## Loveland



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. So, it was back there as I subversively hoped for my elder to make a rare bad guess and hire some

P. 12 oaward to Edmonds speech breezy faker whose team of horses would run away with him the instant he climbed onto the hay rake, rather than signing up a solid silent was back there.

workman probably named Swede, that I developed an abiding interest in the trait called character and its even more seductive flowering into a plural form, characters.

I shall always envy the advantages of imagination-stretching that my dad had by operating there in beerstool reality. There was the time he could not resist hiring a guy known as Raw Bacon Slim, the kind of name which no editor will ever let me invent for one of my fictional beings. Nonetheless, the realm of each novel I attempt has to be populated from somewhere. By rough count, I figure I've now employed more than 400 characters in eight works of fiction. I grant that there are

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scenes in War and Peace and Moby Dick where there seems to be a cast that size occupying a single page--and that doesn't count the armies and the whales--but my bunch have been sorting themselves out, down through their generations and across landscapes from New Zealand to Sitka to Harlem, as steadily as I've been able to foreman them for the past quarter century. Fathering and for that matter mothering entire populations of books probably is beyond reasonable explanation even for someone who earns a living by making everything up. But now that I am in the novel-making process for the ninth time--on a World War Two novel which demands, yes, an army of characters--in my case I can delineate that I begin by handing out names, noises, and noses.

First, names. Or as I go about it, first names before last, way before.

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What to call each of them, the sudden new citizens who need passports onto my pages? The literary slate is not permissively blank. "Ishmael" of course is taken; "Emma" the shared property of the longestablished firm of Austen and Flaubert; and so on up to the perils of trespassing into the spooky Kingdom of "Carrie." The mouth magic, though, that gives each of us identification to the rest of humankind constantly flourishes and renews there in the alphabetic combinations we are forever tinkering with, in the inexhaustible prop shop called language. And so, to an extent that seems to startle academic questioners, my characters' names tend to be determined more by linguistic chimings than, say, mythological implications or the nearest phone book.

QUICK

"America. Montana. Those words with their ends open." Thus mused my narrator, Angus McCaskill, in Dancing at the Rascal Fair as he and a lifelong chum set forth from Scotland in 1889 to take up homesteads in the American West. Not accidentally, the same aspirant vowel of promise, hope, boundless prospect, characterizes the romantic prospects whom Angus and other yearning hearts meet up with in that book and its successors in the Two Medicine trilogy: Anna, Marcella, Leona, Lexa, and to add a slightly chestier note of unconformity, Mariah with an aitch. The men of these women's lives tend to come with conclusive consonants: Isaac, Jick, Alec, Mitch, and another round of unconformity, Riley.

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Naturally, generational attention must be paid in this naming game. The lovestruck young couple I married off beside the splashy waterfall in the lobby of the Holiday Inn in Billings, in the course of the 1989 doings of **Ride With Me, Mariah Montana**, had to be Darcy and Jason--not, say, Anna and Isaac.

Except for Jick McCaskill, who narrates two of those novels and fairly cheerfully accepts having been "dubbed for the off card...the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps," nicknames are a spice cabinet in my fiction rather than a raw-bacon larder. Mostly I sprinkle them on minor characters. Good Help Hebner, whom you may bet isn't. Birdie Hinch, reputed chicken thief. But who knows, there may yet be a further story in a Borgesian fact observed while hanging around my

dad's hayhands: that in a crew of eight to ten men, two or three are likely to have the same first name and nicknames therefore become primary.

Waiting somewhere is that Double W ranch crew I long ago created in English Creek which boasts Mike the Mower, Long Mike, and Plain Mike...

// So, name affixed, what noise in the world must a character make to not only stand up over time but continue to march, cavort, and sing rowdily in the reader's mind? Which is to say, what is the voice, the characteristic sound or memorable mannerism, of the person talking on the page?

Please meet, as I did on a stroll of my imagination, Oliver Milliron, widower father of three in **The Whistling Season**. All I knew of him,

back then, was what my narrator tells me on the second page of manuscript: "Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first." That's a start, though, in giving readers something to remember Oliver by.

Occasionally all the organ stops can be pulled out: the aforementioned Good Help Hebner has a braying way of speaking that "would blow a crowbar out of your hand." But generally small auditory touches count most effectively toward larger character dimension, I believe. Perhaps a word that a character owns, unobtrusively but consistently, throughout the story. Monty Rathbun in Prairie Nocturne still says "piana," bunkhouse style, when he is standing next to the swank instrument in Carnegie Hall. And to all practitioners of fiction,

whistling ned-Damon-"Mall" there is forever the example of that first draft of A Christmas Carol in which Scrooge scoffs at the holiday with a mere "Humbug!" and then Charles Dickens reconsiders and dabs on the single-syllable bit of voice polish that has kept his crotchety naysayer alive and unforgettable for 160 years, "Bah!"

appearance perhaps presents the melody line. As the example of Oliver indicates, problematic as they are for the novelist who has already reached into that bin of characteristics for several books' worth, things such as noses have to be faced. Also eyes, ears, hairline, the whole physiognomy, and beyond that, lo, the soul.

Sheer economy is sometimes best. In **Typhoon**, all we ever know or need to know about the waiting wife of the magnificently phlegmatic sea skipper MacWhirr is when Joseph Conrad tells us: "The only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good."

Conversely, in **The All of It**, Jeannette Haien's compact marvel of storytelling, the fullness of description is glorious:

"Kevin: with his straight, light, soft hair (the merest breeze would randomly part it); his blue eyes that tended easily to water over; the mould of his features expressive more of determination than of intelligence; his nimble-jointed body (he could go up a ladder and come down it with a crazy ease that drew smiles)..." That's only half of the

descriptive paragraph, but already you feel you've known this loosemade Irish farmer for, well, half your life.

Call me analog, but I believe memorable fictional creation is usually best served by physical magnitudes rather than minimalist digits of dis and data. Archival photos, turns of phrase that simply pop to mind ("slim as a clarinet" characterizes one of my Harlem characters in Prairie Nocturne), revelatory glimpses across a room--the supply of characteristics leading toward character is as broad as a writer's experience and as deep as he cares to delve. Of course, some rules or at least strictures of common sense apply. I never use my friends as models for my fictional people; and relatives, I say, are best saved for memoirs. Nor, except in minor roles, do I employ actual historical

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## LANDSEEKERS

quarter of a million people, many of them snapping up that bet with the government, homesteading tooth and nail. The record of homestead entries, that start of paperwork such as my g den looked like land hunger on steroids: in 1905 entyfive hundred homestead claims entered in tl year 1910 there were twenty-two thousand--and iring in until 1919. The state's population tripled in eighteen years--1 know you're used to population explosion here along the Front, but three people wherever there had been only one, less than a generation before? The Montana phenomenon must have had the fretful guru of overpopulation, Thomas Malthus, vibrating in his grave.

All in all, the 2000 census counted 402 counties, in the states west of the Mississippi River, with six people or fewer per square mile.

them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, when I was born. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for sixty years or more--yet it perseveres in me--as my family's first step on the ladder called America. That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettoes did for city America--provided landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else -- that particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of

thousands of others in the West, have given me impetus for much of my writing.

To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other empty homesteads where families hung their names on the wind of time.

Well, where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill from that homestead where he was born, to a ranch where my newly-married parents in the 1930s began their years as the western equivalent of sharecroppers--we even called the arrangement by which my father would take charge of a herd of cattle or a band of sheep

To me, that flood of people onto western acres, in the years just before and during World War One, is a great overlooked frontier. It doesn't fit readily with our other western sagas--the gold rushes, the Santa Fe Trail, the Oregon Trail, the spike-by-spike drama of the building of the transcontinental railroads--because it is a twentieth century story. Yet I believe it qualifies as the last great American frontier, because the restless settlement pattern it brought hasn't ended yet.

"Frontier" is a word that for some time now has fallen out of favor with my western historian friends, focused as they rightly are on the long processes that have made the American West what it is. But in some seminar room long ago, I made an internal veer from any kind of a future as a historian to a way of life as a word wrangler, and "frontier" is not

professionally off-limits to me. In the case of the great homestead boom, I very much subscribe to the geographer Isaiah Bowman's definition of frontier:

"It is one of the outstanding characteristics of a frontier or pioneering people that they live a life of experiment. Instead of doing the same thing in much the same way from year to year and stabilizing its life to correspond with a settled agricultural practice, the frontier community is in a state of unsettlement. With unending change in strongly accented climatic and economic conditions an entire region may not be able to cease experimentation. The pioneering type of life then becomes not a stage of development but an ultimate result."

To me, this fits the situation that we all know of in the West that's east of here--the American mid-section that has been <u>un</u>settling itself with every census; the emptying-out farms and small towns of eastern Montana and the Dakotas and Nebraska and Kansas and, I dare say, you may know some of that exodus here on the plains of your own state. That frontier of "unending change" that Bowman talks about is thus one of the hallmarks of the great homestead boom.

Certainly change of that sort, unforeseen as it was unending, was the case for my land-taking Doig forebears. My grandfather's land claim, in the Big Belt mountains of south-central Montana, is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that homestead--the last of