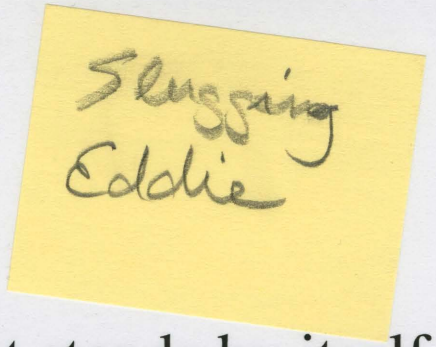
the readiest answer to that toughest question a writer ever gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy answered when asked that about **War and Peace**?) For the next little while, at least, this 130,000-word book which takes in a span of time from the coming of Halley's Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 and involves America's biggest single land-rush (the Montana homesteading boom early in the 20th Century), and wily political maneuvering by a state superintendent of schools, and affairs of the heart and wallet among the grownups--tonight, I simply want you to meet the characters at the heart of this book, **The Whistling Season.**



Whistling Season intro

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul." Those are the words of my narrator of this novel, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that is the readiest answer to that toughest question a writer gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy answered when asked that about **War and Peace**?) For tonight, at least, this 130,000-word book which takes in a span of time from the coming of Halley's Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 and involves America's biggest

single land-rush (the homesteading boom early in the 20th Century), and political maneuvering by a state superintendent of schools, and affairs of the heart and wallet among the grownups--tonight, I simply want you to meet the characters at the heart of this book, The Whistling Season. Give us all a chance to laugh a little with them, in their lamp-lit center of the universe.

It's a one-room school, a few months before Halley's Comet makes its dazzling appearance overhead in 1910. This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, the soul of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a Montana locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be about a hundred miles northwest of Great Falls. The voice of this book, Paul Milliron, is a bright seventh-grader, hopelessly in love with words and books. What he decidedly is **not** in love with is the student who sits nearest--a circumstance some of you former children might recognize. Here, briefly, is Paul's situation with his classmate, Carnelia Craig:

*(One advantage of this book is that whatever the audience, I can assume a high proportion of former children among my listeners.)

"She and I were oldest enemies. Even yet I can't fully account for the depth of passion, of the worst sort, between us. After all, with more than a dozen years apiece in this world, together we amounted to a responsible age, or should have. But Carnelia and I were the entire seventh grade of the Marias Coulee school, as we had been the entire first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth, and there was not a minute of any of it when the two of us did not resent sitting stuck together there like a two-headed calf until that farthest day when we would graduate from the eighth grade."

One phrase you will hear applied to Paul in today's scene is "contrary warrior." That refers to daredevil Plains Indian warriors who would show their bravery, and their contempt for their enemies, by riding into battle backwards on their horses. Paul because of some of his high jinks on horseback has a shoolyard reputation as a contrary warrior.

Paul's life is also spiced, shall we say, by his pair of brothers:

--Damon, the brother just younger than Paul, is in the sixth grade; as you'll hear, he's a bit of an operator, crafty, the kind of sibling you wouldn't trade the world for but you probably wouldn't want more than one of [redacted] either.

--Toby, the second-grader, is exuberance personified. He roars around the place with their dog, Houdini, and whenever anyone asks him that eternal boring question, "How is school?" Toby's eyes light up and he yelps, "I have perfect attendance!"

--Oliver Milliron, the father, you do not meet in this scene, I'm sorry to say. But he's already had a brief starring role, nationally, when I was starting to write this book and the

The plot gets underway when the Milliron brothers' father, Oliver--a fairly recent widower--gives up in despair at trying to run the household and his homestad both, and hires, sight unseen, a housekeeper in Minneapolis who has run an ad in Montana weekly papers advertising her skills, under the headline **Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite.**

The prospect of this housekeeper excites the boys, and in this first scene the youngest brother, Toby, can hardly wait to ride to school--these are horseback days, remember; these three dozen kids ride in from all points of the map, to this one-room school--

and tell everyone about the magical housekeeper who's on her way.

(Toby HAS ~~has~~ bragged first of all to their loyalest friends, who ride to school with them every day, the three Pronovost kids, and now they all reach school that day.)

But Rose's appearance on the scene sends everyone's spirits up--with her arrival, they are all freed from various chores they've been doing; among other things, Rose has agreed ~~with~~ TO the stipulation that housekeeping in Montana can include milking the cow, so they're librated from the milk pail, for instance--and the three boys ride off to school that first day of the new housekeeping regime in high hopes:

Some time passes now, with the three Milliron boys getting teased unmercifully in the schoolyard about the none-biting housekeeper:

--"Does she wear a muzzle?"

--"Did she forget her false teeth? Is she a gummer?"

That sort of thing. But when she arrives, Rose Llewelynn indeed proves to be a paragon of housekeeping, and on her first inspection of the mussy Milliron domain declares her guideword in life, "Upkeep. That's every secret of a pleasant household, regular upkeep." As Paul observes, what he and the other three males in their household are used to is better described as "downkeep."

A brief bit of background: **The Whistling Season** takes place mostly in l910 and 1957, a set of cosmic parentheses of time that quickly becomes clear in the book but not necessarily here today. The voice of the book, the narrator, is that of Paul Milliron, and here as the story begins he's a seventh-grader in a one-room school and somewhat brighter than he knows what to do with. The other characters in this opening scene are his brothers--Toby, a second-grader, and Damon, a sixth-grader--and their

father, Oliver Milliron. You'll hear a reference to two other characters who aren't on the scene yet--George and Rae--Rae in this case is a woman's name, R-A-E. The Millirons are on a dry-land homestead in an area I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be about a hundred miles northwest of Great Falls, Montana. There's a mention of a nearby prairie boomtown--Westwater--with a big irrigation project.

Well, I think that's enough to introduce the Milliron family, and so here they are:

(FOR THE NEXT 20 MINUTES OR SO)

So, that is my most veteran book, and now we'll have a world premiere--of the book that's on its way into print. This selection is from a novel called **The Whistling Season**. It will be published early next year, and this is the first time any of it has appeared in public.

A brief bit of background: **The Whistling Season** takes place mostly in 1910 and 1957, a set of cosmic parentheses of time that quickly becomes clear in the book but not necessarily here tonight. The voice of the book, the narrator, is that of Paul Milliron, and here as the story begins he's a seventh-grader in a

one-room school and somewhat brighter than he knows what to do with. The other characters in this opening scene are his brothers--Toby, a second-grader, and Damon, a sixth-grader--and their father, Oliver Milliron. The Millirons are on a dry-land homestead in an area I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be somewhere between Cut Bank and Valier, about a hundred miles northwest of Great Falls. There's a mention of a nearby prairie boomtown--Westwater--with a big irrigation project, and that more or less corresponds with the early history of Valier, where I went to high school several decades later. And where in actuality in the early twentieth century, land was sold to

You'll hear a reference to two other characters who aren't on the scene yet--George and Rae--Rae in this case is a woman's name, R-A-E.

homesteaders under the inspirational slogan, "Aridity is insurance against flood." (I don't know about yours, but my dry-land ancestors lasted just long enough on their homesteads to question the wisdom in that.)

Well, I think that's enough to introduce the Milliron family, and so here they are:

TO KICK THINGS OFF TONIGHT,

~~decided~~ the book and I have decided--to just take you into the (OF THE WHISTLING SEASON).
heart of the story.

It's a one-room school,a few months before Halley's Comet is to ~~appear in~~ EMBLAZON the heavens in 1910. This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, THE SOUL of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a Montana locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be about a hundred miles northwest of Great Falls. The voice of this book, my narrator, is Paul Milliron, and here in this scene, I'M GOING TO READ, Paul is a seventh-grader in the Marias Coulee school. (CONTRARY WARRIOR) A bit of background on Paul's family:

(TODAY)

So, tonight I simply want you to meet the characters at the heart of this book, The Whistling Season. Give us all a chance to laugh a little with them, in their lamp-lit center of the universe.

Washington Post asked me for an article about creating fictional characters. I did a rough headcount on my then seven novels and found I had fathered and mothered some 360 people made up out of my head--but because I was working on Oliver Milliron at the moment, he stepped forward onto the newspaper page, and ultimately into the pages of the book, and so we know that he's a whimsical man, particularly for a homesteader in tough circumstances, with "a weather-tanned face, with its work wrinkles running down his cheeks, like a copper coin a bit melted"--and as Paul tells us, "Father had a short, sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first."

--Oliver's wife, the mother in this story, died the year before this story opens--part of the saga of homesteading was its terrible toll on women, in childbirth and otherwise--and not to put too fine a point on it, since her passing, the Milliron house is a mess. The story actually gets underway when Oliver decides to hire mail-order housekeeper. Here's a short passage of what that housekeeper, Rose, fresh from the mansions of Minneapolis, finds on her first inspection of the Milliron ~~homestead~~ household, which I'll read because it also gives you a feel for Paul, Damon and Toby:

Rose has just announced to the assembled Milliron family her guideword: "Upkeep. That's every secret of a pleasant household, regular upkeep."

"Everywhere Rose's gaze of inspection alit, ours following hers a bit apprehensively, some shortfall of housekeeping stood revealed like a museum exhibit of bachelor habits. Underfoot: we swept occasionally, but mopped never. Overhead: spiderwebs and soot clouded together in a way Shakespeare could have made something of. The upstairs bedroom where Damon and I shared the big bed and Toby nestled in his corner bunk displayed the individual clutter of each of us. If anything, we practiced

downkeep. Damon's sports scrapbooks lay around open when he was working on them and he was always working on them. (It's noted elsewhere in the book that Damon would have bristled to be told so, but he had a Shakespearean taste for sports heroes who came to some gory end or another. The outfielder who fell from the bar car of a train. The fullback who rashly wrestled a sideshow bear.) Over in his nook Toby had a growing assortment of bones from the buffalo jump we had discovered, secretly hoping, I suspect, that he could accumulate a buffalo. My books already threatened to take over my part of the room and keep on going. Mother's old ones, subscription sets Father had not been able to

resist, coverless winnowings from the schoolhouse shelf, whatever cargoes of words I could lay my hands on I gave safe harbor. All three of us had arrowhead collections; Rose must have divined instantly that it wasn't safe to put a finger down on any surface without a good close look first."

Not the least of the surprises Rose has in store for the Millirons is her brother, who unexpectedly got off the train with her when the family went to meet this paragon of housekeeping and upkeep. Morris Morgan--and you're going to meet him now--is rather elegant and citified and as Paul puts it, "an extraordinary amount of him was mustache. It was one of those maximum ones such as

I had seen in pictures of Rudyard Kipling, a soup strainer and a lady-tickler and a fashion show, all in one." Morrie, as Paul and his brothers instantly call him, also seems to know something about everything, and so, no wonder--when Marias Coulee school unexpectedly loses its teacher during the school year, who do you suppose is pressed into duty?

Whistling intro, first day of school

When I began in the writing trade, as a young western workhorse harnessed to a newspaper job--as my family referred to it, "back east in Illinois"--I dreamed ahead from that daily newspaper wordage to somehow joining one or another of the literary lineages aboard Shakespeare's ark--the lions of narrative, the foxes of mystery, the griffins of science fiction and fantasy, the watchful herons of history, the gazelles and dolphins of poetry, the badgers of biography, the lop-eared leopards of memoir. Little did I imagine that going up that gangplank would

bring me back and back to a port of call such as this bookstore, now with my eleventh book under my arm. I seem to keep writing them, and Third Place--bless it and its staff--keeps letting me in the door.

[Tonight] I thought we may as well hitch-hike together, aboard the fiction deck of that ark of literature, back to a country where we all have been, that territory that shapes the rest of the world for us--childhood.

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul." Those are the words of my narrator of this novel, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that is

Elliott Bay, June 1 '06

Good to be here, with so many old friends. And by now this bookstore itself is an old friend. I don't dare count up how many times I have read here, or I'd owe rent.

But the Elliott Bay folks keep letting me in the door, and this time my eleventh book came in under my arm. Rick did his usual breathtaking introduction. For those of us whose life and living is the transfer of words from our fingertips to your waiting eyes as readers, what a piece of work is Rick Simonson. One of my favorite sayings about [redacted] artistry is from the great jazz trumpeter,

Louis Armstrong: "We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the other notes for yourself." Rick finds them.

For the writer who has been sitting around in his own head for the past couple of years listening to the do-re-mi of his keyboard, and hopefully some grace notes beyond that, there comes the time when he realizes he has to let his words sing out loud a bit, on occasions like this. Tonight is opening night, for **The Whistling Season**--at last count, there are thirty stops ahead on this booktour, from San Francisco to Calgary and Philadelphia, Boston, and the other Washington

& the book is off to a good start. Y'day came the news it is a national bestseller in independent bookstores such as this hallowed one. & this morning my editor called w/ other sweet words - we've gone back to press for more copies.

Whistling Season intro

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul." Those are the words of my narrator of this novel, Paul Milliron--as you might guess, they also happen to be mine--and to me, that is the readiest answer to that toughest question a writer gets, "What's the book about?" (I've always wondered what Tolstoy answered when asked that about **War and Peace**?) For (TODAY) tonight, at least, this 130,000-word book which takes in a span of time from the coming of Halley's Comet in 1910 to the orbiting of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 and involves America's biggest single land-rush (the homesteading boom early in the 20th

Century), and political maneuvering by a state superintendent of schools, and affairs of the heart and wallet among the grownups--tonight, it's about the kids in the book. Let's see if any of them sound familiar to you, from the childhood that stands by itself in you--I'm pretty sure all or most of you are former children.

The heart of the story is a one-room school, a few months before Halley's Comet makes its dazzling appearance overhead in 1910. This school, three dozen students in eight grades, is the center, the heartbeat, of a rural neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a Montana locale I've named Marias Coulee--if it existed, it might be about a hundred miles northwest of Great

Seattle Public Library, June 2 '06

As ~~Sharon~~ DAVID mentioned, my degree from the UW is in history--in fact, the history of the American West, and my dissertation was on the Seattle pioneer, John J. McGilvra--of McGilvra Boulevard, and a lot of landholdings in early Seattle, ~~that~~ WHICH included Foster's Island, ~~that is~~ now part of the Arboretum--and so any time I'm lured downtown here on account of one of my books, I think back to those pioneer days. In 1875 ~~that~~ the Washington Territory Board of Immigration put together a guidebook on Puget Sound

and its surrounding territory--"Its Soil, Climate, Productions and General Resources." That guidebook included this warning:

"Literary men and loiterers are not wanted, and had better keep away."

You can be assured I am not here to loiter. But I am apt to be literary. Although not too literary, because while this new novel (The Whistling Season) has a good many serious parts, the selection I'm going to read today will give you a chance to laugh a little.

It also takes you into the heart of the story.

PACE & MARKINGS

Whistling Season intro

When I was about as tall as my father's elbow as he judiciously bent it in the nine taverns of our town, I saw a lot of character on display. Among his distinctive western aspects--he'd been a homestead kid, broncbuster, sheepherder, short-order cook--my father was a haymaker: a haying contractor, a kind of free-lance foreman, who would hire his own crew and put up ranchers' hay crops.

Those small-town Montana saloons where I was lucky enough to tag along with him were his hiring halls, and as he would sound out a hayhand on whether the man had ever handled the reins of

workhorses, quite a ritual of sizing up went on. The talk may have been of haystacks and summer wages, but the undercurrent was character--my father always having to gauge whether the man sipping beer with him was going to be reliable or a drunk, a good worker or, as was said, so lazy he would starve to deth in bed in the bunkhouse. Of course, from my point of view as an eight- and nine- and ten-year-old, the more my dad made bad guesses about the character of the person on the bar stool next to him, the better. What kid wouldn't rather be around a breezy faker whose team of horses runs away with him two minutes after he climbs onto the

hay rake, than a good solid silent workman probably named Swede?

So, it was maybe back there that I began picking up a couple of things that have brought me here in front of you (tonight) (today): a devilish liking for stories--you should have seen that runaway team of horses bouncing that guy across the irrigation ditches of the Montana prairie--and an abiding interest in the trait called character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.

① Portland

You maybe can't tell it by looking at me, but I've had some ~~quite~~ haltorfed shared glory ~~a distinction~~ added to me since the last time I read in this store. A couple of summers ago, Michael Powell and I found ourselves sitting next to each other at a banquet thrown by the Pacific NW Writers Conference — where they were honoring us with "lifetime achievement awards. As best we could figure out, that means Michael & I are now ~~we're~~ something like walking landmarks. (At least they haven't put plaques on us yet.)

Powell's and Portland is an oasis for me, on this book tour that is taking me to nearly 30 places. I flew in this afternoon from San Francisco, and a couple of days of tooth-and-nail bookselling there. In the morning I go home to Seattle, but still tooth-and-nail book touring in a couple of the big stores there the next few nights — then next week it's Philadelphia, Boston & Washington D.C. And the week after that, it's Calgary. The airports and crowded planes and long hours alone in hotel rooms are a drag, as you can guess, between the intervals of the real stuff, like this, in bookstores with real readers of books. I have always done strenuous tours for my books, starting back there with the first one, This House of Sky — I've always figured some effort is owed to the bookstores and the readers —

and this time I'm finding a bit of entertainment in the rear-view mirror. In the San Francisco stores where I read and hung around and signed books, I noticed I was about 48 hours ahead of some writer named John Updike — & about 72 hours ahead of one called John McPhee. I think tooth-and-nail book touring may be a rather newer experience for those guys than it is for me and my Gold Dust Twin writing buddy, Craig Lesley, (over here) — and so just in case one of the wandering literati from the East strays off schedule and walks in the door about now, I'm going to start my reading.

(2) I was up home in Seattle, sublimely ignorant of all this — sitting around in my own head, working on another book as usual — until the Chronicle published the results. With considerable help from time & mortality among my fellow authors, lo & behold, I was the only living writer west of the Hudson to end up in the top dozen on <u>both</u> lists. After the first week of this book tour — which is taking me some 30 places, from here to Calgary, and from this beloved coast to that other coast, I can [redacted] say I am still more or less the only living writer on that fortunate Chronicle list.

And it's good to be back here at Black Oak. I don't dare count up how many times I've read here, or I'd owe rent.

And the Cal campus, the Bancroft Library, are old research stomping grounds for at least a couple of my books. I'd be glad to talk more about that, if you'd like during the questions after the reading.

But let's get to that reading, of the characters at the ...

(pick up @ "heart

The plot gets underway when the Millican brothers' father, Oliver – a fairly recent widower – gives up in despair at trying to run the household and his homestead both, and hires, sight unseen, a housekeeper in Minneapolis who has run an ad in the Montana weekly papers saying, Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite.

The prospect of this housekeeper excites the boys, & in this first scene the youngest brother, Toby, can hardly wait to ride to school – these are horseback days, remember – and tell everyone about the housekeeper who's on her way.

(He's bragged first of all to their loyalest friends, who ride to school with them every day, the 3 Provost kids, and now they all reach school that day:)

my own personal
brought book-plates; I can sign & inscribe
- you folks around here, collect your books w/ receipt & paste in bookplate
- out-of-towners, we've arranged with my hometown bookstore in Seattle for free mailing of ~~any books~~ Whistling Season or any other of my books - and of course for any of Percival Everett's and David Laskin's as well ~~& we'll even make you a deal on Whistling Season. At least Amazon can't.~~

So during the booksigning, any of you out-of-towners who can't patronize the fine bookstore here, ~~we~~ we have slips telling you how to do this — just see me or my business-like wife, Carol, to get one.

Whistling Season short reading intro

I've always thought that asking a writer to get up on a stage and talk is like asking a guy who sits around whistling to himself all the time to jump up on the bandstand and do a guitar solo. It's not clear the qualifications transfer.

We're under a double whammy here today, because when the Humanities Council people asked me to lead this off by reading a short sample of what I'm working on now, I said Sure... I guess so...why not?--and then realized the title of this latest piece of writing is **The Whistling Season**.

Well, as Louie Armstrong said about jazz, "We all go do-re-mi, but you got to find the rest of the notes for yourself"--and so, for a few minutes, here's my little solo.

The Whistling Season is fiction, the magical genre where writers can get away with a lot. The novelist's job description is something like, telling truths by making stuff up. A brief bit of background about this novel: it takes place mostly in 1910 and 1957, a set of cosmic parentheses of time that quickly becomes clear in the book but needs a bit of explaining here. Something startling appears in the sky in each of those years: in 1910, it is Halley's Comet, bright as the North Star but with its immense veil

of luminous cloud trailing behind it across half the sky. Halley's Comet appears regularly every seventy-five years--it was last here in 1986--some of you will see it around 2061. I probably won't.

The thing in the sky in 1957, when the book is told from, is Sputnik, the Russian satellite, the first satellite ever launched from Earth. The voice of the book, the narrator, is that of Paul Milliron, and here in this scene--in 1910--he's a seventh-grader in a one-room school, over in Montana, and somewhat brighter than he knows what to do with. Pretty much bored with school, Paul perks up--a little apprehensively--when a new teacher arrives into the school year. Paul knows this stranger--in his mind he calls

him by his first name, Morrie--just well enough to be worried about how this is going to go, in that classroom with three dozen students scattered through eight grades. Morrie is rather elegant and citified and as Paul puts it, "an extraordinary amount of him was mustache. It was one of those maximum ones such as I had seen in pictures of Rudyard Kipling, a soup strainer and a lady-tickler and a fashion show, all in one." Morrie is also capable of going off on flights of thought that would just about challenge Halley's Comet or Sputnik.

In this scene Morrie, first thing on his first day of teaching, is calling the roll to learn students' names, and it has not gone

smoothly. A nervous fifth-grader has burst out in a stupendous nosebleed. A mischievous sixth-grade girl named Barbara has announced that she wants to take this opportunity, with the new roll call, to change her name to Rabrab. Reversals are piling up against this rookie teacher, obviously, but Morrie has persevered until there's just one grade to go, in the roll call. But, as Paul tells us, it's the dreaded eighth grade.

One of the very first reviews likened it to Chas Dickens & Laura Ingalls Wilder--in the same sentence. (I of course await being mentioned in the same breath with JK Rowling & Harry Potter.) But if there is any visiting spirit it is likely Mark Twain, and he traveled the heavens to do it. Halley's) My narrator, PM, is a bright kid on a ~~xxxxxxx~~ homestead, hopelessly in love with words and books.

The toughest question a writer gets is, What's the book about? What do you suppose Tolstoy answered when asked that abt War & Peace?) One thing is voice, the sound of the tale-teller on the page when the ~~xxx~~ novel has a narrator, as this one does.