do you have the Big Scissors?" (pause)

We do that a lot, in telling each other stories—alert one another that the Big Scissors of life is on the loose. Various famous book-length stories bring us large facts of life. Home truths. Open the novel Anna Karenina, and the first sentence you read is, "Happy families are all alike—every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Tolstoy goes on for another 950 pages, but you've had the Big Truth there in the opening line.
Other books, considerably more light-footed, give us their story simply by being such good company. In contrast to Tolstoy’s opening pronouncement, listen to the opening of The Summer Book, Tove Jansson’s magnificent children’s book that is so much more than a children’s book:

"It was an early, very warm morning in July, and it had rained during the night. The bare granite steamed, the moss and crevices were drenched with moisture, and all the colors everywhere had deepened. Below the veranda, the vegetation in the morning shade was like a rain forest of lush, evil leaves and flowers, which she had to be careful not to break as she searched. She held one hand in front of her mouth and was constantly afraid of losing her balance.

“What are you doing?” asked little Sophia.

"Nothing," her grandmother answered. "That is to say," she added angrily, "I’m looking for my false teeth." (A hugely engaging book.)

Then there are writers, storycatchers, to whom the language itself is part of the story. To me, these are the real magicians of our tribe. The ones who are not only providing us a narrative string of events, but meanwhile are showing us—

is capable of?

—see what the language can do? See what the human tongue isn’t this a terrific language?

We are all, interested in the play of language. We all do it. When I was

Notice how rapidly the coming of the computer is providing its own vocabulary of novel Dancing at the Rascal Fair, slang. It was ever thus. For the background of my next novel, I’ve been reading

I read up on the craft of wheelwrights a hundred years ago in Scotland—the wheelwright shops, where craftsmen made the wagon and carriage wheels the world ran on before train and automobile. Like the computer hackers, the wheelwrights had a rich lingo of their own, as I found when I came across sentences such as: "If ye was to nip yerself while gettin' her onto her legs, ye'd catch a woodlouse." Which translates: If you pinch a finger while hoisting a wagon box onto its wheels, you'll get yourself a blood blister.
writers try to use that play of language, to see how far it can go.

Anais Nin once urged her fellow writers to "the use of language as magic, the use of rhythm and image. The fear of using the full span of language would be like denying ourselves the use of an orchestra for a symphony. James Joyce tried to tell us in so many ways that man's life does not take place on one level only but on several simultaneously. And we cannot express this with one string."

Another sort of writer, another sort of storyteller, gives us scenes rather than the spell of language.

In American literary history, I suppose Henry James was the high-collared Victorian godfather of this "scene" sort of storytelling. His biographer, Leon Edel, admits that the prose of James is "baroque, difficult," but he thinks it is exactly the social fussiness of every scene in James that is his distinct achievement.

"He was the most visual of all our novelists," Edel writes. "Any page in any of his novels is filled with subtle observation, by his characters, of their environments. We could say that his eyes were camera lenses: that he turned himself into a mobile camera long before film was invented."

Well, maybe. Another way of looking at Henry James's preoccupation with social nuance and baroque exploration of it is that his prose chews more than it can bite off.

I think a mark of our

Our great American writers, the ones for whom the language itself is a kind of story, tend to bite off more than they can chew. Melville, Faulkner. Faulkner once told Malcolm Cowley: "My ambition is 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." Faulkner went on to explain that in writing his prodigious sentences he is trying to convey a sense of simultaneity, not only giving what happened in the shifting moment but suggesting everything that went before and made the quality of that moment. A big ambition -

And so you get from Faulkner a sentence such as this one, in his story "Spotted Horses"—where a herd of Texas mustangs have been brought in from Texas for sale, they are in the corral at Frenchman's Bend, the Mississippi farmers who have spent all their lives slogging behind slow mules are standing longingly looking at these quick, vivid horses from the West, as described by Faulkner this way—

"Calico-coated, small-bodied, with delicate legs and pink faces in which their mismatched eyes rolled wild and subdued, the horses huddled, gaudy, motionless and alert, wild as deer, deadly as rattlesnakes, quiet as doves." An extravagant sentence, which kicks over some rule of writing about every third word, yet one in which the language itself is telling us, those horses were all these things, at once. You should have seen those horses!

There is always the problem, once you get into a story--how to get out of it. Particularly in public. So I'm going to resort to Isak Dinesen's story about her book, Out of Africa.
in the teens and twenties of this century,
On her coffee farm in Kenya, as Isak Dinesen worked into the nights on
the manuscript which became Out of Africa, her Kikuyu houseboy Kamante was
standing at the wall, watching. One evening Kamante announced to her that he did not
think her writing could ever amount to anything. Dinesen records:

"I had nobody else to discuss my book with," I said as we stood
against the wall, "I laid down my paper and asked him, Kamante,
why not? I now found that he had ... prepared himself for this; he
stood with the blue-bound book of the Odyssey itself behind his back, and here he laid it
on the table.

"Look, Mabu," he said, "this is a good book. It hangs together from the
one end to the other. Even if you hold it up and shake it strongly, it does not
come to pieces. The man who has written it is very clever. But what you write"

Kamante went on, both with scorn and with a sort of friendly compassion:
"What you write here and some there. When the people forget to close the door it blows about,
even down on the floor and you get angry. It will not be a good book."

Isak Dinesen continues:
I explained to him that in Europe the people would be able to fix it all up
together.

"Will your book then be as heavy as this?" Kamante asked, weighing the Odyssey.

When he saw that I hesitated he handed the blue-bound book to me in order
that I might judge for myself.

"No," I said, "it will not, but there are other books in the library...
that are lighter."

"(Then will it be as hard as this one?)", he asked.
I said it was expensive to make a book so hard. ...

Dinesen concludes:

A few days later, I heard Kamante explain to the other houseboys that in
Europe, the book which I was writing could be made to stick together—and that
with terrible expense it could even be made as hard as the Odyssey, which he
again displayed. He himself, however, did not believe that it could be made blue."

So that’s one method of diagnosing a book, and with more common sense
behind it than other reviewers and critics sometimes can muster.

And maybe there’s some inspiration there for those of us who are professional
storycatchers, storytellers. We at least must try, as Kamante wanted of Isak
Dinesen, to make our pages hang together from one end to the other. With a
little luck, maybe some of them will turn out to be good enough that we can
bind them in blue.
If novelists do have an advantage in getting at anybody's souls—equine or human—I believe it's there in the million-element experiment called language. The process is far from automatic—a writer can't simply lens in on the people of Reno or Provo or Chouteau like a frontier photographer and become an instantaneous soul-stealer; the money isn't that easy, I regret to report—because the alchemy of language carries with it the high probability of fizzle. Faulkner's own townspeople, after all, were being plenty clever with the language when they took a look at their squirely local author, concluded there was only a letter or two of difference between that and squirely, and dubbed him Count No Account. William Faulkner. But the Mississippians' characterization of him has fizzled away, while his of them burns on and on.
Spired and wooded and not a little stoned, the campus sprawled amid the 1960’s like a disassembled cathedral. The University of Washington, thirty-five thousand students strong and restive as a mutinous barracks, was the upper left corner of the battle banner that was writhing through Berkeley and Madison and Morningside Heights and a hundred other bastions of learning, wafted by the highs of drugs and dorm sex and soon to be blown jetstream-high by the storm of opposition to the Vietnam war.

Mitch Rozier had come for football. He was raw then, but he knew it and figured there might be a cure for it in a place like Seattle. His athletic scholarship had come like a bingo jackpot--the big kid from a small town playing his one card in
life and having it pay off at the Shrine Game, the high school all-stars on the other side of the line strewn like train wreck victims in the wake of Mitch’s three touchdown runs. In the stands was Washington’s most junior assistant coach, assigned to recruit the longshots, and even though this fired-up running back was from some dinkyville, he liked the kid’s unexpectedness on the field, the quicksilver quality you didn’t often see in a fullback. So Mitch arrived to the green and gray city, the Elysian campus, and the bootcamp-like football practices of the Washington Huskies. The industrial brand of football played in the Pacific Coast Conference was savage compared to what he was used to, but he did not back off from it. Mitch was
very sizable, and as determined as he was large. He knew a free ride to a college degree when he saw one. After where he had come from, college was Coney Island. As best Mitch could determine, he was undergoing something like hourly evolution. Hurrying from class to class, he would have sworn he could feel one part of his brain grow, then another. He was like that example of the chickadee they talked about in Biology 101, able to expand one lobe when winter came and a greater number of feeding spots had to be remembered. For a while it surprised him
every time, and then the surprise became reliable, that he all at once could stretch his mind around some bigger thing. Just then the UW campus had some hot departments. History--God, man, over in History one of the profs had kicked William F. Buckley's fancy butt in a debate over Vietnam. And in English, to his and the department's mutual astonishment, Mitch found home. The white but Afroed instructor for his Writing Skills section openly winced when he bulked into her classroom, but as soon as she discovered this was one football jock who seemed incurably curious about the
insides of sentences and would rework a piece of writing to death, she fed him books. A nature freak herself, she turned him on to Thoreau, inspector-general of the seasons: “I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.” To the tidal force of Rachel Carson: “I tell here the story of how the young planet Earth acquired an ocean...” To the University of Washington’s own just-dead nova,
Theodore Roethke, who had held forth in this exact classroom; greenhouse ghost that he always was--it did not hurt that he had been a father fighter, too--Roethke ranted great whispers of poems through the windowpanes to Mitch's tuned-up ear. "At the field's end, in the corner missed by the mower/Where the turf drops off into a grass-hidden culvert"--Mitch knew that field. And to the human hawk of Big Sur, Robinson Jeffers--Mitch practically groaned sexually when he encountered the lines the old voice of the ocean, the bird-chatter of little rivers....Love this, not man apart from
this. It was a time when zinger sentences walked the earth.
When Thom Chambliss asked me here to join Jim and Eric in talking about the “write” stuff—he told me I should tell you about the evolution of my book; “Make it memorable,” he said. “And be funny about it. Oh, and wake them up, while you’re at it.” I asked him how much time I had for all that, and he said, “Ten to fifteen minutes.” Wake up in a hurry, or you’re going to miss the rest of it.
It's a view, incidentally, that I tried to write of from the heart rather than the irony gland, as, say, you've seen happen in a recent millenium-centered bestseller-to-be that didn't manage to best-sell. Centuries have been turned before, without a novelistic curl of the lip. There's a lot of irony around in fiction today, and one reason is that it's easy. In the only sports-page analogy I hope ever to use, irony is the literary equivalent of a baseball player letting a pitch him in the butt. It gets you on base every time, no matter how ignominiously.
I think, though, that people’s lives are ultimately lived in earnest, not in irony. I’m at best a distant cousin of the Baby Boomers, born as I was in the year World War Two began, but I’ve been fascinated with the mammoth behavioral bulge caused by that generation and I believe that the age group tempered by the 1960s deserve more than ironic treatment as they move from rebellion to the oldest kind of family obligations.
Books set here on this side of the Mississippi haven't always given attention to the workaday life. It's a little more than 80 years now since the publication of The Virginian, Owen Wister's famous novel of the West. That book provided millions of people, all around the world, with a version of the west of America. That version is that when a bad guy insults a good guy--in the book, the actual insult is "you son of a blank"--the good guy dangerously draws back, "When you call me that--smile." But as I remember that book, that sort of thing is about all that does go on in The Virginian--or for that matter, in a lot of the shoot-em-up versions of the West. None of the guys, good or bad, seems ever to do a lick of everyday work--milk a cow, churn butter, plant a potato.
You get the impression that somewhere just out of sight, there must be a catering service, maybe someplace around Omaha, that comes out and feeds everybody, and does the chores.

Nonsensical as that sort of portrait of the west is, it does have consequences: it fudges the terms of life in much of the actual American west—that, east of the Cascades, this is a big, dry, fragile, contentious part of the country which requires a lot of work to make a living—and that, even here on the west side of Mount Rainier, the ecosystem is challengingly complex—as a forestry scientist once pointed out to me, between the crest of the Cascades and the Pacific shoreline there can be as much variation in climate as in the stretch between the Gulf of Mexico and mid-Ontario.
Speaking of speaking, last month I participated in the symposium in tribute to Wallace Stegner, at the University of Montana, up in Missoula. Stegner's fatal car wreck in Santa Fe, as we all know, took from us the dean of American Western writers. It made me think back to last Christmas, when in my card to Stegner I reported that I had a national bestseller but it had taken Norman Maclean's fishing pole to do it—my reading of A River Runs through It, on the Audio Press cassette—and Stegner wrote back on his card, "Go on--keep on getting rich and famous--and vocal."
I will be suggesting at the Stegner

I suggested to the symposium gathering that maybe we can find a

**even such a loss as a Stegner.**

strength, in this loss. That instead of Wallace Stegner's long-familiar

and often lonely eloquence for the West, the rest of the country may now

have to hear from us as a tribe of western writers, a swarm of us. An

entire bunch of western wordsmiths, heart earthers --- various in our poetry

and even our facts, but consistent in our love and expression for this region,

these mountains, these plains.
group since the passing of Stegner and company, a sort of writing generation of us out here now, who without consulting each other about it have decided to use our own Western lives and backgrounds—the stuff we ought to know best—as the raw material for our books. Of course, it took a historian to point out to us what we're doing. It was Richard Maxwell Brown, now professor emeritus of Pacific Northwest history at the University of Oregon, the only man I've ever known who somehow manages to read everything.
In his looking-over of Western writing, Richard Maxwell Brown cites me and This House of Sky and Heart Earth, so I will blushingly skip over that part, but he lists several recent books where "nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty" and other "universals of human life" meet, and which add up to what he calls the West's grassroots autobiography and biography. William Kittredge's memoir Hole in the Sky; Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams; Rain or Shine, by Cyra McFadden; Mary Clearman Blew's brilliant set of books
Balsamroot, and All But the Waltz. I would add to his list Teresa Jordan's Riding the White Horse Home, and one that was published last spring, Kim Barnes' *coming of age* of coming-of-age in a logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho—In the Wilderness. (Talk about "makings"—Kim Barnes' parents and relatives were called "pole-makers", loggers who carefully felled trees that were the right thickness for telephone poles.

The characteristics of this literary grassroots trend, Brown says, include these:
"the simple but powerful formula of the grassroots reality of our region: place, plus family... These biographies and autobiographies are unusually vivid in their evocation of both family and place."

"The authors... are all extremely talented... and also notably reflective. Their books are implicitly conceptual... but not overtly so. They appeal to the mind by first reaching the emotions of the reader... The intellectual appeal of these books is subtle but strong. Their authors
are trained intellects—most of them have graduate degrees and support themselves by work in the realm of ideas.

—And finally, this "new grassroots" trend "is a meeting ground of the literary talent and the social history of the West."

That, then, is at least an early historical take, on where Western writing has been heading toward, lately.
Well, "they call it regional, this relevance." But there's one last ingredient by which, I believe, writers can move the central power of literature to where they are in the world.

This bit of "makings" we can identify and name--by our own style of putting things together, here in the West, naturally—as the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, I owe this final bit of writerly psyche to the late Richard Hugo, the bigger-than-life poet of
Washington and Montana. In teaching aspiring poets, Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile."

Among the things he meant by that are a list of pretended assumptions that he would use when he set out to write a poem—as he told it in his terrific book on writing, The Triggering Town, "Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following"—and I'll give you just a few from his long list:
"I am an outcast returned. Years ago the police told me to never come back but after all this time I assume that either I'll be forgiven or I will not be recognized."

"On Saturday nights everyone has fun but me. I sit home alone and listen to the radio. I wish I could join the others though I enjoy feeling left out."

"The town was once supported by mining, commercial fishing, or farming. No one knows what supports it now."
This kind of adjuration to the imagination is said many
ways, probably in all forms of art—when the great carver Bill
Reed was asked why his tribe, the Haidas, were the pre-eminent
artists of the Northwest coastal tribes, he said the Haidas
simply out-crazied everybody else.

But I've always liked Hugo's crocodile prescription, and
covers
think it... a lot of otherwise unexplainable wonders of
prose, too—the go-for-broke elements that come right up off
the page and get you.
And I’ve always liked Paul Horgan’s saying whenever he’d get too tired of always getting called a Southwestern writer—”Everybody is a regionalist,” he wrote. “Tolstoy is a regionalist.”
Quite a number of us out West are, I think, simply trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our place of origin in our words. We’re not the first to sit around inside our heads all the time and monkey away at that. James Joyce evidently didn’t stop being an Irishman when he moved to Paris—or we wouldn’t have the greatest Dublin novel—Ulysses.
Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.
Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I’m sure Tolstoy had his own uninvited ghosts to get past as he tried to write of his heartland. But those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolmarm—\textit{the West of people who came to build rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with it—such stereotypes as we’ve had to write our way past, The Virginian} and his later heftier cohorts, Louis L’Amour and John Wayne.
So, those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolmarms—the West of people who came to build rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with it—we’ve had to write our way past “The Virginian” and his later heftier cohorts, Louis L’Amour and John Wayne. Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.
And it did and it has, with a considerable nudge from the singing teachers of those of us who write prose--our betters, the poets. Instead of "bang bang bang bang," listen to this, from the late great Oregon poet, William Stafford:

"They call it regional, this relevance--the deepest place we have:
in this pool forms
the model of our land, a lonely one,
responsive to the wind.
Everything we own
has brought us here:
from here we speak."
By listening, by looking things up--once in a while by a little lucky making things up--people and their everyday treasury of language can be brought to life on the page, I believe. Here's one of my efforts from English Crick, the scene where the forest fire on the Two Medicine National Forest is just starting to get nasty. The narrator, 14-year-old Jick McCaskill, the forest ranger's son, hears the party-line telephone ring:

I called out to my mother, "I'll rubber."

The voice on the line was my father himself.
“It is an ornery sonofabitch of a fire,” he was informing the dispatcher, Chet. “Every time a person looks at it, it looks a little bigger. We better hit it hard. Get hold of Isidor and have him bring in a camp setup. And tell Great Falls we need fifty EFFs--(Emergency Fire Fighters)--and a timekeeper for them.”

“Say again on that EFF request, Mac,” queried Chet. “One-five or five-oh?”

“Five-oh, Chet.”

Pause.

Chet was swallowing on the figure.
With crews of emergency firefighters already on the Chinese Wall fire and the fires down in the Lewis and Clark forest, Two headquarters in Great Falls was going to greet this request for fifty more like the miser meeting the tax man.

"Okay, Mac," Chet mustered. "I'll ask for them. What else can I get you?" Chet could not have realized it, but this was his introduction to the Golden Rule of a veteran ranger such as my father when confronted with a chancy fire..."While you're getting, get plenty."
Before the West began to hear from its first couple of generations of writers actually born and raised out here, literary tourists pretty much had their way with us. Books set out here on the west side of America didn't give much attention to the workaday life and the valid voices of our region. A romantic version that one scholar called "the cowboys without the cows" got underway at the start of this century with The Virginian, Owen Wister's famous novel. The Virginian began a lineage of books that might be called Wisterns. In a Wistern,
a bad guy insults a good guy—-in The Virginian, the actual insult is
(SHRUG)
"you son of a/blank"—and the good guy dangerously drawls back, "When
you call me that/

But that's about all that does go on in a
Wistern. None of the guys, good or bad, seems ever to do a lick of
everyday work—-milk a cow, churn butter, plant a potato. You get the
impression that somewhere just out of sight, there must be a catering
service—maybe someplace around Omaha—-that comes out West and feeds
everybody and does the chores.
Quite a number of us out West are, I think, trying to do what writers have always done, and pay homage to our native place our words. We’re not the first to sit around inside our heads all the time and monkey away at that. James Joyce evidently didn’t stop being an Irishman when he moved to the greatest Dublin novel—Paris—or we wouldn’t have Ulysses. And I’ve always liked Paul Horgan’s saying—whenever he’d get too tired of always getting called a Southwestern writer—"Everybody is a regionalist," he wrote. "Tolstoy is a regionalist."
Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I’m sure Tolstoy had his own uninvited ghosts to get past as he tried to write of his heartland. But those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolmarms—the West of people who came to build rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with it—such stereotypes as we’ve had to write our way past “The Virginian” and his later heftier cohorts, Louis L’Amour and John Wayne.
I tried to write about that hunger in the blood a bit in *Heart Earth*, the memoir about the short life of my mother, that brought my thinking back to the Southwest where my life turned when I was five years old. Here's the section of my father and my mother and Montana ranch people to the bone, fetching up in the winter of 1944 in a borrowed cabin in the desert outside Wickenburg, Arizona:
"Neighbors now consisted of lizards and scorpions. The mountains wavering up from every horizon looked ashen, dumpy... No pelt of sagebrush to soften this country for us, either; saguaro cacti, with their spiky mittens out, stubbled the hills. Where the familiar black-green of Montana's jackpines would have shadowed, here the bare green blush of paloverde
scarcely inflected the gulches--arroyos--and under every other bristling contortion of vegetation, prickly pears crouched like shin-hunting pygmies in ambush. Even the desert birdsounds had a jab to them, the ha ha of a Gambel's quail invisibly derisive in the bush, the yap of a Gila woodpecker scolding us from his cactus penthouse.

///I loved every fang and dagger of it.
Any bloodline is a carving river and parents are its nearest shores. At the Faulkner Creek ranch (in Montana) I had learned to try out my mother's limits by running as fast as I could down the sharp shale slope of the ridge next to the ranch house. How I ever found it out without cartwheeling myself to multiple fractures is a mystery, but the avalanche angle of that
slope was precisely as much plunge as I could handle as a headlong four- and five-year-old. The first time my visiting grandmother saw one of my races with the law of gravity, she refused ever to watch again. Even my father, with his survivor's-eye view from all the times life had bunged him up, even he was given pause by those
vertical dashes of mine, tyke roaring drunk on momentum. But my mother let me risk. Watched out her kitchen window my every wild downhiller, hugged herself to bruises while doing so, but let me. Because she knew something of what was ahead? Can it have been that clear to her, that reasoned? The way I would grow up, after, was contained in those freefall moments down
that shale-bladed slope. In such plunge if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to. Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling/through the language."
It has brought me, among other places, here. And it had better take me, next, to an exit paragraph of these musings about makings:
To me, language--the substance on the page, that poetry under the prose--is the ultimate ‘region’, the true home, for a writer. Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression--
I've been thinking about this for a couple of reasons--first among them, my own work. As best I can tell, for the foreseeable future my books are going to take turns being about the two chunks of the West I happen to know anything about--Montana here along the rim of the Rockies, where I grew up, and the Puget Sound country of Washington where I live now. They're of course very different territories--Norman Maclean in A River Runs Through It quotes his brother's definition of the main difference: "Practically everybody on the West Coast was born in the Rocky Mountains where they failed as fly fishermen, so they migrated to the West Coast and became lawyers, certified public accountants, presidents of airplane companies, gamblers or Mormon missionaries"; I guess I add hiders-behind-typewriters to that list--

but I think my pair of wests are alike in two very large ways: each has dramatic and challenging landscape, each has a tradition of storytelling. At least, I'm drawn to both these elements, whichever of my wests I happen to be writing about. In House of Sky, almost all of the dialogue is storytelling of one sort or another, the material which lodged in my head as I listened in the bars of White Sulphur or the Chadwicks' cafe in Dupuyer. And the western thread of storytelling--the "storying"--caught me up again very early in the book I've just finished.
Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.

And it did, with a considerable artistic nudge from non-cowyboying, non-gunslinging Westerners. Instead of “bang bang bang bang,” listen to this, from the late great Oregon poet, William Stafford, in his jackknife-sharp little poem, “Lake Chelan”:
"They call it regional, this relevance--
the deepest place we have:
in this pool forms
the model of our land, a lonely one,
responsive to the wind.
Everything we own
has brought us here:
from here we speak."
This is what she had to say about a writer’s necessary state of patience:

“I’m a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away. I see
it happen all the time. Of course you have
to make your habits in this conform to what
you can do. I write only about two hours
every day because that's all the energy I
have, but I don't let anything interfere with
those two hours, at the same time and the
same place. This doesn't mean I produce
much out of the two hours. Sometimes I
work for months and have to throw
everything away, but I don’t think any of that was time wasted. Something goes on that makes it easier when it does come well. And the fact is that if you don’t sit there every day, the day it would come well, you won’t be sitting there.”

Ultimately, Flannery O’Connor’s advice does add up, I believe.
"The authentic Western voice...is one heard often in life but only rarely in literature, the reason being that to truly know the West is to lack all will to write it down. The very subject of 'The Executioner's Song' is that vast emptiness at the center of the Western experience...a dread so close to zero that human voices fade out, trail off, like skywriting."

I've heard this called "the literature of place." Certainly it's an honorable enough phrase, and "place," landscape, backdrop of mountain and plain and hard weather, does figure large in the work of a lot of us. 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 these big bold landscapes. Joan Didion, when she reviewed Norman Mailer's book, The Executioner's Song, praised Mailer's view of the west almost in astonishment. Odd argument for a writer as brilliant as Joan Didion to make, but she seemed to say it's all but impossible for a writer truly to portray Westerners. She said: