I respond to that pretty much the way of the Scottish housewife at the outbreak of a war, when the British government levied new taxes for the military effort. She demanded of her shopkeeper why the price of candles had gone up, and he told her, "because of the War." "Oh," she said, "I hadn't realized they're going to fight this one by candlelight."

Like that housewife, I think high-sounding explanations often miss the logic of the situation. If today's western writing were primarily a literature of place, of landscape instead of people, it seems to me it would simply be travelogue, instead of the rich and varied cast of characters who have found a continuing life in the minds of readers recently.

There's one last thing I want to say about the storytelling tradition, because it's the best summary I've found yet about why we deal in stories—both those of us who tell stories in Montana bars and cafes, and maybe even Montana libraries, and those of us who try to make writing out of such stories.
Later, as these two have taken up their land and in the work of making homesteads, there is this passage about how that dream is turning out:

"Here then is land. Just that, land, naked earthskin. And now the due sum: from this minute on, the next five years of your life, please, invested entirely into this chosen square of earth of yours."
Put upon it house, outbuildings, fences, garden, a well, livestock, haystacks, performingh every bit of this at once and irrespective of weather and wallet and whether you have ever laid hand to any of these tasks before. Build before you can plan, build in your sleep and through your mealtimes, but build, pilgrim, build, claimant of the earth, build, build, build. You are permitted to begin in the kind delusion that your utensils of homestead-making at least are the straightforward ones--axe, hammer, adze, pick, shovel, pitchfork. But your true tools are other. The nearest names that can be put to them are hope, muscle, and time.”
immediately, and the book’s opening sentence reads:

“That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country.”

There are, I can report on the basis of a lot of research, places besides libraries where you can creatively sit. People here in the West have been known to go out to eat and drink, and I spend a lot of time simply following the sound of their voices into those places. It begins at breakfast, in Choteau, Montana, or Cortez, Colorado, or Baker City, Oregon, when the guys in
tractor caps take over their usual table and start drinking coffee and solving the world's problems. Folklorists actually have a term for those caffeine circles—they call them "the big table." I've always just called them "the geezer table"—but in any case, those gatherings, over morning coffee, or Fourth of July rodeo picnic potato salad, or evening imbibings in bars usually called The Stockman or The Mint, are a rhythm of the West that I, at least, believe is worth some listening to. Something must account for this kind of example—
a bit of dialogue in my novel Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, overheard between two fly beer drinkers perched at the bar with their cans of beer:
Activity picked up too at my ear nearest the beer pot. "Tell you, Ron, I don't know what you got going with Barbara Jo, but don't let her get you in front of no minister. This marriage stuff is really crappy. You take, Jeannie's mom is always on my back about why don't we come over more. But we go over there and the stuff she cooks, she never salts anything or anything, and I don't eat that crap without no salt on it. Last time she called up and asked Jeannie why we weren't coming over, I told Jeannie to tell her I had to lay down and rest. Then there's Jeannie's dad, he just got dried out down at Great Falls. Cranky old sonofabitch, I think they ought to let him have a few beers so he wouldn't be so much of a craphead, is what I think. And you know what else, Jeannie's brother and sister-in-law had a Fourth of July picnic and didn't even invite us. That's the kind of people they are. Jeannie and I been talking a lot lately. I told her, I about had it with her crappy family. Soon as the first of the year and I get enough money ahead to buy my big bike, I'm heading out to the coast and go to school somewhere."

"Yeah?" Ron responded. "What in?"

"Social work."
In this particular case, that swatch of bar talk was about half-overheard—including, I swear on an oral history manual, that punchline—and half made up by me. The made-up half has in it the trace element of fact that wasn't there for me as an eavesdropper, folklorist, oral historian, researcher, whatever—the echo of exodus that sweeps back and forth in the West, this time our incipient social worker's dream of "heading out to the Coast."

This is part of the job description of the writer.
Trying to learn the lingo of damworkers of the 1930's, I showed one of them a picture by Margaret Bourke-White in her famous photo-essay of Fort Peck Dam and its boomtowns in the first issue of LIFE magazine—the photo showed one of the dam's tunnel liners, a steel culvert thirty feet in diameter, cobwebbed inside with crisscross support rods bolted to collars in the middle of this colossal tube, and a bunch of damworkers 15 feet in the air, in there, climbing on these skinny rods—and I asked, "What's going on here?"
MY ELDERLY DAMWORKER

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

"If that's not everyday poetry and/or literature, I don't know what is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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..."
I suppose the reason writers get invited to give speeches is that people are curious to see just what we'll do when we can't hide behind a typewriter. Early in *House of Sky* there's the story my father used to tell about a couple of the kids he went to school with, over in the Sixteen country—that they were so spooked and shy that if they couldn't find anything else to hide behind, they'd flop down with their lunchbuckets in front of them and peek out from behind those. I thought tonight, since I don't have the safety of my typewriter, I'd take cover behind a topic which might as well be called "storying."
"Do you see what I have done?" he asked softly. "Without passing a solid thing from my hand to yours, I have put words into your head, and they're the words of a story. Now you will carry the story back in your head to America, and perhaps you will tell the story, too, or perhaps you will write it down. And after a while I will die, but over in America will be a story of mine going around, without ever stopping from going, one to another, and so I won't be dead at all, in one way of thinking it. That's what I have done this day. God bless!"

I think that's the impulse in all our tongues—to have some portion of us live on within the heads of others. Thanks for listening to my tongue tonight.

I came across a magazine article of some thirty years ago by the late New Yorker writer John McNulty, telling of his first visit to his ancestral Ireland. There he heard a classic Irish storyteller relate a long, long tale of a young fisherman who had grown angry at the sea and of his doomed battle with the great water. The story at last ended, the audience drifted away, McNulty and his wife had tea and bread-and-butter with the storyteller and his family, and at last said their goodbyes, when the storyteller stopped McNulty at the door.
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.
I think one of Stafford's most heart-felt, titled "Lake Chelan," by William Stafford, the late-great Oregon poet—I think reminds us that the West is delineated by more than state lines and survey lines and property lines. Lines of poetry and lines of prose, also mark out for us this "deepest place we have." The strongest of poetry and story-telling comes right up off the page into our lives, and I want to move—for the next several minutes—to some instances of what I never know what to call except "the slow poetry/of fact."
most of her short writing life, but her
collection of letters show her to have been
a dedicated sardonic professional, as when
she gave this unbeatable version of the
experience of looking over one's own
writing: "I have just corrected the page
proofs and I spent a lot of time getting
'似乎' and 'as if' constructions out of it. It
was like getting ticks off a dog."
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
"CRYSTALIZING DETAILS," THEY'RE SOMETIMES CALLED

the arithmetic of particulars--dabs of "makings"--which creatively get added up into story. Let me take you briefly through this writerly process of the poetry of fact accumulating itself--using an example I know best, my own.
Or, to put it more poetically, as the late great Oregon poet William Stafford did:—

"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."
The third heart of writing is geographical: where we speak from. "They call it regional," the Oregon poet William Stafford wrote in his poem, "Lake Chelan"—

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

So, specific geographies—but galaxies of imaginative expression. It is my conviction that writers can 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 Layé. 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 Layé 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.
So, those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolteachers—the West of people who came to build and not to destroy, to work but to dance and laugh along with it—thought we had safely written our way past "The Virginian" and his later heftier cohorts in popular culture, John Wayne and Louis L'Amour.
Quite a number of us out West in fact do what writers have always done and pay homage to our native place in our words. By now a couple of literary generations of us, through fiction and memoir and the insights of our scholarly allies called the "New West" historians, have produced versions of the West that turn "The Virginian" on his head. Owen Wister's 1902 novel colored the West with that blood-red tint of the gunfighting cowboy--the walkdown in the dusty street, "When you call me that, smile," bang bang bang bang and so on. The cowboys without the cows, that version of the West was, because no one in Wister's pages ever did the milking or put in time at the calving shed; they were much too busy with gunplay.
Faulkner and the rest of us in the cottage industry called fiction-writing can be accused of having fashioned ourselves a job where we claim to be trying to tell some truth by making things up. (Not so incidentally, with nine-tenths of the ink of this century now expended, modern American fiction in terms of originality and staying power still adds up to "Faulkner and the rest of us.") I know I wouldn't have spent the past decade concocting novels if I didn't think there are real fidelities in the writing of fiction, and I'll try to parse through a few of those in show-and-tell time here imminently. But I wonder first if there shouldn't be a brief interlude of philosophy, a little piped-in ditty from the literary keyboard which you as writers of history can decide to hum along with or not.
William Faulkner's crocodile was simply that haunting fever-dream prose of his in which, as a boggled critic said the sentences advance like armies.
her in his time was one of the most industrious
and respectable American novelists, but I never liked anything
else of his nearly as much as when he took a chance and retold
the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view in his novel Grendel. There may be no more wonderfully crocodilian
sentence than the one after Grendel the narrator has rampaged
through a meadhall: "I silently sack up my dead."
Writers about the American West have done some inspired engineering on the crocodile factor, I'm happy to say. Louise Erdrich's kaleidoscopic shifts of points of view—and points of time—in her stories—which add up to novels are often Faulknerianly brilliant. James Welch took the poetic fact that the historic Blackfeet believed sometimes spoke to them, and from there made perhaps the greatest leap any of us of this writing generation are going to make toward the soul of our people, when in his novel Fools Crow he has the nonhuman
creatures of their cosmos telling his Blackfeet characters in one of what's up. Mary Clearman Blew, from the grassroots memoir Balsamroot, I mentioned, in her book has coaxed one of the fiercest of crocodiles--the mysteries of one's own family--into a brilliant narrative technique which makes a memoir read with the flow of a fast-paced novel.

For my part, to close this out with somebody whose motives I'm supposed to be sure of, among the things I've tried to do is show a community of time, as well as of people. (I realize
it's been said time was invented so that everything doesn't happen at once, but those of us trying to keep track of the West know that a lot of life does happen that way, don't we.)
I knew when I set out to write Bucking the Sun that I wanted to deal with a big contentious family at one of history's turning points—the five couples in the Duff family I thought up, and plopped them into the Depression years—and the pint-size sheriff they bedevil, and the boomtown life and work-flavor of building the biggest dam in the world then,
Fort Peck Dam, on the upper Missouri River. As I worked away at what ultimately became 350-some scenes gliding in and out of the characters' lives, it dawned on me: these people have to sleep sometime. That was the making of this page in Bucking the Sun:

"The dreamwork of Fort Peck built through the November nights, turbulent, drifting on the dark change of season and work and prospect, restless inside the bone hulls of fate, thousands of sleep-made privacies tossing and turning."
The boomtown of Wheeler, with its alcohol content, tended in its dreams toward inward uproar: showdowns, arguments won on a second try, woozy otherwise-unimaginable sexual situations. In the Corps of Engineers' townsite, along Officers' Row, the dreams held a tendency toward hierarchy, Colonel Parmenter's vision of a command post in the blissful sweltering Philippines and Mrs. Parmenter's nocturnal jaunt backward thirty years and thirty pounds to her cotillion debut both overriding, say, Captain Brascoe's delirious armwaving scene with garbagemen
who were delivering garbage into his tidy streets instead of hauling it away. Across a few of those streets, in the workers' barracks, Darius Duff dreamt back to Scotland. One floor up from him, the cook Tim Jaarala was shaking dice in the saloons of Wheeler, and winning.

In both towns, in the course of any night, more than one man dreamt of the peroxide-blond taxi dancer, Proxy Shannon.

Within the walls of the Duffs, Hugh the family patriarch was on mental horseback, riding a workhorse—it seemed to be
the broad-beamed dun nag they had called "Hippo", back on
the homestead--through the snowdrifts of the road between
Fort Peck and Glasgow. Hugh thought it odd he was drawing
wages for this, merely riding around in the snow, but who
was he to complain. His wife of three decades, Meg, beside
him in bed and not, was on the bandstand of the Blue Eagle
saloon, where she could peer over the heads of the drinking
crowd, watching and watching, until finally she saw him
come in through the door, the tall familiar figure of Hugh.
It was Hugh, wasn't it? Their son Bruce, the government diver, slept the sleep of the underwater walker, stupefied but unalarmed, while his wife Kate wanted out of the dream she was in, where she was trying to wait on her customers at the Rondola Cafe and feed her baby Jack on her breast at the same time and the smartasses along the counter kept saying, "I'll have what Jackie's having." Meanwhile her sister-in-law Rosellen, who had been sending off stories to magazines, was stalled in a reverie version of the Fort Peck post office,
waiting to hear from editors.

waiting for the mail, Every time she went up to the wicket window and asked, "Is there any for me?", the postmaster would say "Did you bring a gunnysack for it?", then laugh and turn away. Minutes before, Rosellen's husband Neil woke up on a rancher's approach road halfway between Fort Peck and the coal mine, having pulled over to doze when he thought he might fall asleep at the wheel on his trucking run, and now had climbed out and was walking around and around the truck to get himself warm and awake enough to drive home. Rosellen's sister
Charlene, by contrast, was steaming in her dream, trying to run a hairdresser shop the size of a department store, customers in chairs even up on the mezzanine, and the only help she had was her mother-in-law Meg who kept asking, "Charlene, tell me again what to do when they say they want 'the works'. " And working at sleep next to Charlene, in sessions that were more like naps linked together, lay Owen Duff, engineer of this dam, perpetually trying to get somewhere on a train, but every single time the conductor
came by and demanded his ticket, Owen could not find the thing."

//That, I believe, is the note to end on. That not just in dream, but in art and history, we have to keep looking at our makings to find out where we and the West are going.
I can hear that, in our own western pages. The jukebox saloon tunes in the background of the prose of William Kittredge, the kitchen-sung songs wafting out as the work of Barbara Kingsolver and Terry Tempest Williams, the anthems of small places and family niches in the writings of Mary Clearman Blew and Craig Lesley and Teresa Jordan, the tribal rhythms of the reservation behind the words of James Welch, and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, the poetic balladry under Rudolfo Anaya's words and Norman Maclean's words and Wallace Stegner's words and I hope maybe my own—if we are doing them right, about the West, they are something more than words, they are heartbeats of the West.
A couple of weeks from now, I’ll be in San Francisco, speaking at a Wallace Stegner memorial—the occasion is for the Stegner Environmental Library in San Francisco’s new public library.
To me, there is simply a perfectly written Western ethic, a
rightness of sound--I can hear any number of Westerners I've known,
coming out with this sentence--in the unbeatable line that Bill Kittredge
wrote in his short story "Balancing the Water," when he had a ranch hand
say, "All you can own is what you do."

(Michael Milken, Ivani-Boesky, and many hundred savings-and-loan
executives could have morally profited from reading that story of Bill's.)
Early in *Heart Earth*, in describing my parents' journey down through the Rockies as they tried "to trade predicament in Montana for predicament in Arizona," I put it this way:

"My parents and my father's sister Anna and her husband Joe and the five-year-old dirtmover that was me had thrown what we had into a Ford coupe and pinballed our way down through the West a thousand and fifty miles, ration books straining from gas station to gas station along U.S. 89, me most of the time intrepidly shelved crosswise in the coupe's rear window, until we rolled to a halt in Phoenix the night before Thanksgiving of 1944."
So, that carload of western questers passed through town, here, that last November of World War Two. And I think it's safe to say that the word "astonishment" wouldn't begin to measure the surprise that Berneta and Charlie Doig, my parents, would have felt, at my being back here tonight to collect this award for the story of them and the Mountain West within their heart of hearts.

It's particularly pleasing that the Evans Award comes from another western family—and my thanks to the various Evanceses, who are here tonight to see my parents honored, in a way, by their parents, David and Beatrice Evans.
Much about this handful of book, Heart Earth, has been unexpected. If my mother's letters from that last half-year of the war had not ricocheted so miraculously—from American deserts and mountaintops to a ship in combat in the South Pacific to a family trunk closed away for forty-one years to a last will and testament to, at very last, a son's eyes—I would not have had enough of a look into her mood and words to ever have written about her.

Nor is it any small surprise to me, to have Heart Earth already so successful, fifteen years after my first effort at writing about the landscape of western minds, in This House of Sky.
Dick Brown, himself one of our western treasures, keeps saying out loud that This House of Sky lives on in a lineage of strong modern writing in the American West, and I'm both proud and pleased to be a member of this western writing community at this moment in literature and history. We are a pretty various bunch of wordsmiths, and I think that's to our credit. 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.
Camara Laye once told an interviewer, who was asking how it was to work so far away from other writers, from the literary power centers, 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 of the prose of William Kittredge, the kitchen-sung songs wafting out as the work of Barbara Kingsolver and Terry Tempest Williams, the anthems of small places and family niches in the writings of Mary Clearman Blew and Craig Lesley and Teresa Jordan, the tribal rhythms of the reservation behind the words of James Welch and Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich, the poetic balladry under Rudolfo Anaya's words and Norman Maclean's words and Wallace Stegner's words and I hope maybe my own—if we are doing them right, they are something more than words, they are heartbeats of the West.
An example of exposition might be: "The Seventh Cavalry halted not far from a stream called the Little Big Horn."

Then an example of development: "A scout rode up to report there seemed to be a whole bunch of Indians over the hill."

Then an example of drama: "Oh hell, said General Custer, there can't be all that many of 'em, let's go take 'em on."

Even seeing the storytelling impulse this way, as a social chinook, fits with the notion that storytelling is a common western theme—the chinook a standard part of your weather here in Montana, deriving its name from an Indian tribe of the West Coast.

What has to be watched out for, of course, is that the storytelling chinook doesn't become just hot air. But I think the Western storytelling tradition can offer a writer some solid advantages, if he'll accept them.

One is structure for what he hopes to say. The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor said, "There are three necessary elements in a story—exposition, development, and drama."
That's the quick version. If you set to work on that same set of story elements with imagination and a whole lot of typing paper, you perhaps come up with something like the novel by Douglas Jones, *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer*.

I think this reliance on traditional storytelling elements operates more directly, for some of us who try to put words on paper about the American West, than is generally recognized. I remember that in the writing of *House of Sky*, when I would get bogged and be trying to think of some fancy format, some kind of literary miracle to conjure onto the page, my wife would say, "just tell me the story." That would settle me down, and the story would begin to get told again.

I know I'm not the only writer out here who harkens to old lessons from storytellers. Listen to Norman Maclean:
(Maclean)

"I was brought up in the oral, Western, storytelling tradition. In my day you had to make your own pleasure, and it came out of your work and imagination. You were your own radio station before there were radio stations, and had your own amateur hour between 8 and 9."

And Richard Hugo, in his book about writing, The Triggering Town:

(Hugo)

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:

The grocer is kind. He gives candy to children. He is a widower and his children live in Paris and never write.

The town was once supported by mining, commercial fishing, or farming. No one knows what supports it now.

Birds never stop. They fly over, usually too high to be identified.
This storytelling to himself can be very direct in a Hugo poem. The first lines of "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg":

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss you had was years ago....

The storytelling tradition of the West, then, I think can give a writer ideas about how to put his work together. It also seems to me there is a kind of oxygen, a breath of life, which stories provide a writer about the West.

Sometimes this can just be the wonderful lifting sensation of discovery. When I set to work to write about sheep ranching in the Meagher County country, I was overjoyed to find a few pages of anecdotes gathered by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930's. It provided the material about the immigrant shepherders who, the forest rangers complained, always knew only two words of English. For the Romanian herdsmen, it was "no savvy"; for the Norwegian herdsmen, it was the name of their boss: "Martin Grande." Even when there were more stories than I could use, there was a kind of atmosphere they could add to my work. For instance, one old ranger told the Federal Writers' Project story-gatherer:
"On Sheep Creek I rode into old Mr. Wolsey's place checking on the forest boundary. I asked him how far he owned down the creek. He pointed to an old rifle hanging on the wall and said, "Just as far as old Betsy will shoot." A useful reminder to me, sitting in my suburban desk chair in Seattle, that some fairly shaggy happenings occurred to people I was plenty old enough to have been acquainted with.

Of course there's also the bonus that there's never any question of accuracy when a Montanan tells a story. A friend here in the state told me about hearing one old-timer describe another, in what I'm sure is general policy out here: "Why," the old-timer said, "that fella was the most honest man I ever knew. He'd tell a story a dozen different ways rather than lie about it."

I'm convinced that, when I was writing *House of Sky*, the book really began to take on life when I let the people in it tell their own stories. Out of a lot of years of tape recordings and letters and notes, I had those stories, and they usually seemed to me to tell themselves at least as well as anything I could do in their place. Sometimes, in fact, they did a whole lot better, and I was baffled as to how to keep up with them. I have an example.
This recent recognition of Western writers of course is rather startled—something like the moments in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" when Butch and the Kid look back over their shoulders at the posse on the horizon and ask, "Who are those guys?"

Just after House of Sky was published, I had a phone call from a bookstore owner in Idaho. He said he'd just been to a reading Jim Welch had done at the university, and he'd noticed Richard Hugo had a new book of poems coming out, and he reported he was selling a lot of Jim Crumley's latest novel, and he was excited that A River Runs Through It was coming out in paperback—finally, "Good God," he said, "you guys from Montana—there must be something in the water up there."
Anyway, whether it's the water or some other Montana beverage, writers here are earning those signs of recognition I mentioned. We're starting to hover around the national awards rather regularly. I think I'm right that the last major award to a Montana writer was A.B. Guthrie's Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1950. But *A River Runs Through It* was chosen for the award by the Pulitzer fiction jury in 1977, only to have it vetoed by the Pulitzer advisory board on the evident grounds that the book wasn't thick enough. Richard Hugo has been nominated twice for the National Book and was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize a few weeks ago; Award for poetry *House of Sky* was nominated for the National Book Award last year—to what probably was an entire chorus of, "Who is that guy?"

Bill Kittredge of Missoula a year or so ago shared the Fiction International award for the year's best collection of short stories. Given that it's been a standing joke that literary prizes in this country are scrupulously awarded equally to East and West—the east side of New York City and the west side of New York City—this seems to me a considerable record. A few other signs of recognition: the Master of Fine Arts writing program at the University of Montana is casually mentioned these days as one of the best in the country, in the same breath with Iowa and Stanford. And this very month, an issue of *Tri-Quarterly*, one of the most high-hat literary quarterlies in the country is devoted entirely to current Western prose, with Kittredge guest-editing the issue.
So the reputation of Western wordsmiths seems to be happening, and as those things usually go, it's probably going to be a reputation based on the wrong thing. My impression is that today's Western writing generally is thought of as a focus on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: The Big Sky... Wolf Willow... A River Runs Through It.

The notion, I suppose, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landscape 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.

Every so often some reviewer of House of Sky would refer to me as having been brought up in the Montana wilderness. Now, White Sulphur and Dupuyer may be a little rough around the edges, but they're not that wild.
us. And I think Eiseley's words have lasted because he was willing to openly risk awe about nature, and to put it to use as a finding device, for himself and us.

Chapter two, now, in the annals of "land listening." Literally, because we begin with this quote:

"I sat in the warm sunshine on tops of the hills overlooking the ranch house, the barns, the fields and the lake bed. I lay down and put my head in the grass. I could hear it! The ground was a moving, writhing, stirring mass of movement and growth. Millions of tiny shoots were probing at the warm earth, drinking its moisture, absorbing its goodness and sending their growth to
the sunlight. The earth, the sky, the air, the universe were
throbbing with life...and it was good!”

Those are the words of Chet Huntley, he of the Huntley Lodge
here at this resort, and--a few of you possibly are just old enough
to recall--of the Huntley-Brinkley nightly news on NBC television
from 1956 to 1970. Chet Huntley at that time may have been the
most famous person from Montana. I myself would have bet on
Gary Cooper or Myrna Loy, but in 1965, NBC hired a consumer
research firm and proudly announced that the resulting survey had
found that Huntley and Brinkley were recognized by more adult
Americans than Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, the Beatles, or John Wayne.

Toward the end of his network career, Huntley's thoughts turned homeward and he wrote a memoir of his growing-up in Montana, titled The Generous Years, published in 1968--the quote I just read is a pretty good sample of its indeed generous view of homesteader life in the early twentieth century.

The book hit home in my family. My father had a taste for old flavors of Montana. Above his living-room chair, where the emphysema-easing oxygen tank tethered him in his last years, always hung a print by Charlie Russell. He would read and get a
kick out of almost anything about the old days in Montana, my father would. And so, inevitably, there came the birthday or the Christmas, when I gave him *The Generous Years*.

On my next visit back here I asked him how he'd liked the book. He didn't say anything for a minute. Then he said: "Ye know, Ivan, maybe I should have written a book and called it *The Stingy Years.*"

The Huntley version had been too much for my father, who had only to look around him, all of his life from his own homestead childhood onward through his shepherding and cowboying years to those last days as a worn-out ranch hand, to
know that fate had placed him in the rural equivalent of a ghetto.
He’d heard a lot of unforgettable things in his seventy years of hard knocks out here, but he’d never heard the grass grow, “moving, writhing, stirring” and “throbbing.”

My own discontent, then and now, with Chet Huntley’s unquestionably well-intentioned memoir is that it shows no sign of trying to live up its literary lineage. Wallace Stegner’s Wolf Willow. Mari Sandoz’s Old Jules. Hamlin Garland’s Boy Life on the Prairie. Those three books alone, by writers who had childhoods on earlier homesteads, constitute what should have been an irresistible family tree; but there’s no sign in The
Generous Years that Huntley was aware of those three classic perspectives on the homestead life, or of the lives of those other authors in bootstrap circumstances akin to his. Nor was Huntley willing to cast a luke-warm eye, let alone a cold eye, on the history he had lived through, in those early years—he was an eyewitness to the last American land frontier, for the Montana homestead boom which brought the Huntleys west along with a quarter-million other landseekers occurred from about 1910 to 1920—and promptly in the early 'twenties the Great Depression had its out-of-town tryout here, when more than half of the banks in the state went under, and drought and economics wiped out
most of the homesteads. What could have been a tellingly powerful book about the West, by someone who--remember--was more recognizable than the Beatles or John Wayne, instead became a mellow recounting of the decidedly good old days, that seems to have been done in a frame of mind reminiscent of those ancient kings, who were said to have forgotten nothing and learned nothing.

The New York Times Book Review kindly gave Huntley’s book a base on balls, an amiable review in the back pages--about the same time it wasn’t deigning to review Wallace Stegner’s novel *Angle of Repose* at all, until Stegner inconveniently won
the Pulitzer Prize with his book. But pretty soon, back there in the early seventies, there was coverage of Chet Huntley in the Times and a lot of other places that wasn’t entirely amiable--for Huntley, upon his return to Montana after his retirement, became the spokesperson for an environmentally controversial project called the Big Sky Resort of Montana.

My own stance, on such matters, is plain enough from my books, I suppose--it’s probably written all over me. In general, I tend to regard ski resorts as a waste of good country. In my millennial kingdom, each state would be permitted one ski resort and one golf course, and we’d all stand in line like nature
intended. (In the interest of climatic fairness and strict averaging, we could let Texas have two golf courses and a really big beach umbrella, while Alaska would be permitted two ski resorts and a hot tub.)

My opinion, though, isn’t what matters most in a historical recounting of the Big Sky story. Very briefly, this was a big project, naturally involving big money. The real estate subsidiary of the Chrysler Corporation and several other sizable backers were behind the plan for twelve hundred condominiums and eight hundred detached homes, and this ski village here and of course the ski slopes. Land had to be swapped with the Forest Service to
assemble the ten-thousand acre project. With the Spanish Peaks Wilderness Area right over here, Big Sky became a contentious environmental issue. Professors were heard from, in protest of so much construction on what they contended are fragile slopes.

Chet Huntley described his part in this as a quite junior partner—"something like two percent"—but because of his prominence it became known as "the Chet Huntley Project." He wasn't bashful about making speeches in which he called the plans for this resort "the greatest thing that ever happened to Montana." He standardly told his audiences: "Tourists come and
spend their money, leave a few tracks in the snow and go back home. What’s so wrong with that?”

The environmental groups in return would point out that bringing in several thousand people per weekend, to a couple thousand condos and homes and this ski village, amounted to a little more impact than that on mountain terrain. As the debate played out, of course, the Big Sky resort prevailed, or we’d all right now be innocently at home, sitting around repairing gerunds. Chet Huntley himself didn’t quite live to see the result here, dying the week he was to dedicate Big Sky in 1972.
The story fast-forwards now to the millennium—the recent turn of the century and those endless lists. When the University of Washington drew up its list of "100 Alumni of the Century," on it were two sons of Montana. There, you bet, was Chet Huntley, but there too was the son of shepherder Charlie Doig. The representative of The Stingy Years, as it were.

I had a good time with my selection onto the list, being relatively alive—I sent in my mug shot and bio sheet to the alumni magazine editors when they called with the news, and when the issue of the magazine came out, neighbors who had always wondered what on earth I do for a living all of a sudden were
depositing copies on my doorstep like purring cats bringing me
robin tidbits.

But alas, poor Chet, not around to fend for himself. When the
editors went to gather material on Chet Huntley, the response they
got at NBC—three times!—was “Who? What was that name
again?” When they finally broke through to somebody who
savvied Huntley’s name, that person told them: Oh, there’s this
old photo agency you need to get in touch with—they have all the
files of “previous talent.”

I’m not here to beat up on the ghost of Chet Huntley—I find
that gaping void of institutional memory at his own television
network savage and sad. Huntley's journalistic talents deserve better. But look at the story trellised for us in that intertwining of his chosen late-life roles--as the writer of *The Generous Years*, and as the voice for putting this resort in this place. I believe it's a story clouded with nostalgia--what Chet Huntley thought he was hearing from the past, when for whatever reason he didn't really put it to any test--and with evanescent celebrity, when for whatever reason he lent his journalistic reputation to the trumpeting of alpine real estate. The prairie of memory, in this case, did not connect with the ecological actuality that we're running out of mountains.
The best description of stories as handled by writers—that I've been simply able to come up with—is the one by the poet Randall Jarrell—whose poem, "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," where the women in SAHRees "go by me from the embassies—Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet. They look back at the leopard like the leopard"—I think is itself a magnificently done story. 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."
PP "15-16" medidas w/ NZ/aeria version
Then there's the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, we owe this final bit of writerly psyche to Richard Hugo. (As I savvy it, it was Dick Hugo—through the medium of Bill Kittredge—who has given us the new emblematic phrase, The Last Best Place.) In teaching aspiring poets, Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile." This 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 alwys liked Hugo's crocodile prescription, and think it covers a lot of otherwise unexplainable wonders of fiction—the elements that come right up off the page and get you.
William Faulkner's crocodile was simply that haunting fever-dream prose of his in which, as a critic (Anatole Broyard) has said, the sentences advance like armies. We know that James Joyce carried punning and other back-and-forth intricacies of language--its vice-versas--to genius level in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, but I'm convinced he's giving us a little crocodile grin even in the famous epiphany of his short story, "The Dead"--that there in the last lines when "snow was general all over Ireland," he's telling us it was not only generalized, "falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen," but that it was indeed in command, even "farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves."
The late John Gardner was one of most industrious and eminent American novelists, but I never liked anything else of his nearly as much as when he retold the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view in Grendel. There may be no more wonderfully crocodilian sentence after he's rampaged through a meadhall: "I silently sack up my dead." (p. 7)
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, pre-occupation, some people would say—but at least it deals in one of humanity'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." 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.

I've spent some time—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 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 Budora 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 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, across the Montana prairie. 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?"

"He often took the notion. My father had been away, up there, for some weeks."

"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 mother 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 month 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 h elloing all the horses."

She said 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, Sneezie! 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 storycatching 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 escapade they had just been talking about, and the written simply 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 eighty's, remembered 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 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 largely 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 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 onto 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 great American writers, the ones for whom the language itself is a kind of story, is that they 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 horses 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 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.

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
would stand along 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 laid down my paper and asked him.
Kamante
why not? I now found that he had prepared himself for this; stood with
the blue-bound book (a copy of) the Odyssey itself behind his back, and here he laid
on the table.

"Look, Msabu," 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, is some
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."

Kamante
"(Then will it be as hard as this one?)", 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.