Work Song intro

It's a pleasure to be back in this venerable bookstore, where I've appeared for nearly all of my thirteen books. And I'm glad now to have this new novel to add to the famous shelves here, where books are presented in that proper way that classy bookstores know how to do it: Dickens, Doctorow, Doig, Dostoevsky.

As to that book: Work Song has a sizable cast--I don't like for my characters to be lonely there on the page--but according to early indications, two of those likely will stand out to you: Morrie, the
schoolteacher and "walking encyclopedia" from The Whistling Season of a few years ago, and Butte, Montana.

Morrie was quite a hit in The Whistling Season, which, if enough other places are like the enlightened community of Lake Forest Park and make it their community read, will quite possibly become my best-selling book. So, with his golden tongue and quicksilver mind, Morris Morgan has turned out to be such a treasure that I figured it would be a mistake not to welcome him back onto the page, and let him take over the telling of this story.

The town of Butte itself easily qualifies as a character, I think. In its copper heyday--by the turn of the twentieth century it was
providing half of America's copper and a quarter of the entire world's supply--Butte and its "richest hill on earth" were one of a kind; more than just a mining town, it was the largest city of the northern Rockies, straining to be cosmopolitan--Charlie Chaplin and Sarah Bernhardt and Clark Gable all appeared onstage there--meanwhile with ten thousand hard-rock miners working mile-deep mineshafts directly beneath its busy streets, earning some of the best wages in America in some of the most dangerous diggings.

I'm from the other Montana, the one of wide open spaces and communities too small to be called towns, let alone cities--and Butte was known to us, when I was growing up out there in ranch
country, as a place as crazily off the charts as, say, Las Vegas is today. Rough, tough, known for altitude and attitude, full of foreign accents and cosmopolitan vices, the mile-high city dominated by the Anaconda Copper Company—which in turn dominated state politics and owned all of its daily papers but one—helping to send ambitious young wordsmiths like A.B. Guthrie and Norman Maclean and yours truly out of state so we didn’t have to “wear the copper collar” as we pursued careers in journalism and literature—all in all, just the kind of place a novelist is looking for, right?

---although as anyone from there is likely to tell you, "Butte is a mile high and a mile deep, but Butte people are on the level."
But to us, out in the sticks, the place was
Work Song is set in 1919, a time full of trouble—another piece of catnip for a novelist. The period just after World War One was terrifically contentious in America, with labor strife, fear of domestic Bolshevism, and government and Wall Street suppression of dissent. Butte with so many of its miners foreign born and highly motivated in union matters was a crucible of all that. It's a setting where characters hear the big questions of life in their sleep, in the round-the-clock workings of the mines on the famous and infamous hill. on earth
So, I’m going to let Morrie now bring us into Butte with him, for a few minutes, and then read a longer scene of one of his adventures there.

"Everything about Butte made a person look twice. My train journey had brought me across the Montana everyone thinks of, mile upon hypnotic mile of rolling prairie with snowcapped peaks in the distance, and here as sudden and surprising as a lost city of legendary times was a metropolis of nowhere: nearly a hundred thousand people atop the earth’s mineral crown, with nothing else around but the Rocky Mountains and the witnessing sky. The immediate neighborhood on the skirt of land out from the depot,
as my gaze sorted it out, seemed to hold every manner of building from shanty to mansion, church to chicken coop, chop suey joint to mattress factory, all mixed together from one topsy-turvy block to the next. Butte stood taller as the ground rose. In the city center several blocks on up the slope, lofty buildings hovered here and there waiting for others to catch up, and the streets also took on elevation, climbing the blemished hill until workers’ cottages mingled with mines and dump heaps along the top of the namesake butte. Up there, the long-legged black steel frameworks over the mineshafts populated the skyline like a legion of half-done miniatures of Eiffel’s tower.
So, in some ways Butte appeared to me to be the industrial apotheosis of that Athenian model of a city built upon a hill, and in other aspects the copper mining capital of the world showed no more pattern than a gypsy camp. I have to admit, I felt a catch at the heart at how different the whole thing was from the solitary homesteads and one-room school I had known the last time I tried my luck in this direction. Everything I knew how to part with, I left behind in a prairie teacherage in that prior time. But an urge can spin the points of a compass as strongly as the magnetism of ore, and in spite of all that happened back then, here I was in that western territory at the very edge of the map of imagination once
more. While I was busy gazing, a couple of bull-shouldered idlers in the shade of the depot eyed me with too much curiosity; somehow I doubted that they were sizing me up for any family resemblance to J.P. Morgan of Wall Street. With barely a glance their way, I squared my hat and hastened past as though I had an appointment. Which could be construed as the truth of the moment. The Richest Hill on Earth and I--and if my hope was right, its riches--were about to become acquainted.

Morrie quickly finds, though, that Butte is harder to get to know than he had hoped. The old miners at the boarding house where he fetches up clue him on the cat's-cradle of conflicts
between the mainstream miners' union and the more radical Industrial Workers of the World--the IWW, the famous Wobblies—and both of those trying to contend with the Anaconda Company and its goons, and the federal government and the state of Montana weighing in on the Company's side: between 1914 and 1920, Butte was occupied by the National Guard or Army units six times. (Any World War Two bffs might be interested in a sidelight event of that period—in 1918, troops under Major Omar Bradley raided the IWW in a converted church. [St. Paul's, on S. Idaho] Only in Butte, hmm?) Under the influence of the old miners and his landlady who tells him she will not have under her
roof a man who wears the copper collar, Morrie scrap[ed] his notion of getting on as a bookkeeper where the money is--the Anaconda Company--and instead lands a job with the C.R. Peterson Modern Mortuary and Funeral Home. Butte had a lot of funerals. Morrie is hired to represent the funeral home as a cryer at wakes in Dublin Gulch, the Irish neighborhood amid the mine-workings up on the Butte hill. He doesn’t have to actually cry, but a mournful countenance and murmurs of respect about the deceased are expected of him every night.

He runs into a complication at the Irish wakes--it comes in a bottle. Montana often has been a leading edge of ideas good and
bad, and the period around World War One was full of both. In 1914 the state voted for women's suffrage—six years ahead of the national constitutional amendment—and in 1918 elected the first woman to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. At about the same time, though, the state voted itself dry, a couple of years ahead of national Prohibition. The main effect of that was to turn Butte's three hundred saloons into three hundred speakeasies, and to create a booming business in bootlegging. When I was a teenage ranch hand up close to the Canadian border—north of Cut Bank—there was a nearby place called Whiskey Gap. Morrie finds that bootleg Canadian rye whiskey and all the toasts he has to join in
as cryer are starting to pickle his brain cells, and so he vows to hunt for a new job. His method is to resort to the city directory and try to spot any likely business—besides the tyrannical Anaconda Company—that might be susceptible to his bookkeeping talents. We join him at the library:

The place saw itself as self-made, tough, and proud—never short on attitude; as Morrie notices, when people say they’re from Butte, their chin comes up an inch on the word.

Writers endlessly have called Butte in its smoky industrial heyday “the Pittsburgh of the West,” but Morrie and I prefer to dub it “the Constantinople of the Rockies” because it was such a colossal mix of peoples. Hard-rock miners from several nations came seeking
Just then a drove of schoolchildren came pattering through, herded toward the downstairs by their shushing teacher, evidently to a story hour. Second-graders, I judged, that unhushable age when whispering is as natural as breathing. I felt a pang as the class passed through like a murmur in church. The distance of ten years evaporated, and I swear, for some moments I was back at the Marias Coulee one-room school, my staiіstep eight grades there in front of me as intricate and intriguing as a daily circus.

And after school, the mental workout of Latin lessons with the keenest pupil I had, Paul Millman. Sitting there watching this motherly teacher shoo her boys and girls along as
Work Song has turned out to have some enduring characters--I'm working now on a sequel, although there's another separate novel coming first, this fall--The Bartender's Tale, a title I hope Chaucer would approve of--and tonight we'll start with two prime ones: Morrie Morgan, the one-room school teacher and "walking encyclopedia" who made his debut in The Whistling Season a few years ago, and the mining city of Butte, Montana, which itself easily qualifies as a character, I think. In its copper heyday--by the turn of the twentieth century it was providing half of
America's copper and a quarter of the entire world's supply--Butte and its "richest hill on earth" were one of a kind; more than just a mining town, it was the largest city of the northern Rockies, straining to be cosmopolitan--Charlie Chaplin and Sarah Bernhardt and Clark Gable all appeared onstage there--meanwhile with ten thousand hard-rock miners working mile-deep mineshafts directly beneath its busy streets, earning some of the best wages in America in some of the most dangerous diggings.

Morrie arrives there in 1919, a time full of trouble--another piece of catnip for a novelist. The period just after World War One, we know, was terrifically contentious in America, with labor
strife, fear of domestic Bolshevism, and government and Wall Street suppression of dissent. Butte with so many of its miners foreign born and highly motivated in union matters was a crucible of all that. But the story begins with Morrie simply trying to find a job worthy of his sometimes indeterminate talents, and so in this scene he is resorting to the Butte Public Library, a wonderful Gothic towered castle of literature, to try to divine where he might best look for employment.
Work Song reading

There is an old story that any Londoners with a madman in the family would drop him off at the library of the British Museum for the day. I was given a searching look as if I might be the Butte version when I presented myself at the desk of the public library that next morning and requested both the *R.L. Polk & Co. City Directory* and Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* in the original Latin.

The stout woman I took to be the head librarian--she had eyeglasses enchained around her neck commandingly enough for it--scrutinized me some moments more, then marched off into the maze of shelves while I found a seat at a broad oaken table.
Everything was substantial, the brass-banistered stairway up to the mezzanine of books in tall rows, the green-shaded electrical lights hanging down from the high ceiling like watchfobs of the gods. I have always felt at home among books, so when the woman from the desk plopped my requested two in front of me, they seemed like old friends dropping by.

Aware that I should get down to business, I instead drew the *Gallic Wars* to me first, unable to resist. I had ordered it up by habit, as a test. To me, a repository of books is not a library without that volume in the mother of languages. prose that reads like poetry--*Gallia divisa in tres partes* --is
collection of knowledge, a siren call from Roman

Handling the book fondly as I was, I became

aware of its own touch: tanned leather, not the more common
calfskin cover put on for show. I examined the binding: sewn
rather than glued. On the pages, lovely to finger, the sentences
practically rose from the paper in a strong clear Caslon typeface.

What I was holding was an exceptionally fine copy, so much
better than my own that had gone astray with my missing trunk
that I momentarily found myself envious of the Butte Public
Library.
they descended the library stairs a whisper at a time, I envied her job but knew it was too late in the school year for me to even think of such an application. Besides, my credentials were not/standard ones.

Sighing, I patted Caesar and closed him away. Opening the city directory, I began to work my way through the idiom of Polk. There they were as ever, the abbreviated citizens found throughout America, \textit{brklyr, carp, messr, repr et cetera}. The skills of bricklayers, carpenters, messengers and repairers were not my own. Nor on subsequent pages could I see myself employed in feather dying, felt mattress manufacture, or fish
salting. Dutifully I paged on through searching for where ledgers that fit my talents might be found. Butte, I discerned, had a modest number of banks for a city of its size; a plenitude of funeral homes; an uninspiring variety of mercantile enterprises; and one Gibraltar of assets, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. I can't deny, it was tantalizing, that financial colossus which surely needed bookkeepers--of a certain talent to sluice the riches of The Hill into Anaconda coffers.

Temptation had to vie with distraction, however. Something about the Gallic Wars at my elbow kept diverting me. Even when they are closed, some books do not shut up. Why was this
beautifully sewn leather edition, a collector’s item if I had ever seen one, spending its existence on a public shelf in a none too fastidious mining town? Once more I peered at those tiers on the mezzanine, and if I was not severely mistaken, many other handsome volumes sat there beckoning in bindings of royal reds and greens and blues and buffs. Curiosity got the better of me.

Up the stairwell I went.

And found myself in a booklover’s paradise.

As though some printerly version of Midas had browsed through the shelves, priceless editions of Flaubert and Keats and Tolstoy [and Goethe] and Melville and Longfellow and countless
other luminaries mingled on the shelves with more standard library holdings. I could not resist running my fingers along the handsomely bound spines and tooled letters of the titles. What on earth was the matron at the desk thinking, in scattering these treasures out in the open? Yet the more I looked, the more I met up with the complete works of authors, surely deliberately collected and displayed. Mystified, I was stroking the rare vellum of a Jane Austen title when a loud voice made me jump.

“You look like a bookworm on a spree.”

I am of medium height, but when I turned around, I was seeing straight into a white cloud of beard. Considerably above
that, a snowy cowlick brushed against furrows of the forehead. In a suit that had gone out of fashion when the last century did, the man frowning down at me had considerable girth at the waist and narrowed at the chest and shoulders; like the terrain around us, he sloped.

Caught by surprise, I had no idea what to make of this apparition confronting me amid the books. That beard was as full as that of Santa Claus, but there was no twinkle of Christmas nor any other spirit of giving in those glacial blue eyes.

Keeping my own voice low, I responded: "Butte is rich in its library holdings, as I assume we both have discovered?"
“Finest collection west of Chicago. Too bad the town doesn’t have the brains to go with the books,” he drawled at full volume. “Quite a reader, are you? Who do you like?”

 Appropriately or not, my gaze caught on a lovely marbled copy of *Great Expectations*. “Dickens,” I began a whispered confession that could have gone on through legions of names. “There’s a person who could think up characters.”

 “Hah.” My partner in conversation reached farther along in the shelves of fiction. “I’ll stick with Stevenson, myself.” He fondled along the gilt-titled set of volumes from boyish adventure to phantasmagoria of shape-shifting souls. “It takes a Scotchman
to know the sides of life.” Abruptly he swung around, towering over me again, and demanded loudly: “You like Kipling or don’t you?”

I put a thumb up and then down, meanwhile murmuring, “His stories are splendid sleight-of-hand, the poetry is all thumbs.”

“Not short of opinion, are you.” He fixed a look on me as if he had shrewdly caught me at something. “Saw you down there pawing at Caesar. English isn’t good enough for you?”

“Lux ex libris,” I tried to put this absolute stranger in his place, “whatever the language on the page.”
"If light comes from books," he drawled back, "how come Woodrow Wilson isn't brighter than he is?"

That stopped me. Was I really expected to debate the intellect of the President of the United States within hearing of everyone in the building?

Just then a couple of elderly ladies entered the reading room below, still chattering softly from the street. Frowning so hard the beard seemed to bristle, my companion leaned over the mezzanine railing. "Quiet!" he bellowed.

That legendary pairing, madman and library, seemed to be coming true as I watched. All heads now were turned up toward
us, the woman at the desk whipping her eyeglasses on and
glowering in our direction. I envisioned arrest for disturbing the
literary peace, even if I was barely an accomplice. "Perhaps," I
whispered urgently, "we should adjourn to a less public spot, lest
the librarian take steps--"

"Ignoramus, I am the librarian." Straightening himself to new
white height of cowlick, he frowned fiercely down at me. "Do
you genuinely not know who the hell you’re talking to?"

"I remember no introduction," I said coolly.

He waved that off. "Samuel Sandison. Come on into my
office before you cause any more ruckus, I want to talk to you."
I hesitated before following, but the ravishing books were too much of a lure. Edging through the doorway of his overflowing office at the back of the mezzanine, I made sure that the nameplate on the desk matched what he had told me. Sandison sandwiched himself behind the desk and wordlessly pointed me to a book-stacked chair. I cleared away the pile and gingerly sat.

"Mr. Sandison, the books you have here--" I hardly had the words. "They're works of art in every way."

"They ought to be." He stroked his beard, as if petting a cat.

"A good many of them are mine."

"Yours?"
"Hell yes. From the ranch."

"Ah. The ranch. You were a livestock entrepreneur, I take it? Sheep?"

"Cattle." He delivered me a look that made me want to duck.

Well, how was I to know? From the train, Montana expanses appeared to me to be as populous with fleeces as the heavens are with clouds.

Sandison leaned across the mess of his desk as though I might be hard of hearing as well as dim of intellect. "You mean you have never heard of the Triple S ranch?"
“I confess I have not, but I have been in town only a short time.”

“It’s gone now,” he growled. “That’s why I’m here. It was the biggest spread in the state, everybody and his brother knew the SSS brand.”

“Mmm. By ‘brand,’ do you mean the practice of searing a mark onto the animal?”

“That’s what branding is. It’s the Latin and Greek of the prairie.”

That startled me. “Intriguing. And so SSS would translate to-?”
He laughed harshly. "Saddle up, sit tight, and shut up, my riders called it. Most of them stuck with me anyway." An odd glint came to him. "I had an army of them, you know."

"I regret to say, I am not sure enough myself to know the intricacies of reading burnt cable."

"It's not alphabetical, for one thing."

"--excellent word! The brandabeltical concept, then. Do you start with the full lingual entity, in this case /saddle up, sit tight, and shut up/ from there?"
he let out and immediately after that, “but you’re right in a way. SSS stood for Seymour-Stanwood-Sandison. I had to have backers in the ranch operation. Money men.” Those last two words he practically spat. Eyeing me as though I were guilty by association, he drawled: “I saw you with your nose stuck in the directory Polk. I suppose you’re another refined hobo who heard about The Hill and came here to make a killing.”

“A living, I had in mind.”

“Hah. You packing around any education worth the description?”

“The Oxford variety.”
He looked at me skeptically.

"I bootstrapped my way through."

"Another shoeleather philosopher," he grumbled. "The Wobblies were full of them, they must empty out the bughouse into Butte every so often."

"I see my little joke did not catch on. Actually, I did work my way through an institution of higher learning--the University of Chicago."

He tugged at his beard. "In other words," he said as if it might be my epitaph, "all you know anything about comes from books."

I bridled. "That is hardly a fair assessment of--"
“Never mind. You’re hired.”

“You are mistaken, I haven’t even made up my mind where to-- Here?”

“Here is where the books are, ninny.”
Work Song intro

It's a pleasure to be back in this cherished bookstore, where I've appeared for twelve of my thirteen books--Village Books wasn't quite here yet when This House of Sky came out, or I know it would be thirteen out of thirteen. And I'm glad now to have this new novel on the same shelves here in that proper way that classy bookstores know how to do it: Dickens, Doctorow, Doig, Dostoevsky.

As to that book: *Work Song* has a sizable cast--I don't like for my characters to be lonely there on the page--but according to early indications, two of those likely will stand out to you: Morrie, the
Work Song intro

It's a pleasure to be back in the bookstore I've known longest and most fondly, ever since I first stepped in here all those years ago as a graduate student, and began browsing the wonderful shelves and shelves of books. And I'm glad to have a fairly new novel--a couple of weeks old now--on those same shelves in that nice way that classy bookstores know how to do it: Dickens, Doctorow, Doig, Dostoevsky.

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Work Song intro

Rick and I have done this together so many times we wore out one entire bookstore.

It's a pleasure to be in the new home of Elliott Bay, and to see this beloved literary institution surviving and thriving. And I'm glad to have a fairly new novel--twelve days old--shelved here in that nice way that classy bookstores do it: Dickens, Doctorow, Doig, Dostoevsky.

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