The Language of

IVAN DOIG

by Larry Olpin

The joy of reading Ivan Doig is in the language. Doig’s writing skillfully mixes a colloquial Western idiom with a poetic prose that is distinctively his own yet has the quality of the universal that is the province of the best writers. Doig’s array of books, ranging from his memoirs to histories to novels, contains his rich, apt voice, making his books absorbing reading whether he is writing about the history of the Forest Service, the nuts and bolts of the Fort Peck Dam, or a romantic scene in a turn-of-the-century Montana school.

Ivan Doig has received considerable attention and acclaim. This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind (1978) was nominated for a National Book Award. In 1989 he was given the Western Literature Association Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work. He has always had a significant number of devoted readers, and it is impossible not to believe that as more people read him and he continues to add to his work, more honors are not in the offing.

Although each of the eight major works of Ivan Doig is singularly different, their roots can all be found in his first book, the autobiographical This House of Sky, published when Doig was 40 years old. Doig’s sense of place in rural Montana and his focus on sheep country are at the book’s center. Many people who touched the author’s youth appear in the story, but two characters loom above the rest: his father, Charlie Doig, and his maternal grandmother, Bessie Ringer. They come together in an unusual, often trying, but oddly effective family relationship to raise the young boy. Charlie and Bessie are characters who fasten in the mind and certainly suggest that the author could create vital, believable fictional characters.

This House of Sky begins with Doig’s sixth birthday and the death of his mother, and ends with the deaths of his father and grandmother, leading to a final short, lyrical confrontation between the author and death that supplies a poetic summary to the entire memoir. These defining events surround many other memorable moments in the book. A few that stand out in my mind are Charlie’s introduction of his son to saloon life in Montana, and the lonely world of the sheep camp, with its fragile hold on both the land the temperamental and always-prone-to-dying sheep. One especially important scene comes when young Ivan, struggling to save newly-born sheep from a freezing spring rain, decides very emphatically that whatever his life might become it “would not include more seasons of sheep or that vast gambling table of Blackfeet rangeland.”

It is difficult to choose what is best rendered in this multidimensional book, but if pushed I would argue for the author’s portrayal of his father. The events of the book are controlled by the events in Charlie’s life, in the loss of his young wife, a mines- alliance and brief marriage to another woman, and finally in a permanent alliance with his first wife’s mother. It is Charlie’s speech that gives the book much of its substance. Everything he says is informed with a kind of folk wisdom and just a touch of humor. There is the bewilderment when he finally realizes that his bright son will be off to college and then the proud claim that he and
Bessie will "back him all the way." Later there is his pleasure in showing off an article about the Western rodeo and his exclamation "that boy of mine sure can write." The portrayal ends with a moving description of Charlie's death, when this once hard-working man succumbs to debilitation and then death from emphysema. *This House of Sky* is an autobiography of Ivan Doig, but it is very much Charlie Doig's book.

With the backing of his father and grandmother, Doig left the rigors of Montana sheep country to go off to Northwestern University in Chicago, where he received a B.A. and an M.A. in journalism. His first job was at a small newspaper in Decatur, Illinois where he soon found that, although he could write four editorials a day, he was not all that fond of newspaper work. Nor did he like the Midwest, where he felt hemmed in by cornfields rather than surrounded by mountains.

Thus he and his new wife, Carol, headed for Seattle to the University of Washington, where he planned to indulge his bookish inclination and become a professor. He did receive a Ph.D. in history, but just as the young boy with the sheep in the freezing spring rain learned what he did not want to do, so the young academic decided that "What graduate school taught me, was that I didn't want to be on a university faculty." He turned away from potential security, choosing instead the uncertain life of the professional writer. The result was several years of freelance journalism, then *This House of Sky*, followed by a steady production of remarkable books.

Doig's second book, *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (1980), focuses on the life and diaries of James Gilchrist Swan who, in the middle of the Nineteenth century, left his home and family in Boston to live in the farthest reaches of the Pacific Northwest, on the coast of Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The book moves deliberately, at a pace that somehow catches the slow rhythms of Swan's life among the Indians and the stark and forbidding beauty of this "edge" of America. Of all Doig's books this is the most likely to get mixed reactions from readers. It can be tedious, especially in the beginning. The author's portrayal of his visit to the area and his attempt to merge himself with the scene of Swan's diaries thus making a connection with Swan as a "winter brother" does not quite work. What does work, however, is Doig's rendering of the seemingly tireless jottings of Swan, who recorded everything he observed in the smallest detail but never bothered to say much, directly about himself or his own feelings. The reader must supply the emotion, and in doing so becomes a winter brother to this solitary soul.

*The Sea Runners* (1982) is Doig's third book and first novel. By most accounts it is the most difficult of his books to find in a first edition. The novel revisits the northern Pacific coast of Winter Brothers and tells the story of four Scandinavian workers who in 1853...
In Mariah Montana, Jack asks, "Why should memory forever own us the way it does?"

A point worth mentioning about Mariah Montana has to do with the dust jacket on the front of her book. For those who value the appearance of a book, it would seem right that the dust jackets of the trilogy would at least match. Whether the dust jacket art, Doig's comment is simple and honest: "We made a mistake." This book was heavily digested, so collectors can still afford to be choosy about their copies. The dust jackets aside, the three novels of Doig's Montana trilogy, though different from one another in conception and subject matter, all bear the distinct stamp of his style, and form a coherent body of literature in their sense of language, character and, most of all, place. Each of the books stands on its own as a novel, but they are so integrated that reading one makes the others more enjoyable. The trilogy, along with This House of Sky, represent the best of Doig's work to date.

For his sixth book Doig returned to the world of This House of Sky and the days of his childhood. Memories of his mother, who he never really knew, were triggered by letters to her brother that the author received after his uncle's death. For two years, Doig (1993), a memoir based on his mother's life, a tale that is more memory—even than reality. To read this short book is to return to the world of Doig's father, Charlie, and his maternal grandmother, Bessie Ringer, as much as it is to remember his mother. It reminds us how big a role her carvers play, both explicitly mentioned and subtly suggested, plays in the author's works. In May 1997, he demanded: "Why should memory forever own us the way it does?" and later would say: "all this monkeys around with the past."

But Doig speaks against his character here. The impact of Heart Earth is achieved in "monkeying around" with the past, in creating the sense of a past remembered and one fabricated from few letters from long ago.

Doig's latest novel, Bucking the System (1996), begins with the mysterious drowning in a pickup truck of two naked people, both of whom are named Duff and both of whom are married, but not to one another. The central mystery is not unravelled until the end of the book, but before this Doig creates a remarkably diversified Duff family and a sense of Montana during the Great Depression. The book's driving historical fact is the building of the earthen Fort Peck Dam in northeastern Montana and the communities that sprang up around the project. In a way this is new territory for Doig. It is a murder mystery with a well-drawn law officer by the name of Carl Kinnich, a man we watch grow old and frustrated in the novel. In its most important aspects, however, the book once again comprises a look at historical Montana and the creation of characters out of its fabric. What is most striking here, however, is Doig's ability to make even the moving of mud from place to place captivating. (An early testimony to the author's method: when a topic is found in a scene in This House of Sky. Doig tells of a note attached to his graduate thesis by one of his research advisors: "People used to stand on the dock in New York and wait for the latest installment of The Pickwick Papers. With something of the same anticipation, I've waited for and read the chapters of your thesis.") It is easy to understand the author's feelings, for so it is with those of us who find Ivan Doig's work so satisfying.
April 28, 1997

Ivan Doig
17021 Tenth Avenue N. W.
Seattle, WA 98177

Dear Ivan,

I decided to address you as Ivan although I don't mind calling you Mr. Doig. But it doesn't seem right for you to call me professor and after all, it is the 90s. And I have spent a good deal of time with you in those books of yours.

Firsts magazine has some good editors, but they did fuss with what I thought were some of my best lines. A case in point, I wanted to say you'd rather be hemmed in by mountains than cornfields, and they said something quite different. But oh well... I hope you enjoy the article. I certainly enjoyed writing.

Best wishes

Larry Olpin

Dear Larry--

Excuse the postcard mode, but I wanted to thank you for the FIRSTS piece before I go out of town a bit. I was pleasantly surprised (and I imagine you were) that it hit print as promptly as it did; it was less than a year ago that you made the long drive to Prairie Lights, wasn't it, and it seems to me it was last fall when you were doing your writing and researching. Anyway, I thought you did well be me in the article, I'm glad to have my books parsed to the collectors that way, and I hope you had some pleasure as well as professional attainment out of doing the piece. All best wishes; by the way, I've heard from your brother and while I couldn't go on the board he wanted me to, I've duly noted his Utah whereabouts; maybe we'll all cross paths there sometime.

Sincerely,