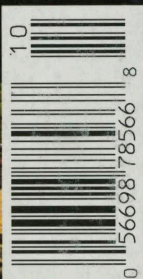


INSIDE: WATERFALLS • FOREST FIRE!

MONTANA

M A G A Z I N E

DISPLAY UNTIL
NOVEMBER 20, 2000



\$3.95 USA
\$5.99 CANADA

IVAN DOIG
DEEP IN
HEART'S EARTH

THE GEOGRAPHY OF RISK

BY DON SNOW

Memory is a kind of homesickness, and like homesickness, it falls short of the actualities on almost every count.

—from *THIS HOUSE OF SKY*

IT'S THE LONGEST DAY OF THE YEAR. I SIT OVER DINNER WITH MY DAUGHTER IN CHOTEAU'S Log Cabin Cafe. Hot rays of the sun stream through the windows next to our table, and though the hour is now 6:30 P.M., it feels like noon. The Teton County courthouse looms next to us where the main street divides and circles the lush public lawn. A block away, dozens of kids splash and squeal in the municipal swimming pool. Our waitress—kind, pretty, businesslike—keeps wanting to close the blinds, but I won't let her. There's a scene outside that has me riveted, lost in the dream-state that comes over me at unexpected moments.

The summer-sharp sky we can see through these windows is filled with twinkling. A breeze rattles the leaves of nearby cottonwoods, and the twinkling is cottonwood down, the fluffy stuff favored by goldfinches to line their nests. I follow the silver flashes into a reverie on the ingenuity of nature—how she finds her way around every problem. Build a tree that fills the sky with fragrance and holds fast the crumbly river banks of arid country. Make the tree so it can reproduce itself in more than one way. Give it sucker staffs to sprout from mother root and search eventually for sky. Give it also tiny seeds as light as baby-breath to be carried into forever in little pillows of down.

My daughter, accustomed to her father's sudden absences, quietly asks, "What are you looking at?"

And I say suddenly, astonishing even myself, "The way the Doig family blew all around this country."

For the past two days we've been on the trail of Ivan Doig, visiting the places where he lived, getting lost on winding red roads into the ranchers' outback, dreaming through the windows of broken-down sheep camp shacks, and trying to imagine the life. Doig has done something



TIM EGAN PHOTO

LEFT: Near Fort Logan, north of White Sulphur Springs

BELOW: Ewe and lambs

PRECEDING PAGES: Rocky Mountain Front, near Heart Butte

Dupuyer and the Two Medicine River.

THIS HOUSE OF SKY tenderly and unsentimentally tells the story of Charlie Doig's reaction to Berneta's death—how he took the reins of Ivan's upbringing with a natural grace punctuated by wrenching episodes of grief. The book follows Charlie and the boy through the sheep and cow camps, the ranches and haymeadows, where Ivan's omni-competent father was valued for his abilities to bend both livestock and men. *Skill*

Yet he owned no land, no ranch of his own. The Doigs were among the thousands of dispossessed whose ancestors had come into the country to homestead. Natives of the Scottish pasturelands around Dundee, the first of Ivan Doig's people came to the Big Belt Mountains in the 1890s and took up a homestead in a spot called Tierney Basin. *Two deep Caledonian notions seem to have pulled them so far into the hills: to raise sheep, and to graze them on mountain grass which cost nothing.* As Charlie Doig would later remark to his son, "*Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out.*"

But as Doig acidly observes, *The homestead sites...turned out not to be the seed acres for yeoman farms...nor*

magnificent, I tell my fifteen-year-old. He has managed to bring a full and rich articulation into an utterly mute countryside.

When you travel through places like Dupuyer and Valier, Ringling and White Sulphur Springs, you can sense, but cannot hear, a maddeningly rich story-base emanating from the land. There are few buildings to announce the contours of culture; there are no crowds seething with faces that proclaim the poetics of place. There is only sky, prairie, mountain, wind, and the scattering of domiciles that often seem forbidding in their isolation. You sense but never hear the stories that seem to vibrate from the roots of those short, nutritious grasses. The point is, the stories are human artifacts, and animal tales, sometimes maybe even the Millennial Saga of Clouds. But until the storyteller comes along, the land lies muffled—like a queen mummy, beautiful but mute.

Ivan Doig was exactly the right

man at exactly the right time. Reading him, one gets the sense that he was born to write, to become the voice who would raise the story of the land. And yes, on first reading, so much of it seems like merely the story of a few families, a few humble souls who walked, or rode, with eyes open into the sharp teeth of Montana. But the more of him you read, and the deeper in you let it go, the more you begin to realize: this man is an oracle. He speaks the truth of his own small experience growing up among the people he calls the "lariat proletariat," yet the truth resonates through time and across humanity. Through his words, the mute countryside opens its mouth and sings.

AT 2:30 IN THE MORNING OF June 27, 1945, Ivan Doig's sixth birthday, his mother died. An asthmatic all her life, the thirty-one-year-old Berneta Ringer Doig succumbed suddenly and shockingly to a heart condition

that had long been masked by her asthma. Her death came at a sheepherders' cabin built first as a homestead in a high meadow of the Big Belt range. It may have been the elevation that triggered her heart failure. *Swift, the attack by which she died. Not the customary siege of short breath, the jolting coughs and lung convulsions, the air-short fatigue that she had ridden out so many times before...Nowhere ever written, then or since, was the simultaneous fact of earth: the acrobat heights of Montana earth that had kept her so alive, until they killed her.* Her death set in motion one of the finest stories ever told by a western American writer—the family story developed in Doig's two memoirs, *THIS HOUSE OF SKY* and *HEART EARTH*.

These books form a rich chronicle of growing up in two places: the high, cold ranch country around White Sulphur Springs and the Big Belt Mountains, and the more mythic and faraway north country that encompasses the landscapes between

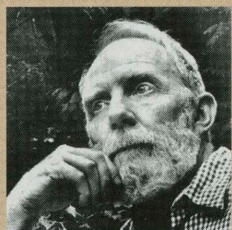


CHUCK HANEY PHOTO

with horses and cattle and sheep was one thing; Dad had those talents, but so did every tenth or twentieth young drifter who came along. The rare thing in the valley was to be able to handle men. Ranch crews were a hard commodity, a gravel mix of drifters, drinkers, gripers, not a few mental cripples, and an occasional steady worker... Along with muscle and feistiness, Dad had a knack of handling tasks around a crew reasonably, almost gently.

the first pastures of tidy family ranches. They turned out to be the landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else. Corporate ranchers and capitalists, not impoverished yeomen, ended up with most of the ranch land near the Doig homestead. By the time Charlie Doig came of age, the land was lost, and that most cherished dream of the westering settler—to own a

FYI



MARION ETTINGER PHOTO

Books and memoirs by Ivan Doig

- THIS HOUSE OF SKY* (1978)
- WINTER BROTHERS* (1980)
- THE SEA RUNNERS* (1982)
- ENGLISH CREEK* (1984)
- DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR* (1987)
- RIDE WITH ME, MARIAH MONTANA* (1990)
- HEART EARTH* (1993)
- BUCKING THE SUN* (1996)
- MOUNTAIN TIME* (1999)



RICHARD MOUSEL PHOTO

LEFT: Cottonwoods in bottomlands along Missouri River
BELOW: A band of sheep at home in Montana
FACING PAGE: Two Medicine River, north of Valier

place—had begun to die. Charlie did the next best thing: ranching on shares. He offered the labor to run jointly owned sheep and cattle on someone else's land. The best new hope was a tidy profit at the end of a season. But weather and predators often killed even that dream.

After Berneta's death, Charlie Doig, though no great drinker, sought solace and conversation among the nine saloons of White Sulphur Springs. He often took young Ivan along, to listen in on the conversations among the ranchhands and stockmen. The little wordsmith-to-be eagerly lapped it up, then stored it in a special bin of the mind. In 1978, with the publication of Doig's first memoir, those witticisms and colloquialisms, and lots of that raw knowledge of place, came pouring out in an astonishing literary outburst. Eight books to follow would only reaffirm the perfection of Doig's ear for spoken language.

With no place of their own, the Doigs blew from spot to spot like cottonwood fluff. Soured on a series of bum deals in White Sulphur and Ringling, Charlie uprooted Ivan and headed for the country around Dupuyer. By now, Berneta's mother Bessie Ringer had joined

in a parenting and working partnership that resembled marriage. While Charlie and Bessie scratched out a living on a lopsided former homestead south of town, Ivan reassumed a pattern that had become familiar: during the school year, he boarded with a family in town. The winters were too bitter, and the roads and automobiles too unreliable, to risk his chances for a decent education. There were times when Charlie had been snowbound for weeks on one of his remote sheep allotments.

Boarded with the Chadwick family in Dupuyer, just six miles north of the ranch, Ivan was a student at Valier High School. It was there that he met the redoubtable Frances Car-

son Tidyman, a kind of intellectual force of nature, who came garbed in the vestments of the Latin teacher. *At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clopped from class to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like Grandma with a half more plumped on all around; her moulding in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses wanted to contain. Leaning forward at the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner's lusty figurehead prowling over a lazy sea.* It was Mrs. Tidyman who recognized the remarkable verbal intelligence of the red-headed boy from Dupuyer—and Mrs. Tidyman, along with Charlie and Bessie, who urged the boy on to college at Chicago's Northwestern University.

And to that, we may all say, God bless Mrs. Tidyman.

TIM EGAN PHOTO



RICK & SUSIE GRAETZ PHOTO

I WANT MY DAUGHTER ALONG ON this writer's-trail-trek for several reasons, but the main one is simple enough: I love spending time with her. She's a sprightly minded teen with a killer sense of humor and a knack for decent conversation. Even with me.

As we approach Valier and I mount my professorial description of how the Carey Act created Lake Francis, and Lake Francis created Valier, she yawns, then suddenly pops out, "Do you envy Ivan Doig?"

"No, not exactly," I say back to her. "I am inspired by him."

"How come?"

I explain to her the tingle of recognition that overcame me when I first read *THIS HOUSE OF SKY*—how I saw in Doig's family story so many parallels to my own, to the stories of ordinary, often dispossessed people who were driven to eke out livelihoods in the West. My people—from Utah, not Montana, and coal

miners, not stockmen—endured many of the same trials as those described so acutely by Ivan Doig. Wedded to a land they loved but were bound to exploit, exploited themselves for their labor and skill, the ordinary people of Montana and the West held on and held out as well as they could. Many lived by a simple creed, one shared equally by Charlie Doig and by the elders who raised young squirts like me: the measure of a man came in three stripes: how he held his word, how well he worked, and how he treated others.

As homilies, these are fine enough for a father to pass along to his daughter, somewhere on a highway near Frances Tidyman's home town, but Doig did something better with them: he honored his people by unflinchingly showing the beauty of their lives, their values, their beliefs. He wrote a story of devotion, and in that story we can see, smell, feel why so many of the

country people can never leave Montana, and why they are often miserable when they do. Bessie and Charlie may have fought like a bobcat and a coyote over Berneta, but there was never any doubting their sincerity: *one thing neither could ever accuse the other of was lack of pure devotion to the girl and woman Berneta. Call it the geography of risk, of how best to situate my mother.*

Or call it the geography of inspiration: that a child of lowly origins can tell the story of a single Montana family, and in doing so, speak in a voice that seems to emanate from raw soil. Or, if you like, from heart earth. **M**

DON SNOW keeps his heart in the Bitterroot Valley, and teaches Environmental Studies at the University of Montana-Missoula. This is the fifth of six articles on Montana writers who tell us about a century of people and places in the state.