

Victoria ^{replace in Morris's 1st day...}, Nov. 13 '06¹

My wife Carol and I want to say a big thanks to Bolen's bookstore and Raincoast publishing company for bringing us up here for tonight's event, and giving us the honor of sharing the evening with David.

And in that spirit, in the section of my novel that I'm going to read I'd like to take you back to a country we all share, 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

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 the great

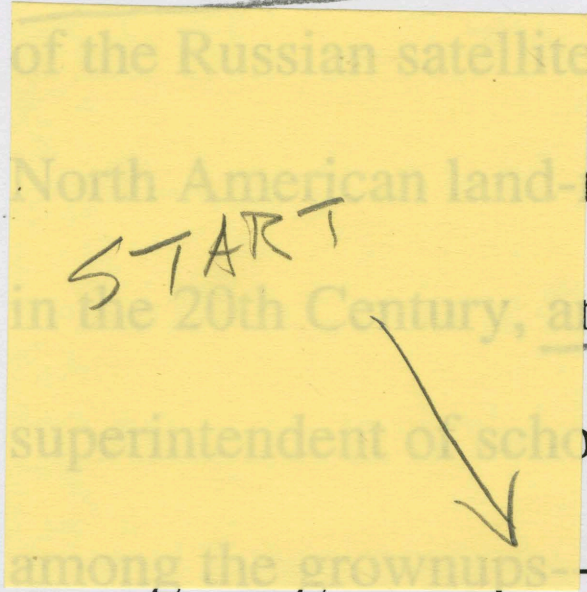
North American land-rush that was the homesteading boom early

in the 20th Century, and wily political maneuvering by a

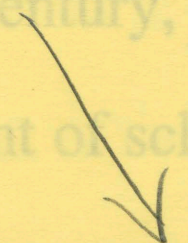
superintendent of schools, and affairs of the heart and wallet

among the grownups—tonight, I simply want you to meet the

characters at the heart of this book, **The Whistling Season.**



START



7.4 follows

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 is to 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 [there in the north-central part of the state]. The voice of this book, Paul Milliron, is a bright seventh-grader at Marias Coulee school, hopelessly in love with words and books. What he decidedly is not in love with is the

student who sits nearest--⁵a circumstance some of you former children might recognize. Here, briefly, is Paul's situation with his classmate, Carnelia Craig:

“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 the scene I'm going to read 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 ~~him~~ 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!"

The plot gets underway when the Milliron boys' 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

Montana weekly papers advertising her skills, under the headline
Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite.

When she arrives, Rose Llewellynn 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."

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? Here is Morrie's first day of school.

Whistling Season reading (Morrie's first day of school)

PACE

“Good morning, young scholars.”

Three dozen sets of schoolchild ears took a considerable moment to adjust to that form of address. Until then, our day was always started with Miss Trent's all-purpose, “Children, hush.”

After a ticktock of contemplating the unexpected new source of articulation at the front of the classroom, all of Marias Coulee school raggedly chorused back to Morris Morgan:

“Good morning, teacher.”

Morrie gave a bit of a bow, his crisp white shirt so maximally washed and starched and ironed ~~by Rose~~ that I thought I could hear it crackle. Not that I dared hope it counted for much, but at least the school had gained sartorially in the swap of baggy Miss Trent-~~Sister Jubal now?~~ for this exemplar of tailoring. Morrie stood before us like an emissary from those farthest places in our books, where prime ministers attired themselves in tweed and vest and a tie as prominent as a chin napkin. Topped off in this case with the imperial mustache, of course.

While I sat there fidgeting, the collective gaze of the schoolroom rested solidly on the figure at the front of the room.

In it, I know from experience at both ends of a classroom, were measures of doubt, awe, trepidation, hope, something approaching dread and something approximating adoration--the ingredients of every first sighting of a teacher by those whose fate it is to sit and be taught. Morrie fingered a piece of chalk as he gazed back at the legion of us. My case of the fidgets grew worse. ~~Hours on the woodpile instructed me about~~ *BY THEN I KNEW* a good many of his mannerisms, and I could tell he was rubbing up one of his gigantic thoughts, genie-in-the-lamp style, from that chalk.

But whatever it was, Morrie managed to stow it for the time being. "The day's first lesson," he sent the hearts of Marias

Coulee school down and just as swiftly up, “is for me, to learn your names.” He whirled to the blackboard as gracefully as if ice-skating. “In exchange, here is mine.” My pride in my penmanship leaked away with every swiftly stroked letter of his name; he wrote an exquisite hand, worthy of copperplate.

QUICK “So.” Quick as the word, he turned to us again. “If you will please stand one by one and announce yourselves, I can acquaint names with faces. Let’s start here with this handsome fellow at the end at the front row.”

Shy with this mighty honor, Josef Kratka barely managed to find the floor with his feet and blurt his name. The other first-

graders wobbled up one after another, as little different from one another as ducklings. Then the second grade, where differentiation took hold. Inez Pronovost popped to her feet like a girl cadet, but Sigrid Peterson barely surfaced to deliver her accented syllables. Hot-eyed Emil Kratka rapped out his name as if challenging anyone to deny it. There was the faintest ghost of a smile on Morrie as Toby reared up and enthusiastically identified himself.

“Sally Emrich, teacher sir,” the school’s leading fussbudget led off primly for the third grade. Maybe this first schoolday

⁶
under the unlikely generalship of Morrie was marching in place,
but even I had to admit it had not fallen on its face yet....

Without incident Morrie's call of the roll reached Damon's grade, the populous sixth. First up was the bashful girl in front of me who had a certain corner of all our hearts because her long and lonely ride to school, FIVE MILES. She gave a shy little curtsy and said:

"Wiwian Willard."

Morrie's forefinger paused in its journey through the Marias Coulee enrollment register. He tapped the paper tentatively as if to encourage its help on this.

"Lillian, I'm sorry but I don't seem to have you on the roll."

“Wiwian,” she said again.

“Miriam?” Morrie tried again.

A guffaw erupted from the back of the room, the den of eighth-grade boys. Morrie peered back there in interested fashion. “A volunteer, full of gaiety. Just the kind of messenger the gods like to send when enlightenment is required.” He singled out the author of the gusty laugh, Milo Stoyanov, with a stare as level as a pointer. “Well? Enlighten me.”

Caught off-guard, Milo looked right, looked left, then gulped out: “Vivian’s her name.”

With that clue, Morrie managed to spy Villard, Viv^{IAN} on his list.

“Ah.” He gave her a gesture of apology. “*Mea culpa*, Vivian, not *youa culpa*.” Everyone in the schoolroom except Damon and Toby and I blinked.

Catching a second wind, Morrie briskly elicited names from Isidor Pronovost and Miles Calhoun. / Then Barbara Rellis / sprang up and identified herself in her cheeky tone of voice. Every male in the room over the age of nine knew she was going to go out in the world and break hearts. Morrie nodded in satisfaction after finding her on the list, but ^{SHE} ~~Barbara~~ stayed standing.

“Teacher? May I please trade my first name in for another one? Just for school.”

All who knew Barbara could have told him it was not a wise move, but Morrie asked speculatively: “And what would that be?”

“Rabrab.”

I saw Morrie brace for a gale of laughter from the rest of us, but none came.

We were all as intrigued as he was. In the expectant silence, Morrie made a try at formulating:

“Technically, Barbara--to address you in the customary manner, for the moment--what you are requesting seems to be an

* antonymous nickname. If I am not mistaken, 'Rabrab' constitutes your given name, at least a majority of it, backwards. Why would you prefer that?"

"Boys get to be contrary warriors their way," she said with a devilish innocence I could have throttled her for. "I figured I could at least do it with my name."

My face felt red enough to ignite. Her usual elbow-length away from me, Carnelia Craig snickered to herself.

Morrie managed to quell the outburst of debate--whether she was Barbara or Rabrab, half the school instantaneously backed her

* an antonym is a word with a sense opposite that of another word: light and dark

all the English majors here know

and the other half reflexively rallied to the opposing view--and
DECIDED TO
 take the matter under advisement.

“Names are mighty things,” he intoned, folding his arms on his chest in what I recognized as his deep-thinking mode. “They may carry the essence of our person, particularly if incised, which is to say nicked, with an apt bit of elaboration. Think of Richard the Lion-Hearted. The Divine Sarah Bernhardt. The Real McCoy,” [his gaze just above Damon’s head for that one.] “We mustn’t take lightly what the world knows us by, and I commend Miss Rellis for the imagination to seek something she finds more fitting. But there is also the matter of official record,” he tapped

(a prizefighter of the time, distinct from any phony McCoys)

the roll call list again, "community custom, and need I say, parents."

With that word, ^A ~~the~~ conspiratorial air ^{DESCENDED ON} ~~that had preceded the~~ wrong end to race returned to ^{SCHOOL} the room. In the hush, every one of us watched Morrie intently as he deliberated. "I need to know if there is a foundation of precedent upon which 'Rabrab' might be installed. Does anyone else go by a nickname, just here at school?"

"Me." Miles Calhoun raised his hand as high as it would go.

Morrie stared at him in consternation. "Miles, I am as certain as anything that you just now informed me that your name is-- Miles."

"That's what everybody calls me. That's what I go by. But my name's Hector and that's what I get all the time at home."

"Then why--" From the corner of his eye Morrie caught my infinitesimal shake of my head. A trackless bog lay ahead of him in the fact that Hector was dubbed Miles by the schoolyard at large because of his ^{INCESSANT} habit of saying *by a mile*, as in ~~Is two against one fair, by a mile?~~ and "I don't believe a word you say, *by a mile.*"

Pulling back just in time, Morrie returned to the issue at hand.

With a Solomonic flair that impressed even those who did not want Barbara to get away with anything, he rendered his decision:

“If you can sufficiently convince your fellow young scholars,
Rabrab it can be, until different notification.”

Peering once more into the ranks of the sixth grade, Morrie looked relieved at the prospect of getting the roll call back on track with Damon. I knew better. Damon had given me a wicked wink during Barbara's--Rabrab's--mischief and I could about hear what was coming, / some wisecrack about reversing his name to

→
Nomad. / But before he got to pull this off, he happened to turn in
the direction of his deskmate as he started to stand up.

→
“Gaahhh! She’s bleeding to death again!”

Damon’s yelp would have raised the hair on the dead. For all
his fascination with gruesome fates of sports heroes, he shared
~~Father’s queasiness~~ ^(WAS QUEASY) around actual blood. And there beside him sat
Marta Johannson, perfectly calm, with a red rivulet running out of
each nostril and darkening her upper lip. Marias Coulee school
had probably more than its share of nosebleeds, usually brought
on by fists, but this spontaneous one of Marta’s was judged
sensational. As Damon tried to scramble away from her, Grover

Stinson leaned across to see past him, adjusting his spectacles for

a better look. The Drobny sisters, Seraphina and Eva, smiled at

Marta's plight like a pair of drawn stilettos. Several sets of feet

RABRAB ANNOUNCED,
drummed on the floor excitedly. "I think I'm going to throw up."

~~Rabrab announced.~~ "You do and I'll hit you one," Eddie Turley

pledged. Milo let out another room-shaking guffaw.

"Everyone! Quiet, a moment."

Speeding down the aisle toward Marta, Morrie glanced to the seventh grade for interpretation as he passed.

"She gets these," Carnelia and I said together in veteran fashion.

FAST
PACE

Morrie slid down onto one knee in front of Marta, working fast. He tore a strip of tablet paper and rolled it into a tight little ball. "Push this up under your lip and hold it there, that's the way." With Marta staunching the flow, he professionally dabbed away the bloody residue with a dampened handkerchief. It was all over in record time.

Breathing a little hard, Morrie walked back to the front of the room and resolutely picked up the roll call list again. I began to wonder if he was going to get us to first period, arithmetic, before the end of his initial teaching day.

The remainder of the sixth grade, perhaps impressed with Morrie's capability around blood, reeled off names without event. Carnelia and I, the total seventh ^{GRADE}, accounted for ourselves in no time. This left the eighth grade, that logjam of big boys. Carl Johannson and Milo Stoyanov had both needed to repeat a grade along the way, and Eddie Turley meanwhile had flunked two. There was a rim of fuzz on the upper lip of each of them, as if they were starting to grow moss from all their years trapped in the schoolroom. Martin Myrdal and Verl Fletcher merely were mansize ahead of schedule, and markedly brighter than the others, but their renegade moods of growing up were such that you had to

watch your step around them, too. I had the impression that even Carnelia was taking an interest in how our new teacher would fare with this bunch. Permanently mad at each other though we were, she and I shared unspoken relief that we did not have to go through life amid the galoots of grade eight.

Morrie did not appear perturbed as one after another of them unfolded out of the desks that were too small for them and muttered a name. He did pause a barest moment when the roll call reached Eddie Turley. Just sitting there, Eddie looked like a menace to society. He took his time about getting onto his feet

and made a face at the whole process, to show he had no problem with sneering at the new teacher.

But beginner's luck was with Morrie. When Eddie lurched back down, the last student of all happened to be Verl Fletcher. Before Verl could reclaim his seat, Morrie popped him a question:

"Verl, I must ask--do you happen to know the derivation of your distinguished family name?"

"Nope."

→!

"No? Allow me then to tell you what a vital profession it was, that of a 'fletcher,' one who 'fletched.'"

PAGE
 I was the one person in the schoolroom who had ever
 witnessed Morrie soar off into full trapeze flight this way. The
 whole student body, however, instinctively understood that our
 new teacher had to catch onto something up there or fall far.

Already Verl was looking uneasy with a family tree of ones who
fledged.

Morrie advanced on the lanky eight^A-grader unfazed. "You
 see, Verl, in days of old a fletcher was an arrowsmith, a maker of
arrows. Knights of the Round Table, huntsmen, Robin Hood,
 they all depended on the skill of the fletcher to make that arrow
 straight and true." Snatching up the yardstick that Miss Trent

used to whap on the blackboard to get our full attention, Morrie
pantomimed an archer drawing back the arrow to let fly. “We
take the measure, so to speak, of those long-ago fletchers every
day of our lives. Verl, what do you notice about the length of this
‘arrow’?” Morrie patiently held his archery pose WITH THE YARDSTICK.

“It’s a yard?” Verl hazarded.

“Exactly! And that is where we get that unit of measure from.

The cloth needed for a bowman’s coat had to be as wide as that
arrow was long, didn’t it. Watch!” Morrie whipped off his

suitcoat, turned it upside down, held one corner up by his ear

where the feathered end of the arrow would have been, thrust out

his arm in drawn-bow fashion again with the other corner of the
coattail in his fingers, and there it was, the yardlong length of
cloth. Everyone in the room had seen their mothers or the clerk at
the Westwater mercantile measure from a bolt of cloth that way,
and now we knew why. Several of the girls who sewed, Carnelia
among them, verified Morrie's domestic insight with testing
motions of their shoulders. Toby and the others in the lower
grades were examining their arrow arms with new respect. Verl
looked somewhat dazed but newly knighted along with it.

FLETCHER

Putting his coat back on and adjusting his cuffs, Morrie
headed toward the more usual teacherly territory at the front of the

room. "You may sit down, Verl, thank you very much. That
 excursion into times past whence measurements come from brings
 us, I believe, to arithmetic period."

Roberta! where, in case
 from...
 a box of hands!
 - how many hair rods, etc?
 " " w/ n' head
 history in family?
 - how many w/ some part
~~history~~ background?
 needles, etc
 & etc