

"Ivan Doig has been, from *This House of Sky*, his first grand entry into literature, one of the great American voices, full of grace, abounding in humanity, easeful in narration, hypnotic in pace, grand in range," says his international contemporary Thomas Keneally of Australia, author of *Schindler's List*. Richard Critchfield added in the Washington Post: "Nor is Doig's gift merely literary. Besides his intuitions and artistry there is the iron purpose of an ex-ranchhand who has earned his Ph.D. in history." Born in Montana in 1939, Doig grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front, the dramatic landscape that has inspired much of his writing. His career has been honored with the lifetime "Distinguished Achievement" award by the Western Literature Association, and in the San Francisco Chronicle poll to name the best American West novels and works of non-fiction of the twentieth century, he is the only living writer with books in the top dozen of both lists: *English Creek* in fiction and *This House of Sky* in non-fiction. He and his wife Carol divide their time between their home in Seattle and the places his writing takes him.

Books and awards include:

This House of Sky, 1978; finalist for the National Book Award; Christopher Award; chosen "best book about Montana" in Montana, The Magazine of Western History readers' poll; more than 200,000 copies sold.

Winter Brothers, 1980; Governor's Writers Award; adapted for television by KCTS, Seattle.

The Sea Runners, 1982; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence; chosen as one of "ten best books of the year" by Chicago Sun-Times and "notable books of the year" by the New York Times Book Review.

English Creek, 1984; Western Heritage Award as best novel of the year; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award; read by The Radio Reader on National Public Radio.

Dancing at the Rascal Fair, 1987; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award.

Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, 1990; Library Journal "highly recommended" choice; Christian Science Monitor serialization.

Heart Earth, 1993; \$10,000 Evans Biography Award; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award.

Bucking the Sun, 1996; Governor's Writers Award.

Prairie Nocturne, 2003; adapted for the stage by Book-It Theatre, Feb. 2012.

The Whistling Season, 2006; six printings; Booksense national bestseller list; American Library Association's 2007 Alex Award as one of ten best books for Young Adults; Reader's Digest Condensed Book; Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award; nominated for International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

The Eleventh Man, 2008; Recorded Books audio set

Work Song, 2010; Indie national bestseller list.

Sky guy

"Big Sky Guy" Chicago Sun-Times, July 7 1996

Writer Ivan Doig mines Montana for his evocative historic novels

BY JOHN BARRON
STAFF REPORTER

The novelist Ivan Doig didn't mind the Montana jokes at all.

You'd think a guy who had spent his entire career writing gorgeous and evocative stories set in the territory—including his new novel one, which hit stores as the jokes started—might have taken offense. After all, his beloved home state had become an easy national punchline thanks to the Freeman and the discovery there of the alleged Unabomber.

But Doig offers a surprising take on the matter (after providing disclaimers that the huge state is a whole time zone unto itself and that those events were entirely coincidental): "For a lot of us who are around Montana and know and like the place, this has been a sort of useful corrective to the idea that Montana is the hot place to live . . . the Riviera of the Rocky Mountains."

He's referring, of course, to the stream of "ranching" celebrities, especially from the entertainment industry, who have "colonized" the state over the past decade.

Doig, a Northwestern University alum, imagines with some relish "the poignant possible scene of people like Ted Turner and Whoopi Goldberg and Jeff Bridges having to wonder whether their stablehands are members of the Montana militia."

The nouveau Montanans' vision of the place is far removed from that found in Doig's grand, beautifully written, historic novels, which include *English Creek* and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, and in his inspiring childhood memoir, the National Book Award nominated *This House of Sky* (1978).

"Until this erupted," Doig says, "I spent a lot of my time being called back to Montana to give speeches. And I was forever warning Montanans to not let the place turn into Georgian England where the rich folks own the big places and the commoners get to stand around and look colorful and do the chores."

Though he probably won't be hired by the Montana state tourism board, Doig's Montana is the real thing.

His new novel, *Bucking the Sun* (Simon & Schuster, \$23), depicts a glorious country that is also hard, temperamental and untamed.

Set during the early and mid 1930s, the novel's unlikely central event is the building of the Fort Peck Dam.

The giant earthen attempt to stop the Missouri River was one of the great "make work" projects of the Roosevelt administration. It offered jobs for 10,000 in the northeast part of the sparsely populated state and attracted an equal number of camp followers.

Doig, 57, vividly recreates the panorama of the boomtown. And into this sort of *Grapes of Wrath* for the employed, he deposits the Duffs, a large clan of headstrong types whose irascible spouses are more than their equals.

To stir the stew the novelist provides an opening "flash-forward" scene in which two of the Duffs are found naked and drowned in the front of a pick-up truck at the dam site. The couple is married, a lawman explains . . . "only not to each other."

Doig, who received both his undergrad and graduate degrees in journalism from Northwestern, was in town recently for his first real visit since he and his wife Carol (another NU grad) packed up

their bags and left Evanston to head back West in the mid 1960s.

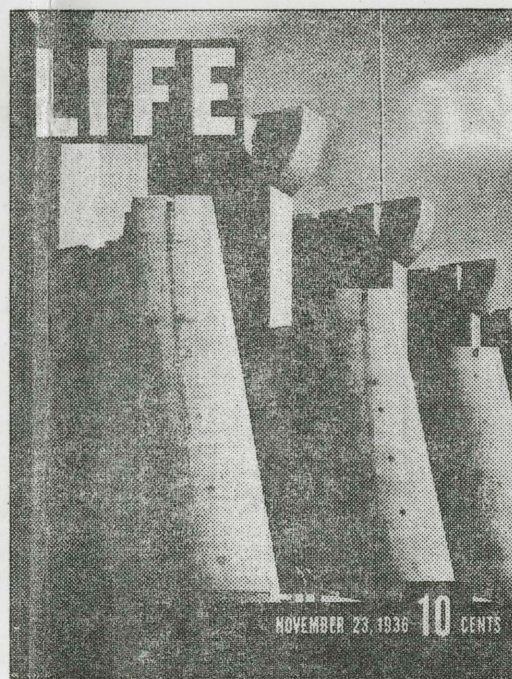
He explained the genesis of the book in a deserted hotel lobby.

"I kept hearing about Fort Peck while researching other novels," Doig says, stroking a thick reddish beard, just going gray. There's not a centimeter of skin visible on the lower half of his face. "Fort Peck kept coming up in the stories. It occurred to me that this was a tremendous launch in life for so many people. It's part of the Montana family album. And I grew up knowing that the Fort Peck Dam—in the Margaret Bourke-White photo—was on the cover of the first Life magazine, the Internet of its time."

To research the new book, Doig, who has lived in Seattle for the past couple of decades, says he turned to old copies of *Engineering News Record* and interviewed a slew of veteran dam builders.

"And the Army Corps of Engineers had people documenting Fort Peck up, down and sideways, more than I could look at," he says with a weary laugh.

Doig relied on his wife's advice when he feared his descriptions of dam building were becoming too



The Fort Peck Dam became part of America's iconography when it appeared on the cover of the first issue of Life magazine.

arcane.

"She kept me on the straight and narrow. I learned enough about dams to eventually know what to leave out."

He succeeds.

By the end of the book, the dam itself has become a character—in much the same way Montana has

become the main character in Doig's body of work.

"It's not Montana per se," he explains. "Rather it's the region authors are so often drawn to—childhood. It's the region where I grew up, what's been long remembered between my ears. The history of the American West has also always interested me as a big readable page. It's not been as populated as much by some of the other main currents of American history."

With the death of Wallace Stegner in 1993, Doig now has to be considered the premier writer of the American West.

And yet he's not sure that people have learned to appreciate or even correctly define the West. He thinks the myth of the six-shooter still prevails.

"In the American West we're closer to the writers out of the old colonial experience," says Doig, not only re-

ferring to geography but also to outsider status. "We have the most in common with the writers of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and so on. I've taken to talking about a group of writing I see as edge of the world writing . . . writing not taking place in the old usual suspects of Manhattan, London

and Paris."

Doig's dedication in *Bucking the Sun* says it all: "To novelists who deliver the eloquence of the edge of the world rather than stammer from the psychiatrist's bin." He includes Roddy Doyle (Ireland), Nadine Gordimer (South Africa) and Thomas Keneally (Australia) in that bunch.

At the same time, however, Doig longs for the day when the West will be truly seen as part of the rest of the country.

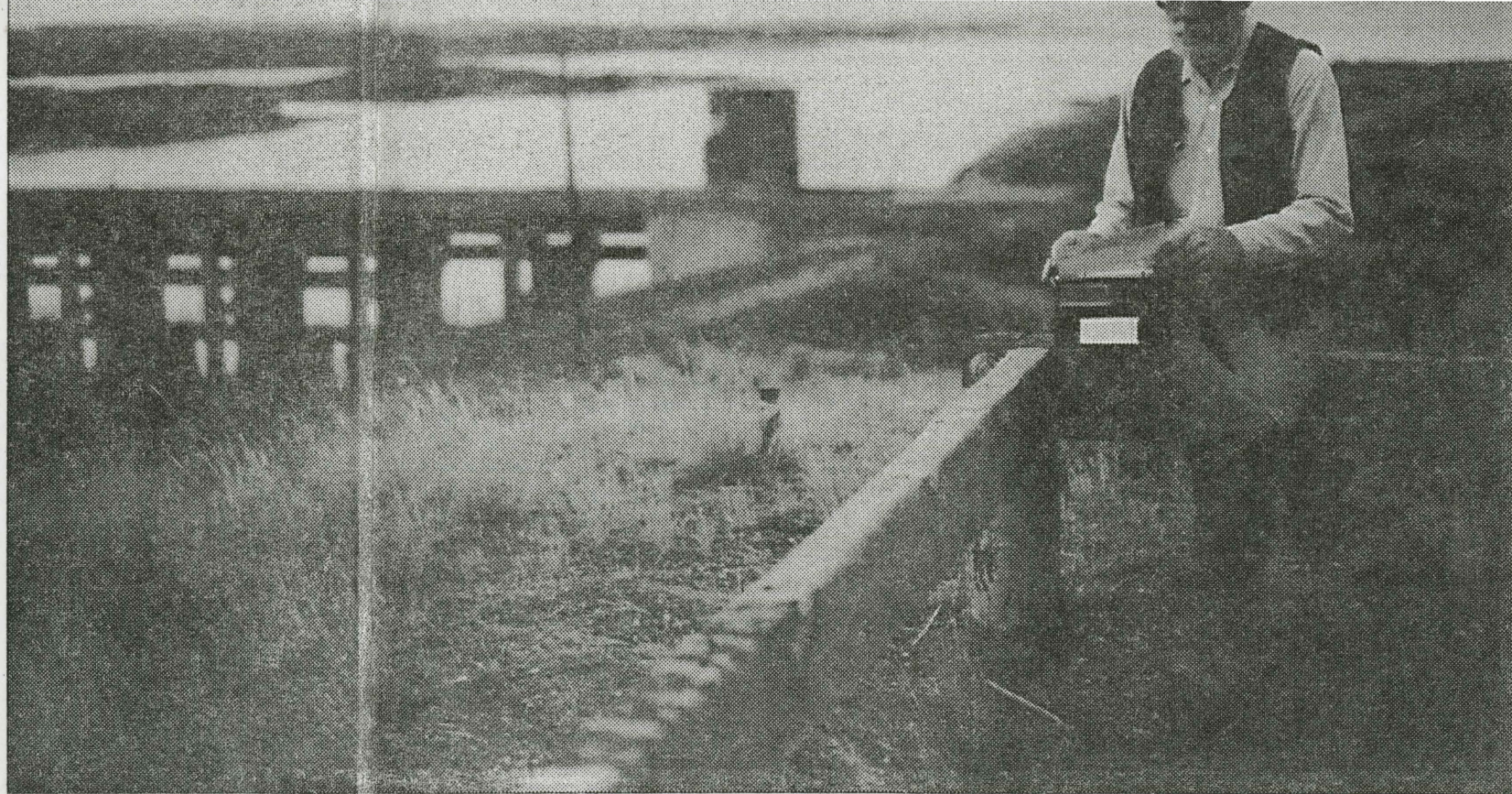
"A lot of us writing about the West," he says, "tend to look at what we see as the West as an expression of American community . . . as opposed to the myth of American individuality."

"From our backgrounds and research we know that the lone cowboy didn't play that much of a role in the big historical context of the West. We are also interested in the male schoolmarm, the woman homesteader, about the people who moved from, say, Minnesota and tried to create a community."

"We're trying to write a literary connective tissue to make readers aware that the country is connected beneath the airplanes—beneath that is a helluvalot of history . . . and places where lots of people have their starts."

Doig stops, pondering the absurdity of all these distinctions.

"Everything was the West at one point."



Book World

Ivan Doig: The Old West And the New

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig
Atheneum. 403 pp. \$18.95

By Richard Critchfield

IVAN DOIG is a happy mixture of poet and historian. In just nine years he has produced five truly distinctive books set in Montana and the Pacific Northwest, three of them novels. All beautifully evoke the American westering experience and firmly establish Doig as one of our finest Western writers.

Look at his achievement: *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, published in 1978 when he was 39, is a powerful memoir about his widowed, sheep-herding father, Charles Doig, son of Scottish immi-

Richard Critchfield is the author of "Those Days: An American Album" and "Villages." He is currently writing a book about Britain.



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RYAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

grants, who instills in his son a deep affinity for language, storytelling and the raw Montana landscape.

This strong sense of the land and a growing preoccupation with time are further developed in *Winter Brothers* (1980), interwoven observations by Doig and excerpts from the 1862-90 diaries of James G. Swan, an obscure artist and observer of coastal Indian life in the Pacific Northwest.

The imaginary retrieval of the past became central in *The Sea Runners* (1982), his first novel. Based on an actual event, it tells of the escape by four indentured Swedes from Russian America (1853 Alaska) to what is now Oregon in a stolen canoe; two die on the way. It is a little masterpiece of harrowing adventure.

In *English Creek* (1984), the first novel in a projected trilogy, Doig introduces the fictional McCaskill family and their sprawling Two Medicine Country. This is the familiar geography of *This House of Sky*, though the town of Dupuyer, just below the Rocky Mountain Front, has now become Gros Ventre (the locals say "Grove-on"). It is summer in the 1930s and Jick McCaskill, the 14-year-old narrator, goes on a horseback trip with his forest ranger father, Varick. Some of the set pieces in this coming-of-age story, such as a Fourth of July rodeo and a forest fire, are terrific.

Dancing at the Rascal Fair is the trilogy's second volume. Another panorama of life in Two Medicine Country, it takes place much earlier, 1889-1919, —Continued on page 11

Dancing at the Rascal Fair

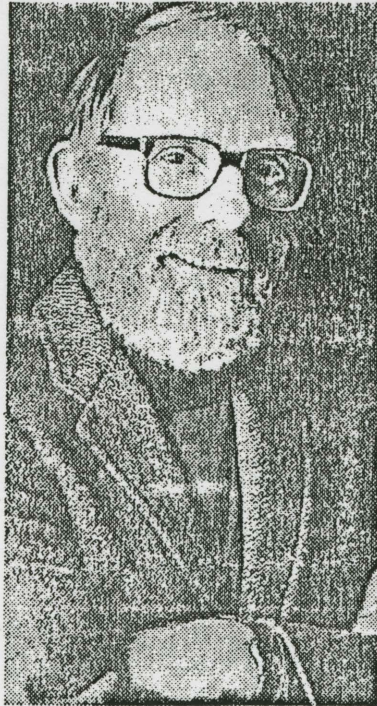
Continued from page 1

and its dramatic thread is the friendship and eventual falling out of two Scotsmen, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, Jick's grandfather. They venture from Glasgow by steerage, fellow villagers of Nethermuir, and homestead as neighbors in Montana, doing what they know, sheep-farming. At work out on the range, in the lambing shed and docking corral, over 30 years they prosper. Angus teaches in a one-room school and, thwarted in his love for Anna Ramsay, another teacher, he marries Rob's sister, Adair.

Time passes through them as they go from youth to middle age, and blizzards, the 1918 influenza epidemic and the raw, rugged land take their toll. The building of fences to divide the once-open rangeland into national forest spells the passing of these pioneer days.

The book is warm in feeling and rich in texture; I found that it packed more emotional punch once Varick, the McCaskills' only child, enters the story; there are strong overtones of Doig's own relationship with his father. Indeed, Charles Doig is quoted at the outset: "Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out." An attraction of Doig's books is how they all fit together; they expand our experience.

Doig does better to convey the quiet feel and detail of ordinary life than to crash cymbals in dramatic crescendo. As Chekhov said, the best writers are realistic and describe life as it is. Doig has said that he tries to "make the stuff up as realistically as I can." But to describe



BY JIM BATES

Ivan Doig

past life as it was is to lack the stimulus of immediate experience. How does he breathe so much life into it?

The secret of Ivan Doig's gift, I think, is his sense of surfaces and place and his ear for dialogue; his people come alive when they talk. And they talk all the time. All but one of his books is written in the first person.

In the earliest, 1889, passages of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, his two Scots speak English strongly influenced by Biblical and Shakespearean cadences. By 1919, they sound a lot more like their fellow American sheep-herders and ranchers. Doig can enter the talk of Burns-quoting Scottish immigrants or grim Scandinavian escapees of a

century ago. Or the talk of modern cowboys at a rodeo. He changes his voice as he becomes for the time being one of them.

Here is Angus McCaskill, noting infant lambs are "a majority of legs, long and askew as the drone pipes of a limp bagpipe." The same narrator voices Doig's creed of realism: "It would be heartening to

think the world is growing less harsh, but the evidence doesn't often say so."

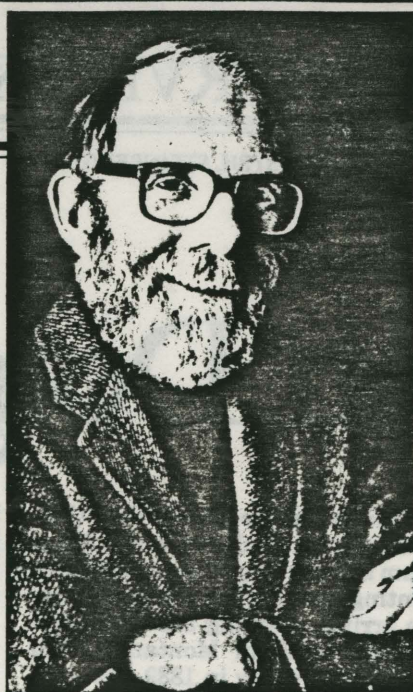
Nor is Doig's gift merely literary. Besides his intuitions and artistry there is the iron of purpose of an ex-ranch hand who has earned his PhD in history. An enormous researcher, Doig is one of those historians who goes from library to library forever on the scent of new documentation. He pours over faded records and newspapers, he reads, he hikes, he travels, he explores, and he talks to all the old people he can. Unusual among novelists, he provides an acknowledgments section at the back of each book, telling how he put it together and who helped him.

In Montana and the Pacific Northwest, this gifted poet-historian has enormous, vivid experience to draw upon as he sets out to rescue some more of our past from oblivion. Let us cheer him on, hoping the next nine years will be as productive as the last. ■

ticular—is virtually another character in the McCaskill trilogy, and all of Doig's books display a deep attachment to the land and a profound sense of place. "Part of that was growing up in the 'great weathers' of Montana. The space is always around you in various configurations—whether it is the mountains or the plains or simply that almost endless sky—big, booming distances in the landscapes. . . . The echoes of those stay with a person. We moved to Seattle largely because of the geography: the mildness of the climate, the nearness of the water, the greenness. Place is important to me and I think to quite a number of Western writers. Richard Hugo, the great poet of Montana, has a line that always sounds to me like something he picked up in a Missoula bar: 'If you ain't noplacé, you can't go nowhere.' To have a base, a plot of existence on the earth, to be familiar with its changes of the seasons, there's a kind of propulsive rhythm to that."

But the West Doig knows so intimately and writes about with such eloquence is *not* the West of legend. "I'm writing deliberately about shepherding, because we've had too damn much cowboy West. I don't think that's what the West has been about, although we've got a guy in the White House who thinks so: too many movie sets will give you that idea. The West has been about families, schoolteachers, miners, fur trappers, town-builders, all kinds of people coming out here to try and make a living. I'm trying to write against the grain of what I call 'Wisterns,' after Owen Wister, the author of *The Virginian*. He went off from Philadelphia and Harvard and got in with some of the rich cattlemen of Wyoming. So far as he could tell, no one in the West ever had to do any work. In 'Wisterns' it's all card games and saving schoolmarms; nobody ever milks a cow or plants a spud. As best I can tell, there's got to be some kind of catering service out of Omaha that comes out and takes care of the whole damn West. It's nonsense, and I think it's harmful nonsense."

"So much of the West has been nurtured and can only be nurtured by Federal policy: the national forest, the Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management. It's an enormous, dry, fragile part of our country—what Wallace Stegner called 'a land of little rainfall and big consequences.' We've had a complex histo-



© Jim Bates

"It seems to me there's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world"

ry of coming to terms with that; there's an ecologically, socially and culturally complex quilt out here from the Ohio River westward. To think that fixing it is just a matter of strapping on your chaps and sixgun is infantile nonsense. This almost tidal swash back and forth between beneficial consequences and harmful consequences interests me."

Doig's characters are always aware that actions have consequences, and the plots of his novels are often driven by the conflict between people's desires and their strong sense of responsibility. "My characters accept that in their lives they do have second thoughts, that part of what we carry around in the attic of our heads are our thoughts about the past. You feel your way along and do as much as you can, yet trying at some point to lead your own life. You're forever feeling your way along this line of equilibrium. Part of the consequence of being alive is that it's not always comfortable."

But Doig also tries to imbue his work with a sense of how many things in life are not within people's control. "My interest in history showed me that both time and the times you live in are going to change you, and I'm trying to write about that. You see in *English Creek* and *Rascal Fair* how much the two

world wars dropped into people's lives out of nowhere. I was trying to use actual historical realities. First the twin calamities of World War I and the flu epidemic of 1919—one out of every 100 Montanans died. Then the fact that one year you were a kid on a ranch in Montana who'd never been further away than the 90 miles to Helena, the next year you're in the Aleutians or the South Pacific, and the year after that maybe you're dead. I'm trying to deal in fiction with the issue of history dropping on us. Of course, we hope it doesn't drop on us in the big way—in the great words of *Riddley Walker*, a book I greatly admire—"The One Big One."

Russell Hoban is only one of the many authors whose work Doig has warmly praised during the conversation; his strong sense of identity as a Western writer doesn't preclude a larger feeling of kinship with world literature. "I've been very much aware of being a Westerner all my life, partly because of memories of the landscape, partly because of the way I was brought up in the West through the accident of being motherless after I was six. I have in some ways the best of both worlds: I'm halfway regarded as a Montana writer, and yet I live outside. The Humanities Council in Billings asked me to talk about looking at Montana from the outside. They have finally said, 'Okay, you're an outsider at last.'"

"Montana has always had this big colonial question, part of the land question: Are we simply, can we ever be, more than an energy colony to be mined? So the West has a lot in common with writers from the old outposts of the British Empire, who are often very skeptical of government and very potent. Nadine Gordimer is one of the most potent writers extant in showing the awful naked skin under her society. Then there are books like *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* and *Riddley Walker*, which push the language out into odd, eloquent corners of the world: the Isle of Guernsey, post-Holocaust England. I'm tending toward the idea, and I don't think it's at all original with me, that there are quite a bunch of us out here at our own centers of the universe, and they're not the metropolitan, polar centers. It seems to me that there's a new kind of eloquence that is not just an eloquence of the West, but an eloquence of the edge of the world." □

EDITED BY SYBIL STEINBERG

Ivan Doig

His novels of the American West benefit as much from his painstaking research as they do from his poetic imagination

BY WENDY SMITH

For just under a decade, in five books resonant with the echoing spaces of the American West, Ivan Doig has examined the ways in which history and geography interact to shape individual and national character, demonstrating our membership in a "community of time" that links Americans to those who preceded us in the landscape, as well as a community of place that knits us together in a complex weave of familial and social obligations.

In *This House of Sky*, his sensitive memoir of growing up in Montana in the 1940s and '50s, and in *Winter Brothers*, an exploration of the Pacific Northwest coastline through the diaries of a man who first ventured there in the 1850s, Doig mingled past and present in discontinuous narrative that skipped around in time yet presented coherent, moving visions of human possibilities against two very different backdrops. He turned to fiction—but not away from the past—in *The Sea Runners*, which chronicled the escape of four men from a Russian prison in 19th century Alaska and their daring canoe journey down the Pacific coast.

Doig is delving deeper into his Montana roots in the McCaskill family trilogy on which he has been at work for the past six years. *English Creek* took up the family's story in the middle with the tale of 15-year-old Jick McCaskill's coming of age in the summer of 1939. His newest nov-

el, *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Fiction Forecasts, July 31), which Atheneum is launching with a 50,000 first printing, goes back to the beginning: the arrival of young Scotsman Angus McCaskill in Montana's Two Medicine Country in 1889, the year the territory became a state. Doig expects to complete the third volume—and carry the McCaskills into the present—in time for the statehood centennial in 1989.

Why has the American past laid such a hold on this writer's imagination? "I think it helps us to know what we are and where we are by knowing where we came from," he says. "Also, I grew up with people in Montana who had a great link to the past. They weren't educated enough in classroom terms to know factual history, but they had a lot of lore in their heads. And it was in the language, too, the sayings that showed up in my father's and grandmother's talk. Going back to Scotland three summers ago to research *Rascal Fair*, I found some of the turns of phrase originated there."

Doig came to the Seattle area, where he has lived for 21 years, to get a Ph.D in history, and his training is evident in the way he works. An energetic, friendly man of 48 whose glasses and gray-red beard give him a vaguely professorial air, he shows PW the file-card boxes filled with research material. "I'm a pretty literal person; I tend to imagine from facts. For example, 'Dancing at the Rascal Fair' is a traditional Scots tune—which I wrote one sleepless night. It comes from this very staunch, Scots, quasi-Marxist sociological book, *Social Class in Scotland, Past and Present*, where I read mention of the fact that when farmers and laborers met to bargain out the summer's wages it was called 'the rascal fair.' I like that phrase. I went to bed one night, not having a title for the book, and the next morning told Carol [his wife], 'I think it's going to be called *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*.' Then I bought a rhyming dictionary and worked

hard on making up the song. Quite a lot of what I do comes that way, the imagination ramified by this kind of dry sociology."

Doig's uncommon ability to bring the past vividly to life stems in part from his attention to detail. "I would talk to people who had been homesteaders at the turn of the century and ask them, 'You were a school kid. How'd you get to school?' 'Well, we rode horses.' 'Okay, what'd you do with the horses?' Out of that would come bits of lore: in the sagebrush part of Montana, they'd probably hitch the horse to a bit of sagebrush; if they lived in the grassier part, the fathers would probably build a hitch rail for the school. The details of Angus's teaching came out of those sort of particulars." To help him visualize the towns he was writing about, Carol Doig took photographs of individual buildings all over Montana and Scotland. Doig arranged the slides on a light table, grouping the pictures together to get a sense of what a given street might have looked like in 1889 or 1919.

The language of Doig's books is also carefully researched. "Language led me to the McCaskill trilogy as much as anything else. I was interested in using the language of my Dad's generation in *English Creek*, which is narrated by a character roughly his age. Then it followed that Angus would narrate *Rascal Fair* in his Scottish-born voice. It was a big decision, because it takes a long time to accumulate the language for these three books. I have a file-card box called 'Montana Lingo,' and I'm working my way through *The Dictionary of American Regional English* to find out how language forms itself, how it comes out in everyday dance and prance—the poetry of the vernacular, because often people who don't have much else in life are very rich in language. I think what I'm up to is an attempt to write a trio of books in some of the West's own language."

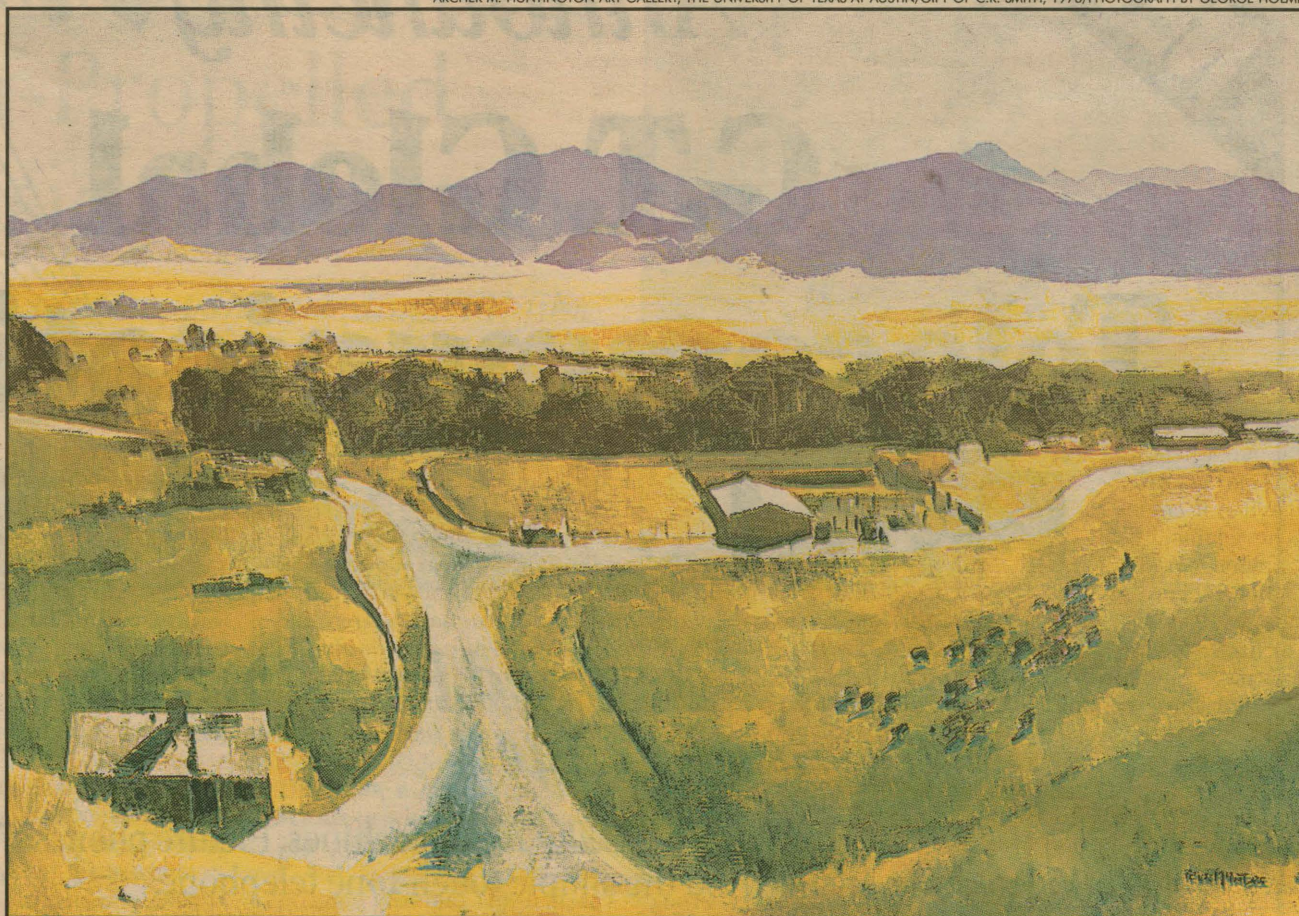
The West itself—Montana in par-

Wendy Smith writes frequently for PW.



THE HOME FORUM

'LONGHORN RANCH,
MADISON VALLEY,
ENNIS, MONTANA (1971):
Oil on canvas,
23 3/8 by 33 1/2 in.,
by Peter McIntyre.



ARCHER M. HUNTINGTON ART GALLERY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN/GIFT OF C.R. SMITH, 1976/PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE HOLMES

Fiction From the 'Big Sky' Country

TOWARD the end of "Ride with Me, Mariah Montana," the third in Ivan Doig's 100-year trilogy about the McCaskill family, there's a 30-second scene in which a character jumps out of a Winnebago fueling up at a gas station, runs over to the sign for "Air & Water," and grease-pencils the other two ancient Greek elements "Earth & Fire." It's a wonderful bit of whimsy, an example of what novelist Doig calls the "crocodile factor" designed to "come right up off the page and get you." And it's just one of the things that makes him one of the most readable and productive authors from that vast expanse of real estate west of the 100th meridian today generating some of the very best American writers.

To read Doig's fiction, to hear him speak wisdom and wit to a gathering of historians in Sparks, Nevada, and to discuss his craft over a meal or two, is to learn of a man with a passion for language, for the minutiae of life and historical accuracy, and especially for "the lingo" of his characters — "the tongues that express their lives."

Doig's career as a writer took off a dozen years ago with "This House of Sky," reminiscences about his early life in Montana. Since then he has produced five more highly acclaimed books, including the Two Medicine trilogy (named for the river near where much of it takes place).

On Ivan Doig's sixth birthday,

when he was living with his parents in a sheep-herding camp on the front range of the Rocky Mountains (where his grandfather had come from Scotland), his father woke him to say the boy's mother had died that night. For the next few years, father and son bounced around western towns and ranches before settling down with Doig's maternal grandmother as homemaker.

By the time he was 16 and spending most of his summers on the back of a horse tending sheep in the high country, Doig knew he wanted to be a writer and that he had to get out of Montana — beautiful as it was — to succeed. He won a full scholarship to Northwestern University, worked on a newspaper in downstate Illinois, then did magazine editing back in Chicago, where he also picked up a master's degree before heading back out West. At the University of Washington in Seattle, he earned a PhD in history (he says graduate school cured him of any desire to teach) then spent an enjoyable but lean decade as a freelance magazine writer while his wife Carol earned most of the family income teaching at a community college.

Like the fictional character who com-

pleted the gas-station list of elements in "Mariah Montana," Doig found journalistic writing too limiting. But his training as a historian and newspaperman left him with the strong need to fill his fiction with accurate details from real life, including the spoken word — the earth of daily human affairs and the fire of speech.

In researching the 1889 trans-Atlantic trip of 19-year-olds Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay for "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (the first book, chronologically, in the trilogy), Ivan and Carol went to Glasgow (to the very pier from

which his grandfather, Peter Doig, had departed), pored over emigrant letters at the University of St. Andrews, and looked up steamship blueprints and investigative reports on the conditions poor travelers endured in steerage.

Later, he dug back into Depression-era Works Progress Administration writers' files in Montana to learn how Anaconda Copper smeltermen, cattle ranchers, and sheep ranchers talked in the early part of the century. The sound of the spoken word is very important to him — "the shimmer behind the plot" feeding the "delicious hunger of the ear." He was careful to have the two Scotsmen gradually lose their burr over the 30 years of "Rascal Fair."

When he wanted to include scenes about fighting fires, he had four forest rangers check his manuscript for details. He photocopied old Forest Service cookbooks so he would know what it was like to cook for 75 men in the woods.

"I'm always looking for details," he says. "The details are what the skeins of life germinate out of." He loves to repeat Vladimir Nabokov's instruction to students at Cornell University that they

must write "with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

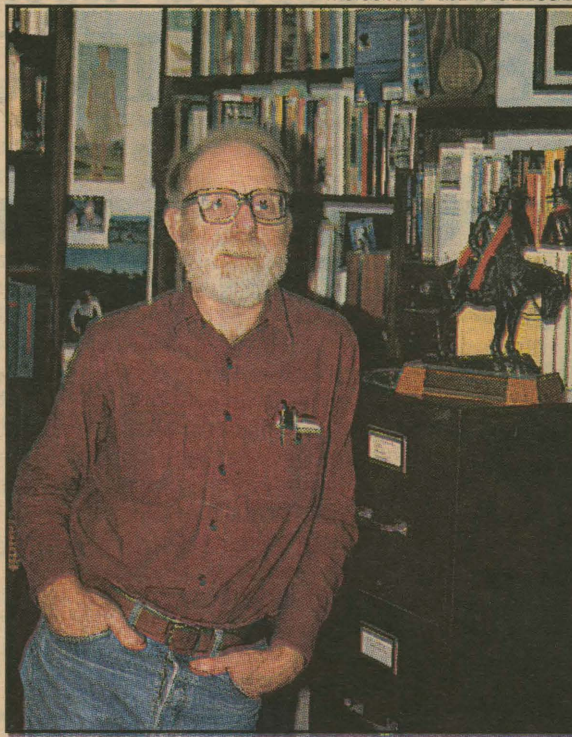
In a spare bedroom office he shares with his wife at home in the north end of Seattle, Doig works away at an old gray Royal typewriter. The remembrance of Scottish ancestors are in his sandy hair and beard. Just back from 50 book readings and signings in San Francisco, Boston, Washington, Chicago, and Minnesota, he relaxes in jeans, a red-striped shirt, and Birkenstocks.

Shelved around him are his favorite writers, including Wallace Stegner, Nadine Gordimer, John Steinbeck, Isak Dinesen, Edward Hoagland, Robinson Jeffers, Loren Eiseley, Beryl Markham, Eudora Welty, Frank O'Connor, Joseph Conrad, Barbara Tuchman, Gretel Ehrlich, and William Faulkner. Contemporary western historians Patricia Nelson Limerick and Donald Worster are there. And also "The Songwriter's Rhyming Dictionary," by Sammy Kahn.

"I like people who dance on the page," he says, leaning back in his chair. "Anybody hip-deep in love with the language." One of his characters in "Mariah Montana" says, "Language is the light that comes out of us."

But "with nine-tenths of the ink of this century now expended," he told the western historians in Nevada, "modern American fiction in terms of originality and staying power still adds up to 'Faulkner and the rest of us.'"

On another shelf, just next to



IVAN DOIG AT HIS SEATTLE HOME

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD KNICKERBOCKER

where he writes, are his notebooks: "Comparison and Description," "Ideas," "Lingo," "Anecdotes," "Phrasing," and "Technique." Bits and pieces waiting to be worked into future projects.

His next book, which will focus on his mother (based on letters to an uncle during World War II, interviews with family members, and his dim recollections as a small boy), will feature "deliberate dreams."

"It's the only way I can think of to get at what might have gone on beyond what I can hear and see," he explains. When it comes right down to it, he admits, "a lot of style and technique is best guess." Then, too, "the alchemy of language carries with it the high probability of fizzle."

Of the growing recognition of contemporary literature coming out of the American West, he says: "I think there are enough classy writers west of St. Paul that scholars will eventually have to write about them as a group as they did about the Southern fugitives."

The thing that connects many of these writers, he acknowledges, is love of the spectacular landscape.

"But I don't agree that that's our strongest muscle," he says. "The language, the style, the craft is of such a skill that I don't see why this kind of travelogue tag is at all justified. I mean, Louise Erdrich is a world-class writer – the equivalent of Robert Penn Warren. Jim Welch in 'Fools Crow' has produced a truly great book. Bill Kittredge has been a unique writer. I mean, this is increasingly fine stuff, and even if it appeared on a barren planet it would be unique writing."

Yet Doig and many of his contemporaries do connect with the land and worry about what's become of it over the past century or so.

"It is saddening that a lot of what we tried in the West – with reasonably good intentions – has not worked out," he says. "Plowing up the prairies was not a good idea. Pulling up the ore and running it poisonously through smelter stacks turns out not to have been a good idea. Damming up every river of any consequence except the Yellowstone hasn't been a good idea, either. So the stance many of us write from out here is 'Wait a minute, we'd better try something else.'" In "Mariah Montana," Jick McCaskill arranges to protect his land when he retires from sheep ranching without selling out to developers or a big agri-business spread.

The result of Ivan Doig's passion for detail and "the lingo" is more than the sum of the parts. Much more, and it comes through most obviously in the clear personality and especially the sound character of the people we meet.

He has been described by one reviewer as "the most hopeful of writers – not blindly optimistic but deeply humanistic." A friend of mine wrote recently: "Over the past year I read most of his books and just fell in love with his characters and their goodness, and of course his descriptions of the West."

Another says she slows down when she gets near the end of a Doig novel because she doesn't want it to end. Not to worry. He's got many productive years ahead of him and plenty of history to mine ... with passion and precision.

Brad Knickerbocker

'Ride With Me, Mariah Montana'

Despite their differences, rancher Jick McCaskill, his daughter Mariah, and her ex-husband Riley have packed their lives into a Winnebago and are driving around Montana. Mariah, a photographer, and Riley, a journalist, are on assignment for the Missoula Montanian newspaper – hoping to capture the spirit of the state 100 years after it joined the Union. Jick, acting as chauffeur, narrates their story. The following is an excerpt from Ivan Doig's most recent book, "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana."

AYAPPITY pup careened across the yard to challenge the Bago. I braked just in time to keep him from becoming a pup pancake.

The canine commotion brought a woman out onto the porch of the older house. Plentiful without being plump, in blue jeans ageworn to maximum comfort and a red-checked shirt with a yoke of blue piping in emphasis across the chest, she still was wearing her hair in a summer hank – it sheened whiter than gray, grayer than white – more abbreviated than a ponytail, to keep it off her neck in back. Somewhat leathered and weathered, she nonetheless had a well-preserved appearance: time simply paid its respects to a face like that. She stood deliberating at the motorhome while the kiwi chorus of the pup reached new crescendos, until Riley slid back the sidewindow and yelled out, "Call off your dog pack, Mother, we're relatively peaceful."

"Here, Manslaughter," she spoke to the barking guardian and patted a denim thigh for him to come to her. By now the woman had recognized Mariah's red hair as well as Riley's vocal presence and she came down off the porch striding quickly, in a kind of aimed glide, toward the Winnebago as if she had something vital to deliver. But when the *Montanian* duo stepped out of the motorhome, followed by me, Riley's mother halted a good distance away and somehow managed to gaze from one to the other of them and both of them at once while saying diagnostically, "I saw by your performances in the paper that you two are tangled together again."

Riley, trust him, cupped a hand to his ear and asked, "Did I hear a 'hello' or was that thunder?" Then he brassed on over as if doing a major favor by delivering a kiss to his matriarch.

"It would help, Riley, it really would, if you'd keep me informed as to when you're on speaking terms with her," his mother gazed indicatively straight at Mariah, "so I can stay in step. Couldn't you have it announced on the radio or something?"

A watcher of this didn't have to be rocket-swift to pretty speedily realize that Riley's mother had as much peeve built up at Mariah as I did at Riley and for the one and same reason, the crash of their marriage. Why this surprised me any I don't know – just one more case of an in-law flopped into an outlaw – but it did.

Mariah looked like she'd rather be juggling hot coals, but she said to the silver-haired woman, "We maybe both better get in practice on our terms, how about."

Riley's mother eyed my daughter skeptically. Then perhaps registering the echo of McCaskill boneline in Mariah's form and my own over Mariah's shoulder, she cast her first full look at me. A moment was required to decipher me under the beard and then her eyes went wide.

"Jick!" she let out with her blaze of a smile. "Hello again."

"Lo, Leona."

Half a century it had been, since I first said that. Since Leona Tracy, as she was then, all but married my brother Alec.

■ Reprinted by arrangement with Atheneum Publishers, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company, from "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," by Ivan Doig, ©1990 by Ivan Doig.

Never Hopeless

IN many parts of the world today, conditions still seem hopeless. Although repressive governments are becoming somewhat less monolithic, there are still areas where freedom is desperately needed. If this seemingly endless struggle were all we could expect, we could perhaps justify the depression and hopelessness that we sometimes feel. Christ Jesus' ministry, however, shows clearly that there is something beyond this finite view of life—that there is hope even in the midst of darkness.

Take Jesus' own example. After the crucifixion, his followers felt the situation was hopeless. Many of them were frightened for their own lives. His resurrection from the grave changed all that. And when the disciples perceived anew the power of Jesus' teachings, they preached fearlessly despite the danger. In short, they had gone beyond a merely human concept of hoping, to the kind of hope that comes from confidence in God.

They were galvanized by the need to share this good news with all. The basis of their ministry was the fact that man is truly spiritual. He is not, and never was, a mortal who could somehow be separated from God or who is the helpless victim of material conditions. We are, in reality, the ideas of God, divine Mind, or Love. This means that each of us has direct access to Love. And it also means that we can never be deprived of Love. The result is that we are never truly alone before a hopeless situation. We always have the presence of God with us.

This presence is Christ, the true idea of Love, and it is what Christ Jesus worked so hard to leave to the world. One significant example of Jesus' attitude when confronting seemingly hopeless conditions is the time when he raised Lazarus to life after he had been dead for four days. The mourners certainly felt hopeless; Lazarus's sisters were more trusting in Jesus, although they were not without doubts. I have often pondered the difference in perspective between Jesus and these other people. The Master, perceiving the spiritual nature of things, was confident of the power of God. The others seemed to think that the best Jesus could do was comfort the sisters in their loss. He did comfort them, but not in the expected way.

After asking for the stone that sealed Lazarus's grave to be removed, Jesus turned to God and said: "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me." Then he simply cried, John's Gospel tells us, "Lazarus, come forth." And a seemingly hopeless condition was completely turned around.

It is so clear from Jesus' life that the understanding of God as divine, ever-present Love was the answer to any hopeless situation. His certainty that God loves all His children and has no desire for them to suffer informed every step he took. And he taught this to his followers as well.

Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science, emphasizes the importance of understanding God in her book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. She declares, "To understand God strengthens hope, enthrones faith in Truth, and verifies Jesus' word: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.'"

Sometimes, when things seem hopeless in my own life, I think of the many times Jesus and his disciples were confronted by situations that were worse than anything I could have imagined. This not only gives me perspective; it also gives me hope. And in each case, I have also found these teachings bring healing solutions to my life. Trust in God does give us hope; and, like Jesus' other followers, we can expect it to save us.

*The Christian
Science Monitor's
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Article*

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This 700 page book is the complete statement of Christian Science.

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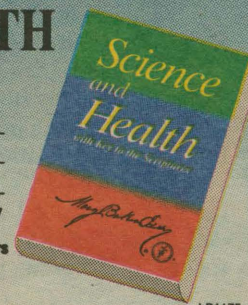
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er Brothers' brings history to life

By Ivan Doig
Reviewed by Jcvanovich:

Westerners, natives in particular, are fortunate that Seattle writer Ivan Doig is busy carving out a unique new genre of books based on the reflections of his own life.

Autobiographical would be a description to save a few words, yet Doig,

transplanted from his native Montana some 14 years ago, gives us more. He has the wonderful talent to transform the prosaic into a unique new art form that should satisfy even the most jaded reader of fiction.

"This House of Sky," winner of critics' acclaim and a nominee for the National Book Award, was Doig's account of being raised with herds of sheep while being guided over the prairies and his early life by his father and grandmother, joined in a realistic assessment of their lives.

But for those who visualize Montana as a reclusive, frontier-type of place to work and write, Doig, his prowlike red Scotsman beard pointed west, reminds of those who grew up and worked there, bodies pared by cold winters, summer dust and skin-wrinkling wind.

On the coast, on Puget Sound, where his wife Carol teaches, Doig has found a new, predominately southwestern wind that sweeps the last mote of true Western feeling.

To capture this, Doig has written "Winter Brothers," subtitled, "A Season at the Edge of America," the writer's interpretation of Port Townsend pioneer and diarist James Gilchrist Swan, a fascinating and versatile character who chronicled the last 40-odd years of his long life into a remarkable 2.5 million words.

Doig, a journalist who decided to complete a doctorate in history, found Swan's diaries and became intrigued with the man's detailed recording of the Puget Sound frontier.

Despite his own lengthy journals, Swan remains a somewhat enigmatic figure since he, of course, tells us only what he wants us to know. At least about himself. Of the Makah Indians, dwelling in cross-cultural confusion on Neah Bay, he tells much more.

Doig has done something interesting but not unique. For a winter he passed through the life of Swan, directly experiencing the locales where the diarist lived, moved with the Indians and shared the gray mists and fogs by the sea where harvests of food came with the tide.

Swan left his wife and children for the frontier out of curiosity and a desire for fortune. A native of New England, like so many early Pacific Northwesters, he was motivated by education and service and was, essentially, and

what is now a cliché, a "Renaissance man."

He built a schoolhouse for the Makahs on Neah Bay, lived there for long periods, partly out of love, partly to get away from booze which, intermittently, branded him an "habitual drunkard" in Port Townsend.

Swan's interests were eclectic. He provided material for the Smithsonian Institute, sending specimens of Indian life throughout the years, and late in life made a fascinating canoe voyage through the Queen Charlotte Islands where he collected Haida Indian artifacts and, with an old Indian chief, visited sites historical to the tribe and never seen by white men.

Swan is never patronizing to the Indians, he is their defender and later becomes their benefactor, substituting the tribal family for his own. In Port Townsend, he becomes a dubious city father, like the rest dreaming of the day the railroad would come and create a metropolis and fat wallets for everyone.

The dream, of course, is not realized. Yet Swan dreams on, remarkably optimistic until, in his 80s, death takes him quietly away, his diaries filled until almost the last declining moment.

Doig finishes the story, but only briefly. Through the preceding pages his responsibility has been to honestly weave Swan's words into his own narrative, and this is done with such beauty and grace, occasionally humorous and never maudlin, that Doig may have created a new form.

Yet it is his own beautiful writing, original and filled with poetic imagery revealing the true romantic, that makes this a grand book and insures Doig's future as a major Northwest writer, if not a major author nationally.

An example: "The strop of this weather on the days, each one brought identically keen, tingling. Rainless hours after rainless hours glimmering past, it has dawned on me how extraordinary is this dry cold time, as if I were living in the Montana Rockies again but without the clouting mountain-hurled wind."

Or this of Swan's: "The eleventh of January, 1860. 'Cloudy and calm. This is my birth day 42 years old. I trust that the remainder of my life may be passed more profitably than it has so far. Self investigation is good for birth days.'"

A "Swan Song" of some 2.5 million words; "Winter Brothers" is a masterpiece by two men joined in the past.



Slim Lindbergh and his friend, Bud Gurney, lean against the type of plane in which Lindbergh first flew in 1922. The book is "The Pathfinders," second volume of "The Epic of Aviation" by Time-Life Books Inc.

Montana' line runs on uncoupled ideas

Westering Journals

WINTER BROTHERS

A Season at the Edge of America.

By Ivan Doig.

246 pp. New York:

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

\$10.95.

By **RAYMOND A. SOKOLOV**

JAMES GILCHRIST SWAN ran away from proper Boston in 1850, left his wife and two children and, after a voyage round Cape Horn, eventually settled in our country's upper left-hand corner, on the Washington coast. Ivan Doig left Montana roughly a century later, collected a Ph.D. in American frontier history and made his home, as Swan had, on America's wet, westernmost shore.

Mr. Doig began to write about this "edge of America" in magazines and in a previous book, "This House of Sky." Then, in the "grey archival boxes at the University of Washington Library," he discovered the diaries in which Swan had scribbled two-and-a-half million words between 1859 and his death in 1890.

How Swan found the time to write is an awesome puzzle, considering that he filled his life with scads of "careers," from exploration to Indian ethnography, to teaching, to oyster wholesaling, to artifact collection for the Smithsonian. And he also took substantial time out from this panoramic industry for very serious drinking. Yet, besotted or not, Swan wrote — wrote with a loose-jointed, gabby verve and high intelligence about frontier life.

One winter, he shared a house with a whaling captain who tried to bake a skunk, but neglected to clean it properly, with the result that "it smelt so unsavory when the bake-kettle was opened that he was forced to throw skunk and kettle into the river, which he did with a sigh, remarking what a pity it was that it smelled so strong, when it was baked so nice and brown."

Fascinated by such stuff, Ivan Doig read deeply in Swan's diaries, looking for companionship in his own "westering" adventure on the flanks of the Olympia Range, by the waters of Puget Sound. Swan had tramped where Mr. Doig now hiked with his wife, Carol, and though the life on that land had changed enormously, Mr. Doig felt a mystical brotherhood with Swan, which he has exemplified in this double diary, matching passages culled from Swan with parallel moments from his own life.

For 90 days, the space of a recent winter, he interspersed his own journal entries with appropriate snippets from Swan's vast memoir. Sometimes the exercise is forced; sometimes it pushes Mr. Doig into overwriting. But the occasional patches of dullness or lushness should deter no one from devouring this gorgeous tribute to a man and a region unjustly neglected heretofore. The reader has the pleasure of encountering two contrasting styles and two angles of view, both infused with the fresh air and spirit of the Northwest.

For example, on Day 11, Mr. Doig and his wife went to Dungeness Spit's "rough spine of driftwood" and

saw an eagle. He writes: "Above the two of us the eagle glides a complete slow circle, as if studying from the corner of his eye our surprising plaid skins." Swan also visited Dungeness, the "longest natural sandspit in the United States; driest point on the West Coast north of San Diego." Or as Mr. Doig puts it: "A thin hook of desert snagging the water." Swan, when he was there in January of 1880, found three feet of snow: "Our boat's deck was loaded with snow and the lighthouse tower on its northeast side had a thick coating from the base to the lantern." The Doigs left Dungeness, returned home to play poker. Swan stayed aboard ship with his traveling companions — "devoting our energies to the successful performance of a game of seven-up, or all-four or old sledge, as that wonderful combination of cards is variously termed."

Where Ivan Doig's and Swan's lives do not much mesh is with Indians. Swan lived among them and observed them. Mr. Doig, lacking such opportunities, contents himself with anthologizing Swan's Indian writing. Witness this terse masterpiece of ethnography: "Called on Kive-ges-lines this PM to see her twins which were born on the 10th. They were pretty babies but the Indians are sure to kill one. Next day: One of the twins died during the night as I predicted. The Indian who told me said. . . 'It died from want of breath' which I think very probable. These Haidas like the Makahs have a superstition that twins bring ill luck."

Ivan Doig's winter with Swan draws to a well-wrought close. He goes with his wife to Neah, where Swan lived among the Makahs, finds them thriving, with a new greenhouse ("progress I am glad to see from Swan's depot of potatoes"). The Doigs are looking for Swan's modest monument to himself. In 1859, as he described it, he "worked carving a swan on a sandstone cliff with my initials under it." Doig locates the carving, barely eroded, "tail fluted high to a jaunty point. . . The stone dot that puts period — and seed of the ellipsis for whatever continuation is on its way — to this winter." ■



Drawings by Robert Gale

Raymond A. Sokolov's most recent book is "Wayward Reporter," a biography of A. J. Liebling.

NYT
Book Review
11/11/81

Homesteading In Montana

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By Ivan Doig

Atheneum; 403 pages; \$18.95

REVIEWED BY PAMELA GULLARD

In this second of a three-novel series, Ivan Doig brings to life the drama and ironies of homesteading in Montana at the turn of the century. I find myself filled with such high praise for this book that instead of relating paltry bits of it, I want to quote the whole glorious thing.

Take Doig's account of a Scotsman's glance to the sky while searching for a suitable homestead: "... above to my right a hawk hung on the wind, correcting, correcting." I am moved not just by the perfection of this description, but also by the way Doig so gracefully packs his words with hints of larger meaning. Here, he speaks not just of the bird, but also of the wide-eyed homesteader who will hang onto a patch of raw land and spend the rest of his life battling drought, low sheep prices, disease, blizzards — that is, correcting, correcting.

The Immigrant Scotsman, narrator of the book, is Angus McCaskill. He is the forefather of characters in the first novel in this series, "English Creek," which appeared to wide acclaim in 1984. In his fiction and in nonfiction histories of the West, Doig moves with authority back and forth through time. This gives his novels a haunting, fated quality, as if whatever is about to come has in some sense already happened.

In "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," Angus McCaskill's future is intertwined with that of his best friend, Rob Barclay. The two come from Nethermuir in Scotland to America to find Rob's Uncle Lucas. The boys hope Lucas will show them how to become Americans, and more important, "Montanians." Their first lesson about the beautiful,

unforgiving land — where they eventually build homes, marry and grapple with the elements and with each other — comes when they meet Lucas face-to-face. He is not a rich silver miner, as they had believed, but rather a saloon-keeper in the fledgling mountain village of Gros Ventre.

And there is one other fact about him the boys learn to their horror: His hands have been blown away in a mining accident. Says Angus, "There was no known rightness of behavior, just as there was no rightness about what had happened to Lucas. Like the clubs of bone and flesh he was exhibiting to us, any justice in life seemed ripped, lopped off. To this day the account of Lucas Barclay's mining accident causes my own hands to open and close."

So Doig plunges right in and, while giving us a gorgeous

story, simultaneously peels that tale back to expose the nubbins of human despair — injustice, failure and that incalculable restlessness exemplified by the immigrant. All the while, Doig's work contains the old-fashioned, Shakespearean notion that even the most complex thought or feeling can be made accessible. Indeed, Doig seems to revel in his accessibility. Gleefully, he has witty Angus remark on the lively chatter at seasonal, "rascal" fairs in Scotland — "That locution of the rascal fair, up there with Shakespeare's best."

Doig always favors clearing the path between the reader and the characters. For example, instead of reproducing a thicket of strange spellings to duplicate a Scottish burr, he

See Page 4



FROM "DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR"

S. F. Chronicle

'DANCING'

Continued from Page 3

has his characters use standard, American English. But such English! Doig has delved into the Scottish lilt and brought out the humor, metaphor and the unexpected tenderness of the imported language. These people greet each other on the range with, "Hullo, what do you know for sure?" Describing a Bible-thumping neighbor, Angus says, "I thought many a time that to watch Ninian on the dance floor was like hearing a giggle out of God." Lamenting disastrously low mutton prices, Lucas declares, "By Jesus, the woollies do make a lovely sight. If we could just sell them for scenery." Author Doig shows that the saving grace

for these characters is their speech.

As the novel progresses, he deepens this theme of the need to filter harsh facts through wry expression. Earlier, Lucas painfully taught himself to write again by using both forearms. Why did he take such trouble to pen the letter that enticed the boys to America? "Matters pile up in a person. They can surprise you, how they want out." People as resilient as Lucas find their voices again. Others are not so lucky. In this book, a father becomes estranged from his son, friends quit speaking to each other, and spouses look elsewhere for fulfillment. Doig shrewdly shows that even the most engaging characters can build silences against each other.

This is not a sad book, however, for the losses Doig depicts seem hugely worth the effort. I think that it is interesting to see how the shrunken-hearted of the world survive their own banality. But it is dazzling to watch Doig depict generous, high-spirited characters seeding their lives with sorrows of their own making. Doig shows us all sides of the damnable human longing for whatever is out of reach. In so doing, he unveils "this rascal thing life." As Angus says about wool, "The pelt that grows itself again ... You cannot overlook the marvelous in that." ■

Menlo Park writer Pamela Gullard has published fiction in The Iowa Review and Primavera.

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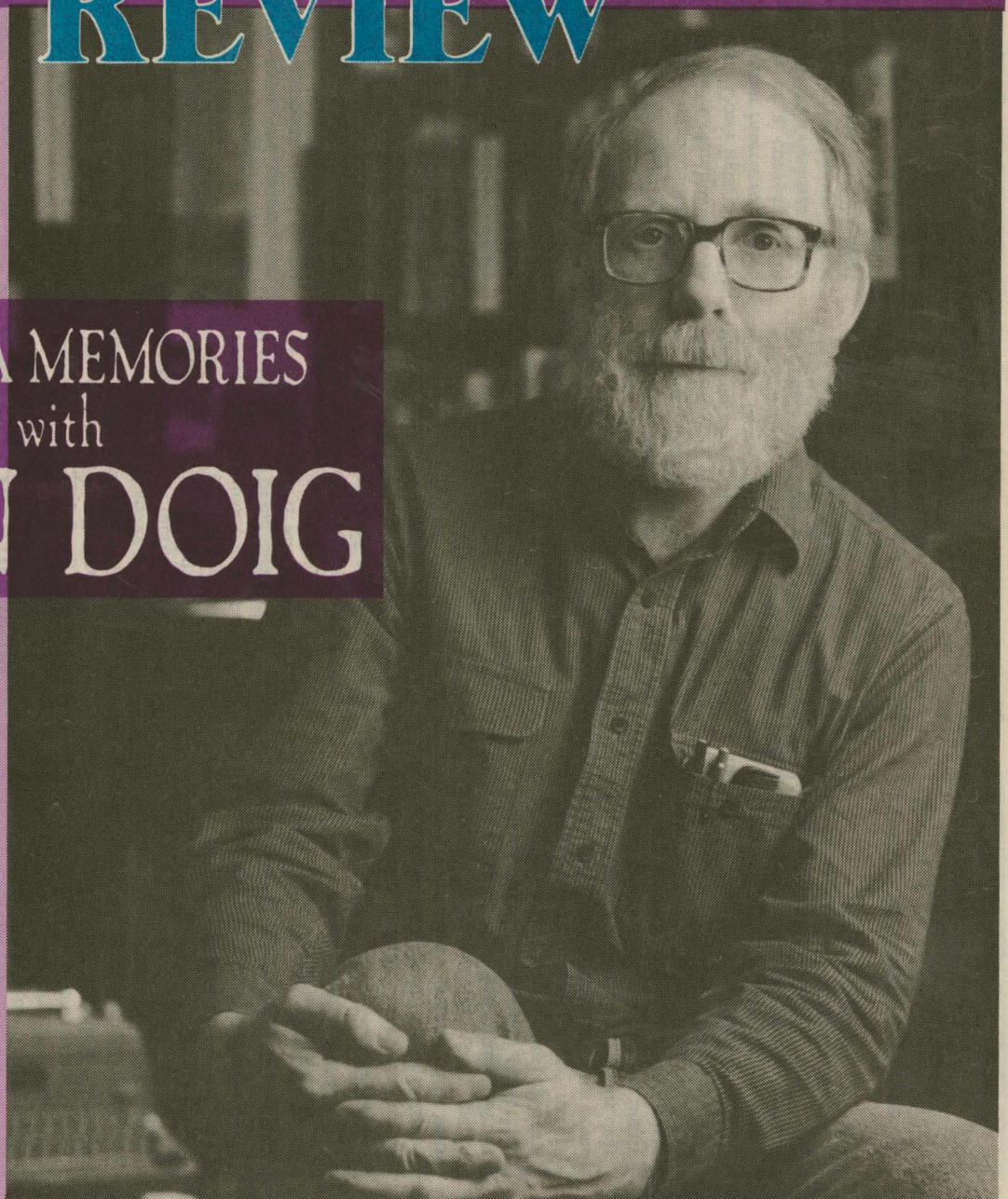
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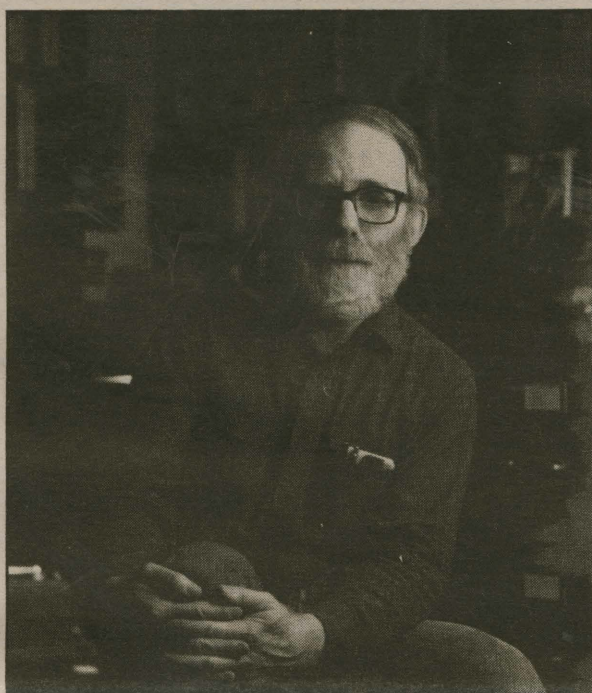
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Montana Memories

Ivan Doig

An Interview by Tom Auer



When *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* was published last fall, Ivan Doig no doubt breathed a deep sigh of relief. His much acclaimed Montana trilogy was complete. Ten years of research and writing about the McCaskills, a fictional family who had immigrated from Scotland to the Two Medicine Country of Montana late in the nineteenth century, had finally come to an end. His father had been a Montana homesteader, and his father's family had immigrated from Scotland to Montana. Doig labored long and hard to make his novels as realistic and true to the times as possible. He and his wife Carol traveled to Scotland, and spent months interviewing Montana homesteading families and researching homestead records in the national archives to make the novels ring true. Not coincidentally, the completion of the trilogy coincided with Montana's Centennial.

Doig has been writing about Montana for many of the twenty-one years since he left the Big Sky country, first for college, and later to pursue a career in wordsmithing, a livelihood not easily managed in his home country. Doig now lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who teaches western literature at a local college. Montana and the Pacific Northwest are deeply ingrained in his work, though his novels concern much more than geography.

After graduating from Northwestern University with a B.S. and M.S. in Journalism, and later a Ph.D. in History from the University of Washington, he set his sights on newspaper and magazine work, which he did for ten years, writing freelance pieces for a variety of publications and working for the Rotarian magazine.

Doig's trilogy may be his best known works: *English Creek* (Atheneum, 1984), *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Atheneum, 1987), and *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* (Atheneum, 1990) have all been well received by critics and readers. But his other works have also garnered some acclaim. His first book, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of the Western Mind* (Peter Smith, 1978) was nominated for a National Book Award and received a Christopher Award; *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) received a Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award and a Governor's Award; his first novel, *The Sea Runners* (Penguin, 1983), was hailed by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the notable books of that year.

The late *Los Angeles Times* critic Robert Kirsh, wrote of *This House of Sky*: "The language begins in western territory and experience but in the hands of an artist it touches all landscape and all life. Doig is such an artist."

Doig stopped by the TBR office last September, when this interview took place.

The Bloomsbury Review: Let's start at the beginning and talk about growing up in Montana and what made you decide to write books? You majored in electronic journalism in college, didn't you?

Ivan Doig: I was a radio and TV major—never used it. And seeing the way television has gone, how thankful I am that I got lured off into newspaper and magazine work, and now books.

Let's see, growing up in Montana. My people were ranch hands, my dad was sometimes cowboy, sometimes sheepherder. My mother often worked with him as a ranch cook. And my grandmother, who ended up sharing in the raising of me after my mother died, she too was a ranch cook. And we sometimes did the western equivalent of sharecropping. My folks would run sheep "on shares," as we called it, which means we'd run them year-round, do the lambing, do the herding, whatever, for a certain share of whatever profit there was. Surprising the number of times it turned out there wasn't any. It's a pretty tough life.

My dad always preached education to me—of finding a way of life so that I wouldn't have to go through some of the things he had to, and trying to muscle out a life of ranches, always working for somebody else, usually somebody big who lived in Seattle or Minneapolis or somewhere.

But I can't remember when I couldn't read. My reading goes back farther than my memory. I was reading before I ever went to grade school. And so my interest in words, combined with my dad's propulsion and my own propulsion out of that ranch, sent me off into making a living with words, one way or another.

TBR: History is a big part of your writing. Is it a life-long interest?

ID: I suppose it is. I wasn't all that aware of it until I got to college. I went to journalism school at Northwestern and one of the thrusts of that journalism school was a lot of liberal arts. They really like to have their students take political science or history. So I ended up with enough history credits to have been a history major, actually. There were some excellent people on the faculty at Northwestern at that time. Ironically, I didn't take his course, but the great panjandrum of the West, Ray Billington, was still teaching his cowboys and Indians course at Northwestern, the guy who wrote the standard text that Patty Limerick and others are pulling to the ground now. He was on the campus all the while. I actually sat in on some of his lectures, auditing, seeing how things looked in other classrooms.

INTERVIEWER: Tom Auer is the publisher of *The Bloomsbury Review*.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Chris Bennion. © 1991.

Probably the original impulse behind the writing, I would think, would be family storytelling. My dad was a good storyteller, and we had somewhat of a self-contained history. He was born on the homestead in 1901, and his parents had come over from Scotland no more than ten years before. And so the entire compartment of American history of the Doigs was readily available, either in his memory or what he had heard from his parents. So there was kind of an immediate feel back through three generations, the full scope of us being in America and in the West.

TBR: Seems natural you would want to write about it.

ID: It seemed like the thing to do. Then I made a U-turn back to history from journalism. I thought I was going to be a journalism professor, but I wanted to try and bring some historical perspective to teaching journalism. As I looked around at the graduate degrees in journalism at that time, they were either business oriented or communications theory oriented. I thought of playing on both of those houses, and I thought neither had anything to interest me at all. So it became kind of an excuse to spend three years getting the Ph.D. in history.

TBR: What made you decide to switch to books? Were you tired of journalism?

ID: I magazine freelanced for almost ten years after I finished the Ph.D. Even during the Ph.D., I kept on writing, one way or another, freelancing little Sunday supplement pieces. And I began writing poetry. The mind finds its own self-defenses against seminars, and so I wrote some poetry. Turned out, I did not take a journalism job, which eventually came open in Indiana. I stayed on, because my wife had her community college professorship by that point. We decided to stay on in the Northwest. And I said, "OK, I'll keep on with magazine work, and start tinkering with books at the same time," in whatever spare time I could find.

I really was infatuated or in love with magazine work. I'd wanted to do that ever since a freshman in college, I suppose, and I sold my first piece when I was a sophomore. At the time, I liked the format very much, 1,500-2,000 words, and doing something new every week or two. And so I did that for nearly ten years, a couple of hundred magazine pieces, from regional magazines in the Seattle area to short pieces for *McCalls* and a number of travel pieces for *The New York Times*, but it got more and more financially preposterous. Inflation set in. Even writing for *The New York Times*, a place where I got marvelous editing. I don't know how they managed to do it, but by telephone, they could look down their nose at you, and say, "It's a nice piece, it just needs a few fixes." And their few fixes would be three days' to a week's worth of work, and by god, they would improve the piece by 30 to 50 percent. They really knew what they were doing. But, they were paying a flat fee of 250 bucks with no travel expenses, either. That's not very much money, but all the prestige you can imagine, I guess. What would have been my best market, so to speak, was an utter financial dead end.

And I had been gathering the material for *This House of Sky*, and working on it, trying things out for it, and decided in late 1976 to take a chunk of time, do a manuscript sample

of respectable length, maybe a third or a fourth of what I hoped the book would be, and really try it as a book writer.

A friend of mine in Seattle who'd been acting as my literary agent for the magazine stuff had never done any book stuff, but she undertook *This House of Sky* sample. And so in the summer of '77, Carol and I went to Montana and did the final research, went to all the places I had lived, and talked with a bunch of people and came home and wrote, finished up about the first 125 pages of manuscript in that sample. And in late '77, the agent sent them out half-a-dozen at a time to New York. We picked names out of *Literary Marketplace*, to senior editors, so it sounded like we knew what we were doing, and back began coming these remorseful, prestigious turn-downs. I've saved those letters: "This is really quite beautiful but we don't see any commercial prospect for it."

But the thirteenth editor was Carol Hale at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and she wrote back, "I like this, I have to get clearance one echelon above me, but I'll let you know within a week." And within a week, she sent us a contract for *This House of Sky*. So it only took about three months of actually sending out manuscript samples.

TBR: The book was quite a remarkable success, wasn't it?

ID: It was nominated for a National Book Award, won a Christopher Award and various regional awards, yeah. And its total sale is 110,000, most of it in paperback. It continues to sell about 10,000 copies a year. It's in, I think, its twelfth printing. It sells quite a lot in college courses now—western lit courses, and northwest lit courses, and some biography and autobiography courses. So *This House of Sky* really wrote my ticket for me, and it became evident even to me, even to a stubborn Scotsman, that magazines no longer were anywhere in the ballpark.

TBR: Having completed the trilogy, how does that feel? Is it relief or is there another book in there somewhere you wish you'd written?

ID: I don't feel any gap. I'm glad to have that amount of work behind me, a ten-year mountain of research is what it amounted to. A lot of it was fairly difficult research. I knew *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* was going to be tough, simply because the homestead period in Montana was so broad and sudden that historians really haven't managed to swim their way through the real sense of the homestead boom in Montana, which was by and large a twentieth-century phenomenon, from World War I on. Most of the real sense of that exists in the homestead papers back in the National Archives, literally hundreds of thousands of homestead entries, or in the homesteaders' reminiscences.

TBR: How did you go about that research?

ID: Once you have the description of the land, and the name involved, all of a sudden here it comes. My own grandfather's homestead claim is about sixty-five pages of stuff going across ten or twelve years of official wishy-washiness. A lot of other people's are somewhat similar. I started interviewing people in '83-84 for *Rascal Fair*, people who'd been kids on the homesteads around World War I or even a little before. Those people are still alive, fairly old people. And I found a surprising number of them to talk to and gathered material from them, and from a good oral history project by the Montana Historical Society, and quite a number of letter collections or people writing reminiscences for their children, particularly people who had emigrated to this country, Danes for instance. I have a Danish character, Dick, who has a Danish grandfather. And so I was able to draw on some of that for the trilogy.

TBR: Idiomatic language is a very important element in your books.

ID: Actually, I see it as the element. The history and the characterization and so forth, those are all fine and obviously important to me, but I think the language is the constant orbit or magnetic force that has me doing all this. That's what really interests me constantly in the writing. History and characters, sure they're interesting, but what I enjoy more are the interesting turns of language as you deal with the history and characters.

TBR: What made you decide to leave Montana? Many of your books are based there. You obviously love the land. But you haven't lived there for twenty-one years.

ID: By the time I left, when I got on the train to go to college, I didn't know it was going to be for good, but in a sense, it was. I was back the next five summers working ranch jobs and so forth, but once I lit into that school of journalism in Evanston, pretty promptly, inoculated with ambition and sense of craft and wanting to get out and work with words, Montana faded pretty promptly for me then. The jobs weren't there, jobs still aren't there unless you're really willing to be professionally underemployed, if you're going to work in journalism. Some people who are doing it are pretty happy, some who are doing it are only semi-happy, I've discovered in talking with them.

In essence, I went to college as an economic refugee from Montana. I had an aging and ill father and grandmother, and I was an only kid. It didn't take too many smarts to see that somebody had better get an income in this family.

A point that's often missed, and I'm going to have to kick some historians in the shins or something, is that agricultural people didn't used to be covered by social security. It wasn't until, I think, the sixties that ranch workers and farmhands were brought under social security. They

(Continued on page 20)

only you can love, what is distinctive to you. Then, I think, writers should go on their way and do it.

TBR: I was probably halfway through the book before I flipped to the back and saw that you had studied and taught writing. I had a sense of an author with a natural gift, a sense for sharp fragments, how to lay them out, how to make them fit in dialogue and so forth. I had this image of you as a rough-hewn guy, like you look in your picture, out in the woods. When I read that writing was your occupation, that you had studied it, I thought, "Ah, it's craft. He's sitting back and doing this with that editorial sense." It shifted my perception of you.

SP: Well, I think all that work made it possible to make it less craft and more a spontaneous expression, a kind of imaginative experience. That's what it was all for. Every time I sit down to write I think, "I'm glad I worked as hard as I did because now I'm able to easily capture my imagination, to sort of plug into it."

In teaching, you can make too much of the question of craft, too much of the question of good writing instead of expression, instead of vision with integrity and individuality. I don't want writing to seem to any student of mine like something dry, like something clinical, like something that isn't spontaneous and immediate and alive, because that's what it is. And if school is going to take that away from them, they shouldn't be in school. And if they think they can remain individual and alive and brave, brave enough to say what they see or try to get at it, then they can go to school. They have to realize always that their teachers don't know half, or can't communicate half, of what they will eventually need to know to write.

I remember once I showed a story to Tim O'Brien when he came to Utah. And he gave it back with a lot of things crossed out and changed. I learned an incredible amount about economizing just from what he turned out. And I said, "My God, you mean I missed all that? How do you do it?" And he said, "Oh I've got this friend in Boston who reads everything that I do and gives it back looking exactly like this." And maybe workshops help to make connections too, establish friendships, the kinds of reliable readers that can tell you when you're not doing what you should be doing, or when you're doing it well, or how to make it better.

TBR: Do you ever, when you're writing, put yourself in the place of the reader to see how it's working? Do you imagine the reader seeing you as the author behind the work?

SP: I may after this, after going on this tour with this book—going public—because suddenly this book is a representation of me. I mean, it represents me in a certain way. I never thought that way before. It was this creation that had its own life that was something that would function independently from me. And I'm glad I looked at it that way. By the same token, I don't think for a minute that I ever could have separated myself from this enough in the writing to have had any clear notion of how it would really be read. You can only guess.

TBR: Do you still like it as much as when you were writing it? Do you have the same sort of affection for it as when it was yours and only yours?

SP: It's different. There are parts where there is a celebration of spirit and imagination and potential that's really wonderful, and I'm moved by that. I care deeply about that, and I'm glad that everybody holding this is going to know those moments. There are things in here that I think are pretty hard-hitting.

I'm thinking of Tom Wolfe's criticism that we're not dealing with real people on the American landscape. If I remember correctly, his criticism was that we're sort of missing the great issues of our time. I might argue we're missing some of the significant types of our time, characters of our time, the cultural aspects of our time.

TBR: Truman Capote once said that he didn't like to read anything he'd ever written because he kept editing it, and I found it to be true; I can't read my book. I keep fixing it in my mind. When you look at *Sirens*, can you leave it alone?

SP: I read a big chunk of it before we left on this tour, and I read the ending in the car on the way over here. It's really the first time I've read it when I couldn't change it, and that was an interesting experience. There were times when I wanted to go back and look at the original and see if, when they typeset it, they didn't screw up!

TBR: How do you feel about the fact that it came out in trade paperback rather than hardcover?

SP: I feel wonderful about it. I had been a big admirer of Vintage Books, and when my agent said they were interested in buying it I was thrilled to be in such wonderful

company. I admire their writers a lot; I think being published in paper meant probably a larger first printing.

TBR: You made *Carlos* a writer. Why? It was a leap for his character, in my mind. Not that it didn't work, but it was a jump.

SP: It calls for the willing suspension of . . .

TBR: Disbelief.

SP: In an earlier draft I had him—as a kid in a program for delinquents—take a brief writing class and write some story about a kid who's on Mars or some damn thing. I cut that out because I felt like it didn't need to be pushed, and I didn't want to call attention to it either. I did believe that language, for him, had become almost his last opportunity to construct himself. At some point he says: The secret is to define yourself before somebody else does. □

Women & Aliens (Continued from page 1)

OSHA and EAP regulation (toxic wastes are being dumped into border rivers) and trade unions seem mainly to fear the continuing loss of domestic jobs. In spite of the president's effort to make opposition a token of radical bias, one is not convinced that the proponents of free trade have the people's interests at heart, Mexican or American, and the concerns that loom are well summarized by Nathan:

... more and more, late twentieth-century capitalism everywhere is basing its survival and growth on making people work for long hours at rock bottom wages without unions or occupational safety or decent housing or environmental controls—in other words, violating tenets of human decency and dignity whose enactment into reality and statute was part of the historical project of the past century. This spiralling descent into neo-barbarism suggests that to mind their countries' fortunes, both the District of Columbia and the Distrito Federal are beginning to depend on the same illegality they used to sniff at when considering the border. Does such a turnabout then mean that life on the lawless frontera is actually the avant-garde of our larger cosmopolitan manana? □

Ivan Doig (Continued from page 9)

were deliberately excluded in the original social security act. So in essence, a lot of people, such as my family, had no pension in sight. You either had what you could save or what we used to call the poor farm, or you'd hope to have a kid with enough brains to go out and get some sort of living. That was still a factor in our lives when I went off to college in '57, that as far as we knew, no one was going to have any social security income. And that's really been overlooked, but it affected a lot of people, certainly of my parent's generation, and it affected a lot of people in my generation. One of the reasons we have these scars on our fingers is from scrambling to find jobs outside of Montana.

So I wasn't aware of all that much choice. Once I could see that I was going to make it somehow in journalism, I stayed with the jobs in newspapering and magazine work for a while. By the time we got to Seattle, my wife's job was in the picture. She's a community college professor. She's been at the same place now for more than twenty years.

TBR: You dedicated your new book to Wallace Stegner. Is he a friend or an influence or both?

ID: He's more influence than friend. We've only met face to face once. We correspond a bit. We have an odd loop of commonality. My primary professor in history, Vernon Carstensen, was Stegner's roommate back at Iowa State, I guess it was, in graduate school back there, and so *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* was dedicated to Carstensen. But it was primarily a matter of Stegner as being, by god, "statesman of us all" out here. He's written in so many fields, written across such a spectrum of the West, fiction and nonfiction, and has said so many of the things that we wish we could say, that somebody needed to say. And, by god, he has said them wonderfully. And I thought it kind of behooved me—as one of the rare western writers who was not a Stegner student—to stick in a dedication. It's been the most popular part of the book. A lot of people have commented on it. It's a bestselling dedication.

TBR: Who are some of the writers of the American West whom you have strong feelings about?

ID: Let me name a few and then say that I don't concentrate all that much on reading writers of the American West. I see myself in a kind of lineage, not literarily, but just personally, I guess, with Stegner, Mari Sandoz, and all the way back to Hamlin Garland—all of us having grown up in outback places, gotten out and become people who made a living at writing. As you know, it was homesteads in

Garland's and Sandoz' and Stegner's cases. I'm one generation away from the homestead—my dad was born on one—so in terms of kinship, I go back to that. *Old Jules* (University of Nebraska) of Sandoz, I think, is a marvelous book, one that I read and reread. Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (University of Nebraska, 1980) is probably my favorite book of his. And *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917, University of Nebraska, 1979), I think, is a very fine, neglected book by Garland.

I have a poet friend in Seattle, Madeline DeFrees, who taught with Richard Hugo at Missoula. Madeline writes poems about "imaginary ancestors" [see review, page 7]. So if I would choose imaginary ancestors, it would be that trio, I think, purely from a professional point of view, rather from a literary theory point of view.

But the writers I think I read and look at are more writers out in, say, the old British empire. I've been reading Nadine Gordimer, for instance, and Thomas Kineally, and some of the other Australians, just to see how wild imaginations sometimes can get with the Australians. And the incredible sense of moral character that comes up off Nadine Gordimer's pages, of course. I've been reading Ismael Kadare, an Albanian writer whose work is starting to be published here. I was just knocked out by *Chronicle in Stone* (New Amsterdam, 1987), his first book. And I'm halfway through *Broken April* (New Amsterdam, 1990) right now. It's really good stuff. Language is what I'm after. Language, I think, is really the territory I read more and about. I go back and read Conrad and Faulkner.

TBR: What about landscape and the elements of nature, which are also a big part of your writing? Any influences there?

ID: Scholars and theorists may see more in it than I do, but I see landscape as a motherlode of metaphor for a writer. I found that in my two books set out on the Pacific Coast, that the ocean and the coast served somewhat the same way as the Rocky Mountain front in the trilogy and *This House of Sky*. There are these monumental facts of nature, weather pouring in over and around them and so forth, and it just seems to me marvelous chances to work with metaphor in describing the landscape.

I tend to preach a little bit against the notion of western writers as mainly presenting a sense of place. I think, by god, we're presenting some pretty good characters. It's true that landscape is in the work of a lot of very prominent western writers, but you get characters like Paul Maclean in Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (University of Chicago, 1976), characters such as Jim Welch's nameless narrator in *Winter in the Blood* (Penguin, 1986), and the characters in *Fool's Crow* (Viking, 1986). Louise Erdrich has communities full of some of the liveliest characters in American literature. It just seems to me that we're not writing travelogues out here, and the sense of place kind of obscures that a little bit.

TBR: What are you working on next? What do we have to look forward to?

ID: Well, an unexpected book back towards family territory. A book that is going to fit in ahead of the time frame of *This House of Sky*, looking at my mother's life. She died when I was six; she was thirty-two. I inquired around to what was left of the family at the time I was working on *This House of Sky*, did anyone have any letters or whatever? Nobody came up with anything. But four years ago, one of my uncles died, and I got a batch of letters from the last six months of her life, and the last six months of World War II, as well.

So here's my uncle Wally out on a destroyer in the South Pacific, and he gets these letters from my mother. There's a geographic shift down the spine of the Rockies. The letters start in Arizona, where my folks had gone in the winter of '44-45, for the sake of her asthma, and for my dad to take a job in a defense plant, an aircraft factory down there. These letters seem to me to show a family not really knowing what it's going to do, but making the decision somewhere in there against the sunbelt life. Back we go to Montana, back we go to her death as well.

What she's talking about in these letters brings up in me some half-memories, family stories and so forth that I think can make a short, intense, maybe edgy kind of book about a woman growing up in the West in the twenties and thirties, who happens to have been my mother.

TBR: It must have been quite an experience to come across those letters.

ID: Yea, it was pretty potent. Along with them are letters of my dad and my grandmother, after her death, as they began fighting over me. So the great sorrow of seeing what these people were going through at that time, that was pretty potent, yeah. But that's the kind of propellant that a writer wants. □

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Los Angeles Times 3/3/92, P. E5

Truth Emerges in Writer's Love of Lingo

■ **Books:** Ivan Doig, author of a trilogy about a Western family and other books, creates scenes that 'come right up off the page and get you.'

By BRAD KNICKERBOCKER
THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

Toward the end of "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana," the third in Ivan Doig's 100-year trilogy about the McCaskill family, there's a 30-second scene in which a character jumps out of a Winnebago fueling up at a gas station, runs over to the sign for "Air & Water" and grease-pencils the other two ancient Greek elements, "Earth & Fire."

It's a wonderful bit of whimsy, an example of what novelist Doig calls the "crocodile factor" designed to "come right up off the page and get you." And it's just one of the things that makes him one of the most readable and productive authors from that vast expanse of real estate west of the 100th meridian today generating some of the very best American writers.

To read Doig's fiction, to hear him speak wisdom and wit to a gathering of historians in Sparks, Nev., and to discuss his craft over a meal or two is to learn of a man with a passion for language, for the minutiae of life and historical accuracy and especially for "the lingo" of his characters—"the tongues that express their lives."

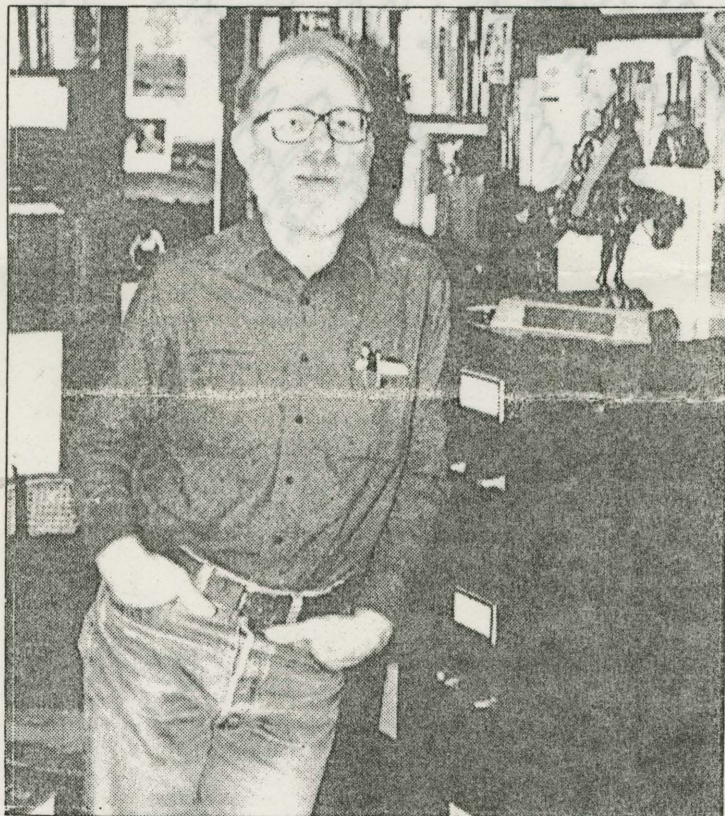
Doig's career as a writer took off a dozen years ago with "This House of Sky," reminiscences about his early life in Montana. Since then he has produced five more highly acclaimed books, including the Two Medicine trilogy (named for the river near where much of it takes place).

On Ivan Doig's sixth birthday, when he was living with his parents in a sheep-herding camp on the front range of the Rocky Mountains, where his grandfather had moved from Scotland, his father woke him to say the boy's mother had died in the night. For the next few years, father and son bounced around Western towns and ranches before settling down with Doig's maternal grandmother as homemaker.

By the time he was 16 and spending most of his summers on a horse tending sheep in the high country, Doig knew that he wanted to be a writer and that he had to get out of Montana—beautiful as it was—to succeed. He won a full scholarship to Northwestern University, worked on a newspaper in Downstate Illinois, then did magazine editing in Chicago, where he also picked up a master's degree before heading back out West.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, he earned a doctorate in history (he says graduate school cured him of any desire to teach), then spent an enjoyable but lean decade as a free-lance magazine writer while his wife, Carol, earned most of the family income teaching at a community college.

Like the fictional character who completed the gas station list of elements in "Mariah Montana," Doig found journalistic writing too limiting. But his training as a



BRAD KNICKERBOCKER / Christian Science Monitor

The sound of the language—"the shimmer behind the plot" feeding the "delicious hunger of the ear"—fascinates author Ivan Doig.

historian and newspaperman left him with the strong need to fill his fiction with accurate details from real life, including the spoken word—the earth of daily human affairs and the fire of speech.

In researching the 1889 trans-Atlantic trip of 19-year-olds Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay for "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" (the first book, chronologically, in the trilogy), Ivan and Carol went to Glasgow (to the very pier from which his grandfather, Peter Doig, had departed), pored over emigrant letters at the University of St. Andrews and looked up steamship blueprints and investigative reports on the conditions poor travelers endured in steerage.

Later, he dug back into Depression-era Works Progress Administration writers' files in Montana to learn how Anaconda Copper smeltermen, cattle ranchers and sheep ranchers talked in the early part of the century. The sound of the spoken word is very important to him—"the shimmer behind the plot" feeding the "delicious hunger of the ear." He was careful to have the two Scotsmen gradually lose their burr over the 30 years of "Rascal Fair."

When he wanted to include scenes about fighting fires, he had four forest rangers check his manuscript for details. He photocopied old Forest Service cookbooks so he would know what it was like to cook for 75 men in the woods.

"I'm always looking for details," he says. "The details are what the skeins of life germinate out of." He loves to repeat Vladimir Nabokov's instruction to students at Cornell University that they must write "with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

In a spare bedroom office he shares with his wife at home in Seattle, Doig works at an old gray Royal typewriter. The remem-

brances of Scots ancestors are in his sandy hair and beard. Just back from 50 book readings and signings in San Francisco, Boston, Washington, Chicago and Minnesota, he relaxes in jeans, a red-striped shirt and Birkenstocks.

Shelved around him are his favorite writers, including Wallace Stegner, Nadine Gordimer, John Steinbeck, Isak Dinesen, Edward Hoagland, Robinson Jeffers, Loren Eiseley, Beryl Markham, Eudora Welty, Frank O'Connor, Joseph Conrad, Barbara Tuchman, Gretel Ehrlich and William Faulkner. Contemporary Western historians Patricia Nelson Limerick and Donald Worster are there. So is "The Songwriter's Rhyming Dictionary" by Sammy Kahn.

"I like people who dance on the page," he says, leaning back in his chair. "Anybody hip-deep in love with the language." One of his characters in "Mariah Montana" says, "Language is the light that comes out of us."

But "with nine-tenths of the ink of this century now expended," he told the Western historians in Nevada, "modern American fiction in terms of originality and staying power still adds up to 'Faulkner and the rest of us.'"

On another shelf, just next to where he writes, are his notebooks: "Comparison and Description," "Ideas," "Lingo," "Anecdotes," "Phrasing" and "Technique." Bits and pieces waiting to be worked into future projects.

His next book, which will focus on his mother (based on letters to an uncle during World War II, interviews with family members and his dim recollections as a small boy), will feature "deliberate dreams."

"It's the only way I can think of to get at what might have gone on beyond what I can hear and see," he explains. When it comes right

down to it, he admits, "a lot of style and technique is best guess." Then, too, "the alchemy of language carries with it the high probability of fizzle."

Of the growing recognition of contemporary literature coming out of the American West, he says: "I think there are enough classy writers west of St. Paul that scholars will eventually have to write about them as a group, as they did about the Southern fugitives."

The thing that connects many of these writers, he acknowledges, is love of the spectacular landscape. "But I don't agree that that's our strongest muscle," he says.

"The language, the style, the craft is of such a skill that I don't see why this kind of travelogue tag is at all justified. I mean, Louise Erdrich is a world-class writer—the equivalent of Robert Penn Warren. Jim Welch in 'Fools Crow' has produced a truly great book. Bill Kittredge has been a unique writer. I mean, this is increasingly fine stuff and, even if it appeared on a barren planet, it would be unique writing."

Yet Doig and many of his contemporaries do connect with the land and worry about what's become of it over the past century or so.

"It is saddening that a lot of what we tried in the West—with reasonably good intentions—has not worked out," he says. "Plowing up the prairies was not a good idea. Pulling up the ore and running it poisonously through smelter stacks turns out not to have been a good idea. Damming up every river or any consequence except the Yellowstone hasn't been a good idea either."

"So the stance many of us write from out here is 'Wait a minute, we'd better try something else.' In "Mariah Montana," Jick McCaskill arranges to protect his land when he retires from sheep ranching without selling out to developers or a big agribusiness spread.

The result of Ivan Doig's passion for detail and "the lingo" is more than the sum of the parts. Much more, and it comes through more obviously in the clear personality and especially the sound character of the people we meet.

He has been described by one reviewer as "the most hopeful of writers—not blindly optimistic but deeply humanistic." A friend of mine wrote recently: "Over the past year I read most of his books and just fell in love with his characters and their goodness, and of course his descriptions of the West."

Another says she slows down when she gets near the end of Doig novel because she doesn't want it to end. Not to worry. He's got many productive years ahead of him and plenty of history to mine—with passion and precision.



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