

Montana Book Festival reading intro

PACE Years back, when I was only a few books into this imprecise career path of being a wandering word minstrel from this state who kept on wandering, one the many, many Montanans who helped me out with the research I needed for my writing was an unlikely friend named Stan Davison. Stan taught western history at the college in Dillon practically forever, and in person he could have given Garrison Keillor's Norwegian bachelor farmers lessons in the bashful single life--in ^{HIS} retirement when I met him, he was still living with his mother.

What an example of Montana grit it was, then, the day he spotted Carol and me in pursuit of something in a library out here, came over and fumbled off his Dillon John Deere dealership tractor cap in deference to Carol, and said if I ever wanted any help on Montana history, he'd be glad to pitch in.

He did so, very fruitfully for me, and when I sent him a copy of **English Creek** in thanks for the spots of research he'd contributed, back came a note saying simply:

"A gift is not/less/appreciated just because it is undeserved."

Tonight, here, I truly grasp those words. What an unforeseen and un-earnable gift it has been for Carol and me to have nearly

three decades of Missoula friendship and good times with Lois Welch
/ and blessed Jim, and with Bill and Annick. SMITH
KITTREDGE

Now I had better try to at least earn my keep with the Festival,
by doing some reading. **The Whistling Season** centers on 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, of a rural
neighborhood of dry-land homesteads in a locale I've named
Marias Coulee--if it existed, it would be up there between Cut
Bank and Valier. The voice of this book, Paul Milliron, is a

bright seventh-grader at Marias ⁴Coulee school, but narrating from later in life. He has a 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."

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 the stipulation that housekeeping in Montana can include milking the cow, so they're liberated 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:

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"Across the crisp grass of autumn Toby and Damon and I spurred our horses with a verve we hadn't had since before Mother left our lives. Great gains came seldom, in our experience, but we could already count ours up since Rose's arousing knock on the door a mere hour ago....

But that afternoon at recess, I slugged Eddie Turley."

As is said elsewhere in the book, just sitting at his desk the big eighth-grader Eddie Turley looked like a menace to society. Paul gets in the one punch on him--and earns everlasting schoolyard fame as One-Punch Milliron--and Damon holds ^{PAUL} ~~him~~ back from

→ further misadventure while ~~other~~ boys hold back his astounded and enraged opponent. PAUL AGAIN:

“My immediate adversary now was not Eddie Turley but my brother. In the strictest sense, Damon and I saw eye to eye. He had caught up to me in height, validating--in his own mind, at least--his passion for every kind of sports over my bookishness. Now he had me in a lasso-like armhold across my chest, and if I hadn't been so mad, it should have occurred to me what I was in for from Eddie if even Damon could so easily handle me. Our faces nearly touched as we traded savage whispers.

“Have you gone crazy? He's too much for you.”

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“I don’t care. I’m through taking it about the housekeeper.”

”What’d he say?”

“He asked me if she fed us from her tit for breakfast.”

“Why didn’t you hit him harder?”

“Thanks all to hell, Damon.”

Damon takes over, tells Paul he knows how to get Eddie off
the notion of beating the jelly out of him, and struts off to parley
with the other side:

“Eddie was staring blue murder at me and for that matter **AT**
Damon. He had the right pedigree for it. Ambrose Turley hunted
wolves and coyotes for a livelihood, and he and Eddie lived not

much better than beasts themselves in a ramshackle place on the Marias River bottomland. People went out of their way to leave Brose Turley alone as he scavenged the countryside setting traps and collecting pelts. His nearly man-size son looked perfectly capable of collecting mine."

Damon points out that Eddie is so much bigger than Paul that a fistfight wouldn't be fair, but Paul will be more than happy to take him on in another way.

INTENSE "Paul will race you. Horseback."

Eddie sneered. "That the best you can do? Any sissy can sit on a horse."

Damon had him where he wanted him. With a wicked grin he specified: "Wrong end to."

Which one of us had come up with riding backward in the saddle in our constant races with each other I can't really prove, but my money would be on Damon. It broke the monotony of the ride to and from school. For a few years there, in good weather my gamesman brother and I pretty much rode daily doubles against each other. Whoever lost in the first gallop only had to say "Wrong end to, this time" and off we shot again, crazy jockeys clinging atop the horse's hindquarters. Now that the bulk

of age is on me, I can barely imagine ever being that nimble in the saddle--shucking out of the stirrups, scooting up and around on the seat of our pants, and ending up reseated as if we were going one direction and the horse the other--or that my roan Joker or Damon's pinto Paint put up with it. We didn't race wrong-end-to as much after Toby started going to school with us, as he didn't need any encouragement in the direction of breaking his neck. But every so often, when the three of us would reach the stretch of the road to school that couldn't be seen from any house, one or the other could not resist flinging the challenge, and the Milliron cavalry would be flying down the road, back pockets first...."

PACE

Damon sets the race--naturally, the whole schoolyard had to be in on it--for Friday after school. And now, Friday has come:

Whistling Season reading (the ¹ race)

FACE "Meet you at The Cut."

That was the watchword, when all of us piled out of the schoolhouse at the end of that interminable day and sprinted to our saddled horses.

The usual homeward group of us and the Pronovosts ^{KIDS}, with the various Drobnys and Stinsons and Miles Calhoun trying to look innocently tacked on, traveled at a just fast enough clip to get ourselves out of sight before parents started looking out of windows. We didn't want to wear out my horse. Joker kept

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flicking his ears at all the patting and rubbing of his mane by so many strangers.

We came down the gradient from the higher ground at the same time as the Turley bunch galloped in from the north gulch they had circled around to. SMUG "The suckers," Damon said to me, confident enough for both of us.

He had to be, because I wasn't so sure. I remember my heart beating at what felt like twice its normal rate, while the last few preparations for the race seemed to take forever. The excited babble of the gathering--Toby was letting loose everything he'd had to save up all day in school--reached me only dimly. We

needed to kill time while the rest of the kids filtered in, and as
they gradually popped into sight from every direction, I stared at
that waiting stretch of road as though Joker's hoofprints and my
shifting shadow had not gone back and forth over it every day of
the past seven school years....

SLOW

The gumbo hill up from our place breaks off into an eroded claybank area, where the road runs flat and straight for about half a mile before climbing again to the bench country. This was The Cut, it was the ground I had known as long as anything in my life, and its bare beaten dirt looked as foreign and forbidding to me at that suspended moment in time as the Sahara.

Finally the Kratka brothers, the last of us and with the most roundabout route to sneak past nosy parents, came spurring madly

in from the river end of the coulee, and Damon got things

QUICK
underway. "We have to make it fast, before somebody comes along. Martin?" he asked Eddie's main adherent. "Is Eddie ready to eat dust?"

For answer, Eddie stomped up to the starting line leading his snorty high-shouldered mount. That horse looked like it could step over the top of Joker and me. The terrible taste of doubt nearly did me in. I must admit, I was within the tip of my tongue of saying uncle, of finding some wild excuse to forfeit the race. But that would doom me at school even worse than losing to Eddie. And the dreams that would beset me--

I gave Joker a last pat and led him out onto the road beside
Eddie's big steel-gray ^{HORSE}

There we stood, at the line scratched in the dirt. Eddie always wore one of Brose Turley's old hats that seemed to have been fashioned out of the dried skin of some major beast. I pulled my mail-order Junior Stetson lower over my eyes and tried to concentrate on the road ahead. The race track, to call it that, stretched from the starting line to a single marker, distant and shining, in the middle of the road. Here was where the genius of Damon came in. At his insistence, the course was a loop, to the far end of The Cut and back.

SHAKE
HEAD

“Flat-out, here to there,” Martin Myrdal understandably had
tried to hold out for when the two sides were negotiating the
ground rules. A horse the size of the steel-gray could build a lot
of velocity when simply aimed straight ahead.

Damon was pitiless. “What, Eddie can’t steer that cayuse of
his around any kind of a corner?”

“I’ll race your squirt brother around in circles, if that’s what it
takes,” Eddie blurted, snapping up the bait.

Most of us carried small lard pails as lunch buckets, and
Damon and Martin now had stacked several of those, with a rock
in each for stability, until they made a silver pillar. I understood

why Damon demanded the momentum-breaking marker, but I still fretted about it. Rounding it, if the horses were close together, would be no easy stunt. On the other hand, if the steel-gray was half a dozen horse-lengths ahead of Joker by then, traffic at the marker was going to be the least of my problems, wasn't it.

Damon and Martin stepped forth to hold the bridles of our horses. The more or less neutral eighth-grader Verl Fletcher had been picked to be the race caller.

PACED "Everybody back, give 'em room," he directed, and there was a collective groan of saddle leather as thirty horseback

schoolchildren moved off into the badland cutbanks on either side to spectate.

"Riders up," Verl called.

Eddie was watching me from the corner of his eye and I was doing the same to him. It hit me: he wanted me to be the first to get up there backward in the saddle, so he could see how. I planted myself like a post until Verl said to us, "You gonna ride 'em or walk 'em?"

Eddie lost patience, stuck his other foot than usual into the stirrup and with a mighty grunt heaved himself upward toward his horse's rump, barely clearing the peril of the saddlehorn as he

wishboned over, then felt around behind him like a blind man for the reins Martin was attempting to hand to him. I swung into my saddle the right way, took control of Joker's reins, then shucked the stirrups and scooted around on my fanny so that I too was established in the leather basin of the saddle wrong-end-to. Eddie glared across at me as if I had just shaken a ballet tutu in his face.

Damon, though, rose on tiptoe beside Joker's mane to ecstatically whisper up to me:

"He hasn't practiced! The dope! Can you believe it?"

"Damon, that horse of his doesn't need any practice," I whispered back.

"You worry too much," ¹¹ DAMON ASSURED ME.

"Gonna give you a count of three," Verl let us know.

Those next moments have stayed with me with the clarity of a clockface. My belt buckle brushed against the cantle of the saddle as I leaned in the direction of Joker's flanks. The reins were wrapped double around my right hand, held as far behind me as I could reach so as not to tug on the bit of the bridle differently than Joker was used to.

"One," Verl chanted.

There was not a sound from the entire mounted legion of Marias Coulee school, from either Eddie's adherents or mine.

Clans of centaurs must have watched with similar appraisal when
match races were run in the groves of Peloponnesus.

“Two.”

QUICK Joker's tensed ears were sharpened to a point now, and
probably mine were too.

“Three, SPUR 'EM!”

Eddie was the only one dressed for that, sporting a pair of
silver jinglebobs, sharp as can openers, that likely were everyday
equipment in the Turley family business of encouraging
saddlehorses to run down wolves. The first jab of those spurs
commanded the steel-gray's attention, definitely. But not quite as

Eddie had intended. The big horse hurtled into action shying right and left, fishtailing down the road as it tried to figure out the wishes of the unbalanced rider on its back. Nor was Eddie the master of handling reins behind his back yet. Joker and I managed a perfectly nice orderly start when I pressed my shoe heels against his ribcage and gave the reins the flick he recognized, but it didn't do us any immediate good. Whatever lane of the road we tried, there was a wall of gray horse in our way, one instant the veering rump of the thing, the next practically a sideways view of Eddie as he tried simultaneously to stay upright and to saw his horse's head around to the right

direction with that reversed grip on the reins. Over the hoofbeats and horse snorts I could hear cheering and shouts of equestrian advice from the onlookers up in their vantage points in the badlands, but none of it registered long enough to last. When I wasn't having to keep an eye on Eddie's galloping wrestle with his horse, I was aware only of the road flying at uncommon speed beneath me. It is surprising how near the hard ground seems when there is only a horse's tail between you and it.

Time whirled away like our dust. As well as I could judge ahead over my shoulder, we were about to reach the halfway point of The Cut. By that stage of the race the steel-gray had covered

at least twice as much road as Joker and I, but we were able to catch up to within a length every time it made one of its sideways veers. Apparently that grizzled mass of horseflesh could hurl along like this all day long. ~~I didn't have time to think of it then, but Morrie's point about the preponderate role of momentum in life was unfortunately holding true so far.~~

I collected my wits, at least those that hadn't been shaken out of me by the jolts that come from riding backwards in the saddle. It was time to make the one maneuver I was capable of. Then or never, and maybe it already was too late. Damon had worked this out with me. "Don't let him see how to use the cantle until you

have to," my brother the race promoter had counseled. "Pretty good chance old Eddie won't have brains enough to figure it out for himself first."

So, until right then I had stayed more or less upright in the saddle the same jouncing way Eddie was, both of us loosy-goosy in the seat as we held on to stirrup leather or saddlestrings or whatever we could find to grab in the absence of the usual saddlehorn. Now, though, when Eddie's horse made another of its spooked tangents toward the far side of the road and Joker was able to close the gap just enough, I dropped down lower than any jockey and grabbed the curved back of the saddleframe in a bear

hug with my left arm. I'd be lying if I said the cante was the most appealing thing I ever hugged in my life. But right then it served its purpose. As one or another of us--probably the natural daredevil, Toby--had discovered in our wrong-end-to races, if you bent over far enough the width of the cante steadied the base of your chest, and, swooping up hip-pocket-high on a person sitting the normal way in the saddle, it provided something substantial to hug onto. And this move greatly streamlined matters for the horse. With a crouched-over jockey now atop him, albeit one tucked in not the usual direction, Joker gained some more on the skittering steel-gray.

Eddie had his hands full with just his horse; the concept of affection for his saddle cantle must have been beyond him. Yet there I was, clinging secure as a cockleburr on the back of my horse, while the back of his was like a hurricane deck. Worse, surely, was the realization that Joker was steadily sneaking up every time his hard-to-rein steed careened across the road.

By now we were thundering down on the turn marker, the pillar of pails. The view over my shoulder told me what I already knew, that the road was not wide enough for both horses to make the turn at the same time. Here the advantage went back to Eddie. The way the steel-gray rocketed back and forth across our

course anyway, Eddie only had to make sure the horse kept going a little farther than usual in its next veer in front of Joker and me, then rein it around hard to loop into the turn. All I could do was to keep us from getting run over by the gray, and try to catch up after the turn somehow. Joker was just far enough behind the other horse that I saw the flash of motion as Eddie set to work on shouldering into our way. He did what riders like the Turleys do on brawny hardmouthed horses. He resorted to his spurs ~~to~~ ~~enforce his reining.~~

As Damon and Toby and I could have told him, spurs actually were not the best idea while riding wrong end to. When you think

about it, if your heels are in the vicinity of the horse's shoulders
where your toes usually are, the rowels of your spurs are going to
hit the horse up front there in the withers, aren't they, rather than
where he expects it in the flanks.

Eddie must have jabbed in an off-balance way, too, raking his
horse more sharply on the off-shoulder. The big gray animal
flinched away from Eddie's intended direction and abruptly
angled off the opposite way. Straight into the turn pillar.

There was a tinny thunder as the steel-gray breasted through
the stack of metal, and it rained lunch pails.

Ducking, I let Joker gallop on past where the pails were clattering down, then tugged hard left on the reins. Joker did not manage to make a sharp turn of it, huffing around like a laborious imitation of a cutting horse, but at least we were eventually turned and headed back down the course toward the finish line. That was more than could be said for our opposition.

What an advantage riding backward in the saddle provided at that moment: I had a perfect view of Eddie bouncing away into the badlands as his horse kept going and going. The claybank formations there north of The Cut gradually fell away into a maze of eroded shapes that in a mile or so reached the Marias River.

The runaway steel-gray showed every sign of taking Eddie for a swim.

And Joker raced on, solo, until I checked ahead and saw Verl waving his arms and yelling, "Eddie flubbed the turn! Paul wins!"

Other shouts and hoots and whoops of congratulation filled the air as everyone headed their horses down onto the road for a better look at Eddie's situation. By the time I hauled Joker to a halt and got myself right side around in the saddle, Damon and Toby were beside me, each more giddy than the other over my victory, and we watched together as the steel-gray disappeared behind a

mudstone hump. When it emerged on the other side, the saddle on its back was empty.

None of us were as concerned as we maybe should have been. If wolfpacks could not do the Turleys in, surely they were impervious to the lesser threat of horses and humans, our line of thinking ran. Still, the entire Marias Coulee school body plunged into the badlands in a loose cavalry charge to the aid of Eddie.

Before we could get there he came limping out from behind the mudstone, shirt torn, hat gone, chin a little bloody, scrapes on every patch of skin that we could see.

“This backwards stuff,” he complained as we rode up, “is
harder than it looks.”