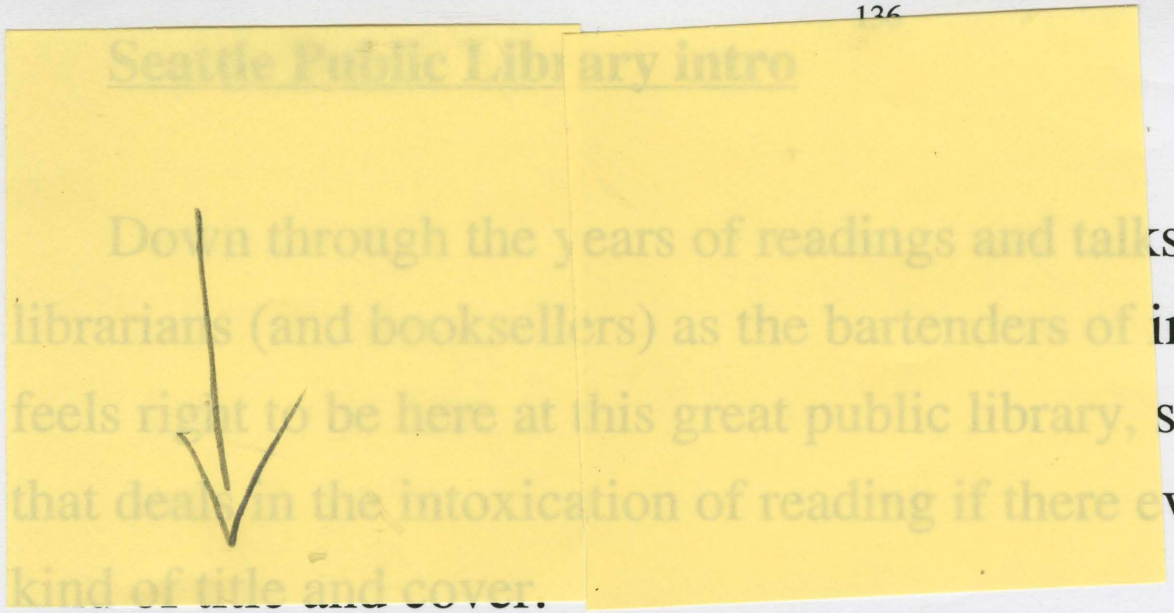
Montana Book Festival, Missoula, Oct. 5 '12

It's always a tug at the heart to come back to Missoula, where Carol and I were lucky enough to have Jim Welch and Dick Hugo as friends, and where I first met Norman Maclean, Bud Guthrie, Jim Crumley, and Dorothy Johnson at occasions similar to this one. This town has the writing-est ghosts of anywhere. Trusting that those great literary spirits are in our company here in the Wilma, I'm pleased and honored to lead off tonight's set of written words spoken upon the air in this historic theater, with this novel that goes back in time to when some of us were a lot younger and some of us ~~were not~~ around yet, **The Bartender's Tale.**

Seattle Public Library intro



Down through the years of readings and talks, I have hailed librarians (and booksellers) as the bartenders of information, and so it feels right to be here at this great public library, surely an establishment that deals in the intoxication of reading if there ever was one, with this kind of title and cover.

As you might surmise from that title, the doings in the novel that brings me here tonight center around a saloon--and yes, a bartender and the young son he's raising alone. By one of those strokes of luck that was entirely disguised at the time, I had a bit of upbringing not too different from that --except my dad was on the other side of the bar. My father--and me, until I found my way to a typewriter--were members of the lariat proletariat--ranch hands sometimes, other times running sheep or cattle

sometimes, other times running sheep or cattle "on shares" as it was called, the western version of sharecroppers, really. One of the seasonal ways my dad made a living for us was as a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up ranchers' hay crops all summer. And to do that, he had to scout up his hay hands in the hiring halls of the time, there in small-town Montana--saloons. Since he was a widower, raising me by himself there for some years, I was lucky enough to tag along with him into the bars. We had nine of them, in White Sulphur Springs, population about a thousand--the town was pretty proud of that ratio. I was seven and eight and nine years old, redheaded little kid--then--and while some beer-drinking and wage negotiation was going on, guys were always buying

NOD HEAD

me bottles or Orange Crush pop and giving me some money to play the jukebox. At least one of those years, I played Pete Seager and the Weavers' hit song, "Good Night, Irene" every single time.

I mention this background because it is the seedbed of imagination for this work of fiction. The bee in the bonnet. The feather tickling the imagination. If you're a working novelist--and this is my eleventh opus pocus--you have to ask yourself one big question all the time: what if?

[If you're a writer like Charles Dickens, you think "What if Scrooge doesn't just say 'Humbug' about Christmas, but 'Bah, humbug!' I believe I'll dab that in and see if it works." If you're one like Tolstoy, you think "What if I turn Napoleon's invasion of Russia into a longish story?"]

"What if?" can lead a writer any number of places. So, "what if" the writer at this microphone now had sat down a few years ago and wondered what if Tom Harry, the practically legendary bartender I put in the middle of the day-and-night carousing of ten thousand dam workers at Fort Peck in **Bucking the Sun,** and marginally more respectably in another barroom setting in **English Creek** and **The Eleventh Man**--what if that bachelor saloonkeeper and avowed foe of matrimony had a kid to bring up? The story of an only child being raised by a challenged but resourceful single father is one I haven't summoned since my father's and my own in **This House of Sky**, and never in fiction, so this adventure in storytelling, tale-telling, I just could not pass up.

The book is from the perspective of the boy, as the character--Russell, always known as Rusty--looks back from later in life. I'm going to read a couple of short segments, scene-setters, and finish with a somewhat longer episode. Let's begin at the beginning:

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BARTENDER'S

~~Miss You~~ excerpt #1 (~~3~~ 8 min.)

My father was the best bartender who ever lived. No one really questioned that in a town like Gros Ventre, glad of any honor, or out in the lonely sheep camps and bunkhouses and other parched locations of the Two Medicine country where the Medicine Lodge saloon was viewed as a nearly holy oasis. What else was as reliable in life as sauntering into ~~There was a reliability rare in life for a customer to walk into~~ the oldest enterprise for a hundred miles around and be met with just the right drink whisking along the polished wood of the prodigious bar, along with a greeting as dependable as the time of day. Not even heaven promised such service.

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Growing up in back of the joint, as my father always called it, I could practically hear in my sleep the toasts that celebrated the Medicine Lodge as an unbeatable place and Tom Harry as perfection of a certain kind behind the bar.

Which was not to say, even the adherents comfortably straddling their bar stools might have admitted, that he added up to the best human being there ever was. Or the absolute best father of all time, in ways I could list. Yet, as peculiar a pair as we made, the bachelor saloonkeeper with a streak of frost in his black pompadour and the inquisitive boy who had been an accident between the

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sheets, in the end I would not have traded my involuntary parent for a more standard model. It is said it takes a good storyteller to turn ears into eyes, but luckily life itself sometimes performs that trick on us. In what became our story together, when life took me by the ears, what a fortunate gamble it was that my father included me in his calling. Otherwise, I'd have missed out on the best seat in the house--the joint, rather--when history came hunting for him.

slow; deliberate

I turned twelve that year of everything, 1960. But as my father would have said, it took some real getting there first.

START OF

Well, that's the philosophy, and back to the tale, now. We join Tom and Rusty when Rusty has proudly turned twelve--just after school has let out, at the start of summer of 1960. They're in the back room of the Medicine Lodge, pretty much doing what they've comfortably been doing for years, but Tom has a spectacular shiner--he's been hit in the eye by the flying elbow of a drunk sheepherder. Of course, that is just about the most mortifying way there is to get a black eye, but true to form, when any of his customers ask what happened, he just says, "You should see the other guy."

For Rusty, the rear of the big, rambling old saloon is the backstage. the prop shop, of the theater of life going on out front in the bar room. Ever since the Medicine Lodge first appeared in my pages, back as far as Dancing at the Rascal Fair, the saloon has also served as a hock shop for the Two Medicine country--anybody who was a little short of money to drink on or buy a bus ticket or get some new work clothes could pawn whatever they had with the saloonkeeper, and across seventy-five years, things have accumulated. Saddles and bridles and horse harness along one wall like a storm of leather, Stetson hats, rodeo belt buckles, yellow slicker coats, spare tires, sheepherders' bedrolls and suitcases, mysterious stuff off in corners under tarps, and quite a lineup of cowboy

boots and dress shoes--as Tom Harry points out, people can't drink with their feet.

So, the back room is this colossal trunk of imagination for a kid like Rusty, and better yet, there's something secret about it. There's an air vent, into the bar room, tucked away up amid the stuffed animal heads where the customers can't notice it, and Rusty can plant himself there in back at his father's desk on a little landing, crack that vent open, and see andhear everything that goes on in the bar--as he says, "almost like a fabulous radio I could take a look into and have each scene come to life."

Here Rusty and Tom are, then, in that setting, on an early summer day like any other day, except that it isn't.

A kid's dream, always, an entire untouched season of liberated days ahead, now that school was out. By habit and inclination I right away all but moved in to the back room of the Medicine Lodge, spending as much of my time as I wanted casually listening in at the vent or practicing basketball shots or building model planes or entertaining myself any of the other ways an only child so well knows how, while Pop's performance of his bar duties went on as clocklike reliable as ever on the other side of the wall. This was how I always wanted things to be, and at last in this peculiar year, here they were along with summertime and every new day of nature's making.

Therefore I was unprepared, soon into those first days of freedom, when Pop came back from a meal at the Top Spot, the cafe down the street which was best described as reliably mediocre, with news of a major change. We invariably ate supper at the Spot, although usually separately because he needed to grab an early bite before his evening of tending bar.

"New couple bought the place," he reported while slitting open a whiskey case ~~in the back of the saloon~~. They were Butte people, and his guess was that Pete Constantine, the husband and cook, had been in some kind of scrape--a lot of things could happen in Butte--and the wife Melina was determined that the cafe would keep his

nose clean, as Pop put it. "I hope to hell they make a go of it. The food's not any better, but at least it's no worse."

Straightening up, he flicked his lighter and lit a cigarette, cocking a look at me in my favorite perch up there on the landing where I was gluing a challenging twin-tail assembly onto my latest model aircraft, a P-38 Lightning fighter plane. His black eye was down to a greenish purple now that I had almost grown used to. "Guess what. They got a kid about your age."

Aw, crud, was my first thought. Every youngster knows the complication of such a situation, the burden of being expected to

make friends with a new kid just because he was new. Why weren't twelve-year-olds entitled to the same system as adults, to merely grunt to any newcomer, "How you doing?" and go on about your own business?

"What's his name?" I asked unenthusiastically.

"Go get yourself some supper," Pop blew a stream of smoke that significantly clouded the matter, "and find out."

The Spot showed it had indeed changed as soon as I walked in, because Melina Constantine herself was behind the counter in the cleanest waitress apron the cafe had seen in ages. Mrs. Constantine was squat, built along the lines of a fireplug, but with large warm eyes and a welcoming manner. She greeted me as if I was an old

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customer--actually, I was--and plucked out the meal ticket Pop had just inaugurated. Activity in the kitchen sounded hectic, and her husband the cook hurried past the serving window, giving me a dodgy nod. No kid my age was in sight, which was a relief.

"Now then, Russell," Mrs. Constantine smiled in motherly fashion as I hoisted onto my accustomed stool at the end of the counter, "what would you like for supper? The special is pot roast, nice and done."

Her smile dimmed a bit when I ordered my usual butterscotch milkshake and cheeseburger, but she punched the meal ticket without saying anything.

DEEP

Wouldn't you know, though, muffled conversation was taking place in the kitchen, and from where I sat, I could just see the top of a dark mop of hair as someone about my height stood waiting while Pete, cook and father rolled into one, dished up a plate of food and instructed that it all be consumed. I heard the new kid groan at the plateload.

CONSTANTINE

Listening in, Mrs. Constantine beamed in my direction again and provided, "You're about to have company." I waited tensely as you do when someone from a different page enters the script of your life. Would he be hard to get along with? Would I?

TENSE

The kitchen's swinging door was kicked open--it took a couple of thundrous kicks--and, meal in hand as if it weighed a tragic amount, out came a girl.

"Hi," she said faintly.

"Hi," I said identically.

Zoe was her name, and she seemed to come from that foreign end of the alphabet, a gypsylike wisp who slipped past me to a table in the back corner before I finished blinking. Her mother corrected that in nothing flat. "Russell, I'll bring yours over to the table too, if you don't mind."

You bet I minded. All my years in Gros Ventre, I had been contentedly eating supper at the counter. In the manner of old

customers, I felt I owned that spot at the Spot. But tugboat that she was, Mrs. Constantine had me maneuvered into changing seats before I could think of a way out of it. "Sure, I guess," I muttered and reluctantly slid off my prized stool to go over to make friends, as grownups always saw it, or to meet the opposition, as kids generally saw it.

At the table, the two of us sat across from each other as trapped as strangers in a dining car. Given my first full look at Zoe, the wide mouth, the pert nose, the inquisitive gaze right back at me, I must have just stared. My education until then had not included time with a girl. Male and female relationships in school were literally a joke. "Your eyes are like pools. Cesspools. Your skin is

SOFT

like milk. Milk of magnesia." But the incontrovertible fact facing me was that Zoe Constantine possessed deep brown eyes that were hard to look away from and she had an olive-skinned complexion that no doubt suntanned nice as toast, unlike mine. Her hair was not quite as richly black as my own, but at the time I thought no one in the world had hair as dark as mine and Pop's. For all of these arresting features, she was so skinny--call it thin to be polite--that she reminded me of those famished waifs in news photos of DP refugee camps. But that was misleading, according to the indifferent way she toyed with her food while I waited edgily for mine. I was close to panic, thinking of endless suppertimes ahead with the two of us about as conversational as the salt and pepper shakers: how was this going to work?

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She spoke first. "I bet your dad was in a knockdown dragout fight, wasn't he. That's some black eye."

"Uh, yeah. You should have seen the other guy."

"People get in fights all the time in Butte," she said in worldly fashion. "It gives them something to do." Idly mashing potatoes that were already mashed, she caught me even more by surprise as she conspiratorially lowered her voice enough that neither her mother behind the counter nor her father in the kitchen could hear: "How come he and you eat here? Where's your mother? Can't she cook better grub than this?"

WHISPERY

"She's, she's not around any more."

Her voice dropped to an eager whisper. "Did they split the blanket?"

"Uh-huh," I whispered back, although I wasn't sure why divorce was a whispering matter. "When I was real little. I wouldn't know her if I saw her."

"Wild! Are you making that up?"

"You can't make something like that up, nobody would believe it."

"Ooh, you're a half orphan, then." That jolted me. It was nothing to what she said next. "You're so lucky."

I was so stunned I could hardly squeak out: "Because I don't have a mother I've ever seen?"

"No, silly, I mean because you've got only one parent to boss you around," she whispered, with either world-weary assurance or

24A follows

perfectly done mischief, it was impossible to tell which. "That's plenty, isn't it?" She peered critically toward the kitchen,. "I'd give up my dad, I think, if it came to that."

"Wh-why?" I sneaked a look at her father in his undersized cook's hat, flipping a slice of Velveeta onto my cheeseburger as if he'd just remembered that ingredient. "What's the matter with him?"

Zoe waved that away with her fork. "Nothing much. He's just not swuft about a lot of things."

This was another stunner from her. *Swuft* did not merely mean quick at handling things, it meant swift-minded, brainy, sensible, and

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quite a number of other sterling qualities she evidently found lacking in her father.

CUT?

"He couldn't beat up anybody in a fight, like I bet your dad can," she was saying as if she would trade with me on the spot. "Besides, my mom could have made your burger while he's standing around looking at it." In fact, Mrs. Constantine kept revving the milkshake machine as she waited for the cheeseburger to find its way out of the kitchen; my shake was going to be thin as water.

All kinds of doubts about the Top Spot under its new management must have begun showing on me, as Zoe now amended her view of fathers for my benefit in another fervent whisper.

"I bet *your* dad is plenty swuft, you can tell that just by looking at him, can't you. Besides, I heard the old owners tell my folks"--her whisper became even more whispery; what a talent she had--"this cafe gets a lot of its business because the Medicine Lodge brings customers to town from everywhere. I guess it's real famous around here?"

I nodded nonchalantly. Fame was right up there with swuftness in her estimation, I could tell.

CURIOUS

"Do you get to be in your dad's saloon," she wrinkled her nose at the less than impressive confines of the cafe, "ever?"

~~It was my turn to astonish~~. "Sure! All the time."

She gave me the kind of look you give a bare-faced liar.

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"Yeah, well," I went on, elaborately casual, "I just about live in the saloon, I'm there so much. In the back room, I mean."

Her ears perked up. I went on at some length about the trove of hocked items housed from floor to ceiling.

Zoe listened as if she had never heard of such a thing, as I suppose she hadn't.

"All kinds of stuff?" she whispered eagerly. "Years' and years' worth? And people are still doing that?"

"You bet. Sometimes the same people, over and over."

"How do you know that?"

"I hear them at it, don't I, out front with my dad."

"What," she scoffed, mischief in her gaze, "is there some rule they have to talk at the top of their voice to get a drink in this town?"

"Don't be silly," I got back at her for that word, "it's not that. All it takes is--"

Carried away with myself, I told her about the vent.

"Really?" Her voice dropped again to the lowest whisper humanly possible. "You can see and hear them but they can't see you? They're down there drinking and carrying on and everything, and you're up there invisible?"

"Uhm, yeah."

Her eyes shone. "That sounds neat! Can I come listen to them, too?"

Before I had to commit to that, my milkshake and cheeseburger were delivered, along with Mrs. Constantine's smiling wish for me to have a good appetite and her instructive frown at Zoe's barely touched victuals. "Eat, missy, or you'll blow away," she recited

and left us to it. I attacked my meal. Zoe sighed and speared a single stringbean off her plate. It dawned on me I had better make sure just how much we were destined to be around each other, apart from what looked like disconcerting suppertimes ahead. Between milkshake slurps, I inquired:

"What grade will you be in?"

"Sixth. Same as you."

"How'd you know?"

A quick devilish look. "Your father bragged you up."

"Uh-huh." I swirled my milkshake in man-of-the-world fashion. "We'll have old lady Spencer for a teacher."

"Is she hard?"

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"Terrible. She catches you whispering, you have to stay an hour after."

The mischievous look again. "In Butte, they cut your tongue out."

By the time I was done snorting milkshake out of my nose, I was in love with Zoe. I have been ever since.

Bartender's Tale intro--Village Books

One of the much, much shorter pieces of writing I've done lately is in a collection of essays titled **My Bookstore**, writers celebrating their favorite literary hangouts. My selection happens to be the University Book Store in Seattle, the first magical emporium of books awaiting us when Carol and alit into this part of the country. It really could have been any number of favorites, however, including this one, that elicited from me the same greeting that Richard Hugo in a New Yorker poem gave to"The Only Bar in Dixon", Montana--"Home. Home. I knew it entering." Somehow that seemed fitting, because down through the years of readings and talks, I have hailed booksellers (and librarians) as the bartenders of information, and nowhere is the intoxication of reading more readily at hand than at bookstores such as your own vintage one-and-only Village Books.

Look up; change pace

Quick

Next, here's a little scene where the pair of them are literally "getting there," Rusty's arrival to Montana, and the town of Gros Ventre, and his father's place of business. Tom has just retrieved Rusty, who's six at thispoint of the story, from Phoenix where he's been parked with Tom's sister's family, and now that he's decided to raise Rusty himself, as soon as they arrive home in Gros Ventre, Tom pulls up in front of the saloon to have a little talk with his son.

SLOW DOWN; DIP HEAD

"Okay, here's the straight scoop, kiddo. I'm in business here"--he nodded to the Medicine Lodge, and I wouldn't have been too surprised if it had nodded back--"just like somebody who sells candy bars or

jellybeans. Only what I sell has alcohol in it. You know what that is, do you?

"Sure. It makes people drunk."

DRAW BREATH

"Too much of it can, just like you can get a bellyache from eating too much candy." I could tell he was putting every effort into making me understand. "People are gonna drink and have a good time, that's just the way it is. Even the Bible says so, Jesus doing that stunt with the water and the wine at the wedding, right? But customers who are feeling thirsty don't need to get out of hand, and I see to it that they don't. If they want to drink themselves blind, they can go down the street to the Pastime (the rundown bar at the other end of town). If they want to have a few snorts in a decent joint, they can come in here." He turned his

Bartender's Tale intro--Eagle Harbor

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