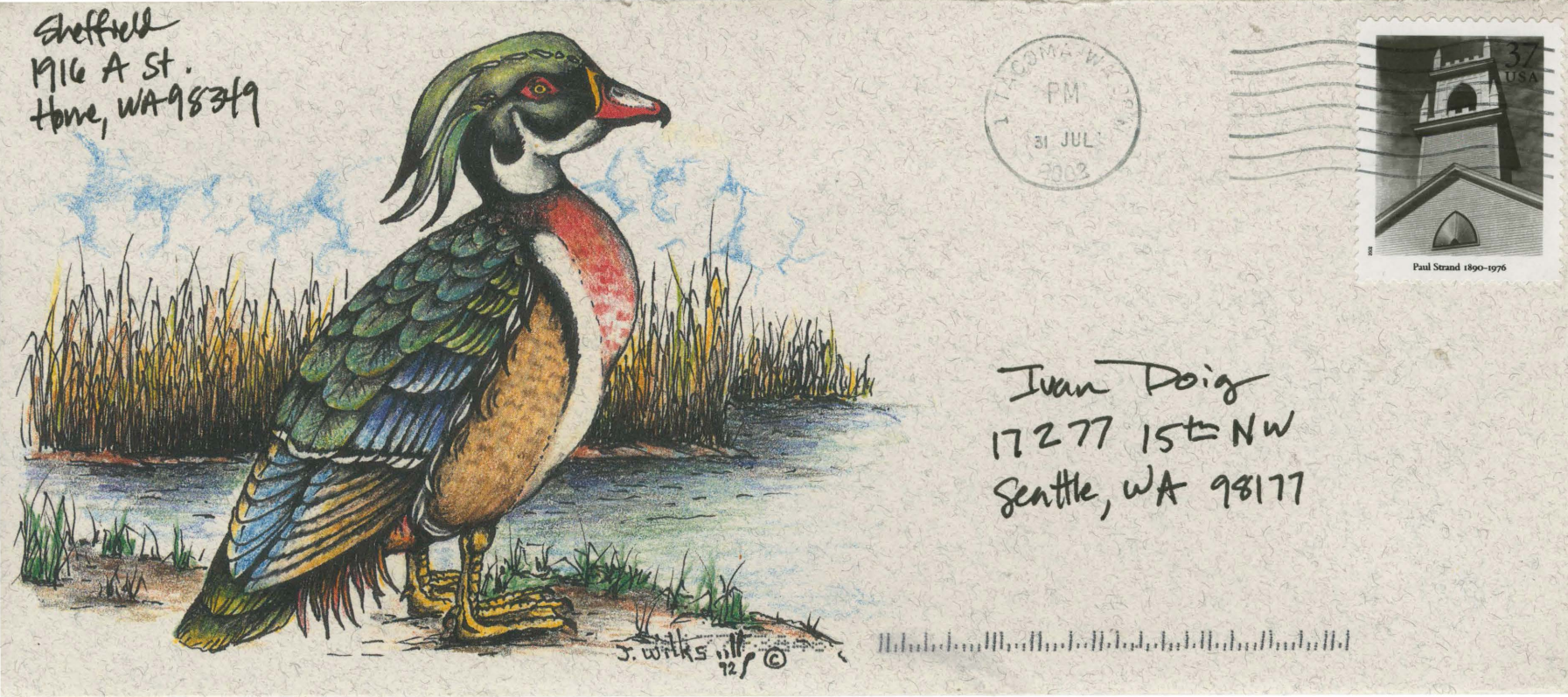

Sheffield
1916 A St.
Home, WA 98349
TACOMA WASH
PM
31 JUL
2002
37
USA
Paul Strand 1890–1976
Ivan Doig
17277 15th NW
Seattle, WA 98177
J. WILKS
72
©

31 July 02

home

Ivan —

You were right — the wedding wasn't all pomp. It managed to grab me by the shoulders like any important ritual or ceremony. All the hassles were worth it.

Thank you to you and Carol for the bowl. I love the understated notion of synthesis, 4 kinds of wood to make a whole. And your inscription — lovely.

Colleen McElroy wrote a poem for the occasion. An epithalamium that rang everyone's bell.

Eagle Harbor Books, Elliott Bay Books and others have been excited about our Seattle Review contribution. I'll see if I can get a few more copies sent to you.

I'm riding high today. Looking Glass Books in Portland is putting one of my poems on its bookmarks. Little do they know I'm not that good — yet.

Home is full of ripe berries: thimble, blue, and even black. Too many crows, though.

Caw,

Derek (& Gabi)

Olympic Peninsula

#9356 **Mount Olympus**

Mount Olympus, at an elevation of 7,965 feet, is the highest mountain in the Olympics and provides some of the most spectacular views in Washington. The average annual precipitation on Mount Olympus is over 220 inches, most of which falls in the form of snow. This contributes to the massive glaciers that cover approximately ten square miles of the peak.

Photographer-Pat O'Hara

TACOMA WA 984
PM
05 SEP
2002



9/5/02

Ivan—
there's another for your collection:
"The art that speaks most clearly, explicity, directly, and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood."
—Eudora Welty

Best from Home,
Derek

impact PHOTOGRAPHICS
www.impactphotographics.com

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Ivan Doig
17277 15th Ave. NW
Seattle, WA 98177

7/9

John Mill: PNCW Tues. award

Big Mitchell job back!
- Clackamas job / 2 of 3 positions
  1 long-term p/t-time
  1 Span/rhetoric

Home!
- 4:4:30

Jonathan Holden - poet/critic
• Mark to Turn (on Stafford)

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An Accurate Account of the West

They never rode into
the sunset, didn't slowly blur
themselves into puddles, or burst,
man and horse in one
fused, fell buck, one myth of ash
gone to the sinking mound.

Instead they rode toward
gaseous fusion, in the direction of
the photosphere as shadows
reached back like charred arms, thinly
touching the still, dusty feet
pointing up at the edge of town.

They rode away
from the doors of saloons
that opened onto a twisting dance
of rock and sand. No music
or feathers, no red grin
rising from the corner.

Or, some minor character
like me, leaning against
this here fir tree in the rain,
this second-growth green,
could put it like this, a side-mouth spit
as the solar wind tears at my hat.

The Eagle Catcher
The man is thought to be Sioux, probably from northwestern Nebraska where Curtis was traveling during this time. This striking photograph is a posed shot. Full-sized eagles were not caught by hand, but in a baited pit. Once in the pit, nets were thrown over the eagles.
Photographed in 1908 by Edward S. Curtis.

LPC12

2/1/02 – Evan – I enjoyed the talk the other night, you fascinating alumnus you. Thought you'd like this new one I been workin' on.
Derek

Evan Doig
17277 15th NW
Seattle, WA
98177

6.28.02

Olympic Peninsula

#9354 **Marymere Falls**
Marymere Falls, located near Lake Crescent in Olympic National Park, tumbles a total of 90 feet in two separate cascades. The trail leading to this magnificent waterfall winds through an old growth forest, with spectacular displays of seasonal flowering plants.
Photographer – Pat O'Hara



Ivan— Im writing to make sure you received your copies of Seattle Review w/ our interview. I'm happy with it— We done good. I'm glad to be able to use the SR to give the readers more Doig. The only thing is they messed up our bios. in the back— other than that, it's as planned.

I also wanted to check and see if you received your $250 check. Please let me know ~~if~~ if one or both have not arrived and I'll make a phone call. Best to you and Carol on a fine rainy day in summer,

Derek Sheffield

© Impact

Ivan Doig
17277 15th Ave. NW
Seattle, WA 98177

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www.impactphotographics.com
503-266-3941 6390 S. Zimmerman Rd. Aurora, OR 97002

Kathleen / Seattle friend / NP pediatrician Miranda

Derek Sheffield –

SR to printers

– 3-line bios / back 1 mag

– new bk

(503) 266-3941

derekasheffield@hotmail.com

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Clackamas – part-time

Francis – full-time benefits

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Clackamas – haven't writers: short on fiction;

– 2 beginning comp; intro to fiction, 2 other comp classes

Oregon Rev

Talking K-L-C 3-credit classes

Clackamas Lit Rev

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Depth of 7-190 6 mi down Hwy

Jul 27 wedding

Derek Sheffield • 5 N. Franklin Wenatchee, WA 98801 • dsheffield@wvcmail.ctc.edu

May 24, 2001

Ivan,

The good news is that Colleen took our interview as is. No cuts, no bruises. The bad is that we've been bumped to the spring issue. Apparently Marilyn Chin is visiting UW this winter, so Colleen moved the retrospective on her to correspond with her visit. I must admit I was a bit deflated when I heard the news, but what to do but think how more glorious will be spring 2002 for our interview?

Meanwhile, thanks much for the standing invitation to give a call when I'm in Seattle. I now know for sure that I won't be teaching at Shoreline next year, but no matter. There are other forges, other irons. Just for kicks, I'm tossing in a newish poem that came out of the ornithology class I took this quarter from one of my colleagues here (one of the benefits of teaching).

Best from the tropics,

Derek

Living on James Wright

Fact-eyed ornithologists show you
charts of neotropical, passerine migrants,
fifty years of songbirds
descending. Opening their skinny arms
as if to flap out of their own race, they show you
Ohio—puckering widows
and one dirty river become the yardstick
for South America's annual clear-cut.
Wright would catch the yellow warbler
that clutched my hand today, its
sweet-sweet-sweet-sue-
so-sweet. As he broke his lines
for the warm tap of its heart, a hobo
dribbling in a ditch would appear
and a boy with rusty hair, a real deadeye, sighting
for another ruddy-faced silhouette, a tanager
singing as the tracks vanish in the heat.
Even the blips of northbound vireos
each spring along the branch between Americas
would cast in his lyric
a green wing. I heard him once, one Ohioan
opening his throat against a sky
three thousand miles
from the flocking shadows of his state.
And today, when that warbler lay in my palm,
thinned from its long flight,
a breath of dusty light
trusting me with black eyes,
I stood there as if I did not breathe,
and only wind could move me.

Derek Sheffield • 5 N. Franklin Wenatchee, WA 98801 • dsheffield@wvcmail.ctc.edu

April 13, 2001

Ivan,

Well, here it is, fresh from the spin cycle. Your editing marks were very easy to read--the ghost of journalism, no doubt. Your reordering of the two portions works well to keep things together and give us a swell note to end on. On page 7 you'll find a question about a word or two--I wasn't sure if that was what you wanted to say. On page 15 I changed my short response to fit the new information about your novel in progress--otherwise, it sounded as if I hadn't heard a word you'd said.

I wince at a place or two where I feel like I cut you off, but overall I feel really good about the interview. I believe in it and its subject, and so I feel it makes a worthwhile contribution to the literary world--heck, to the world. I've enjoyed the process, the work involved, and have learned much from it and you. At the same time, I doubt I'll run off and become Charlie Rose. I'm only interested in doing this work when it coincides with my own passions. Before your name came up, Colleen had tried to get me to interview three previous writers whose work I didn't know or didn't want to know.

Thanks for the kind comments on *Mouthpiece*. And for passing on Linda's words--its a nice boost to hear that kind of thing coming from one master wordwright through another. I'm doubtful of the Shoreline job by this time, but I'm not overly surprised. These things are so damned competitive. Again, thanks to Carol for her good advice. Craig Lesley has been trying, in his saint-like way, to get me in at Clackamas. Something will come up somewhere. I'll let you know.

I guess we're at the point of final revisions, so just mail me any changes you see and then I'll get it to Colleen. I'm going to tell her that we already slashed it up quite a bit. I don't want her to cut anything. If that kind of thing looks like it's going to happen, rest assured I'll be in touch with you. They will mail a $200 check with your contributor's copies in the fall when the next issue comes out.

All good cheer to you and Carol.

Derek

20 April '01

Dear Derek--

Okay, in considerable haste--company on the horizon, and the trip to the Oregon coast just after--but vaster gratitude, here's the final version as far as I'm concerned. Dabs of commas and rounding-out phrases were all, as hoped. It's a good job, thanks to your spine of organization and choice of questions; makes us both sound smarter than we maybe are--can't beat that. I'll much look forward to the printed product this fall.

Meanwhile, if you pass through and we're around, feel free to give a call to see if we can get together for a meal; you know the life of a writing household, we can't always, but sometimes we're famished for a night out and reasonable conversation. Incidentally, Carol thought you may be overly pessimistic about the Shoreline outlook; she says they're always later than hell in hiring. That's good news about the look-in at Clackamas, though; Craig really is one in a million. In any case, good luck with both the classroom and the pomes, as Linda B. calls them.

Best from both of us,

Conversation with a Middle Class Cosmic Mechanic

Born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, Ivan Doig has been a ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor and writer. His novels are The Sea Runners (1982), Bucking the Sun (1996), Mountain Time (1999), and his Montana Trilogy: English Creek (1984), Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987), and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana (1990). Doig has also written three works of nonfiction: two memoirs, This House of Sky (1978) and Heart Earth (1993), and Winter Brothers (1980), a book which fuses excerpts from the diaries of James Swan, an early settler of the Puget Sound region, with entries from Doig's own journal evoking the same coastline.

Ivan Doig has received numerous writing awards, including a Christopher Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, the Governor's Writers Day Award, and the David W. and Beatrice C. Evans Biography Award. This House of Sky was a finalist for the National Book Award in contemporary thought, and in 1989 the Western Literature Association honored Doig with its Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work.

A graduate of Northwestern University, where he received degrees in journalism, he holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington and honorary doctorates from Montana State University and Lewis and Clark College.

Annie Proulx has called him "one of the best we've got" and Wallace Stegner writes, "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real Montana, and real West, through the eyes of a real writer."

Ivan Doig lives in north Seattle with his wife Carol. The interview took place on December 29, 2000 at their home where I found my gaze drawn occasionally to the sizable window of Doig's office, which looks, of course, west. Over a neatly gardened yard, past a steep bank, sailboats and freighters criss-crossed the Puget Sound. Beyond this slow and silent commotion, the Olympic Mountains stood sharply with such presence they managed to climb right into the dialogue. Around us, American history played along well-stocked bookshelves in the form of figurines: soldiers trudging, cannons aiming, and horses rearing. And one floor above, Carol Doig sipped tea and went about her business.

Though he has reached some impressive heights in his writing, Ivan Doig has remained grounded in the ground he loves. He is congenial and has a rich and resonant voice that would have filled the airways, had Doig gone that way. His laughter riddles the interview as frequently as his Scotch wit. He loves language, spoken and written, and wades in it daily as his writing grows from considerable work habits. While thinking about how to describe Ivan Doig, I recalled some lines from Richard Hugo's poem, "Letter to Levertov from Butte":

> ...no matter what my salary is
> or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual
> dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble...

11 March '01

Derek--

It's gonna be so good. Right now, of coure, the interview looks like it's been gone across by a mad doodler armed with a Ticonderoga #2. But under all the lead, and with my vocal wanderings excised, I think it'll clean up fine. Your questions, not incidentally, gave it a good structure and continuity; I saw only two portions we ought to move--one to keep a craft discussion together, and the other to give us a solid ending--and that's a record, given how interviews usually wander. Call me if you're baffled by any of my handwriting, OK/

After you run this version through the wash-and-spin cycle on your computer, we'd probably do well for me to take a quick look at the cleaned-up version, sheerly for accuracy. I could do this in proofs, if that's the way the *Review* works, or just ship me a printout when your fingers have done their magic. Will be away a bit in May and maybe after, so sooner is probably better, if possible.

The title is of course terrific.

Other things: We really thank you for the copy of *Mouthpiece*--what a beauty of a book. Just to further concentrate your mind, I can report that Linda Bierds spontaneously speaks well of you; something about you getting good, which is where we all keep trying to get. And on the job front, best of luck from this household on the Shoreline front. Keep us posted.

Regards from Carol, too.

Wenatchee Valley College
English Department
1300 Fifth Street
Wenatchee, WA 98801-1799
(509) 662-1651

February 27, 2001

Ivan—

Well, sir. Here 'tis, the unedited draft. I've a feeling Colleen will want to cut it a bit, so feel free to get your cuts in first. **Anything** is fair game for your red pen. I highlighted a couple spellings/words of which I'm uncertain.

The title is a last minute decision of mine. What do you think? If you don't like it, I'm happy to drop or alter it. Also, if there's anything that doesn't suit you in the intro., run your red pen through it. It's a mix of broad and specific info. because it introduces the whole retrospective on you and your work as well as the interview. Any suggestions welcome. And please let me know if my facts are bent.

At the risk of inflicting my poetry upon you, I've enclosed my little book as partly a "thanks" for the chance to chat. No response expected.

We've plenty of time on this. Colleen told me last week that it will run in the Fall 2001 issue.

All good cheer,

Derek

How did your family take your decision to leave ranch work for writing?

My dad always would say, "For God's sake, get yourself an education." Not unlike a lot of fathers who were working people. They wanted better things for their kids than they had had. Within him too, I now realize, was the Scotch respect for education, and his own limited education had been enough to show him that a little schooling could do quite a bit for you. He only went through the eighth grade,

the family, and it's almost as difficult even if there is. So, as a viable fiscal way of life, there's still not that much to be missed there. Being under the Rocky Mountain Front on a good day on a tractor is a pretty damn fine thing, I know. One of the lessons of life in northern Montana is that you aren't gonna have that many good days sitting on tractors or trailing sheep. The ones that you do are going to be everlasting pageants in your head. But the incessant wind, the prospect of drought or enormous winters, just really kicks a lot of the romance out of the outdoor life. There are people, some of whom are my high school friends, who do seem to be cut out for that kind of life. Riley, the smart-mouthed newspaper writer I invented for Ride with Me, Mariah Montana, said something about guys not realizing they're working themselves to death because they're doing it out of doors. I've seen quite a lot of that. So I find it a lot more attractive and beneficial to my work to be able to go into the outdoors carrying a notebook and a pen and putting in dawn-to-dark days out there, looking at the country, listening to people, thinking it over.

That reminds me of Van Gogh taking his canvas out into the fields.

It's a pretty good idea to get out and feel the elements you're writing about. Some of them I've been able to bring into my work from memory. I saw enough blizzards in the time I was growing up out there that I don't feel compelled to rush out into a blizzard anymore. But the Montana droughts, I have gone there to experience because they weren't around as viciously when I was growing up. Apparently the warming of the earth is now wheeling them around.

Well, I've read in Elizabeth Simpson's book about your thorough research habits, how you really take the time to know your material.

Right. I've always tried to go take a look at the geography I'm writing about. Indeed, went to Scotland to see where the young men of Dancing at the Rascal Fair take off from the old life there.

Did the story of the draft horse come from Scotland?

It did, it did. The opening one. Now, this is the danger of being an interviewer, because notions about how carefully things are structured sometimes get disappointed by the time I'm done with them. I did come across, in a Scottish newspaper, an incident not far from the one that opens Dancing at the Rascal Fair, a horse being dragged into the Greenock harbor by a cart that flipped off the dock. But it must have taken me a year and a half, Derek, before I thought of having something similar toward the climax of the book. And even at that point when Rob goes into the reservoir on a horse, it wasn't because of that Scottish horse. It was a horse I had ridden across a similar reservoir. I made it safely, of course, but some years later on that same ranch a husky young ex-Marine did not. He drowned in an accident similar to what I have happen to Rob. Someone in an audience surprised me once by asking, "Now how did you carefully plan to have those two horse drownings?"

That image of Rob and the horse drowning in that reservoir is as haunting to me, as a reader, as the elk in Craig Lesley's Winterkill and the horses in Linda Bierds' The Stillness, The Dancing.

immediate attractions, including theater life. The university was a handsome campus to set foot on. The first time we walked in the quadrangle there we thought it looked like it had been there since Dink Stover came west from Yale. It was promptly a comfortable place. And I think your question does have a lot of carrying power because when it came time to look at leaving, once I had my Ph.D. and was in the job market, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

William Blake wrote, "We become what we behold." Does this explain how landscape shapes identity?

I think it does, to a kind of intriguing extent.

And how landscape, identity and memory work their way into most of your work?

Yeah, although when I'm sitting around here, what I think I'm working on is usually the language. But I'm generally pounding away on one of those three themes.

The way that the landscape of the West has fixed a lot of people into place and kept them there maybe even against their better interest, perhaps leading hopeless ways of life, as the larger world would look at it--yeah, there certainly has to be a lot of unarticulated love that keeps people there. And it's been one of the tugs that I've seen in a lot of friends. My own solution to it was that there are a lot of good places to live in the West, and I've chosen one which has its own appeal. It's not the Rocky Mountain Front out there, but pretty damn good mountains even so.

Was it easier to love this landscape after first loving the Rocky Mountains?

I think so. That's been on my mind lately too because I'm fairly recently back from a book tour in the upper Midwest. Saw many old friends there, one of my oldest friends from college, various people who have spent their whole lives on a flat disc of earth maybe a hundred miles across. And it apparently doesn't bother them that this geography is out here waiting for them because I've tried to coax them out, to shame them [laughter]. But indeed if I had been brought up in that, maybe I would prize the banks of the Mississippi River, or the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin, as deeply I do these places of the West. So, yes, I think where you land into life does put some kind of a parenthesis of vision around you. I know when I worked in Evanston on The Rotarian magazine as a young assistant editor, anything that came from the West was just handed to me, and my habit at lunch, one of the guys pointed out to me once, was that I would go off by myself down to Lake Michigan rather than going to the cafeteria. I certainly wasn't trying to mark myself off as "the lone westerner" but these guys I worked with knew I was.

Do you have a greater allegiance to one landscape over another, Montana over the Sound? Or is it a tie?

Well, it's pretty close to a tie. There are a few enlightened countries in the world--I think Ireland is one--that give you dual citizenship. And I've had something like that in my writing and the reception to it. I've been exceedingly fortunate being able to go back to Montana and have readers there ask me, "Why don't you live in Montana?" When I point out to them that I'm (?) economically starved out, my as a young guy

wife's job is in Seattle, and I'm in Montana as much as I can be, there doesn't seem any kind of rancor.

In fact, they've been giving you honorary degrees.

Right. I've felt very fortunate in that reception, and I haven't felt any rancor for living out here and writing the majority of my fiction about the Rocky Mountain Front area. The trellis of history and landscape that the McCaskills grow on certainly goes up along the Rockies there, Derek, but part of that is something I once heard Wallace Stegner talk about. Fortunately it was long after I started doing it myself, so it only confirmed me. He was speaking in Portland and someone in the audience asked him why he had stopped writing short stories, and he said, "Well, you use up your capital all the time." And he meant in terms of characterization. That certainly was one thing Faulkner did not do. Faulkner just kept the genealogy pasted on the wall and thought, "Okay, if X burns down Y's barn, how does that trigger what's going to happen in another generation here." And so I keep creating this long family line which serves as a kind of a trellis that my characters grow their lives on. That tends to be Rocky Mountain. It wouldn't have to be. When I was researching Heart Earth in Arizona, asking questions about that winter my family spent there, the Tucson newspaper's book editor grinned and said, "Well, if you hadn't left you might be writing about the Grand Canyon country, might you?" Yeah. Could be worse.

Well, Keats wrote about Negative Capability, and I think part of what he meant by that term was distance from the subject, a bit of a cool remove. William Stafford wrote his best Kansas poems when he was living in Oregon.

And the one I always cite. Joyce didn't write Ulysses about Paris. We don't have as good a book about Paris. In my case, I've always known that the writing is easier to get done here than it is back in Montana or somewhere else in the West. Part of that unfortunately means the shirking of perfectly good citizenship, which, if I lived in Montana I would feel quite compelled to pitch in on. Here, with the larger population in the state and with greater resources to the society, I've felt a lot more free to hole up in a suburb and work, and do not much anything else.

Are you talking about say devoting some of your time to protecting the environment?

No, less that than participating in Montana's educational community or something else. Jim Welch served on the parole board in Montana something like ten years. Kittredge is kind of a circuit riding preacher, all the things he does. I think I would have to do, at the very least, writing conferences and poets-in-the-schools and so on.

Seattle frees you up.

It frees me up a lot. I'm able to try to pick my spots, and a lot of it does entail going back to Montana or to rural Utah through one of the state humanities councils or some kind of Nature Conservancy event. But I'm able to schedule those things outside of a writing stint. So in terms of sitting down and doing what I think I'm meant to do, a Puget Sound suburb is the most efficient place to do it.

You mentioned earlier that your aim in the writing is to get the words right, not necessarily to evoke a theme, to get to what Maclean calls the "poetry under the prose." I mentioned to a poet friend a few weeks ago that I was going to interview you and she knew your name but unlike most of the folks around here hadn't read your books. So I read her a passage from This House of Sky, one of the memory sections and she said, "Oh my God, that's beautiful. How did it ever get published?" I know she was responding to the poetry under the prose. Can you talk about that?

Sure. I did keep a journal part-time when I was writing This House of Sky. It wasn't full-time because the work on This House of Sky was strewn across half a dozen years. But every so often I would put down what I was trying to do, and there is an entry somewhere back there--evidently after what I thought was a pretty decent day's work--that it would be wonderful to write it all as highly charged as poetry if I could just do it. And I think the clearest answer, about trying to get the poetry in, is that I simply worked on it and worked on it as if the book were an epic poem.

Did you read it aloud as you worked on it?

I would read aloud some. This goes back to broadcast journalism. I've always been aware of the power of spoken words and the power of rhythm, in particular. It maybe also goes back to a great stroke of luck in college, where the ungodly old scholarship dorm I landed in was also full of theater people and so you couldn't walk through the front door of that place without Richard Benjamin imitating Wrigley Field, or Ron Hogate singing as he later would on Broadway. And my best friend was a theater major, so I went to many of the rehearsals in what was a marvelous theater department, and I read a lot of Shakespeare, read a lot of dramatists, and was aware of the wonderful trickeries of the language. Allied with that was my own mercifully brief stint in trying to write poetry when I was in graduate school in history at the UW. All of these combine into the passion for the sentence and working within the sentence which meant going back over the words countless times--I don't know if I consciously did it on This House of Sky or not, Derek, but it's the same process. On some books I have taken a colored marker and either done it myself or hired somebody to mark every verb. Look at every Goddamned verb. Look at how every paragraph begins and ends. Look at every adjective, whether to take it out or leave it in. Try to be a cosmic mechanic on the language.

In my ear, the poetry under the prose is still alive. It is less overt than in This House of Sky, but nevertheless present in the more recent books.

One of the things I'm embarked on now is, in fiction, to see how much I can drop it back a notch and still have lively language there, and maybe do something else within the story. Perhaps make a story move more quickly. Maybe extend the characterization or the interior. Maybe put the spotlight on something else within the story rather than on every showy verb. So I've been consciously tinkering.

Much of the poetry in your prose, it seems to me, comes from the way people talk. In this respect, your work compares with William Stafford's. And I'm certain that

you've nailed it, that you've leashed the colloquial with your language. Recently I was about to go skiing with some folks and one said, "Okay, everybody read-aye?" This was in La Grande, Oregon. And I realized that I had just read that "read-aye" the night before in Mountain Time. I don't know if I had heard it before, but this was the first time I heard it. It reminds me of another time, also in Oregon, in the Willamette Valley, when I saw these two deer leap away from the road and I immediately remembered the phrase Mary Oliver uses in one of her poems to describe a startled deer, "silky agitation." She had recreated the deer in the language, just as you have recreated western speech in "read-aye." What's the value of these real voices in your writing?

It seems to me there's an intrinsic rightness. To anybody who knows anything about the society or part of the country you're writing about, it punches that "validity" ticket. Perhaps it's the familiarity. Perhaps it entertains them in a certain way. But to have the characters sound right and sound memorable is one of the best fundamentals you can have for a story. You see these file cards back here. A lot of these are dialogue, and they're around here in various incarnations. There's one box which is largely Scotchisms, many of them picked up from trips to Scotland, various turns of phrases which the characters in Dancing at the Rascal Fair use. There's Montana lingo picked up in bars and cafes. The novel I'm working on now will have an African-American western guy who grew up there in the Two Medicine country. It's been interesting to find that lingo. I've given him a Sergeant in the black cavalry as a father, and so all these neighborhoods of colloquialisms are there to be visited and it's an aspect of language that constantly tickles at people's minds. You notice that computer geeks, who in many other aspects of life are just as dry and emotionless as they can manage to be, have produced almost instantly their own colloquial language as rich as cowboys'. And teenagers who don't seem to know the time of day are as busy at it as Shakespeare.

And we still have "cool."

And "cool" comes back and back and back. I think this is its third time around in my lifetime. I got a card today from the Nature Conservancy inviting us up to the Skagit River on their boat trip to see the eagles and the guy says, "It's going to be cold but it'll be cool." Lingo like that is one of the most fertile fields for a novelist to work in. What I say on love of lingo should be hedged in by something I should have mentioned earlier, that I'm a more natural editor than a first drafter, and I come at a lot of these things from the editing experience I picked up in journalism and probably from an inclination to tinker. I'm not particularly interested in immaculate conceptions. It maybe goes back to being used to doing chores. You have to get the firewood, you have to carry the water, you have to do thus and such. So I see my tinkering with the way my characters talk as a real part of the writing routine. But I've been thinking a lot lately too about how much to do it. Where do you draw the line? I feel fine in my own work, but I've been trying to put together a talk sometime for a speech request, about how other writers have done it, and how sometimes it's been overdone. Flannery O'Connor was pretty vocal on how much you do. Not very much, according to her. In fiction writing, it seems to me, you want people to sound like perhaps clever bits of vaudeville, in the Shakespearean sense with the wonderful clowns. You don't want them to sound like burlesque. So, it is a line to walk.

You mentioned some work habits, like the early mornings. And I know Hugo had his sharpened, number two pencils.

Steinbeck did the same thing, I've read. It had to be a certain kind of pencil. And I always respected that, but thought it was a bit much. Now I've discovered I have to have these Goddamn Ticonderogas. I blame it on the pencil industry because it's getting harder and harder these days to pick up any pencil ~~these days~~ with a good dark lead. These small things. There's a famous Hugo story--I'm not sure this is craft or what it is--but he'd be working away with the coffee pot about at his elbow, and he'd say, "Ripley, could you get me a cup of coffee?" [imitates Hugo's voice] He couldn't be disturbed that far.

In terms of habit for me, so many words a day is a good part of it. The output is pretty precisely measured--400 words a day--when I'm rough-drafting.

Some of it is just the tiny touches I try to put into dialogue. As an example, in Dancing at the Rascal Fair--again, I'm aware of this because I consciously thought it up--Ninian Duff uses the Scottish "Ay" at the start of sentences, and Lucas Barclay uses it at the end of sentences. I've heard it both ways in Montana Scotch. I deliberately did that so that these characters--one's a Bible banger and one's a bartender--make a kind of dialogue parenthesis, to show that they have a commonality of language and expression, even though they may be opposed to each other. And that's a conscious touch. Another example comes from my current manuscript. My African-American ranch hand and singer is very raw, in terms of his talent, and he's never sung with the piano. At one point Susan Duff, in giving him lessons, says all right, it's time to go to the piano. And I think he's gonna say--instead of what I have had him say for the past six months--"I've never sang with a piano"--I think he's gonna have to say, "I've never sang with a piana." It's dawned on me that it needs an "A," the way I heard the bunkhouse guys on my dad's crews say it.

How planned is your writing? Do you write from an outline?

No, I've tried it a time or two. In fact I tried it with Dancing at the Rascal Fair. It had dawned on me that most of my books were turning out to have six or seven chapters or sections, and I thought, "Well, maybe I oughtta take a look at this." And so I took the yellow pad and tried to do an outline of where I thought Rascal Fair would go, and it didn't. It ended up with seven chapters.

What I actually start with is an arc of time, which I know: what the time span of the book is going to be. That becomes an armature to build a lot of the plot on because so much of my fiction relies upon people caught in the historical laws of gravity. World War One comes along and if you're a young male in Montana, why, you're swept away into it pretty surely. And if the 1919 flu epidemic comes along, it changes entire communities.

So, the timescape and the landscape work together in your work.

So the timescape is usually the plotting framework, and within that, various kinds of patchwork is done. How a character is going to talk will sometimes shape her personality. In English Creek, Jick fairly early says of his mother that when you start to hear her capital letters, you're in trouble. I simply knew I wanted some character who had that trait, and I didn't necessarily know it was going to be her.

And Jick even gets his name from talk, from one of Stanley's quips.

Yes. And in The Sea Runners, the blacksmith, probably the least likely candidate to have knowledge of the Bible, gets to be a Bible spouter because by the time it occurred to me that I needed one for 19th Century flavor the other characters were already shaped and I just thought, "Well, by God, let's make it interesting. Let's give it to the least likely guy." And so those kinds of decisions shape personalities and thereby the plots. Some turns in plots, skirmishes in them, will come about because you want to try something or see how far you can go out on the edge. I'm thinking of Bucking the Sun, the little sheriff there shoots a thief in the legs with a shotgun because he's also a shrimp, as the sheriff is, and he's kind of snickering at the sheriff companionably. "We're both runts aren't we?" is what his laugh is saying. I have no idea where that came from.

Sticks and stones.

Sticks and stones. I had come across an old newspaper account of someone robbing jewelry stores across the Highline in Montana. It's a funny serial robbery to do because all the towns are about fifty miles apart. And you wonder: how smart is this? So I wanted this sequence of dumb robberies just to see what would happen. And indeed my sheriff is patiently waiting for the guy when he hits Glasgow.

Facts, history, really seem to stir your imagination, which makes a lot of sense considering your background in journalism and your doctorate in history.

It's pretty hard to make things up as strange as things happen. If I had written a thriller about the election that has just finished it would be preposterous to have Jeb Bush in that plot. The guy's brother is governor of the state? Come on. But that sort of thing seems to happen a lot simply because there's so many of us and the pinball clicks of us against each other produce all this strangeness.

When I was reading Dancing at the Rascal Fair, I was sure that people on long voyages would *suck on limes. I was sure that that was some bit of history you'd come across in your research.*

I don't remember where I got that. I do remember something similar, coming across a bit of detail and saying, "Oh yeah, that's going in." Throwing the straw mattresses overboard when they're off Sandy Hook. I had not known that, although I had read quite a bit about immigration, but I came across that one in a letter in the Scottish archives. Details like that are often the little watch spring parts that I imagine from.

Your books are a living record of the West, particularly Montana. If I knew someone who was interested in the history of Montana, I could just point him to a stack of your books.

When I'm in Montana doing book signings, people do come up and say, "Oh I read your book and moved here." And this is a little more responsibility than I or my books want. But one of the wonderful, totally unforeseen bonuses of my books has been the friendship of Western historians that they've engendered. Bill

Robbins down at Oregon State has used English Creek in history courses about the West. Carol and I were down at Stanford last summer to do a talk in a summer seminar they do for their alumni and I was introduced by Richard White. Richard is a friend of ours, but he's also one of the hottest Western historians, the most encyclopedic, and to my astonishment he introduced me as being more interested in history than historians are. At that moment I thought, "That's a funny way to put it." But I've spent part of this week sitting around here going back through a book called Lost Country Life, which is about Medieval agriculture, and how things were done, and what tools looked like, and how turns of phrase like "spitting image" came out of "splitting image"--cutting trees exactly in half so you would have matching beams in ships or house building. And I got to thinking that maybe Richard saw me in the right light.

It vitalizes you and then you vitalize it in your writing.

Yeah, it's kind of a shaped accident. I gave up dissipating it into magazine work. Now I am able to sit in one spot for two or three years at a time and shape it into a book. I don't drink it away, I don't talk it away, it is able to incubate its way into print. I see that as kind of a stroke of luck of personality, since I haven't utterly forged myself.

Success can be a difficult experience among writers, an inhibitor. Since you have staked out a lasting homestead in the hearts and thoughts of so many readers, has it been difficult to keep going?

I can say "no" pretty fluently. That has helped a lot.

Well, I'm glad you didn't say "no" to this interview.

[laughter]
I haven't gone on some of the circuits of success, particularly the summer writing workshops that I think can take a lot of time, energy and attention. I'm pleased that others are able to, and there are so many good writers that I'm not really needed there. I do go out and give occasional talks and so on, but my level of success has been a comfortable one. I'm a fairly rare bird: a middle class novelist, in that my books don't sell like Stephen King or John Grisham levels, but they sell healthily and consistently. So I've been able--largely on the basis of my writing and, always with the underpinning of Carol's teaching career, in terms of medical coverage and some kind of pension to look forward to--to come from a three-room railroad shack in Ringling to this place. That's been a reasonably comfortable arc of success to work within, Derek. One thing I was aware of at the time, when This House of Sky did not win the National Book Award, when The Snow Leopard carried the day, it dawned on me pretty promptly, "Well, this is going to make my life easier." And indeed it probably has. With that goes the realization that you probably only get one crack at the National Book Award or Pulitzer or other prizes. But life doesn't end if you don't get it on that one crack. As long as you've got other books to write, your health and a decent life and a good spouse and so forth. Hugo had, in a lot growlier way, that same attitude, because we were around him when he lost on the Pulitzer to Donald Justice and others year after year.

Yes, I'm about two-fifths of the way along. I'm able to put that kind of a fraction on it because I sent the first chunk of the manuscript to my editor just before the holidays. The one useful thing the computer can do for us is count every Goddamned word now. Beyond that, writing on a computer is a mixed bag. But you do always know how many words you have anymore. [laughter] So that's the course of this book. There are some flashbacks in it. It's a novel where time tunnels backwards into what has happened to shape the motives of these characters and how they respond to it.

Doig Time. While reading your most recent book, Mountain Time, I was thinking there is such a thing as Doig Time. Your prolific use of the flashback and the historical perspective with which you and your characters see the West. I'm thinking of Lexa hiking down that mountain in the steps of Bob Marshall. What a gift to see the landscape like that, to hear those old steps. And that gift is being passed on in your books.

I feel lucky in being tuned in that way. I also see it as going with the storytelling impulse that a lot of my characters have, that I grew up around, and that I have, too. These historical flashbacks are technically analogous to the characters liking to

tell stories. I've had reinforcement from readers, out on the bookstore trail, who tell me they like the flashbacks. They don't see them as intrusive or something to be fast-forwarded over with the eye. Anybody who's going to read my books soon knows they're going to have to spend some time with them. And so if you take readers back to tell them more about a character, they probably will like that. I don't know if I would ever try to write a book in the flat, contemporaneous straight chronology. I mean, there's a certain appeal if you just sit down and tell a story from finger snap to thunderclap. I admire that stuff, but I'm not sure it's in me. I've been reading John Fowles' book of essays called Wormholes, where his mind goes off in every direction. You can kind of see how we got the French Lieutenant's Woman out of that guy, that those great flashbacks are there if writers can just find the shutter to click.

"The" is part of title

It seems that even though you are surrounded by teachers and teachers populate your books and have been prominent in your life, that it's been best for you to avoid the teaching life, against the stream of so many writers today, and make your living as a writer.

This goes to the saying, "Life is choices."

Your father used to say that.

Yes, that's right. It comes straight out of the family. Very early on, probably in graduate school, I realized I do not have the energy or metabolism, whatever you want to call it, to teach and write both. I liked teaching a lot as a teaching assistant at the UW. I found it a vitalizing way of life. But it took me over, too. So it's a question of what are you going to be taken over by. And a lot of people can balance them, but I simply have a head that mulls only in one direction.

And rather than shortchange one...

And I felt I'd be shortchanging both, actually, by trying to do both. So if they advance from Dolly and clone all of us, why yeah, I'll be a teacher. But until then, I gotta be a writer.

my editing

Conversation with a Middle Class Cosmic Mechanic

Born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, Ivan Doig has been a ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor and writer. His novels are The Sea Runners (1982), Bucking the Sun (1996), Mountain Time (1999), and his Montana Trilogy English Creek (1984), Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987), and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana (1990). Doig has also written three works of nonfiction: two memoirs, This House of Sky (1978) and Heart Earth (1993), and Winter Brothers (1980), a book which fuses excerpts from the diaries of James Swan, an early settler of the Puget Sound region, with entries from Doig's own journal evoking the same coastline.

Ivan Doig has received numerous writing awards, including a Christopher Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, the Governor's Writers Day Award, and the David W. and Beatrice C. Evans Biography Award. This House of Sky was ~~nominated~~ a finalist for the National Book Award in contemporary thought, and in 1989 the Western Literature Association honored Doig with its Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work.

A graduate of Northwestern University, where he received degrees in journalism, he holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington and honorary doctorates from Montana State University and Lewis and Clark College.

Annie Proulx has called him "one of the best we've got" and Wallace Stegner writes, "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real Montana, and real West, through the eyes of a real writer."

Ivan Doig lives in north Seattle with his wife Carol. The interview took place on December 29, 2000 at their home. During our talk, I found my gaze drawn occasionally to the sizable window of Doig's office, which looks west, of course. Over a neatly gardened yard, past a steep bank, sailboats and freighters criss-crossed the Puget Sound. Beyond this slow and silent commotion, the Olympic

Mountains stood sharply with such presence they managed to climb right into the dialogue. Around us, American history played along well-stocked bookshelves in the form of figurines: soldiers trudging, cannons aiming, and horses rearing. And one floor above, Carol Doig sipped tea and went about her business.

Though he has reached some impressive heights in his writing, Ivan Doig has remained grounded in the ground he loves. He is congenial and has a rich and resonant voice that would have filled the airways, had Doig gone that way. His laughter riddles the interview as freqently as his Scotch wit. He loves language, spoken and written, and wades in it daily as his writing grows from considerable work habits. While thinking about how to describe Ivan Doig, I recalled some lines from Richard Hugo's poem, "Letter to Levertov from Butte":

> ...no matter what my salary is
> or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual
> dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble...

I've read that you were 16 when you decided ranch work wasn't in your future. When did you know that writing would be? That you would become the remembrancer, the tale-bringer?

Well that turning point at age sixteen was in the midst of a ~~Two Medicine~~ summer when we were running sheep up above the Two Medicine river and a freezing rain just after the sheep had been sheared sent a lot of them over an old buffalo jump and made many others simply lie down and give up their ghost ~~and so~~ I knew by the time I went back to high school that autumn that I was going to do something else ~~with myself in life~~ besides ranch work. ~~The decision can be consciously read there in that~~ I dropped out of Future Farmers of America and took typing and Latin ~~that year~~. That moved me a lot closer in my mind to the high school teacher who became very influential in my becoming a writer ~~of some kind~~. Her name was Francis Tiddman. She's described at some length in This House of Sky. ~~She was~~ one of these impossible prairie tornadoes who sometimes show up in small schools. She taught all the high school English and then she would teach Latin

some years, Spanish ~~another~~ other year, and ran the high school paper ~~and~~ the annual, and so on. ~~By the time~~ When I ~~was~~ came within her reach ~~this way~~ she had me on the school paper pretty promptly, and to a lesser extent, the school annual and ~~soon, and~~ my own inclination for turning towards trying to become a journalist emerged and so by the time I was seriously applying for scholarships my senior year, ~~why~~ that's where it had all led.

I took most of her classes.

I had no notion then that it was going to lead on toward books. It's not very well known that I was a broadcast journalism major in college. My intention, if anything, was to become Edward R. Murrow [laughter], ~~someone of that sort~~. The radio had played an enormous role in our lives in Montana. It brought in whatever wafts of dream we had like major league baseball, or drama, or comedy and it also ~~of course~~ brought in the news which caught my attention. I think that kind of magnet has proven a historically sound one. The great newsmen, particularly the CBS news crew which Murrow set up, the last of them just died a few weeks ago, Robert Trout, ~~Robert Trout, that these guys~~ did prove to be so superb that they were worthy ~~people to~~ model ~~myself on~~. It wasn't until I got my master's degree at the one Northwestern that I had to make the break between college and career--that so many guys my age had to, because the military was there waiting for me. I was in the Air Force Reserve during the Cuban Missile Crisis. When I came back out, ~~started to get a~~ my first job, ~~it~~ turned out to be a ~~writing job, a~~ newspaper job, so that carried me on in to writing.

So it was the job that derailed you from broadcast journalism?

~~Yeah~~ it was. It's what was there. I came out of the Air Force at an awkward time of the year, ~~I think I came out in March~~, when people weren't particularly hiring. Northwestern was March well networked in placing its students ~~but~~ and that happened to be the best-looking thing at the moment, a job as an editorial writer for a chain of newspapers in down-state Illinois, so I promptly took it and ~~really~~ stayed with print media from then on.

How did your family take your decision to leave ranch work for writing?

~~Well~~ my dad always would say, "For God's sake, get yourself an education." Not unlike a lot of fathers who were working people. They wanted better things for

their kids than they had had. Within him too, I now realize, was the Scotch respect for education and his own limited education had been enough to show him that a little schooling could do quite a bit for you. He only went through the eighth grade, but he was ~~quite~~ good at arithmetic. ~~They didn't have math, but he~~ and went through ~~his~~ life running crews of men where he had to keep track of wages ~~figures~~ and so forth.

And he could count sheep.

~~He~~ he even could count sheep. ~~He~~ And he could measure haystacks which is a fairly complicated formula [laughter]. ~~And~~ also he could write perfectly well. His ~~letters and~~ commas are in the right place, words are spelled right ~~and so forth.~~ He has hellish handwriting [laughter]. Apparently the Spenserian method did not get down to the end of his fingertips ~~there~~, but in terms of handling the language ~~is~~ he was really quite good. So that's a long way of saying that ~~he~~ my father was always all for me getting an education, although his original notion of how far I could go ~~was~~ John's the pinnacle of it was becoming ~~something like~~ a pharmacist, a druggist. One of his nephews had attained that and that's kind of what he could see. And I've ~~been~~ realized ~~recently~~ since that was not too bad an idea from his viewpoint ~~either~~. All those little towns had drugstores in those days. There weren't malls or whatever. If indeed you wanted a ~~pretty good~~ portable career in the small town West, ~~that~~ druggist was a pretty good one.

My grandmother...(sigh)...saw my going away as taking a piece of her heart with her. She was always all for whatever I wanted to do ~~was okay~~ and she would always end up telling me that. But she had so much more of an embrace of family and by the time I was leaving she had lost one of her four children--my mother--through an early death. Another one was badly crippled with Multiple Sclerosis. A third ~~of her four children was~~ one had died in Australia. So she had already seen a lot of people she cherished go from her, and ~~so~~ my going out of state weighed ~~pretty heavily~~ on her ~~until I was off an doing it.~~

In <u>English Creek</u> you write, "Those firstborn always, always will live in a straddle between the ancestral path of life and the route of the new land." In the context of the book, you're speaking of Scotland versus America, but I want to apply it to

ranch work versus word work. The physical, immediate, daily interaction with the world you had growing up was certainly hard work, but do you ever miss aspects of it? Or have you achieved a balance between time spent in the world and time spent re-creating the world?

Those two very different looking kinds of work actually have a lot of similarities in the chores involved, the habit of doing the chores. I even keep pretty much the same working hours that I grew up with on a ranch. I'm up very early, ~~I'm always up~~ before dawn, down here starting to milk the thesaurus about the time I would have been milking cows on a Montana ranch. ~~There~~ This is something I've tried to do some serious thinking about. There is a kind of physicality to the habit of writing too, of ~~these~~ words ~~in my case~~ coming out the ends of my fingers and it's not always clear to me that they've lingered or been in my brain before they show up there on the keyboard. I've talked with some artist friends about this, the sculptor Angell Tony Angel is one of them, and a jazz musician, and ~~there's~~ a watercolor artist. I've talked with them separately and we all ~~have~~ feel what the sculptor has put a name on--"Getting it in the fingers," ~~as we call it.~~ Often ~~we're~~ I'm surprised how the physicality of sitting and caressing the language ~~in my case~~ produces, physically produces, the work I'm after. So there's that sort of mystical link, ~~I guess,~~ to it.

The parts of ranch work I miss would be oriented to the land, I think Derek. The way of life still is as tough as I figured out it was going to be ~~at sixteen.~~ I keep in touch around the West as best I can and ~~read as much as I can and~~ it's still pretty preposterous for sixteen year old kid today to think he's going to be a farmer or rancher if there's no land in the family and it's almost as difficult even if there is ~~some land in the family.~~ So as a viable fiscal way of life there's still not that much to be missed there ~~as far as I can see.~~ But being under the Rocky Mountain front on a good day on a tractor is a pretty damn fine thing. One of the lessons of life in northern Montana is that you aren't gonna have that many good days sitting on tractors or trailing sheep, ~~or whatever.~~ The ones that you do are going to be everlasting pageants in your head ~~when you remember them.~~ But the incessant wind, the ~~question~~ prospect of drought ~~and the question of~~ or enormous winters ~~it just really~~ kicks a lot of the romance out of the outdoor life. There are people, ~~many of whom I know,~~ some of whom are my high school friends ~~in fact,~~ who do seem to be cut out for that kind of life. ~~Now I put in one of the books.~~ Riley, the smart-mouthed

I invented for Ride With Me, Mariah Montana, / newspaper writer, said something about guys not realizing they're working themselves to death because they're doing it out of doors. I've seen quite a lot of that. So I find it a lot more attractive and beneficial to my work to be able to go into the outdoors carrying a notebook and a pen and putting in ~~perhaps~~ dawn to dark days out there, looking at the country, listening to people, thinking it over.

That reminds me of Van Gogh taking his canvas out into the fields.

~~Yeah,~~ it's a pretty good idea to get out and feel the elements you're writing about. Some of them I've been able to bring into my work from memory. I saw enough blizzards in the time I was growing up out there that I don't feel compelled to rush out into a blizzard ~~particularly~~ anymore. But the Montana droughts I have gone ~~back~~ to experience because they weren't around as viciously, apparently the warming of the earth is now wheeling them around.

when I was growing up

there

Well I've read in Elizabeth Simpson's book about your thorough research habits, how you really take the time to know your material.

Right

~~Yeah,~~ I've always tried to go take a look at ~~where~~ the geography I'm writing about. Indeed, went to Scotland to see where the young men of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* take off from the old life there. ~~And that proved to be very useful~~

Did the story of the draft horse come from Scotland?

It did, it did. The opening one. Now this is the danger of being an interviewer because ~~it disappoints a lot of~~ notions about how carefully things are structured ~~and about how things are carried out.~~ I did come across, in a Scottish newspaper, an incident not ~~too~~ far from the one that opens Dancing at the Rascal Fair, a horse being dragged into the **Greenock** harbor by a cart that flipped off the dock, but it must have taken me a year and a half, Derek, before I ~~was thinking~~ thought of having something similar toward the climax of the book. And even at that point when Rob goes into the reservoir on a horse, it wasn't a Scottish horse. It was a horse ~~that~~ I had ridden across a similar reservoir ~~and~~ I made it safely, of course, but a husky young guy ~~who had recently come out of the~~ ex-Marines did not ~~make it. In the next~~

sometimes get disappointed by the time I'm done with them.

Galbraith OK

because of that

some years later on that same ranch

~~generation or two, on that same ranch, that same reservoir, a guy had~~ drowned in a similar accident to what ~~had~~ happened to Rob. ~~I don't think I ever did entirely tumble until~~ someone in the audience ~~asked~~ me once, "Now how did you carefully ~~frame~~ those two horse drownings?" ~~And it dawned on me at that point that I was simply using the researched experience in both instances.~~

That image of Rob and the horse drowning in that reservoir is as haunting to me, as a reader, as the elk in Craig Lesley's Winterkill and the horses in Linda Bierds' The Stillness, The Dancing.

Well, good. I'm glad to be in that company because those are images that are permanently on the cave walls in the back of my head too. I remember working long and hard on that scene of the horse going into the reservoir. ~~You know, you try to use everything you have,~~ try to bring to a book everything you have and one thing I have is a experience of nearly drowning as told in This House of Sky. Consequently, I don't know how many drownings there have been in my ~~books.~~ ~~There's~~ one in The Sea Runners, ~~And it seems to me there's one or~~ two somewhere else. ~~So~~ I've been able to draw on that as probably the closest risk I've ever been through and bring it into the fiction. ~~I've sometimes thought that should have taught me something.~~ I should have gone out and taken swimming lessons after that. But I've ~~thought~~ since, "No, no, this is a very useful fear for me to have as a writer." It's like boating ~~or whatever.~~ ~~First of all~~ I get seasick very promptly. ~~Which helped~~ was just a great help when I was writing The Sea Runners, to give ~~uh~~...

Misery.

Yes...to give misery to ~~Venberg, I guess, but also this very healthy respect slash fear of water is a very valuable thing for me.~~

Richard Hugo writes, "Poets turn liabilities into assets."

[laughter]

Hugo was so great. He would sum up in one sentence what we're trying in the whole damn interview to get at. I knew Hugo, incidentally.

Yes, I read that you had been acquainted with him in Montana, and that whole group of Montana writers...Hugo, Kittredge, Welch and others.

Yeah. It's kind of an odd loop in our case to Hugo. Carol, in her first job out of college, worked at the same college as Mildred Walker, a writer who ultimately became Hugo's mother-in-law.

Oh, Ripley's mother.

And this was many years ago, before Ripley and Hugo ever made eyes at each other in his class. When I first went into a Missoula bookstore with This House of Sky, it'd been reviewed in the Missoulian by somebody I'd never heard of--Ripley Schemm. Carol knew instantly what was going on. So, out of that came some unusually wonderful kidding opportunities on Hugo. We could always threaten to sic his mother-in-law on him. [laughter]

Well, the connection does seem to run deep. Primarily two landscapes inhabit your work, the coastal one of the Puget Sound, and Montana. In this respect, you are like Richard Hugo, but in reverse as he went a bit east and you west. In fact, you two even have Scotland in common. He spent some time there in Skye on a Guggenheim to produce his book The Right Madness on Skye. Of Skye, he said the weather and vegetation reminded him of the Puget Sound while the starkness was all Montana. He claimed that he was a landscape poet. Are you a landscape writer? And what does that mean?

You can get away with wearing the landscape sandwich board more easily if you are a poet than you can if you are a fiction writer because reviewers and critics will quickly slap ~~you~~ a fiction writer on the back of the sandwich board and leave the piece of paper that says regional. So I tend to balk a little bit at the notion that we're writers with a sense of place out here when it's simply put that baldly because I think there's so much more going on in the writing in and about the American West ~~by my~~

pick up from

~~generation and certainly that would include our one time oldest honorary member,~~ Norman Maclean, down through the younger generation ~~coming on,~~ say, Deidre McNamer, ~~I suppose,~~ and somebody like **Melanie Rae Thon. (sp?).** I'm mostly familiar with writers more or less my own age ~~,~~ Welch, Mary Clearman Blew, Craig Lesley, ~~and of course Norman Maclean.~~ You read ~~those~~ books and ~~yeah~~ there's a lot of landscape in them but God there's pretty damn wonderful dialogue and I think a level of characterization in Western fiction which, if we hadn't put landscape in, the critics would say, "Well, it's a sense of person that these westerners grew up with." ~~So I tend to say that~~ we're not just writing travelogues out here ~~that the landscape,~~ sense of place, tag can too easily suggest. ~~Within that,~~ I try to make the landscape character, ~~is my own view of what I'm trying to do~~. I did it ~~pretty~~ consciously in The Sea Runners. ~~That's the one book~~ I've managed to keep a journal of the writing of ~~the book, Derek, as I did it.~~ And so I've got the old file cards and entries ~~on~~ that show quite consciously after one of the trips to Alaska that by God the way to handle this Northwest coast is to put it in there as if it's the fifth character ~~of this book.~~ Put it in almost nonfiction terms. Just write a description of the coast and the tides and so on and maybe the ~~guys~~ are in the scene and maybe they're not. ~~And so I think the~~ other ~~fiction~~ probably shows it to a lesser extent ~~when it tends to be backdrop.~~ But the landscape, for me, is probably in the same creative territory as it is for Hugo. I'm ~~quite~~ aware that it triggers analogies in me. It sets me to thinking of ways to handle it and it keeps showing up when it didn't particularly have to in my books. How the mountains look to one of the characters. ~~Well~~ in the book I'm writing now, ~~the woman~~ is going back to the abandoned homestead in Scotch Heaven ~~and it's~~ Susan Duff who was a prized schoolgirl in Angus McCaskill's one-room schoolhouse.

Ninian's daughter.

Yes, she's going back in 1924 and the place has been abandoned since '18 or '19, and cows have gotten in the house as they tended to do in old homestead cabins so she's there scrubbing up after the ~~W.W.~~ cows but the mountains are out too.

The landscape is a character in your work. Is it a character in your life as well?

Oh yeah. It has let me down on the long rope of life to the Puget Sound here. Carol and I were married in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago. That's where we'd had our education and ~~that's~~ where we'd had pretty good magazine jobs, ~~and so forth~~ and we found ourselves driving into northern Wisconsin on weekends to see scrubby little pine trees, so that began to tell us something. Within not much over a year, it had led us out here. The combination of mountains and water have always lured us. I'm not any kind of a mountain climber, or rock climber, but it still means something to us that we've been on top of Mt. Townsend across here [pointing across the Sound toward the Olympic Mountains] and Elk Peak and Deer Park ~~and some of the things we can see from here.~~ We've missed ~~walked~~ ~~so~~ much of the shoreline that we can see from here.

When you came to Seattle did you have the feeling a familiarity that Angus does in <u>*Dancing at the Rascal Fair*</u> *when he's picking out a homestead site?*

Let me try to describe as best as I can recreate it, pulling into Seattle on an August day in 1966. Carol and I left Chicago with the temperature and humidity ~~were~~ both in the 90's, and we pulled across the floating bridge on a day when Mt. Rainier was out. Within a week or two ~~I guess~~ we'd found a house up behind University Village to rent and our neighbors, who were lifelong Seattleites--the guy had been born and raised across the alley there, ~~he had been there for sixty five years--they~~ were hiding out in their basement because the temperature was almost 80. I very much have the memory of us looking at each other and saying, "This feels about right." [laughter] ~~This climate feels wonderful.~~ And Seattle had a lot of immediate attractions ~~in terms of the~~ including theater life. The university was a handsome campus to ~~first~~ set foot on. The first time we walked in the quadrangle there it looked like it had been there since Dick Stover came west from Yale. It was ~~pretty~~ promptly a comfortable place. And I think your question does have a lot of carrying power because when it came time to look at leaving, once I had my Ph.D. and was in the job market, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

we thought

DINK STOVER

William Blake wrote, "We become what we behold." Does this explain how landscape shapes identity?

~~Yeah~~ I think it does to a kind of intriguing extent.

And how landscape, identity, and memory work their way into most of your work?

Yeah, although when I'm sitting around here, what I think I'm working on is usually the language. But I'm generally pounding away on one of those three themes ~~I suppose.~~

The way that the landscape of the west has fixed a lot of people into place and kept them there maybe even against their better interest ~~in life,~~ ~~as I was talking toward earlier,~~ perhaps leading hopeless ways of life, as the larger world would look at it, yeah, there certainly has to be a lot of unarticulated love that keeps ~~a lot of~~ people there. And it's been one of the tugs that I've seen in a lot of friends. My own solution to it was that there are a lot of good place to live in the West. And I've chosen one which has ~~to me~~ its own appeal. It's not the Rocky Mountain front out there but pretty damn good mountains. even so

Was it easier to love this landscape after first loving the Rocky Mountains?

~~Yeah,~~ I think so. That's been on my mind lately too because I'm fairly recently back from a book tour in the upper Midwest. Saw many old friends there, one of my oldest friends from college, various people who have spent their whole lives on a flat disc of earth maybe a ~~100~~ hundred miles across. And it apparently doesn't bother them that this is out here waiting for them because I've tried to ~~advise them,~~ to coax them, to shame them [laughter] ~~and indeed~~ But if I had been brought up in that, maybe I would prize the banks of the Mississippi River, or the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin as deeply I do these places of the West. So, yes, I think where you ~~do~~ land into life does put some kind of a parenthesis of vision around you ~~of what you're looking for perhaps, in scenery, in what you want to surround yourself with. Because~~ I know when I worked ~~there~~ in Evanston on the Rotarian magazine as a young assistant editor anything that came from the west was just handed to me, and ~~one of~~ my habits at lunch, one of the guys pointed out to me once, ~~where~~ was that I would go off by myself down to Lake Michigan ~~and have lunch~~ rather than going to the cafeteria ~~or~~

whatever. I certainly wasn't trying to mark myself off as "the lone westerner" but these guys knew it. I worked with knew I was.

Do you have a greater allegiance to one landscape over another, Montana over the Sound? Or is it a tie?

Well it's pretty close to a tie. There are a few enlightened countries in the world--I think Ireland is maybe one--that give you dual citizenship. And I've had something like that in the writing and in the reception to the writing. I've been exceedingly fortunate being able to go back to Montana and readers there ask me "Why don't you live in Montana?" But when I point out to them that I'm economically starved out, my wife's job is in Seattle, and I'm out here as much as I can be and so on there doesn't seem any kind of rancor there.

In fact, they've been giving you honorary degrees.

Yeah, right. So I've felt very fortunate in that reception. And I haven't felt any rancor for living out here and writing the majority of my fiction at least about the Rocky Mountain front area. The trellis of history and landscape that the McCaskills grow on certainly goes up along the Rockies there, Derek, but part of that is something I once heard Wallace Stegner talk about, fortunately it was long after I started doing it and so on, so it only confirmed me. He once talked about his past as a short story writer which is not particularly well known but it turns out that he wrote a hell of a lot of short stories in his early days and won some O'Henry awards and so on. He was speaking in Portland and someone in the audience had asked him about this, why he had stopped writing short stories, and he said, "Well, you use up your capital all the time." And he meant in terms of characterization I think. That certainly has been one thing I've seen Faulkner did not do. Faulkner just kept the genealogy pasted on the wall and thought, "Okay, if X burns down Y's barn, how does that trigger what's going to happen in another generation here." And so this long family line which I tend to...as I say a kind of a trellis that my characters grow their lives on. That tends to be Rocky Mountain. It wouldn't have to be. When I was writing Heart Earth and being out and asked questions afterwards about that time my family spent in Arizona, it dawned on me--I think it

~~was even suggested to me by a~~ the newspaper's Tucson book editor ~~who~~ grinned and said, "Well if you hadn't left you might be writing about the Grand Canyon country, might you?" Yeah. Could be worse.

Well, Keats talked about Negative Capability, and I think part of what he meant by that term was distance from the subject, a bit of a cool remove. William Stafford wrote his best Kansas poems when he was living in Oregon.

~~Yeah, Yeah.~~ And the one I always cite. Joyce didn't write Ulysses about Paris. We don't have as good a book about Paris. In my case, I've always known that the writing is easier to get done here than it is back in Montana or somewhere else in the west. Part of that unfortunately means the shirking of perfectly good citizenship, which if I lived in Montana I would feel quite compelled to pitch in on. Here, with the larger population in the state and with greater resources to the society, I've felt a lot more free to hole up in a suburb and work ~~at what I do~~ and do ~~pretty~~ much not ~~anything~~ else.

Are you talking about say devoting some of your time to protecting the environment?

No, less that than participating in Montana's ~~the~~ educational community or something else. Jim Welch served on the parole board in Montana ~~out there~~, something like ten years. Kittredge is kind of a circuit riding preacher, all the things he does. I think I would have to do at the very least writing conferences and poets in the schools and so on.

Seattle frees you up.

It frees me up a lot. I'm able to try to pick my spots and a lot of it does entail going back to Montana or to rural Utah through one of the state humanities councils or some kind of nature conservancy grant. ~~Something of that sort.~~ But I'm able to schedule those things outside of a writing stint. So in terms of sitting down and doing what I think I'm meant to do, ~~why~~ a Puget Sound suburb ~~I've long felt~~ is the most efficient place to do it.

You mentioned earlier that your aim in the writing is to get the words ~~write~~ right, not necessarily to evoke a theme, to get to what Maclean calls the "poetry under the prose." I mentioned to a poet friend a few weeks ago that I was going to interview you and she knew your name but unlike most of the folks around here hadn't read your books. So I read her a passage from This House of Sky, one of the memory sections and she said, "Oh my God, that's beautiful. How did it ever get published?" I know she was responding to the poetry under the prose. Can you talk about that?

~~Yeah,~~ Sure. I did keep a journal part-time when I was ~~working on~~ writing This House of Sky. It wasn't full-time because the work on This House of Sky was strewn across half a dozen years. But I would every so often put down what I was trying to do and there is an entry somewhere back there--evidently after what I thought was a pretty decent day's work--that it would be wonderful to write it all as highly charged as poetry if I could just do it. And I think the clearest answer, about trying to get the poetry in, is that I simply ~~went back and~~ worked on it and worked on it as if ~~it~~ the book were an epic poem.

Did you read it aloud as you worked on it?

Yeah, I would read aloud some. ~~Some of~~ this goes back to broadcast journalism. I've always been aware of the power of spoken words and the power of rhythm, in particular. It maybe also goes back to a great stroke of luck in college where the ungodly old scholarship dorm I landed in was also full of theater people and so you couldn't walk through the front door of that place without Richard Benjamin imitating Wrigley Field ~~for you~~, and Ron Holgate singing as he later would on Broadway, and my best friend was a theater major. ~~And~~ so I went to many of the rehearsals in what was a marvelous theater department, and I read a lot of Shakespeare, read a lot of dramatists, and ~~so I~~ was ~~quite~~ aware of the wonderful trickeries of the language. Allied with that was my own, ~~for the world~~, mercifully brief stint in trying to write poetry when I was in graduate school in history at the UW. All of these combine ~~I guess~~ into the passion for the sentence and working within the sentence which meant going back--I don't know if I consciously did it on This House of Sky or not Derek, but it's the same process. On some books I have over the words countless times

taken a colored marker and either done it myself or hired somebody to mark every verb. Look at every Goddamned verb. Look at how every paragraph begins and ends ~~and the usual things too.~~ look at every adjective, ~~and so on.~~ It is trying to be a cosmic mechanic on the language.

whether to take it out or leave it in.

In my ear, the poetry under the prose is still alive. It is less overt than in This House of Sky, but nevertheless present in the more recent books.

~~Yeah,~~ one of the things ~~I think~~ I'm ~~semi-consciously~~ embarked on now is, in fiction, to see how much I can drop it back a notch and still have it there, and maybe do something else within the story. Perhaps make a story move more quickly. Maybe extend the characterization or the interior. Maybe put the spotlight on something else within the story rather than on every showy verb. ~~Something of that sort.~~ So I've been ~~kind of~~ consciously tinkering ~~with that.~~

lively language

Much of the poetry in your prose, it seems to me, comes from the way people talk. In this respect, your work compares with William Stafford's. And I'm certain that you've nailed it, that you've leashed the colloquial with your language. Recently I was about to go skiing with some folks and one said, "Okay, everybody read-aye?" This was in La Grande, Oregon. And I realized that I had just read that "read-aye" the night before in Mountain Time, ~~I believe.~~ I don't know if I had heard it before, but this was the first time I heard it. It reminds me of another time, also in Oregon, in the Willamette Valley, when I saw these two deer leap away from the road and I immediately remembered the phrase Mary Oliver uses in one of her poems to describe a startled deer, "silky agitation." She had recreated the deer in the language, just as you have recreated western speech in "read-aye." What's the value of these real voices in your writing?

It seems to me there's an intrinsic rightness, a ~~validity when you get those voices right.~~ To anybody who knows anything about the society or part of the country you're writing about, it punches that "validity" ticket. Perhaps it's the familiarity. Perhaps it entertains them in a certain way. But to have the characters sound right and sound memorable is one of the best fundamentals you can have for a story. ~~I spend a lot of time...~~ you see these file cards back here, a lot of these are ~~indeed~~

dialogue, and they're around here in various incarnations. There's one box ~~somewhere down there~~ which is largely Scotchisms, many of them picked up from trips to Scotland, ~~some~~ various turns of phrases which the characters in Dancing at the Rascal Fair use. There's Montana lingo picked up in bars and cafes. The novel I'm working on now will have an ~~Afro~~ African-American westerner guy who grew up there in the Two Medicine country. ~~So~~ it's been interesting to find that lingo. I've given him a Sergeant in the black cavalry as a father and so all these neighborhoods of colloquialisms are there to be visited and it's an aspect of language that constantly tickles at peoples' minds. You notice that computer geeks, who in many other aspect of life are just as dry and emotionless as they can manage to be, have produced almost instantly their own colloquial language as rich as cowboys. And teenagers who don't know the time of day, ~~apparently, to look at them,~~ are as busy at it as Shakespeare.

And we still have "cool."

And "cool" comes back and back and back. ~~Cool I think...I have to trace this out a little, but~~ I think this is ~~the~~ third time around in my life. I got a card today from the Nature Conservancy inviting us up to the Skagit River on their boat trip to see the eagles and the guy says, "It's going to be cold but it'll be cool." ~~Now I think I've found that back into the 20s or 30s at least. So anyway it's~~ one of the most fertile ~~parts~~ fields for a novelist to work in. ~~One thing that I've always been aware of...~~ What I ~~say on any of this~~ should be hedged in by something I should have mentioned earlier, that I'm a more natural editor than a ~~writer, or~~ first drafter, and ~~so I think~~ I come at a lot of these things from the editing experience I've picked up in journalism and probably from an inclination ~~in me that I'm interested in~~ tinkering. I'm not particularly interested in immaculate conceptions. It maybe goes back to being used to doing chores. You have to get the firewood, you have to ~~do~~ carry the water, you have to do thus and such. So I see ~~the~~ my tinkering with the way ~~people~~ my characters talk as a real part of it, but I've been thinking a lot lately too about how much ~~do you do it?~~ to do. Where do you draw the line? I feel fine in my own work, but I've been trying to put together a talk sometime for a speech request about how other writers have done it, ~~how they've done it~~ and how sometimes it's been overdone. Flannery O'Connor was pretty vocal on how much you do. ~~You don't do~~ Not very

much, according to her. In fiction writing, ~~how people sound on the page~~ it seems to me you want ~~them~~ people to sound like perhaps clever bits of Vaudeville in the Shakespearean sense with the wonderful clowns. You don't want them to sound like Burlesque. So, it is a line to walk.

move pp. 25-26 "work habits" question & answer to here

How planned is your writing? Do you write from an outline?

No, I've tried it a time or two. In fact I tried it with Dancing at the Rascal Fair, I guess. It had dawned on me that ~~I forget what that was...my fourth or fifth book, something like that~~ most of my books were turning out to have seven chapters or ~~seven~~ six or sections ~~or whatever, and~~ I thought, "Well, maybe I oughtta take a look at this." And so I took the yellow pad and tried to do an outline of where I thought Rascal Fair would go, and it didn't ~~end up anything like that~~ ended up with ~~It was pretty much~~ seven chapters. What I actually start with is an arc of time which I know what the time span of the book is going to be, ~~and~~ that becomes an armature to build a lot of the plot on because so much of my fiction relies upon people caught in the historical laws of gravity. World War ~~Two~~ One comes along and if you're a young male in Montana, why, you're swept away into it pretty surely. And if the 1919 flu epidemic comes along, it changes entire communities.

So, the timescape and the landscape working together in your work.

So the timescape is usually the plotting framework and within that various kinds of patchwork is done. How a character is going to talk will sometimes shape ~~their~~ her personality. In English Creek, Jick fairly early ~~talks about~~ says of his mother ~~and~~ that when you start to hear her capital letters, you're in trouble. I simply knew I wanted some character who had that trait and I didn't necessarily know it was going to be her.

And Jick even gets his name from talk, from one of Stanley's quips.

And

Yes. In The Sea Runners, the blacksmith, probably the least likely ~~guy~~ candidate to have knowledge of the Bible, be a Bible spouter because ~~is there because it's a book, to me, with a kind of 19th Century flavor and I thought, "Well, somebody ought to know something about the Bible," and~~ by the time ~~that had~~ it occurred to me the other

gets to

that I needed one for 19th Century flavor

were already shaped just
characters ~~didn't seem to be likely candidates~~ and I thought, "Well, by God, let's make it interesting. Let's give it to the least likely guy." And so those kinds of decisions ~~will~~ shape personalities and thereby the plots. ~~Plots sometimes~~, some turns in ~~them, side actions~~, skirmishes in them, will come about because you want to try something or see how far you can go out on the edge. I'm thinking of Bucking the Sun, the little sheriff there shoots a ~~guy~~ in the leg with a shotgun because he's also a shrimp, as the sheriff is, and he's kind of snickering at the sheriff companionably. "We're both runts aren't we?" is what his laugh is saying. ~~I think it's one of the few times in my books when a gun is fired in anger, or whatever that is~~. I have no idea where that came from. development

Sticks and stones.

Sticks and stones. ~~I think~~ I ~~probably~~ had come across a newspaper ~~piece, as that often happens~~, of someone robbing jewelry stores across the **Highline** in Montana. It's a funny serial robbery to do because the towns are about fifty miles apart. And you wonder how smart is this? ~~And indeed, the sheriff is waiting for the guy in my instance~~, so I wanted this sequence of robberies to see what would happen. ~~That's what came out of it.~~ And indeed my sheriff is patiently waiting for the guy when he hits Glasgow.

Facts, history, really seem to stir your imagination, which makes a lot of sense considering your background in journalism and your doctorate in history.

~~I still tend to argue, also, that~~ it's pretty hard to make things up as strange as things happen. If I had written a thriller about the election that has just finished it would be preposterous to have ~~Jed~~ Jeb Bush in that plot. The guy's brother is governor of the state? Come on. ~~And~~ that sort of thing seems to happen a lot simply because there's so many of us and the pinball clicks of us against each other produce all this strangeness.

Dancing at the Rascal Fair

When I was reading ~~English Creek~~, I was sure that people on long voyages would suck on limes. I was sure that that was some bit of history you'd come across in your research.

~~Yeah~~, I don't remember where I got that. I do remember something similar, coming across ~~something~~ a bit of detail and saying, "Oh yeah, that's going in." Throwing the straw mattresses overboard when they're off Sandy Hook ~~or someplace~~. I had not known that, ~~and~~ although I had read, ~~I thought~~, quite a bit about immigration, but I came across that one ~~I think~~ in a letter in the Scottish archives. ~~And you can see that in the head~~. ~~So yes, the~~ like that details are often the little watch spring parts that I imagine from.

~~In your books both the landscape and the characters grow up, and, as we have just heard, grow back - you mentioned Faulkner earlier--and Progress with a capital P. comes to both~~. Your books are a living ~~(in the sense that literature can live)~~ record of the West, particularly Montana. ~~To dub you as a "landscape writer" does indeed seem very limiting~~. If I knew someone who was interested in the history of Montana, I could just point him to a stack of your books.

~~Well, a lot of that is reported to me~~. When I'm in Montana doing book signings ~~and so forth~~, people do come up and say, "Oh I read your book and moved here." And this is a little more responsibility than I or my books want. But one of the ~~really~~ wonderful, totally unforeseen bonuses of my books has been the friendship of Western historians that they've engendered. Bill Robbins down at Oregon State has used *English Creek* in history courses about the West. Carol and I were down at Stanford last summer to do a talk in a summer seminar they do for their alumni ~~last summer, and to my astonishment,~~ and Richard I was introduced by Richard White, ~~who~~ is a friend of ours, but he's also one of the hottest Western historians, the most encyclopedic, ~~and the most various adjectives in the West,~~ and ~~Richard~~ introduced me as being to my astonishment he more interested in history than historians are. ~~And~~ At the moment I thought, "That's a funny way to put it." But I've spent part of this ~~vacation~~ week sitting around here going back through a book ~~over there~~ called Lost Country Life, which is about Medieval agriculture, and how things were done, and what ~~things~~ tools looked like, and how turns of phrase like ~~how~~ "spitting image" came out of "splitting image" ~~of~~ cutting trees exactly in half so you would have matching beams in ships ~~and so forth~~ or housebuilding. And I got to thinking that maybe Richard saw me in the right light there. ~~That that does seem to be what occupies my head.~~

It vitalizes you and then you vitalize it in your writing.

Yeah, it's kind of a shaped accident ~~or whatever.~~ I gave up dissipating it into magazine work. Now I am able to sit in one spot for two or three years at a time and shape it into a book. I don't drink it away, I don't talk it away, it is able to incubate its way into print ~~with me.~~ I see that as kind of a stroke of luck of personality ~~or whatever. You know,~~ since I haven't utterly forged myself.

Success can be a difficult experience among writers, an inhibitor. Since you have staked out a lasting homestead in the hearts and thoughts of so many readers, has it been difficult to keep going?

~~Well,~~ I can say "no" pretty fluently. That has helped a lot.

Well, I'm glad you didn't say "no" to this interview.

[laughter]

I haven't gone on some of the circuits of success, particularly the summer writing workshop ~~circuit~~ that I think can take a lot of ~~your~~ time, energy and attention. I'm pleased that others are able to, and there are so many good writers ~~other people~~ that I'm not really needed there. I do go out and give ~~the~~ occasional talks and so on, but my level of success has been ~~really~~ a ~~pretty~~ comfortable one. I'm a fairly rare bird: I'm a middle class novelist, ~~I guess,~~ in that my books don't sell ~~like~~ to Stephen King or John Grisham levels, but they sell healthily and consistently. ~~And~~ so I've been able, largely on the basis of my writing and, always with the underpinning of Carol's teaching career, in terms of medical coverage and some kind of pension to look forward to, ~~you know able~~ to come from a three room railroad shack in Ringling to this place. That's been ~~I think~~ a ~~quite~~ reasonably comfortable arc of success to work within, Derek. One thing I was aware of at the time, when This House of Sky did not win the National Book Award, when The Snow Leopard carried the day, it dawned on me pretty promptly, "Well, this is going to make my life easier." And indeed it probably has. ~~And~~ with that goes the realization that you probably only get one crack at ~~something like that~~. But life doesn't end if you don't get it on that one crack. As long as you've got ~~the~~ other books to write, your health

the National Book Award or the Pulitzer or other prizes.

and a decent life and a good spouse and so forth. Hugo had ~~that same~~, in a lot growlier way, that same attitude because we were around him when he lost on the Pulitzer to ~~people like~~ Donald Justice and ~~so forth~~ others year after year.

Then there's Robert Lowell who said something like, "A few years ago I couldn't get anything published and now I can't stop from getting everything published, and that scares me more."

Well, I ~~again,~~ benefitted from a kind of internal stroke of luck ~~or whatever.~~ When I was a magazine freelancer for ten years, I wrote incessantly. I wrote a couple dozen pieces a year. It turns out that working on the books ~~pretty well~~ weaned me off that entirely. I don't feel a compulsion now to do ~~really~~ any of the shorter pieces that are asked of me.

Financially speaking, you don't have to.

Financially, I don't have to, and even though a topic may interest me, I don't feel I have to find out what I have to say on that topic. So I'm currently not even writing book reviews. I have reviewed more books than I will personally ever write. So I've contributed my bit to those great scales of reviewing justice. ~~And I've found that I think in particular the last couple of book reviews, that I~~ I would work very hard on ~~them~~, and ~~I've often~~ had the habit--I got it in ~~the~~ my magazine days--of including a paragraph which ~~can~~ could be cut for reasons of space ~~or whatever.~~ More and more I ~~find~~ found that paragraph ~~is~~ was always ~~being~~ cut so that the illustration ~~can~~ could be goosed up. And I got to thinking, "Uh-uh. I'm not going to spend the weekend thinking up a good sentence or paragraph and then the graphic designer yanks it out of there ~~for the sake of the illustration.~~"

MOVE TO p. 26

It seems that even though you are surrounded by teachers and teachers populate your books and have been prominent in your life, that it's been best for you to avoid the teaching life, against the stream of so many writers today, and make your living as a writer.

This goes to the saying, "Life is choices."

MOVE TO p. 26

Your father used to say that.

Yes, that's right. It comes straight out of the family. Very early on, probably in graduate school, I realized I do not have the energy or metabolism, whatever you want to call it, to teach and write both. I liked teaching a lot as a teaching assistant at the UW. I ~~really~~ found it a vitalizing way of life. But it took me over too. So it's a question of what are you going to be taken over by. And a lot of people can balance them, but I simply have a head ~~where it~~ that mulls only in one direction. ~~Wherever I'm at, I'm totally writing that stream of thought.~~

And rather than short change one...

And I felt I'd be short changing both, actually, by trying to do both. So if they advance from Dolly and clone all of us, why yeah, I'll be a teacher. But until then, ~~well it's~~ gotta be a writer. #

You referred to some early Doig poems. How much money would the Seattle Review have to come up with to be able to reprint those?

[laughter]

Eight or nine figures. Well, they probably already show up in dabs in the novels. I'm not sure there's anything that hasn't been cannibalized and the bones licked clean by now. They ~~show~~ pop up a little bit in Mariah Montana. Riley does a column about homesteads ~~I think~~ and he alludes to Thomas Jefferson and "the red school house of his head" ~~or something like that.~~

"The red schoolhouse of his head." That's plundered from a poem.

Yes. And I've written all of the songs in my fiction--to the detriment of my fiction I must add--but I have written all the sons of bitches.

I wondered about that. Particularly in Dancing at the Rascal Fair because the song is so integral to the book.

however. I wrote that song because I wanted to to use the phrase as the book title.

~~Now~~ none of that, ~~I don't think~~, was early poetry. And I'm writing now, Lord help me, spirituals for the current book. ~~And~~ I swiped a few lines I had left over in a notebook the other day for something there: "Does the hawk know its shadow?"

So we have managed to get some Doig poetry in here.

~~And~~ for free, no less, you clever devil.
[laughter]

~~*Two final questions.*~~ *Can you say more about the new book ~~your~~ you're working on and maybe what's coming after that? What are Doig's readers going to see on the shelves 5 to 10 years from now?*

~~Well,~~ within (2) or (3) years, I hope they'll be seeing this ~~current~~ novel ~~in the bookstores, which is a novel~~ about motives and how much they can be read by other people and even by ourselves, and what's mixed in with them. It has ~~The~~ three principal characters are Susan Duff, grown from schoolgirlhood in Dancing at the Rascal Fair ~~to being~~ a singing teacher in Helena. She's been ~~through~~ the Suffrage Movement ~~along the way~~, and that was a vital piece of history in the West. The western states preceded the constitutional amendment by a number of years. ~~And so the West was a battleground on this before it was a national battleground.~~ So Susan's been through those political wars. In the course of them she met and had an affair with a, ~~really a~~ kind of bull moose progressive Teddy Roosevelt sort of politician. But he's one of the Williamsons of the hated WW Ranch ~~in all my books~~. He's a World War One hero, ~~so he's been through that~~. But so far I'm running him against the grain. He doesn't come out of it disillusioned in the same way as the Lost Generation of the (20s). I want him to have different scars on him than the absolute kind of mandatory, stamped-out scars that have been attributed to that so called Lost Generation. He's not lost. He's rich and a lot of other things. But he has lost the governorship of Montana because he and Susan ~~Duff got~~ were caught in this affair and he got blackmailed out of it. ~~He shows~~ up in her life four years later in 1924. He surprises her, walks into the house, ~~by saying~~ and says he has a prize student for her, and it's his black chauffeur, ~~A guy~~ who's grown up on the WW,

has become a figure in suffrage amendments

he running. The book opens with him showing Monty Rathbun, a ranch hand

the son of the Afro-American laundress. Out of this comes the plot: What is everyone up to here? So it's a pretty interesting book to write. It's given me an excuse to write some set scenes I didn't know were in me. The Afro-American guy, as it turns out, as I sat down to write, he has a background as a rodeo clown. That's been his performing record so far. So the first time you see him, he's in that barrel that they hop in when the Brahmas take after them. So there are similar scenes. There's probably going to be one back in Scotland between Susan and the politician flirting tooth and nail outside the Castle in Edinburgh.

So you're still writing this.

Yes, I'm about two-fifths of the way along. I'm able to put that kind of a fraction on it because I sent of the manuscript to the editor just before the holidays. The one useful thing the computer can do for us is count every Goddamned word now. Beyond that it's a mixed bag. But you do know how many words you have anymore. [laughter] So that's the course of the book. There's some flashbacks in it. It's a book where time sort of tunnels backwards into what has happened to shape the motives of these characters and how they respond to it.

Doig Time. While reading your most recent book, Mountain Time, I was thinking there is such a thing as Doig Time. Your prolific use of the flashback and the historical perspective with which you and your characters see the West. I'm thinking of Lexa hiking down that mountain in the steps of Bob Marshall. What a gift to see the landscape like that, to hear those old steps. And that gift is being passed on in your books.

I feel lucky in being tuned in that way, I suppose. I also see it as going with the storytelling impulse that a lot of my characters have, that I grew up around, and I have too, and these flashbacks, these historical things, are to me, kind of, technically analogous to the characters liking to tell stories. I've had good a reinforcement from readers out on the bookstore trail who tell me that they like the flashbacks. They don't see them as intrusive or something to be fast-forwarded over with the eye. I think anybody who's going to read my books knows they're going to have to spend some time with it. And so you take them back to tell them

more about a character, ~~it turns out that~~ they probably will like that. ~~So that's probably going to be the pattern.~~ I don't know if I would ever try to write a book in the flat, contemporaneous straight ~~through~~ chronology. I mean there's a certain appeal if you just sit down and tell a story from finger snap to thunderclap ~~at the end~~. I admire that stuff but I'm not sure it's in me. I've been reading ~~recently~~ John Fowles' book of essays called Worm Holes, where his mind goes off in every direction. You can kind of see how we got the French Lieutenant's Woman out of that guy, that those great flashbacks are there if we can just find the shutter to click.

Wormholes one word

~~*And lastly, is there a question or topic I didn't bring up that you'd like to address?*~~

Only maybe to talk around ~~a little~~ bit about technique or attention to the craft of ~~writing~~. We've gone across it in a lot of ways.

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You mentioned some work habits, like the early mornings. And I know Hugo had his sharpened, number two pencils.

~~Yeah, right. You know,~~ Steinbeck did the same thing. It had to be a certain kind of pencil. And I always respected that, but thought it was a bit much. ~~But~~ Now I've discovered I have to have these Goddamn Ticonderogas. I blame it on the pencil industry because it's getting harder and harder these days to pick up any pencil these days ~~and find it has a darkness to it~~ with a good dark lead. ~~But yes, it turns out~~ these small things. There's ~~the~~ famous Hugo story. I'm not sure this is craft or what it is, but he'd be ~~sitting here like this~~ working away and he'd say, "Ripley, could you get me a cup of coffee?" [imitates Hugo's voice] ~~It would be at his elbow but~~ he couldn't be disturbed that far.

with the coffee pot about at his elbow,

~~*That reminds me of how Wendell Berry refuses to use a computer, but has his wife type his work.*~~

[laughter]

I look with some bemusement, a lot of respect, but also some bemusement on Wendell Berry and **Vernon Clinkenborg (sp?)** who writes the New York Times nature and rural editorials, and gets to review almost anything written about

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pick up

~~rurality, or the West, or whatever. These guys live on these farms propped up by all the machinery that the rest of us are putting up with.~~ [laughter] But in terms of habit for me, so many words a day is a good part of it. The output is pretty precisely measured--400 words a day--when I'm rough-drafting. Some of it is just the tiny touches you try to put into dialogue. As an example, ~~to tag it to one character versus another character.~~ In Dancing at the Rascal Fair--again, I'm aware of this because I consciously thought it up--Ninian Duff uses ~~that "A-Y,"~~ the Scottish "Ay" at the start of sentences, and Lucas Barclay uses it at the end of sentences. I've heard it both ways in Montana Scotch. I deliberately did that so that these characters--one's a Bible banger and one's a bartender--to make a kind of dialogue parenthesis ~~to enclose these guys~~, to show that they have a commonality of language and expression, even though they may be opposed. And that's a conscious touch ~~I've done. One that has occurred to me over Christmas vacation~~ another example comes from my current manuscript to each hero ranch hand and here. My Afro-American singer, very raw, in terms of his talent, and he's never sung with the piano. At one point Susan Duff, in giving him lessons, says all right, it's time to go to the piano. And I think he's gonna say--instead of what I have had him say for the past six months--"I've never sang with a piano," I think he's gonna have to say, "I've never sang with a piana." It's dawned on me that it needs an "A," the way I heard the bunkhouse guys on my dad's crews say it.

~~*A bit like "coyo'te" versus "co'yote."*~~

Yes. I think it's in Rascal Fair, Adair shows up. As I once heard, in New Zealand, or Britain or somewhere, foreigner's difficulty in remembering "coyote" and "cayeuse," which is which. There's a historian who's written about the Australian Outback and the American West who's said he's always had to have a cheat sheet in his drawers to where Wauga Wauga is and where Walla Walla is. [laughter] Which country lays claim to which. So those kinds of technique on the dialogue interest me a lot and I think help push the books into the reader's mind, the way mine ~~have gone. That's about all I have to say.~~

Let's use the "surrounded by teachers" material on pp. 21-22 as a stronger ending.

Conversation with a Middle Class Cosmic Mechanic

C's. editing

Born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, Ivan Doig has been a ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor and writer. His novels are The Sea Runners (1982), Bucking the Sun (1996), Mountain Time (1999), and his Montana Trilogy: English Creek (1984), Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987), and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana (1990). Doig has also written three works of nonfiction: two memoirs, This House of Sky (1978) and Heart Earth (1993), and Winter Brothers (1980), a book which fuses excerpts from the diaries of James Swan, an early settler of the Puget Sound region, with entries from Doig's own journal evoking the same coastline.

Ivan Doig has received numerous writing awards, including a Christopher Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, the Governor's Writers Day Award, and the David W. and Beatrice C. Evans Biography Award. This House of Sky was nominated for the National Book Award in contemporary thought, and in 1989 the Western Literature Association honored Doig with its Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work.

A graduate of Northwestern University, where he received degrees in journalism, he holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington and honorary doctorates from Montana State University and Lewis and Clark College.

Annie Proulx has called him "one of the best we've got" and Wallace Stegner writes, "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real Montana, and real West, through the eyes of a real writer."

Ivan Doig lives in north Seattle with his wife Carol. The interview took place on December 29, 2000 at their home. During our talk, I found my gaze drawn occasionally to the sizable window of Doig's office, which looks west, of course. Over a neatly gardened yard, past a steep bank, sailboats and freighters criss-crossed the Puget Sound. Beyond this slow and silent commotion, the Olympic

Mountains stood sharply with such presence they managed to climb right into the dialogue. Around us, American history played along well-stocked bookshelves in the form of figurines: soldiers trudging, cannons aiming, and horses rearing. And one floor above, Carol Doig sipped tea and went about her business.

Though he has reached some impressive heights in his writing, Ivan Doig has remained grounded in the ground he loves. He is congenial and has a rich and resonant voice that would have filled the airways, had Doig gone that way. His laughter riddles the interview as freqently as his Scotch wit. He loves language, spoken and written, and wades in it daily as his writing grows from considerable work habits. While thinking about how to describe Ivan Doig, I recalled some lines from Richard Hugo's poem, "Letter to Levertov from Butte":

> ...no matter what my salary is
> or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual
> dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble...

I've read that you were 16 when you decided ranch work wasn't in your future. When did you know that writing would be? That you would become the remembrancer, the tale-bringer?

Well, that turning point at age sixteen was in the midst of a ~~Two Medicine~~ summer when we were running sheep up above the Two Medicine river and a freezing rain, just after the sheep had been sheared, sent a lot of them over an old buffalo jump and made many others simply lie down and give up their ghost ~~and so~~ I knew by the time I went back to high school that autumn that I was going to do something else ~~with myself in life~~ besides ranch work. The decision can be consciously read there in that I dropped out of Future Farmers of America and took typing and Latin ~~that year~~. That moved me a lot closer in my mind to the high school teacher who became very influential in my becoming a writer ~~of some kind~~. Her name was Francis Tideman. She's described at some length in This House of Sky. ~~She was~~ one of these impossible prairie tornadoes who sometimes show up in small schools. She taught all the high school English and then she would teach Latin

some years, Spanish ~~another~~ other year, and ran the high school paper ~~and~~ the annual and so on. ~~By the time~~ When I ~~was~~ came within her reach ~~this way~~--she had me on the school paper pretty promptly, and to a lesser extent, the school annual and ~~so on~~--and my own inclination for turning towards trying to become a journalist and so by the time I was seriously applying for scholarships my senior year, why, that's where it had lead.

I had no notion then that it was going to lead toward books. It's not very well known that I was a broadcast journalism major in college. My intention, if anything, was to become Edward R. Murrow [laughter], someone of that sort. The radio had played an enormous role in our lives in Montana. It brought in whatever wafts of dream we had like major league baseball, or drama, or comedy and it also ~~of course~~ brought in the news which caught my attention. I think that kind of magnet has proven a historically sound one. The great newsmen, particularly the CBS news crew which Murrow set up (the last of them Robert Trout just died a few weeks ago) ~~Robert Trout, that these guys~~ did prove to be so superb that they were worthy ~~people to~~ model ~~myself on~~. It wasn't until I got my master's degree at Northwestern that I had to make the break between college and career--that so many guys my age had to, because the military was there waiting for me. I was in the Air Force Reserve during the Cuban Missile Crisis. When I came back out, ~~started to get a~~ my first job, ~~it~~ turned out to be ~~a writing job,~~ a newspaper job, so that carried me on in writing.

So it was the job that derailed you from broadcast journalism?

~~Yeah~~ it was. It's what was there. I came out of the Air Force at an awkward time of the year, March, ~~I think I came out in March.~~ When People weren't particularly hiring. Northwestern was well networked in placing its students ~~but~~ and that happened to be the best-looking thing at the moment, a job as an editorial writer for a chain of newspapers in down-state Illinois, ~~so~~ I promptly took it and ~~really~~ stayed with print media from then on.

How did your family take your decision to leave ranch work for writing?

Well, my dad always would say, "For God's sake, get yourself an education." Not unlike a lot of fathers who were working people. They wanted better things for

their kids than they had had. Within him too, I now realize, was the Scotch respect for education and his own limited education had been enough to show him that a little schooling could do quite a bit for you. He only went through the eighth grade, but he was quite good at arithmetic. ~~They didn't have math, but~~ he went through his life running crews of men where he had to keep track of wage figures and so forth.

And he could count sheep.

He could count sheep. He could measure haystacks which is a fairly complicated formula [laughter]. And also he could write perfectly well. His letters and commas are in the right place, words are spelled right and so forth. He has hellish handwriting [laughter]. Apparently the Spenserian method did not get down to the end of his fingertips ~~there~~, but in terms of handling the language...is really quite good. So that's a long way of saying that he was always all for me getting an education, although his original notion of how far I could go ~~was~~...the pinnacle of it...was becoming something like a pharmacist, a druggist. One of his nephews had attained that and that's kind of what he could see. And I've been realizing recently that was not too bad an idea from his viewpoint either. All those little towns had drugstores in those days. There weren't malls ~~or whatever~~. If indeed you wanted a ~~pretty good~~ portable career in the small town West, that was a pretty good one.

My grandmother...(sigh)...saw my going away as taking a piece of her heart with her. She was always all for...whatever I wanted to do ~~was okay~~ and she would always end up telling me that. But she had so much more of an embrace of family and by the time I was leaving she had lost one of her children--my mother--through an early death. Another one was badly crippled with Multiple Sclerosis. A third of her four children was living in Australia. So she had already seen a lot of people she cherished go from her, and ~~so~~ my going out of state weighed ~~pretty heavily~~ on her ~~until I was off an doing it.~~

In <u>English Creek</u> you write, "Those firstborn always, always will live in a straddle between the ancestral path of life and the route of the new land." In the context of the book, you're speaking of Scotland versus America, but I want to apply it to

ranch work versus word work. The physical, immediate, daily interaction with the world you had growing up was certainly hard work, but do you ever miss aspects of it? Or have you achieved a balance between time spent in the world and time spent re-creating the world?

Those two very different looking kinds of work actually have a lot of similarities in the chores involved, the habit of doing the chores. I even keep pretty much the same working hours that I grew up with on a ranch. I'm up very early, always up before dawn, down here starting to milk the thesaurus about the time I would have been milking cows on a Montana ranch. There is something I've tried to do some serious thinking about. There is a kind of physicality to the habit of writing, too, of these words coming out the ends of my fingers not always clear to me that they've lingered or been in my brain before they show up there on the keyboard. I've talked with some artist friends about this, the sculptor Tony Angel is one of them, a jazz musician, and there's a watercolor artist. I've talked with them separately. We all have what the sculptor has put a name on--"Getting it in the fingers". Often we're surprised how the physicality of sitting and caressing the language produces, physically produces, the work I'm after. So there's that sort of mystical link, I guess, to it.

The parts of ranch work I miss would be oriented to the land, I think Derek. The way of life still is as tough as I figured out it was going to be. I keep in touch around the West as best I can and read as much as I can and it's still pretty preposterous for sixteen year old kid today to think he's going to be a farmer or rancher if there's no land in the family and it's almost as difficult even if there is some land in the family. So as a viable fiscal way of life there's not that much to be missed. But being under the Rocky Mountain front on a good day on a tractor is a pretty damn fine thing. One of the lessons of life in northern Montana is that you aren't gonna have that many good days sitting on tractors or trailing sheep. The ones that you do are going to be everlasting pageants in your head. But the incessant wind, the question of drought and the question of enormous winters just really kicks a lot of the romance out of the outdoor life. There are people, many of whom I know, some of whom are my high school friends in fact, who do seem to be cut-out for that kind of life. Riley, the smart-mouthed

I invented for Ride with Me, Mariah Montana,

newspaper writer said something about guys not realizing they're working themselves to death because they're doing it out of doors. I've seen quite a lot of that. So I find it a lot more attractive and beneficial to my work to be able to go into the outdoors carrying a notebook and a pen and putting in perhaps dawn to dark days out there, looking at the country, listening to people, thinking it over.

That reminds me of Van Gogh taking his canvas out into the fields.

~~Yeah,~~ it's a pretty good idea to get out and feel the elements you're writing about. Some of them I've been able to bring into my work from memory. I saw enough blizzards in the time I was growing up out there that I don't feel compelled to rush out into a blizzard ~~particularly~~ anymore. But ~~the~~ Montana droughts I have gone back to experience because they weren't around as viciously when I was growing up apparently the warming of the earth is now wheeling them around.

~~Well~~ *I've read in Elizabeth Simpson's book about your thorough research habits, how you really take the time to know your material.*

~~Yeah,~~ I've always tried to go take a look at ~~where~~ the geography I'm writing about. Indeed, went to Scotland to see where the young men of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* take off from the old life there. And that proved to be very useful.

Did the story of the draft horse come from Scotland?

It did, it did. The opening one. Now this is the danger of being an interviewer because it disappoints a lot of notions about how carefully things are structured and about how things are carried out. I did come across, in a Scottish newspaper, an incident not too far from the one that opens Dancing at the Rascal Fair, a horse being dragged into the **Greenock (?)** harbor by a cart that flipped off the dock, but it must have taken me a year and a half, Derek, before I was thinking of something toward the climax of the book. And even at that point when Rob goes into the reservoir on a horse, it wasn't a Scottish horse. It was a horse that I had ridden across a similar reservoir and I made it safely, of course, but a husky young ~~guy who had recently come out of the~~ Marines did not ~~make it. In the next~~ a couple of generations later

generation or two, on that same ranch, that same reservoir, a guy had drowned in a similar accident to what had happened to Rob. I don't think I ever did entirely tumble until someone in the audience asked me once, "Now, how did you carefully frame those two horse drownings?" And it dawned on me at that point that I was simply using the researched experience in both instances.

That image of Rob and the horse drowning in that reservoir is as haunting to me, as a reader, as the elk in Craig Lesley's Winterkill and the horses in Linda Bierds' The Stillness, The Dancing.

Well, good. I'm glad to be in that company because those are images that are permanently on the cave walls in the back of my head, too. I remember working long and hard on that scene of the horse going into the reservoir. You know, you try to use everything you have, try to bring to a book everything you have and one thing I have is a experience of nearly drowning as told in This House of Sky. Consequently, I don't know how many drownings there have been in my books. There's one in The Sea Runners. And it seems to me there's one or two somewhere else. So I've been able to draw on that as probably the closest risk I've ever been through and bring it into the fiction. I've sometimes thought that should have taught me something. I should have gone out and taken swimming lessons after that. But I've thought since, "No, no, this is a very useful fear for me to have, as a writer." It's like boating or whatever. First of all I get seasick very promptly, Which helped, was just a great help when I was writing The Sea Runners, to give...uh...

Misery.

Yes...to give misery to Venberg, I guess, but also this very healthy respect slash fear of water is a very valuable thing for me.

Richard Hugo writes, "Poets turn liabilities into assets."

[laughter]

Hugo was so great. He would sum up in one sentence what we're trying in the whole damn interview to get at. I knew Hugo, incidentally.

Yes, I read that you been acquainted with him in Montana, and that whole group of Montana writers. Hugo, Kittredge, Welch and others.

Yeah. It's kind of an odd loop ~~in our case~~ to Hugo. Carol, in her first job out of college, worked at the same college as Mildred Walker, a writer who ultimately became Hugo's mother-in-law.

Oh, Ripley's mother.

And this was many years ago, before Ripley and Hugo ever made eyes at each other in his class. When I first went into a Missoula bookstore with This House of Sky, it'd been reviewed by somebody I'd never heard of--Ripley Schemm. Carol knew instantly what was going on. So, out of that came some unusually wonderful kidding opportunities on Hugo. We could always threaten to sick his mother-in-law on him. [laughter]

Well, the connection does seem to run deep. Primarily two landscapes inhabit your work, the coastal one of the Puget Sound, and Montana. In this respect, you are like Richard Hugo, but in reverse as he went a bit east and you west. In fact, you two even have Scotland in common. He spent some time there in Skye on a Guggenheim to produce his book The Right Madness on Skye. Of Skye, he said the weather and vegetation reminded him of the Puget Sound while the starkness was all Montana. He claimed that he was a landscape poet. Are you a landscape writer? And what does that mean?

You can get away with wearing the landscape sandwich board easier if you are a poet than you can if you are a fiction writer because reviewers and critics will quickly slap you on the back of the sandwich board and leave the piece of paper that says regional. So I tend to balk a little bit at the notion that we're writers with a sense of place out here, when it's simply put that baldly because I think there's so much more going on in the writing in and about the American West by my

generation and certainly that would include our one time oldest honorary member, Norman Maclean, down through the younger generation coming on, say, Deidre McNamer, I suppose, and somebody like **Melanie Rae Thon (sp?).** I'm mostly familiar with writers more or less my own age... Welch, Mary Clearman Blew, Craig Lesley, and of course Norman Maclean. You read those books and yeah there's a lot of landscape in them but God there's pretty damn wonderful dialogue and I think a level of characterization in Western fiction which, if we hadn't put landscape in, the critics would say, "Well, it's a sense of person that these westerners grew up with." So I tend to say that we're not just writing travelogues out here that the landscape, sense of place, tag can too easily suggest. Within that, I try to make the landscape character, is my own view of what I'm trying to do. I did it pretty consciously in The Sea Runners. That's the one book I've managed to keep a journal of the writing of the book, Derek, as I did it. And so I've got the old file cards and entries on that show quite consciously after one of the trips to Alaska that by God the way to handle this Northwest coast is to put it in there as if it's the fifth character of this book. Put it in almost nonfiction terms. Just write a description of the coast and the tides and so on and maybe the guys are in the scene and maybe they're not. And so I think the other fiction probably shows it to a lesser extent when it tends to be backdrop. But the landscape, for me, is probably in the same creative territory as it is for Hugo. I'm quite aware that it triggers analogies in me. It sets me to thinking of ways to handle it and it keeps showing up when it didn't particularly have to in my books. How the mountains look to one of the characters. Well, in the book I'm writing now, the woman is going back to the abandoned homestead in Scotch Heaven and it's Susan Duff who was a prized schoolgirl in Angus McCaskill's one-room schoolhouse.

Ninian's daughter.

Yes, she's going back in 1924 and the place has been abandoned since '18 or '19 and cows have gotten in the house as they tended to do in old homestead cabins so she's there scrubbing up after the W.W. cows but the mountains are out too.

The landscape is a character in your work. Is it a character in your life as well?

Oh yeah. It has let me down on the long rope of life to the Puget Sound here. Carol and I were married in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago. That's where we'd had our education and that's where we'd had pretty good magazine jobs, and so forth, and we found ourselves driving into northern Wisconsin on weekends to see scrubby little pine trees, so that began to tell us something. Within not much over a year, it had led us out here. The combination of mountains and water have always lured us. I'm not any kind of a mountain climber, or rock climber, but it still means something to us that we've been on top of Mt. Townsend across here [pointing across the Sound toward the Olympic Mountains] and Elk Peak and Deer Park and some of the things we can see from here. We've walked so much of the shoreline that we can see from here.

When you came to Seattle did you have the feeling a familiarity that Angus does in Dancing at the Rascal Fair when he's picking out a homestead site?

Let me try to describe as best as I can recreate it pulling into Seattle on an August day in 1966. Carol and I left Chicago with the temperature and humidity were both in the 90's, and we pulled across the floating bridge on a day when Mt. Rainier was out. Within a week or two I guess we'd found a house up behind University Village to rent and our neighbors, who were lifelong Seattleites--the guy had been born and raised across the alley there...he had been there for sixty five years--they were hiding out in their basement because the temperature was almost 80. I very much have the memory of us looking at each other and saying, "This feels about right." [laughter] This climate feels wonderful. And Seattle had a lot of immediate attractions in terms of the theater life. The university was a handsome campus to first set foot on. The first time we walked in the quadrangle there it looked like it had been there since Dick Stover came west from Yale. It was pretty promptly a comfortable place. And I think your question does have a lot of carrying power because when it came time to look at leaving, once I had my Ph.D. and was in the job market, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

William Blake wrote, "We become what we behold." Does this explain how landscape shapes identity?

~~Yeah~~ I think it does to a...kind of intriguing extent.

And how landscape, identity, and memory work their way into most of your work?

Yeah, although when I'm sitting around here, what I think I'm working on is usually the language. But it's generally pounding away on one of those three themes, ~~I suppose~~.

The way that the landscape of the west has fixed a lot of people into place and kept them there maybe even against their better interest ~~in life, as I was talking toward earlier,~~ perhaps leading hopeless ways of life, as the larger world would look at it, yeah, there certainly has to be a lot of unarticulated love that keeps ~~a lot of~~ people there. And it's been one of the tugs that I've seen in a lot of friends. My own solution to it was that there are a lot of good place to live in the West, And I've chosen one which has ~~to me~~ its own appeal. It's not the Rocky Mountain front out there but pretty damn good mountains.

Was it easier to love this landscape after first loving the Rocky Mountains?

~~Yeah,~~ I think so. That's been on my mind lately too because I'm fairly recently back from a book tour in the upper Midwest. Saw many old friends there, one of my oldest friends from college, various people who have spent their whole lives on a flat disc of earth maybe a 100 miles across. And it apparently doesn't bother them that this is out here waiting for them because I've tried to advise them, to coax them, to shame them [laughter] and indeed if I had been brought up in that, maybe I would prize the banks of the Mississippi River, or the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin as deeply I do these places of the West. So, yes, I think where you ~~do~~ land into life does put some kind of a parenthesis of vision of what you're looking for ~~perhaps~~, in scenery, in what you want to surround yourself with. ~~Because~~ I know when I worked ~~there~~ in Evanston on the Rotarian magazine as a young assistant editor anything that came from the west was just handed to me, and one of my habits at lunch, one of the guys told me once, ~~where~~ I would go off by myself down to Lake Michigan ~~and have lunch rather~~ than going to the cafeteria ~~or~~

whatever...I certainly wasn't trying to mark myself off as "the lone westerner" but these guys knew it. I walked with knew I was.

Do you have a greater allegiance to one landscape over another, Montana over the Sound? Or is it a tie?

Well it's pretty close to a tie. There are a few enlightened countries in the world--I think Ireland is maybe one--that give you dual citizenship. And I've had something like that in the writing and in the reception to the writing. I've been exceedingly fortunate being able to go back to Montana and have readers there ask me "Why don't you live in Montana?" But when I point out to them that I'm economically starved out, my wife's job is in Seattle, and I'm out here in Montana as much as I can be and so on...there doesn't seem any kind of rancor there.

In fact, they've been giving you honorary degrees.

Yeah, right. So I've felt very fortunate in that reception, And I haven't felt any rancor for living out here and writing the majority of my fiction at least about the Rocky Mountain front area. The trellis of history and landscape that the McCaskills grow on certainly goes up along the Rockies there, Derek, but part of that is...something I once heard Wallace Stegner talk about, fortunately it was long after I started doing it and so on, so it only confirmed me...he once talked about his past as a short story writer which is not particularly well known but it turns out that he wrote a hell of a lot of short stories in his early days and won some O'Henry awards and so on. He was speaking in Portland and someone in the audience had asked him about this, why he had stopped writing short stories, and he said, "Well, you use up your capital all the time." And he meant in terms of characterization I think. That certainly has been one thing I've seen Faulkner did not do. Faulkner just kept the genealogy pasted on the wall and thought, "Okay, if X burns down Y's barn, how does that trigger what's going to happen in another generation here." And so this long family line which I've created I tend to...as I say a kind of a trellis that my characters grow their lives on. That tends to be Rocky Mountain. It wouldn't have to be. When I was researching writing Heart Earth and being out in Arizona and asking and being out and asked questions afterwards about that time my family spent in Arizona, it dawned on me--I think it there,

was even suggested to me by a Tucson book editor who grinned and said, "Well if you hadn't left you might be writing about the Grand Canyon country, might you?" Yeah. Could be worse.

Well, Keats talked about Negative Capability, and I think part of what he meant by that term was distance from the subject, a bit of a cool remove. William Stafford wrote his best Kansas poems when he was living in Oregon.

Yeah, Yeah. And the one I always cite...Joyce didn't write Ulysses about Paris. We don't have as good a book about Paris. In my case, I've always known that the writing is easier to get done here than it is back in Montana or somewhere else in the west. Part of that unfortunately means the shirking of perfectly good citizenship which if I was in Montana I would feel quite compelled to pitch in on. Here, the larger population in the state with greater resources to the society, I've felt a lot more free to hole up in a suburb and work at what I do and do pretty much not anything else.

Are you talking about say devoting some of your time to protecting the environment?

No, less that than participating in the educational community or something else. Jim Welch serves on the parole board out there, something like ten years. Kittredge is kind of a circuit riding preacher, all the things he does. I think I would have to do at the very least writing conferences and poets in the schools and so on.

Seatte frees you up.

It frees me up a lot. I'm able to try to pick my spots and a lot of it does entail going back to Montana or to rural Utah through one of the state humanities councils or some kind of nature conservancy. Something of that sort. But I'm able to schedule those things outside of a writing stint. So in terms of sitting down and doing what I think I'm meant to do, why a Puget Sound suburb I've long felt is the most efficient place to do it.

You mentioned earlier that your aim in the writing is to get the words write, not necessarily to evoke a theme, to get to what Maclean calls the "poetry under the prose." I mentioned to a poet friend a few weeks ago that I was going to interview you and she knew your name but unlike most of the folks around here hadn't read your books. So I read her a passage from This House of Sky, one of the memory sections and she said, "Oh my God, that's beautiful. How did it ever get published?" I know she was responding to the poetry under the prose. Can you talk about that?

Yeah, I did keep a journal part-time when I was working on This House of Sky. It wasn't full-time because the work on This House of Sky was strewn across half a dozen years. But I would every so often put down what I was trying to do and there is an entry somewhere back there--evidently after what I thought was a pretty decent day's work--that it would be wonderful to write it all as highly charged as poetry if I could just do it. And I think the clearest answer, about trying to get the poetry in, is that I simply went back and worked on it and worked on it as if it were an epic poem.

Did you read it aloud as you worked on it?

Yeah, I would read aloud some. Some of this goes back to broadcast journalism. I've always been aware of the power of spoken words and the power of rhythm, in particular. It maybe also goes back to a great stroke of luck in college where the ungodly old scholarship dorm I landed in was also full of theater people and so you couldn't walk through the front door of that place without Richard Benjamin imitating Wrigley Field for you, and Ron Holgate singing as he later would on Broadway, and my best friend was a theater major. And so I went to many of the rehearsals in what was a marvelous theater department, and I read a lot of Shakespeare, read a lot of dramatists, and so I was quite aware of the wonderful trickeries of the language. Allied with that was my own, for the world, mercifully brief stint in trying to write poetry when I was in graduate school in history at the UW. All of these combine I guess into the passion for the sentence and working within the sentence which meant going back--I don't know if I consciously did it on This House of Sky or not Derek, but it's the same process. On some books I have

taken a colored marker and either done it myself or hired somebody to mark every verb. Look at every Goddamned verb. Look at how every paragraph begins and ends and the usual things too. Look at the adjectives, and so on. It is trying to be a cosmic mechanic on the language.

In my ear, the poetry under the prose is still alive. It is less overt than in This House of Sky, but nevertheless present in the more recent books.

Yeah, one of the things I think I'm semi-consciously embarked on now is, in fiction, to see how much I can drop it back a notch and still have it there, and maybe do something else within the story. Perhaps make a story move more quickly. Maybe extend the characterization or the interior. Maybe put the spotlight on something else within the story rather than on every showy verb. Something of that sort. So I've been kind of consciously tinkering with that.

Much of the poetry in your prose, it seems to me, comes from the way people talk. In this respect, your work compares with William Stafford's. And I'm certain that you've nailed it, that you've leashed the colloquial with your language. Recently I was about to go skiing with some folks and one said, "Okay, everybody read-aye?" This was in La Grande, Oregon. And I realized that I had just read that "read-aye" the night before in Mountain Time, I believe. I don't know if I had heard it before, but this was the first time I heard it. It reminds me of another time, also in Oregon, in the Willamette Valley, when I saw these two deer leap away from the road and I immediately remembered the phrase Mary Oliver uses in one of her poems to describe a startled deer, "silky agitation." She had recreated the deer in the language, just as you have recreated western speech in "read-aye." What's the value of these real voices in your writing?

It seems to me there's an intrinsic rightness, a validity when you get those voices right. To anybody who knows anything about the society or part of the country you're writing about, it punches that "validity" ticket. Perhaps it's the familiarity. Perhaps it entertains them in a certain way. But to have the characters sound right and sound memorable is one of the best fundamentals you can have for a story. I spend a lot of time...you see these file cards back here...a lot of these are indeed

dialogue, and they're around here in various incarnations. There's one box somewhere down there which is largely Scotchisms, many of them picked up from trips to Scotland, some various turns of phrases which the characters in Dancing at the Rascal Fair use. There's Montana lingo picked up in bars and cafes. The novel I'm working on now will have an Afro-American westerner guy who grew up there in the Two Medicine country. So it's been interesting to find that lingo. I've given him a Sergeant in the black cavalry as a father and so all these neighborhoods of colloquialisms are there to be visited and it's an aspect of language that constantly tickles at peoples' minds. You notice that computer geeks, who in many other aspect of life are just as dry and emotionless as they can manage to be, have produced almost instantly their own colloquial language as rich as cowboys. And teenagers who don't know the time of day, apparently, to look at them, are as busy at it as Shakespeare.

And we still have "cool."

And "cool" comes back and back and back. Cool I think. I have to trace this out a little, but I think this is the third time around in my life. I got a card today from the Nature Conservancy inviting us up to the Skagit River on their boat trip to see the eagles and the guy says, "It's going to be cold but it'll be cool." Now I think I've found that back into the 20s or 30s at least. So anyway it's one of the most fertile parts for a novelist to work in. One thing that I've always been aware of.... What I say on any of this should be hedged in by something I should have mentioned earlier, that I'm a more natural editor than a writer, or first drafter, and so I think I come at a lot of these things from the editing experience I've picked up in journalism and probably from an inclination in me that I'm interested in tinkering. I'm not particularly interested in immaculate conceptions. It maybe goes back to being used to doing chores. You have to get the firewood, you have to do the water, you have to do thus and such. So I see the tinkering with the way people talk as a real part of it, but I've been thinking a lot lately too about how much do you do it? Where do you draw the line? I feel fine in my own work. I've been trying to put together a talk sometime for a speech request about how other writers have done it, how they've done it and how sometimes it's been overdone. Flannery O'Connor was pretty vocal on how much you do. You don't do very

much, according to her. In fiction writing, how people sound on the page, you want them to sound like perhaps clever bits of Vaudeville in the Shakespearean sense with the wonderful clowns. You don't want them to sound like Burlesque. So, it is a line to walk.

How planned is your writing? Do you write from an outline?

No, I've tried it a time or two. In fact I tried it with Dancing at the Rascal Fair, I guess. It had dawned on me that I forget what that was...my fourth or fifth book, something like that, most of the books were turning out to have seven chapters or seven sections or whatever, and I thought, "Well, maybe I oughtta take a look at this." And so I took the yellow pad and tried to do an outline of where I thought Rascal Fair would go, and it didn't end up anything like that. It was pretty much seven chapters. What I start with is an arc of time which I know what the time span of the book is going to be, and that becomes an armature to build a lot of the plot on, because so much of my fiction relies upon people caught in the historical laws of gravity. World War Two comes along and if you're a young male in Montana, why, you're swept away into it pretty surely. And if the 1919 flu epidemic comes along, it changes entire communities.

So, the timescape and the landscape working together in your work.

So the timescape is usually the plotting framework and within that...various kinds of patchwork is done. How a character is going to talk will sometimes shape their personality. In English Creek, Jick fairly early talks about his mother and when you start to hear her capital letters, you're in trouble. I simply knew I wanted some character who had that trait and I didn't necessarily know it was going to be her.

And Jick even gets his name from talk, from one of Stanley's quips.

Yes. In The Sea Runners, the blacksmith, probably the least likely guy to have knowledge of the Bible, be a Bible spouter, is there because it's a book, to me, with a kind of 19th Century flavor and I thought, "Well, somebody ought to know something about the Bible," and by the time that had occurred to me the other

characters didn't seem to be likely candidates ~~and~~ I thought, "~~Well~~, by God, let's make it interesting. Let's give it to the least likely guy." And so those kinds of decisions will shape personalities and thereby the plots. ~~Plots sometimes,~~ some turns in ~~them~~ plots, ~~side actions,~~ skirmishes in them, will come about because you want to try something or see how far you can go out on the edge. I'm thinking of Bucking the Sun, the little sheriff there shoots a guy in the leg with a shotgun because he's also a shrimp, as the sheriff is, and he's kind of snickering at the sheriff companionably. "We're both runts aren't we?" is what his laugh is saying. ~~I think~~ it's one of the few times in my books when a gun is fired in anger, ~~or whatever that is.~~ I have no idea where that came from.

Sticks and stones.

Sticks and stones. ~~I think~~ I ~~probably~~ had come across a newspaper account ~~niche, as that often happens~~, of someone robbing jewelry stores across the **Highline** (?) in Montana. It's a funny serial robbery to do because the towns are about fifty miles apart. And you wonder how smart is this? And indeed, the sheriff is waiting for the guy ~~in my instance,~~ so I wanted this sequence of robberies to see what would happen. ~~That's what came out of it.~~

eg

Transpose sentences.

Facts, history, ~~really~~ seem to stir your imagination, which makes a lot of sense considering your background in journalism and your doctorate in history.

I still tend to argue, also, that it's pretty hard to make things up as strange as things happen. If I had written a thriller about the election that has just finished it would be preposterous to have ~~Jed...~~Jeb Bush in that plot. The guy's brother is governor of the state? Come on. And that sort of thing seems to happen a lot simply because there's so many of us and the pinball clicks of us against each other produce all this strangeness.

When I was reading English Creek, I was sure that people on long voyages would suck on limes. I was sure that that was some bit of history you'd come across in your research.

~~Yeah,~~ I don't remember where I got that. I do remember something similar, coming across something and saying, "Oh yeah, that's going in." Throwing the straw mattresses overboard when they're off Sandy Hook ~~or someplace~~. I had not known that, ~~and~~ although I had read, ~~I thought,~~ quite a bit about immigration, but I came across that one ~~I think~~ in a letter in the Scottish archives. ~~And you can see that in the head.~~ ~~So~~ Such yes, ~~the~~ details are often the little watch spring parts that I imagine from.

In your books both the landscape and the characters grow up, and, as we have just heard, grow back--you mentioned Faulkner earlier--and Progress with a capital P comes to both. Your books are a living ~~(in the sense that literature can live)~~ record of the West, particularly Montana. ~~To dub you as a "landscape writer" does indeed seem very limiting.~~ If I knew someone who was interested in the history of Montana, I could just point him to a stack of your books.

Ok?

Well, a lot of that is reported to me. When I'm in Montana doing book signings ~~and so forth~~, people come up and say, "Oh I read your book and moved here." And this is a little more responsibility than I or my books want. One of the ~~really~~ wonderful, totally unforeseen bonuses of my books has been the friendship of Western historians that they've engendered. Bill Robbins down at Oregon State has used *English Creek* in history courses about the West. Carol and I were down at Stanford to do a talk in a ~~summer~~ seminar they do for their alumni last summer, ~~and~~ to my astonishment, I was introduced by Richard White, who is a friend of ours, but he's also one of the ~~hottest~~ Western historians, the most encyclopedic, ~~and the most various adjectives in the West~~, and Richard introduced me as being more interested in history than historians are. ~~And~~ at ~~the~~ that moment I thought, "That's a funny way to put it." But I've spent part of this vacation sitting around here going back through a book ~~over there~~ called Lost Country Life, which is about Medieval agriculture, and how things were done, and what things looked like, and how turns of phrase like ~~how~~ "spitting image" came out of "splitting image" of cutting trees exactly in half so you would have matching beams in ships ~~and so forth.~~ And I got to thinking that maybe Richard saw me in the right light ~~there~~. That that does seem to be what occupies my head.

week

It vitalizes you and then you vitalize it in your writing.

Yeah, it's kind of a shaped accident ~~or whatever~~. I gave up dissipating it into magazine work. I am able to sit in one spot for two or three years at a time and shape it into a book. I don't drink it away. I don't talk it away. It is able to incubate its way into print ~~with me~~. I see that as kind of a stroke of luck of personality ~~or whatever. You know,~~ since I haven't utterly forged myself.

Success can be a difficult experience among writers, an inhibitor. Since you have staked out a lasting homestead in the hearts and thoughts of so many readers, has it been difficult to keep going?

~~Well~~, I can say "no" pretty fluently. That has helped a lot.

Well, I'm glad you didn't say "no" to this interview.

[laughter]

I haven't gone on some of the circuits of success, particularly the summer writing workshop ~~circuit~~ that I think can take a lot of ~~your~~ time, energy and attention. I'm pleased that others are able to, and there are so many other people that I'm not really needed there. I do go out and give ~~the~~ occasional talks ~~and so on~~, but my level of success has been ~~really~~ a ~~pretty~~ comfortable one. I'm a fairly rare bird, ~~I'm~~ a middle class novelist, ~~I guess,~~ in that my books don't sell ~~like~~ Stephen King or John Grisham levels, but they sell healthily and consistently. ~~And~~ so I've been able, largely on the basis of my writing and, always with the underpinning of Carol's teaching career, in terms of medical coverage and some kind of pension to look forward to, ~~you know able~~ to come from a three-room railroad shack in Ringling to this place. That's been ~~I think~~ a ~~quite~~ reasonably comfortable arc of success to work within, Derek. One thing I was aware of at the time, when <u>This House of Sky</u> did not win the National Book Award, when <u>Snow Leopard</u> carried the day, it dawned on me pretty promptly, "Well, this is going to make my life easier." And indeed it probably did. ~~And~~ with that goes the realization that you probably only get one crack at something like that. But life doesn't end if you don't get it on that one crack. As long as you've got ~~the~~ other books to write, your health

and a decent life and a good spouse and so forth. Hugo had ~~that same~~, in a lot growlier way, that same attitude because we were around him when he lost ~~on~~ the Pulitzer to ~~people like~~ Donald Justice and ~~so forth~~ others year after year.

Then there's Robert Lowell who said something like, "A few years ago I couldn't get anything published and now I can't stop from getting everything published, and that scares me more."

Well, I...~~again,~~ a kind of internal stroke of luck ~~or whatever.~~ When I was a magazine freelancer for ten years, I wrote incessantly. I wrote a couple dozen pieces a year. It turns out that working on the books ~~pretty well~~ weaned me off that entirely. I don't feel a compulsion now to do ~~really~~ any of the shorter pieces that are asked of me.

Financially speaking, you don't have to.

Financially, I don't have to, and even though the topic may interest me, I don't feel I have to find out what I have to say on that topic. So I'm currently not even writing book reviews. I have reviewed more books than I will personally ever write, So I've contributed my bit to those great scales of reviewing justice. ~~And I've found that, I think in particular the last couple of book reviews, that I would work very hard on them,~~ and I've often had the habit--I got it in the magazine days--of including a paragraph which can be cut for reasons of space ~~or whatever~~. I ~~find~~ that paragraph is always being cut so that the illustration can be goosed up. And I got to thinking, "Uh-uh. I'm not going to spend the weekend thinking up a good sentence or paragraph and then the graphic designer yanks it out of there for the sake of the illustration."

It seems that even though you are surrounded by teachers and teachers populate your books and have been prominent in your life, that it's been best for you to avoid the teaching life, against the stream of so many writers today, and make your living as a writer.

This goes to the saying, "Life is choices."

Your father used to say that.

Yes, that's right. It comes straight out of the family. Very early on, probably in graduate school, I realized I do not have the energy or metabolism, whatever you want to call it, to teach and write both. I liked teaching a lot as a teaching assistant at the UW. I ~~really~~ found it a vitalizing way of life. But it took me over, too. So it's a question of what are you going to be taken over by. ~~And~~ a lot of people can balance them, but I simply have a head ~~where it~~ that mulls only in one direction. Wherever I'm at, I'm totally writing that stream of thought.

And rather than short change one...

And I felt I'd be short changing both, actually, by trying to do both. So if they advance from Dolly and clone all of us, why yeah, I'll be a teacher. But until then, ~~well it's~~ gotta be a writer.

You referred to some early Doig poems. How much money would the Seattle Review have to come up to be able to reprint those?

[laughter]

Eight or nine figures. Well, they probably already show up in dabs in the novels. I'm not sure there's anything that hasn't been cannibalized and the bones licked clean by now. They show up...a little bit in Mariah Montana. Riley does a column about homesteads ~~I think~~ and he alludes to Thomas Jefferson and "the red school house of his head" ~~or something like that.~~

"The red schoolhouse of his head." That's plundered from a poem.

Yes. And I've written all of the songs in my fiction--to the detriment of my fiction I must add--but I have written all the sons of bitches.

I wondered about that. Particularly in Dancing at the Rascal Fair because the song is so integral to the book.

Now none of that, I don't think, was early poetry. However, And I'm writing now, Lord help me, spirituals for the current book. And I swiped a few lines I had left over in a notebook the other day for something there. "Does the hawk know its shadow."

So we have managed to get some Doig poetry in here.

And for free, no less, you clever devil.
[laughter]

~~Two final questions~~. Can you say more about the new book your working on and maybe what's coming after that? What are Doig's readers going to see on the shelves 5 to 10 years from now?

Well, within 2 or 3 years, I hope they'll be seeing this current novel in the bookstores, which is a novel about motives and how much they can be read by other people and even by ourselves, and what's mixed in with them. The three principal characters are Susan Duff, grown from schoolgirlhood in Dancing at the Rascal Fair to being a singing teacher in Helena. She's been through the Suffrage Movement ~~along the way~~, and that was a vital piece of history in the West. The western states preceded the constitutional amendment by a number of years. And so the West was a battleground on this before it was a national battleground. So Susan's been through those political wars. In the course of them she met and had an affair with ~~a, really~~ a ~~kind of~~ bull moose progressive, Teddy Roosevelt sort of politician. But he's one of the Williamsons of the hated WW Ranch ~~in all my books~~. He's a World War One hero, ~~so he's been through that~~. But so far I'm running him against the grain. He doesn't come out of it disillusioned in the same way as the Lost Generation of the 20s. I want him to have different scars on him than the absolute kind of mandatory, stamped-out scars that have been attributed to that so called Lost Generation. He's not lost. He's rich and a lot of other things. But he has lost the governorship of Montana because he and Susan Duff got caught in this affair and he got blackmailed out of it. He shows up in her life four years later in 1924. He surprises her, walks into the house, by saying he has a prize student for her, and it's his black chauffeur. A guy who's grown up on the WW,

the son of the Afro-American laundress. Out of this comes the plot: What is everyone up to here? So it's a pretty interesting book to write. It's given me an excuse to write some set scenes I didn't know were in me. The Afro-American guy has, as it turns out, as I sat down to write, he has a background as a rodeo clown. That's been his performing record so far. So the first time you see him, he's in that barrel that they hop in when the Brahmas take after them. So there are similar scenes. There's probably going to be one back in Scotland between Susan and the politician.

So you're still writing this.

Yes, I'm about two-fifths of the way along. I'm able to put that kind of a fraction on it because I sent of the manuscript to the editor just before the holidays. The one useful thing the computer can do for us is count every Goddamned word now. Beyond that it's a mixed bag. But you do know how many words you have anymore. [laughter] So that's the course of the book. There's some flashbacks in it. It's a book where time sort of tunnels backwards into what has happened to shape the motives of these characters and how they respond to it.

Doig Time. While reading your most recent book, Mountain Time, I was thinking there is such a thing as Doig Time. Your prolific use of the flashback and the historical perspective with which you and your characters see the West. I'm thinking of Lexa hiking down that mountain in the steps of Bob Marshall. What a gift to see the landscape like that, to hear those old steps. And that gift is being passed on in your books.

I feel lucky in being tuned in that way, I suppose. I also see it as going with the storytelling impulse that a lot of my characters have, that I grew up around, and I have too, and these flashbacks, these historical things, are to me, kind of technically analogous to the characters liking to tell stories. I've had good reinforcement from readers out on the bookstore trail who tell me that they like the flashbacks. They don't see them as intrusive or something to be fast-forwarded over with the eye. I think anybody who's going to read my books knows they're going to have to spend some time with it. And so you take them back to tell them

more about a character, ~~it turns out that~~ they probably will like that. ~~So that's probably going to be the pattern~~. I don't know if I would ever try to write a book in the flat, contemporaneous straight chronology ~~through~~. I mean there's a certain appeal if you just sit down and tell a story from finger snap to thunderclap ~~at the end~~. I admire that stuff but I'm not sure it's in me. I've been reading ~~recently~~ John Fowles' book of essays called Worm Holes, where his mind goes off in every direction. You can kind of see how we got the French Lieutenant's Woman out of that guy, that those flashbacks are there if we can just find the shutter to click.

writers

~~And lastly~~, is there a question or topic I didn't bring up that you'd like to address?

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Only maybe to talk around a little bit about technique or attention to the craft of writing. We've gone across it in a lot of ways.

You mentioned some work habits, like the early mornings. And I know Hugo had his sharpened, number two pencils.

~~Yeah, right. You know,~~ Steinbeck did the same thing. It had to be a certain kind of pencil. And I always respected that, but thought it was a bit much. ~~But I~~ Now I've discovered I have to have these Goddamn Ticonderogas. I blame it on the pencil industry because it's getting harder and harder these days to pick up any pencil ~~these days~~ and find it has a darkness to it. ~~But yes, it turns out~~ these small things. There's the famous Hugo story. I'm not sure this is craft or what it is, but he'd be ~~sitting here like this~~ working away and he'd say, "Ripley, could you get me a cup of coffee?" [imitates Hugo's voice] It would be at his elbow but he couldn't be disturbed that far.

That reminds me of how Wendell Berry refuses to use a computer, but has his wife type his work.

[laughter]

I look with some bemusement, a lot of respect, but also some bemusement on Wendell Berry and **Vernon Clinkenborg (sp?)** who writes the New York Times nature and rural editorials, and gets to review almost anything written about

OMIT

rurality, or the West, or whatever. These guys live on these farms propped up by all the machinery that the rest of us are putting up with. [laughter] But in terms of habit for me, so many words a day is a good part of it. The output is pretty precisely measured--400 words a day--when I'm rough-drafting. Some of it is just the tiny touches you try to put into dialogue. As an example, to tag it to one character versus another character. In Dancing at the Rascal Fair--again, I'm aware of this because I consciously thought it up--Ninian Duff uses that "A-Y," the Scottish "Ay" at the start of sentences, and Lucas Barkley uses it at the end of sentences. I've heard it both ways in Montana Scotch. I deliberately did that so that these guys--one's a Bible banger and one's a bartender--to make a kind of dialogue parenthesis to enclose these guys, to show that they have a commonality of language and expression, even though they may be opposed. And that's a conscious touch I've done. One that has occurred to me over Christmas vacation here. My Afro-American singer, very raw, in terms of his talent, and he's never sung with the piano. At one point Susan Duff, in giving him lessons, says all right it's time to go to the piano. And I think he's gonna say--instead of what I have had him say for the past six months--"I've never sang with a piano." I think he's gonna have to say, "I've never sang with a piana." It's dawned on me that it needs an "A."

A bit like "coyo'te" versus "co'yote."

Yes. I think it's in Rascal Fair, Adair shows up. As I once heard, in New Zealand, or Britain or somewhere, foreigner's difficulty in remembering "coyote" and "cayeuse," which is which. There's a historian who's written about the Australian Outback and the American West who's said he's always had to have a cheat sheet in his drawers to where Wauga Wauga is and where Walla Walla is. [laughter] Which country lays claim to which. So those kinds of technique on the dialogue interest me a lot and I think help push the books into the reader's mind, the way mine have gone. That's about all I have to say.

unmarked

Conversation with a Middle Class Cosmic Mechanic

Born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, Ivan Doig has been a ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor and writer. His novels are The Sea Runners (1982), Bucking the Sun (1996), Mountain Time (1999), and his Montana Trilogy: English Creek (1984), Dancing at the Rascal Fair (1987), and Ride with Me, Mariah Montana (1990). Doig has also written three works of nonfiction: two memoirs, This House of Sky (1978) and Heart Earth (1993), and Winter Brothers (1980), a book which fuses excerpts from the diaries of James Swan, an early settler of the Puget Sound region, with entries from Doig's own journal evoking the same coastline.

Ivan Doig has received numerous writing awards, including a Christopher Award, the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Literary Excellence, the Governor's Writers Day Award, and the David W. and Beatrice C. Evans Biography Award. This House of Sky was nominated for the National Book Award in contemporary thought, and in 1989 the Western Literature Association honored Doig with its Distinguished Achievement Award for his body of work.

A graduate of Northwestern University, where he received degrees in journalism, he holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington and honorary doctorates from Montana State University and Lewis and Clark College.

Annie Proulx has called him "one of the best we've got" and Wallace Stegner writes, "Doig knows this country and this life from the bottoms of his feet upward, and has known it, as he might say, ever since his legs were long enough to reach the ground. Here is the real Montana, and real West, through the eyes of a real writer."

Ivan Doig lives in north Seattle with his wife Carol. The interview took place on December 29, 2000 at their home. During our talk, I found my gaze drawn occasionally to the sizable window of Doig's office, which looks west, of course. Over a neatly gardened yard, past a steep bank, sailboats and freighters criss-crossed the Puget Sound. Beyond this slow and silent commotion, the Olympic

Mountains stood sharply with such presence they managed to climb right into the dialogue. Around us, American history played along well-stocked bookshelves in the form of figurines: soldiers trudging, cannons aiming, and horses rearing. And one floor above, Carol Doig sipped tea and went about her business.

Though he has reached some impressive heights in his writing, Ivan Doig has remained grounded in the ground he loves. He is congenial and has a rich and resonant voice that would have filled the airways, had Doig gone that way. His laughter riddles the interview as freqently as his Scotch wit. He loves language, spoken and written, and wades in it daily as his writing grows from considerable work habits. While thinking about how to describe Ivan Doig, I recalled some lines from Richard Hugo's poem, "Letter to Levertov from Butte":

> ...no matter what my salary is
> or title, I remain a common laborer, stained by the perpetual
> dust from loading flour or coal. I stay humble...

I've read that you were 16 when you decided ranch work wasn't in your future. When did you know that writing would be? That you would become the remembrancer, the tale-bringer?

Well that turning point at age sixteen was in the midst of a Two Medicine summer when we were running sheep up above the Two Medicine river and a freezing rain, just after the sheep had been sheared, sent a lot of them over an old buffalo jump and made many others simply lie down and give up their ghost and so I knew by the time I went back to high school that autumn that I was going to do something else with myself in life besides ranch work. The decision can be consciously read there in that I dropped out of Future Farmers of America and took typing and Latin that year. That moved me a lot closer in my mind to the high school teacher who became very influential in my becoming a writer of some kind. Her name was Francis Tideman. She's described at some length in <u>This House of Sky</u>. She was one of these impossible prairie tornadoes who sometimes show up in small schools. She taught all the high school English and then she would teach Latin

some years, Spanish another year, and ran the high school paper and annual and so on. By the time I was within her reach this way--she had me on the school paper pretty promptly, and to a lesser extent, the school annual and so on--and my own inclination for turning towards trying to become a journalist and so by the time I was seriously applying for scholarships my senior year, why, that's where it had lead.

I had no notion then that it was going to lead toward books. It's not very well known I was a broadcast journalism major in college. My intention, if anything, was to become Edward R. Murrow [laughter], someone of that sort. The radio had played an enormous role in our lives in Montana. It brought in whatever wafts of dream we had like major league baseball, or drama, or comedy and it also of course brought in the news which caught my attention. I think that kind of magnet has proven a historically sound one. The great newsmen, particularly the CBS news crew which Murrow set up, the last of them just died a few weeks ago, Robert Trout, that these guys did prove to be so superb that they were worthy people to model myself on. It wasn't until I got my master's degree at Northwestern that I had to make the break between college and career--that so many guys my age had to, the military was there waiting for me. I was in the Air Force Reserve during the Cuban Missile Crisis. When I came back out, started to get a job, it turned out to be a writing job, a newspaper job, so that carried me on in writing.

So it was the job that derailed you from broadcast journalism?

Yeah it was. It's what was there. I came out at an awkward time of the year. I think I came out in March. People weren't particularly hiring. Northwestern was well networked in placing its students but that happened to be the best-looking thing at the moment, a job as an editorial writer for a chain of newspapers in down-state Illinois, so I promptly took it and really stayed with print media from then on.

How did your family take your decision to leave ranch work for writing?

Well my dad always would say, "For God's sake, get yourself an education." Not unlike a lot of fathers who were working people. They wanted better things for

their kids than they had had. Within him too, I now realize, was the Scotch respect for education and his own limited education had been enough to show him that a little schooling could do quite a bit for you. He only went through the eighth grade, but he was quite good at arithmetic. They didn't have math, but he went through his life running crews of men where he had to keep track of wage figures and so forth.

And he could count sheep.

He could count sheep. He could measure haystacks which is a fairly complicated formula [laughter]. And also he could write perfectly well. His letters and commas are in the right place, words are spelled right and so forth. He has hellish handwriting [laughter]. Apparently the Spenserian method did not get down to the end of his fingertips there, but in terms of handling the language...is really quite good. So that's a long way of saying that he was always all for me getting an education, although his original notion of how far I could go was...the pinnacle of it...was becoming something like a pharmacist, a druggist. One of his nephews had attained that and that's kind of what he could see. And I've been realizing recently that was not too bad an idea from his viewpoint either. All those little towns had drugstores in those days. There weren't malls or whatever. If indeed you wanted a pretty good portable career in the small town West, that was a pretty good one.

My grandmother...(sigh)...saw my going away as taking a piece of her heart with her. She was always all for...whatever I wanted to do was okay and she would always end up telling me that. But she had so much more of an embrace of family and by the time I was leaving she had lost one of her children--my mother--through an early death. Another one was badly crippled with Multiple Sclerosis. A third of her four children was living in Australia. So she had already seen a lot of people she cherished go from her, and so my going out of state weighed pretty heavily on her until I was off an doing it.

In <u>English Creek</u> you write, "Those firstborn always, always will live in a straddle between the ancestral path of life and the route of the new land." In the context of the book, you're speaking of Scotland versus America, but I want to apply it to

ranch work versus word work. The physical, immediate, daily interaction with the world you had growing up was certainly hard work, but do you ever miss aspects of it? Or have you achieved a balance between time spent in the world and time spent re-creating the world?

Those two very different looking kinds of work actually have a lot of similarities in the chores involved, the habit of doing the chores....I even keep pretty much the same working hours that I grew up with on a ranch. I'm up very early. I'm always up before dawn, down here starting to milk the thesaurus about the time I would have been milking cows on a Montana ranch. There is something I've tried to do some serious thinking about. There is a kind of physicality to the habit of writing too, of these words--in my case--coming out the ends of my fingers not always clear to me that they've lingered or been in my brain before they show up there on the keyboard. I've talked with some artist friends about this, the sculptor Tony Angel is one of them, a jazz musician, and there's a watercolor artist. I've talked with them separately. We all have what the sculptor has put a name on--"Getting it in the fingers"--as we call it. Often we're surprised how the physicality of sitting and caressing the language--in my case--produces, physically produces, the work I'm after. So there's that sort of...mystical link, I guess, to it.

The parts of ranch work I miss would be oriented to the land, I think Derek. The way of life still is as tough as I figured out it was going to be at sixteen. I keep in touch around the West as best I can and read as much as I can and it's still pretty preposterous for sixteen year old kid today to think he's going to be a farmer or rancher if there's no land in the family and it's almost as difficult even if there is some land in the family. So as a viable fiscal way of life there's still not that much to be missed there as far as I can see. But being under the Rocky Mountain front on a good day on a tractor is a pretty damn fine thing. One of the lessons of life in northern Montana is that you aren't gonna have that many good days sitting on tractors or trailing sheep, or whatever. The ones that you do are going to be everlasting pageants in your head when you remember them. But the incessant wind, the question of drought and the question of enormous winters--it just really kicks a lot of the romance out of the outdoor life. There are people, many of whom I know, some of whom are my high school friends in fact, who do seem to be cut-out for that kind of life. Now I put in one of the books...Riley, the smart-mouthed

newspaper writer, said something about guys not realizing they're working themselves to death because they're doing it out of doors. I've seen quite a lot of that. So I find it a lot more attractive and beneficial to my work to be able to go into the outdoors carrying a notebook and a pen and putting in perhaps dawn to dark days out there, looking at the country, listening to people, thinking it over.

That reminds me of Van Gogh taking his canvas out into the fields.

Yeah, it's a pretty good idea to get out and feel the elements you're writing about. Some of them I've been able to bring into my work from memory. I saw enough blizzards in the time I was growing up out there that I don't feel compelled to rush out into a blizzard particularly anymore. But the Montana droughts I have gone back to experience because they weren't around as viciously...apparently the warming of the earth is now wheeling them around.

Well I've read in Elizabeth Simpson's book about your thorough research habits, how you really take the time to know your material.

Yeah, I've always tried to go take a look at where I'm writing about. Indeed, went to Scotland to see where the young men of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* take off from the old life there. And that proved to be very useful.

Did the story of the draft horse come from Scotland?

It did, it did. The opening one. Now this is the danger of being an interviewer because it disappoints a lot of notions about how carefully things are structured and about how things are carried out. I did come across, in a Scottish newspaper, an incident not too far from the one that opens Dancing at the Rascal Fair, a horse being dragged into the **Greenock (?)** harbor by a cart that flipped off the dock, but it must have taken me a year and a half, Derek, before I was thinking of something toward the climax of the book. And even at that point when Rob goes into the reservoir on a horse, it wasn't a Scottish horse. It was a horse that I had ridden across a similar reservoir and I made it safely, of course, but a husky young guy who had recently come out of the Marines did not make it. In the next

generation or two, on that same ranch, that same reservoir, a guy had drowned in a similar accident to what had happened to Rob. I don't think I ever did entirely tumble until someone in the audience asked me once, "Now how did you carefully frame those two horse drownings?" And it dawned on me at that point that I was simply using the researched experience in both instances.

That image of Rob and the horse drowning in that reservoir is as haunting to me, as a reader, as the elk in Craig Lesley's Winterkill and the horses in Linda Bierds' The Stillness, The Dancing.

Well, good. I'm glad to be in that company because those are images that are permanently on the cave walls in the back of my head too. I remember working long and hard on that scene of the horse going into the reservoir. You know, you try to use everything you have, try to bring to a book everything you have and one thing I have is a experience of nearly drowning as told in This House of Sky. Consequently, I don't know how many drownings there have been in my books. There's one in The Sea Runners. And it seems to me there's one or two somewhere else. So I've been able to draw on that as probably the closest risk I've ever been through and bring it into the fiction. I've sometimes thought that should have taught me something. I should have gone out and taken swimming lessons after that. But I've thought since, "No, no, this is a very useful fear for me to have as a writer." It's like boating or whatever. First of all I get seasick very promptly. Which helped, was just a great help when I was writing The Sea Runners, to give...uh...

Misery.

Yes...to give misery to Venberg, I guess, but also this very healthy respect slash fear of water is a very valuable thing for me.

Richard Hugo writes, "Poets turn liabilities into assets."

[laughter]

Hugo was so great. He would sum up in one sentence what we're trying in the whole damn interview to get at. I knew Hugo, incidentally.

Yes, I read that you been acquainted with him in Montana, and that whole group of Montana writers...Hugo, Kittredge, Welch and others.

Yeah. It's kind of an odd loop in our case to Hugo. Carol, in her first job out of college, worked at the same college as Mildred Walker, a writer who ultimately became Hugo's mother-in-law.

Oh, Ripley's mother.

And this was many years ago, before Ripley and Hugo ever made eyes at each other in his class. When I first went into a Missoula bookstore with This House of Sky, it'd been reviewed by somebody I'd never heard of--Ripley Schemm. Carol knew instantly what was going on. So, out of that came some unusually wonderful kidding opportunities on Hugo. We could always threaten to sick his mother-in-law on him. [laughter]

Well, the connection does seem to run deep. Primarily two landscapes inhabit your work, the coastal one of the Puget Sound, and Montana. In this respect, you are like Richard Hugo, but in reverse as he went a bit east and you west. In fact, you two even have Scotland in common. He spent some time there in Skye on a Guggenheim to produce his book The Right Madness on Skye. Of Skye, he said the weather and vegetation reminded him of the Puget Sound while the starkness was all Montana. He claimed that he was a landscape poet. Are you a landscape writer? And what does that mean?

You can get away with wearing the landscape sandwich board easier if you are a poet than you can if you are a fiction writer because reviewers and critics will quickly slap you on the back of the sandwich board and leave the piece of paper that says regional. So I tend to balk a little bit at the notion that we're writers with a sense of place out here when it's simply put that baldly because I think there's so much more going on in the writing in and about the American West by my

generation and certainly that would include our one time oldest honorary member, Norman Maclean, down through the younger generation coming on, say, Deidre McNamer, I suppose, and somebody like **Melanie Rae Thon (sp?).** I'm mostly familiar with writers more or less my own age...Welch, Mary Clearman Blew, Craig Lesley, and of course Norman Maclean. You read those books and yeah there's a lot of landscape in them but God there's pretty damn wonderful dialogue and I think a level of characterization in Western fiction which, if we hadn't put landscape in, the critics would say, "Well, it's a sense of person that these westerners grew up with." So I tend to say that we're not just writing travelogues out here that the landscape, sense of place, tag can too easily suggest. Within that, I try to make the landscape character, is my own view of what I'm trying to do. I did it pretty consciously in The Sea Runners. That's the one book I've managed to keep a journal of the writing of the book, Derek, as I did it. And so I've got the old file cards and entries on that show quite consciously after one of the trips to Alaska that by God the way to handle this Northwest coast is to put it in there as if it's the fifth character of this book. Put it in almost nonfiction terms. Just write a description of the coast and the tides and so on and maybe the guys are in the scene and maybe they're not. And so I think the other fiction probably shows it to a lesser extent when it tends to be backdrop. But the landscape, for me, is probably in the same creative territory as it is for Hugo. I'm quite aware that it triggers analogies in me. It sets me to thinking of ways to handle it and it keeps showing up when it didn't particularly have to in my books. How the mountains look to one of the characters...Well, in the book I'm writing now, the woman is going back to the abandoned homestead in Scotch Heaven and it's Susan Duff who was a prized schoolgirl in Angus McCaskill's one-room schoolhouse.

Ninian's daughter.

Yes, she's going back in 1924 and the place has been abandoned since '18 or '19 and cows have gotten in the house as they tended to do in old homestead cabins so she's there scrubbing up after the W.W. cows but the mountains are out too.

The landscape is a character in your work. Is it a character in your life as well?

Oh yeah. It has let me down on the long rope of life to the Puget Sound here. Carol and I were married in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb north of Chicago. That's where we'd had our education and that's where we'd had pretty good magazine jobs, and so forth, and we found ourselves driving into northern Wisconsin on weekends to see scrubby little pine trees, so that began to tell us something. Within not much over a year, it had led us out here. The combination of mountains and water have always lured us. I'm not any kind of a mountain climber, or rock climber, but it still means something to us that we've been on top of Mt. Townsend across here [pointing across the Sound toward the Olympic Mountains] and Elk Peak and Deer Park and some of the things we can see from here. We've walked so much of the shoreline that we can see from here.

When you came to Seattle did you have the feeling a familiarity that Angus does in Dancing at the Rascal Fair when he's picking out a homestead site?

Let me try to describe as best as I can recreate it...pulling into Seattle on an August day in 1966. Carol and I left Chicago with the temperature and humidity were both in the 90's, and we pulled across the floating bridge on a day when Mt. Rainier was out. Within a week or two I guess we'd found a house up behind University Village to rent and our neighbors, who were lifelong Seattleites--the guy had been born and raised across the alley there...he had been there for sixty five years--they were hiding out in their basement because the temperature was almost 80. I very much have the memory of us looking at each other and saying, "This feels about right." [laughter] This climate feels wonderful. And Seattle had a lot of immediate attractions in terms of the theater life. The university was a handsome campus to first set foot on. The first time we walked in the quadrangle there it looked like it had been there since Dick Stover came west from Yale. It was pretty promptly a comfortable place. And I think your question does have a lot of carrying power because when it came time to look at leaving, once I had my Ph.D. and was in the job market, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

William Blake wrote, "We become what we behold." Does this explain how landscape shapes identity?

Yeah I think it does to a...kind of intriguing extent.

And how landscape, identity, and memory work their way into most of your work?

Yeah, although when I'm sitting around here, what I think I'm working on is usually the language. But it's generally pounding away on one of those three themes I suppose.

The way that the landscape of the west has fixed a lot of people into place and kept them there maybe even against their better interest in life, as I was talking toward earlier, perhaps leading hopeless ways of life, as the larger world would look at it...yeah, there certainly has to be a lot of unarticulated love that keeps a lot of people there. And it's been one of the tugs that I've seen in a lot of friends. My own solution to it was that there are a lot of good place to live in the West. And I've chosen one which has to me its own appeal. It's not the Rocky Mountain front out there but pretty damn good mountains.

Was it easier to love this landscape after first loving the Rocky Mountains?

Yeah, I think so. That's been on my mind lately too because I'm fairly recently back from a book tour in the upper Midwest. Saw many old friends there, one of my oldest friends from college, various people who have spent their whole lives on a flat disc of earth maybe a 100 miles across. And it apparently doesn't bother them that this is out here waiting for them because I've tried to advise them, to coax them, to shame them [laughter] and indeed if I had been brought up in that, maybe I would prize the banks of the Mississippi River, or the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin as deeply I do these places of the West. So, yes, I think where you do land into life does put some kind of a parenthesis of vision of what you're looking for perhaps, in scenery, in what you want to surround yourself with. Because I know when I worked there in Evanston on the Rotarian magazine as a young assistant editor anything that came from the west was just handed to me, and one of my habits at lunch, one of the guys told me once, where I would go off by myself down to Lake Michigan and have lunch rather than going to the cafeteria or

whatever...I certainly wasn't trying to mark myself off as "the lone westerner" but these guys knew it.

Do you have a greater allegiance to one landscape over another, Montana over the Sound? Or is it a tie?

Well it's pretty close to a tie. There are a few enlightened countries in the world--I think Ireland is maybe one--that give you dual citizenship. And I've had something like that in the writing and in the reception to the writing. I've been exceedingly fortunate being able to go back to Montana and readers there ask me "Why don't you live in Montana?" But when I point out to them that I'm economically starved out, my wife's job is in Seattle, and I'm out here as much as I can be and so on...there doesn't seem any kind of rancor there.

In fact, they've been giving you honorary degrees.

Yeah, right. So I've felt very fortunate in that reception. And I haven't felt any rancor for living out here and writing the majority of my fiction at least about the Rocky Mountain front area. The trellis of history and landscape that the McCaskills grow on certainly goes up along the Rockies there, Derek, but part of that is...something I once heard Wallace Stegner talk about, fortunately it was long after I started doing it and so on, so it only confirmed me...he once talked about his past as a short story writer which is not particularly well known but it turns out that he wrote a hell of a lot of short stories in his early days and won some O'Henry awards and so on. He was speaking in Portland and someone in the audience had asked him about this, why he had stopped writing short stories, and he said, "Well you use up your capital all the time." And he meant in terms of characterization I think. That certainly has been one thing I've seen Faulkner did not do. Faulkner just kept the genealogy pasted on the wall and thought, "Okay, if X burns down Y's barn, how does that trigger what's going to happen in another generation here." And so this long family line which I tend to...as I say a kind of a trellis that my characters grow their lives on. That tends to be Rocky Mountain. It wouldn't have to be. When I was writing Heart Earth and being out and asked questions afterwards about that time my family spent in Arizona, it dawned on me--I think it

was even suggested to me by a Tucson book editor who grinned and said, "Well if you hadn't left you might be writing about the Grand Canyon country, might you?" Yeah...Could be worse.

Well, Keats talked about Negative Capability, and I think part of what he meant by that term was distance from the subject, a bit of a cool remove. William Stafford wrote his best Kansas poems when he was living in Oregon.

Yeah, Yeah. And the one I always cite...Joyce didn't write Ulysses about Paris. We don't have as good a book about Paris. In my case, I've always known that the writing is easier to get done here than it is back in Montana or somewhere else in the west. Part of that unfortunately means the shirking of perfectly good citizenship which if I was in Montana I would feel quite compelled to pitch in on. Here. the larger population in the state with greater resources to the society, I've felt a lot more free to hole up in a suburb and work at what I do and do pretty much not anything else.

Are you talking about say devoting some of your time to protecting the environment?

No, less that than participating in the educational community or something else. Jim Welch serves on the parole board out there, something like ten years. Kittredge is kind of a circuit riding preacher, all the things he does. I think I would have to do at the very least writing conferences and poets in the schools and so on.

Seatte frees you up.

It frees me up a lot. I'm able to try to pick my spots and a lot of it does entail going back to Montana or to rural Utah through one of the state humanities councils or some kind of nature conservancy. Something of that sort. But I'm able to schedule those things outside of a writing stint. So in terms of sitting down and doing what I think I'm meant to do, why a Puget Sound suburb I've long felt is the most efficient place to do it.

You mentioned earlier that your aim in the writing is to get the words write, not necessarily to evoke a theme, to get to what Maclean calls the "poetry under the prose." I mentioned to a poet friend a few weeks ago that I was going to interview you and she knew your name but unlike most of the folks around here hadn't read your books. So I read her a passage from This House of Sky, one of the memory sections and she said, "Oh my God, that's beautiful. How did it ever get published?" I know she was responding to the poetry under the prose. Can you talk about that?

Yeah, I did keep a journal part-time when I was working on This House of Sky. It wasn't full-time because the work on This House of Sky was strewn across half a dozen years. But I would every so often put down what I was trying to do and there is an entry somewhere back there--evidently after what I though was a pretty decent day's work--that it would be wonderful to write it all as highly charged as poetry if I could just do it. And I think the clearest answer, about trying to get the poetry in, is that I simply went back and worked on it and worked on it as if it were an epic poem.

Did you read it aloud as you worked on it?

Yeah, I would read aloud some. Some of this goes back to broadcast journalism. I've always been aware of the power of spoken words and the power of rhythm, in particular. It maybe also goes back to a great stroke of luck in college where the ungodly old scholarship dorm I landed in was also full of theater people and so you couldn't walk through the front door of that place without Richard Benjamin imitating Wrigley Field for you, and Ron Holgate singing as he later would on Broadway, and my best friend was a theater major. And so I went to many of the rehearsals in what was a marvelous theater department, and I read a lot of Shakespeare, read a lot of dramatists, and so I was quite aware of the wonderful trickeries of the language. Allied with that was my own, for the world, mercifully brief stint in trying to write poetry when I was in graduate school in history at the UW. All of these combine I guess into the passion for the sentence and working within the sentence which meant going back--I don't know if I consciously did it on This House of Sky or not Derek, but it's the same process. On some books I have

taken a colored marker and either done it myself or hired somebody to mark every verb. Look at every Goddamned verb. Look at how every paragraph begins and ends and the usual things too...look at the adjectives, and so on. It is trying to be a cosmic mechanic on the language.

In my ear, the poetry under the prose is still alive. It is less overt than in This House of Sky, but nevertheless present in the more recent books.

Yeah, one of the things I think I'm semi-consciously embarked on now is, in fiction, to see how much I can drop it back a notch and still have it there, and maybe do something else within the story. Perhaps make a story move more quickly. Maybe extend the characterization or the interior. Maybe put the spotlight on something else within the story rather than on every showy verb. Something of that sort. So I've been kind of consciously tinkering with that.

Much of the poetry in your prose, it seems to me, comes from the way people talk. In this respect, your work compares with William Stafford's. And I'm certain that you've nailed it, that you've leashed the colloquial with your language. Recently I was about to go skiing with some folks and one said, "Okay, everybody read-aye?" This was in La Grande, Oregon. And I realized that I had just read that "read-aye" the night before in Mountain Time, I believe. I don't know if I had heard it before, but this was the first time I heard it. It reminds me of another time, also in Oregon, in the Willamette Valley, when I saw these two deer leap away from the road and I immediately remembered the phrase Mary Oliver uses in one of her poems to describe a startled deer, "silky agitation." She had recreated the deer in the language, just as you have recreated western speech in "read-aye." What's the value of these real voices in your writing?

It seems to me there's an intrinsic rightness, a validity when you get those voices right. To anybody who knows anything about the society or part of the country you're writing about, it punches that "validity" ticket. Perhaps it's the familiarity. Perhaps it entertains them in a certain way. But to have the characters sound right and sound memorable is one of the best fundamentals you can have for a story. I spend a lot of time...you see these file cards back here...a lot of these are indeed

dialogue, and they're around here in various incarnations. There's one box somewhere down there which is largely Scotchisms, many of them picked up from trips to Scotland, some various turns of phrases which the characters in Dancing at the Rascal Fair use. There's Montana lingo picked up in bars and cafes. The novel I'm working on now will have an Afro-American westerner guy who grew up there in the Two Medicine country. So it's been interesting to find that lingo. I've given him a Sergeant in the black cavalry as a father and so all these neighborhoods of colloquialisms are there to be visited and it's an aspect of language that constantly tickles at peoples' minds. You notice that computer geeks, who in many other aspect of life are just as dry and emotionless as they can manage to be, have produced almost instantly their own colloquial language as rich as cowboys. And teenagers who don't know the time of day, apparently, to look at them, are as busy at it as Shakespeare.

And we still have "cool."

And "cool" comes back and back and back. Cool I think...I have to trace this out a little, but I think this is the third time around in my life. I got a card today from the Nature Conservancy inviting us up to the Skagit River on their boat trip to see the eagles and the guy says, "It's going to be cold but it'll be cool." Now I think I've found that back into the 20s or 30s at least. So anyway it's one of the most fertile parts for a novelist to work in. One thing that I've always been aware of....What I say on any of this should be hedged in by something I should have mentioned earlier, that I'm a more natural editor than a writer, or first drafter, and so I think I come at a lot of these things from the editing experience I've picked up in journalism and probably from an inclination in me that I'm interested in tinkering. I'm not particularly interested in immaculate conceptions. It maybe goes back to being used to doing chores. You have to get the firewood, you have to do the water, you have to do thus and such. So I see the tinkering with the way people talk as a real part of it, but I've been thinking a lot lately too about how much do you do it? Where do you draw the line? I feel fine in my own work. I've been trying to put together a talk sometime for a speech request about how other writers have done it, how they've done it and how sometimes it's been overdone. Flannery O'Connor was pretty vocal on how much you do. You don't do very

much, according to her. In fiction writing, how people sound on the page, you want them to sound like perhaps clever bits of Vaudeville in the Shakespearean sense with the wonderful clowns. You don't want them to sound like Burlesque. So, it is a line to walk.

How planned is your writing? Do you write from an outline?

No, I've tried it a time or two. In fact I tried it with Dancing at the Rascal Fair, I guess. It had dawned on me that--I forget what that was...my fourth or fifth book, something like that--most of the books were turning out to have seven chapters or seven sections or whatever, and I thought, "Well, maybe I oughtta take a look at this." And so I took the yellow pad and tried to do an outline of where I thought Rascal Fair would go, and it didn't end up anything like that. It was pretty much seven chapters. What I start with is an arc of time which I know what the time span of the book is going to be, and that becomes an armature to build a lot of the plot on because so much of my fiction relies upon people caught in the historical laws of gravity. World War Two comes along and if you're a young male in Montana, why, you're swept away into it pretty surely. And if the 1919 flu epidemic comes along, it changes entire communities.

So, the timescape and the landscape working together in your work.

So the timescape is usually the plotting framework and within that...various kinds of patchwork is done. How a character is going to talk will sometimes shape their personality. In English Creek, Jick fairly early talks about his mother and when you start to hear her capital letters, you're in trouble. I simply knew I wanted some character who had that trait and I didn't necessarily know it was going to be her.

And Jick even gets his name from talk, from one of Stanley's quips.

Yes. In The Sea Runners, the blacksmith, probably the least likely guy to have knowledge of the Bible, be a Bible spouter, is there because it's a book, to me, with a kind of 19th Century flavor and I thought, "Well, somebody ought to know something about the Bible," and by the time that had occurred to me the other

characters didn't seem to be likely candidates and I thought, "Well, by God, let's make it interesting. Let's give it to the least likely guy." And so those kinds of decisions will shape personalities and thereby the plots. Plots sometimes, some turns in them, side actions, skirmishes in them, will come about because you want to try something or see how far you can go out on the edge. I'm thinking of Bucking the Sun, the little sheriff there shoots a guy in the leg with a shotgun because he's also a shrimp, as the sheriff is, and he's kind of snickering at the sheriff companionably. "We're both runts aren't we?" is what his laugh is saying. I think it's one of the few times in my books when a gun is fired in anger, or whatever that is. I have no idea where that came from.

Sticks and stones.

Sticks and stones. I think I probably had come across a newspaper niche, as that often happens, of someone robbing jewelry stores across the **Highline (?)** in Montana. It's a funny serial robbery to do because the towns are about fifty miles apart. And you wonder how smart is this? And indeed, the sheriff is waiting for the guy in my instance, so I wanted this sequence of robberies to see what would happen. That's what came out of it.

Facts, history, really seem to stir your imagination, which makes a lot of sense considering your background in journalism and your doctorate in history.

I still tend to argue, also, that it's pretty hard to make things up as strange as things happen. If I had written a thriller about the election that has just finished it would be preposterous to have Jed...Jeb Bush in that plot. The guy's brother is governor of the state? Come on. And that sort of thing seems to happen a lot simply because there's so many of us and the pinball clicks of us against each other produce all this strangeness.

When I was reading English Creek, I was sure that people on long voyages would suck on limes. I was sure that that was some bit of history you'd come across in your research.

Yeah, I don't remember where I got that. I do remember something similar, coming across something and saying, "Oh yeah, that's going in." Throwing the straw mattresses overboard when they're off Sandy Hook or someplace. I had not known that, and I had read, I thought, quite a bit about immigration, but I came across that one I think in a letter in the Scottish archives. And you can see that in the head. So yes, the details are often the little watch spring parts that I imagine from.

In your books both the landscape and the characters grow up, and, as we have just heard, grow back--you mentioned Faulkner earlier--and Progress with a capital P comes to both. Your books are a living (in the sense that literature can live) record of the West, particularly Montana. To dub you as a "landscape writer" does indeed seem very limiting. If I knew someone who was interested in the history of Montana, I could just point him to a stack of your books.

Well, a lot of that is reported to me. When I'm in Montana doing book signings and so forth, people come up and say, "Oh I read your book and moved here." And this is a little more responsibility than I or my books want. One of the really wonderful, totally unforeseen bonuses of my books has been the friendship of Western historians that they've engendered. Bill Robbins down at Oregon State has used *English Creek* in history courses about the West. Carol and I were down at Stanford to do a talk in a summer seminar they do for their alumni last summer, and to my astonishment, I was introduced by Richard White, who is a friend of ours, but he's also one of the hottest Western historians, the most encyclopedic, and the most various adjectives in the West, and Richard introduced me as being more interested in history than historians are. And at the moment I thought, "That's a funny way to put it." But I've spent part of this vacation sitting around here going back through a book over there called Lost Country Life, which is about Medieval agriculture, and how things were done, and what things looked like, and how turns of phrase like how "spitting image" came out of "splitting image" of cutting trees exactly in half so you would have matching beams in ships and so forth. And I got to thinking that maybe Richard saw me in the right light there. That that does seem to be what occupies my head.

It vitalizes you and then you vitalize it in your writing.

Yeah, it's kind of a shaped accident or whatever. I gave up dissipating it into magazine work. I am able to sit in one spot for two or three years at a time and shape it into a book. I don't drink it away. I don't talk it away. It is able to incubate its way into print with me. I see that as kind of a stroke of luck of personality or whatever. You know, I haven't utterly forged myself.

Success can be a difficult experience among writers, an inhibitor. Since you have staked out a lasting homestead in the hearts and thoughts of so many readers, has it been difficult to keep going?

Well, I can say "no" pretty fluently. That has helped a lot.

Well, I'm glad you didn't say "no" to this interview.

[laughter]
I haven't gone on some of the circuits of success, particularly the summer writing workshop circuit that I think can take a lot of your time, energy and attention. I'm pleased that others are able to, and there are so many other people that I'm not really needed there. I do go out and give the occasional talks and so on, but my level of success has been really a pretty comfortable one. I'm a fairly rare bird. I'm a middle class novelist, I guess, in that my books don't sell like Stephen King or John Grisham levels, but they sell healthily and consistently. And so I've been able...largely on the basis of my writing and, always with the underpinning of Carol's teaching career, in terms of medical coverage and some kind of pension to look forward to, you know able to come from a three room railroad shack in Ringling to this place. That's been I think a quite reasonably comfortable arc of success to work within, Derek. One thing I was aware of at the time, when <u>This House of Sky</u> did not win the National Book Award, when <u>Snow Leopard</u> carried the day, it dawned on me pretty promptly, "Well, this is going to make my life easier." And indeed it probably did. And with that goes the realization that you probably only get one crack at something like that. But life doesn't end if you don't get it on that one crack. As long as you've got the other books to write, your health

and a decent life and a good spouse and so forth. Hugo had that same, in a lot growlier way, that same attitude because we were around him when he lost on the Pulitzer to people like Donald Justice and so forth year after year.

Then there's Robert Lowell who said something like, "A few years ago I couldn't get anything published and now I can't stop from getting everything published, and that scares me more."

Well, I...again, a kind of internal stroke of luck or whatever. When I was a magazine freelancer for ten years, I wrote incessantly. I wrote a couple dozen pieces a year. It turns out that working on the books pretty well weaned me off that entirely. I don't feel a compulsion now to do really any of the shorter pieces that are asked of me.

Financially speaking, you don't have to.

Financially, I don't have to, and even though the topic may interest me, I don't feel I have to find out what I have to say on that topic. So I'm currently not even writing book reviews. I have reviewed more books than I will personally ever write. So I've contributed my bit to those great scales of reviewing justice. And I've found that, I think in particular the last couple of book reviews, that I would work very hard on them, and I've often had the habit--I got it in the magazine days--of including a paragraph which can be cut for reasons of space or whatever. I find that paragraph is always being cut so that the illustration can be goosed up. And I got to thinking, "Uh-uh. I'm not going to spend the weekend thinking up a good sentence or paragraph and then the graphic designer yanks it out of there for the sake of the illustration."

It seems that even though you are surrounded by teachers and teachers populate your books and have been prominent in your life, that it's been best for you to avoid the teaching life, against the stream of so many writers today, and make your living as a writer.

This goes to the saying, "Life is choices."

Your father used to say that.

Yes, that's right. It comes straight out of the family. Very early on, probably in graduate school, I realized I do not have the energy or metabolism, whatever you want to call it, to teach and write both. I liked teaching a lot as a teaching assistant at the UW. I really found it a vitalizing way of life. But it took me over too. So it's a question of what are you going to be taken over by. And a lot of people can balance them, but I simply have a head where it mulls only in one direction. Wherever I'm at, I'm totally writing that stream of thought.

And rather than short change one...

And I felt I'd be short changing both, actually, by trying to do both. So if they advance from Dolly and clone all of us, why yeah, I'll be a teacher. But until then, well it's gotta be a writer.

You referred to some early Doig poems. How much money would the Seattle Review have to come up to be able to reprint those?

with

[laughter]
Eight or nine figures. Well, they probably already show up in dabs in the novels. I'm not sure there's anything that hasn't been cannibalized and the bones licked clean by now. They show up...a little bit in Mariah Montana. Riley does a column about homesteads I think and he alludes to Thomas Jefferson and "the red school house of his head" or something like that.

"The red schoolhouse of his head." That's plundered from a poem.

Yes. And I've written all of the songs in my fiction--to the detriment of my fiction I must add--but I have written all the sons of bitches.

I wondered about that. Particularly in Dancing at the Rascal Fair because the song is so integral to the book.

Now none of that, I don't think, was early poetry. And I'm writing now, Lord help me, spirituals for the current book. And I swiped a few lines I had left over in a notebook the other day for something there..."Does the hawk know its shadow."

So we have managed to get some Doig poetry in here.

And for free, no less, you clever devil.
[laughter]

Two final questions. Can you say more about the new book your working on and maybe what's coming after that? What are Doig's readers going to see on the shelves 5 to 10 years from now?

Well, within 2 or 3 years, I hope they'll be seeing this current novel in the bookstores, which is a novel about motives and how much they can be read by other people and even by ourselves, and what's mixed in with them. The three principal characters are Susan Duff, grown from schoolgirlhood in Dancing at the Rascal Fair to being a singing teacher in Helena. She's been through the Suffrage Movement along the way, and that was a vital piece of history in the West. The western states preceded the constitutional amendment by a number of years. And so the West was a battleground on this before it was a national battleground. So Susan's been through those political wars. In the course of them she met and had an affair with a, really a kind of bull moose progressive Teddy Roosevelt sort of politician. But he's one of the Williamsons of the hated WW Ranch in all my books. He's a World War One hero, so he's been through that. But so far I'm running him against the grain. He doesn't come out of it disillusioned in the same way as the Lost Generation of the 20s. I want him to have different scars on him than the absolute kind of mandatory, stamped-out scars that have been attributed to that so called Lost Generation. He's not lost. He's rich and a lot of other things. But he has lost the governorship of Montana because he and Susan Duff got caught in this affair and he got blackmailed out of it. He shows up in her life four years later in 1924. He surprises her, walks into the house, by saying he has a prize student for her, and it's his black chauffeur. A guy who's grown up on the WW,

the son of the Afro-American laundress. Out of this comes the plot: What is everyone up to here? So it's a pretty interesting book to write. It's given me an excuse to write some set scenes I didn't know were in me. The Afro-American guy has, as it turns out, as I sat down to write, he has a background as a rodeo clown. That's been his performing record so far. So the first time you see him, he's in that barrel that they hop in when the Brahmas take after them. So there are similar scenes. There's probably going to be one back in Scotland between Susan and the politician.

So you're still writing this.

Yes, I'm about two-fifths of the way along. I'm able to put that kind of a fraction on it because I sent of the manuscript to the editor just before the holidays. The one useful thing the computer can do for us is count every Goddamned word now. Beyond that it's a mixed bag. But you do know how many words you have anymore. [laughter] So that's the course of the book. There's some flashbacks in it. It's a book where time sort of tunnels backwards into what has happened to shape the motives of these characters and how they respond to it.

Doig Time. While reading your most recent book, Mountain Time, I was thinking there is such a thing as Doig Time. Your prolific use of the flashback and the historical perspective with which you and your characters see the West. I'm thinking of Lexa hiking down that mountain in the steps of Bob Marshall. What a gift to see the landscape like that, to hear those old steps. And that gift is being passed on in your books.

I feel lucky in being tuned in that way, I suppose. I also see it as going with the storytelling impulse that a lot of my characters have, that I grew up around, and I have too, and these flashbacks, these historical things, are to me, kind of technically analogous to the characters liking to tell stories. I've had good reinforcement from readers out on the bookstore trail who tell me that they like the flashbacks. They don't see them as intrusive or something to be fast-forwarded over with the eye. I think anybody who's going to read my books knows they're going to have to spend some time with it. And so you take them back to tell them

more about a character, it turns out that they probably like that. So that's probably going to be the pattern. I don't know if I would ever try to write a book in the flat, contemporaneous straight through. I mean there's a certain appeal if you just sit down and tell a story from finger snap to thunderclap at the end. I admire that stuff but I'm not sure it's in me. I've been reading recently John Fowles' book of essays called Worm Holes, where his mind goes off in every direction. You can kind of see how we got the French Lieutenant's Woman out of that guy, that those flashbacks are there if we can just find the shutter to click.

And lastly , is there a question or topic I didn't bring up that you'd like to address?

Only maybe to talk around a little bit about technique or attention to the craft of writing. We've gone across it in a lot of ways.

You mentioned some work habits, like the early mornings. And I know Hugo had his sharpened, number two pencils.

Yeah, right. You know, Steinbeck did the same thing. It had to be a certain kind of pencil. And I always respected that, but thought it was a bit much. But I discovered I have to have these Goddamn Ticonderogas. I blame it on the pencil industry because it's getting harder and harder these days to pick up any pencil these days and find it has a darkness to it. But yes, it turns out these small things...There's the famous Hugo story...I'm not sure this is craft or what it is...but he'd be sitting here like this working away and he'd say, "Ripley, could you get me a cup of coffee?" [imitates Hugo's voice] It would be at his elbow but he couldn't be disturbed that far.

That reminds me of how Wendell Berry refuses to use a computer, but has his wife type his work.

[laughter]
I look with some bemusement, a lot of respect, but also some bemusement on Wendell Berry and **Vernon Clinkenborg (sp?)** who writes the New York Times nature and rural editorials, and gets to review almost anything written about

rurality, or the West, or whatever. These guys live on these farms propped up by all the machinery that the rest of us are putting up with. [laughter] But in terms of habit for me, so many words a day is a good part of it. The output is pretty precisely measured--400 words a day--when I'm rough-drafting. Some of it is just the tiny touches you try to put into dialogue. As an example, to tag it to one character versus another character. In Dancing at the Rascal Fair--again, I'm aware of this because I consciously thought it up--Ninian Duff uses that "A-Y", the Scottish "Ay" at the start of sentences, and Lucas Barkley uses it at the end of sentences. I've heard it both ways in Montana Scotch. I deliberately did that so that these guys--one's a Bible banger and one's a bartender--to make a kind of dialogue parenthesis to enclose these guys, to show that they have a commonality of language and expression, even though they may be opposed. And that's a conscious touch I've done. One that has occurred to me over Christmas vacation here. My Afro-American singer, very raw, in terms of his talent, and he's never sung with the piano. At one point Susan Duff, in giving him lessons, says all right it's time to go to the piano. And I think he's gonna say--instead of what I have had him say for the past six months--"I've never sang with a piano." I think he's gonna have to say, "I've never sang with a piana." It's dawned on me that it needs an "A."

A bit like "coyo'te" versus "co'yote."

Yes. I think it's in Rascal Fair, Adair shows up. As I once heard, in New Zealand, or Britain or somewhere, foreigner's difficulty in remembering "coyote" and "cayeuse," which is which. There's a historian who's written about the Australian Outback and the American West who's said he's always had to have a cheat sheet in his drawers to where Wauga Wauga is and where Walla Walla is. [laughter] Which country lays claim to which. So those kinds of technique on the dialogue interest me a lot and I think help push the books into the reader's mind, the way mine have gone. That's about all I have to say.

Derek Sheffield
5 N. Franklin
Wenatchee, WA 98801
1-509-665-0170

WENATCHEE, WA 988
PM
03 FEB
2001



Ivan Doig
17277 15th NW
Seattle, WA 98177

If she has any advice she'd like to pass my way, she'd find a grateful recipient.

Let me end by saying what a delight it was to meet you (again) and Carol and to listen in along with the Olympics.

All good cheer,

Derek

2 Feb. '01

Dear Ivan Doig--

Well, you weren't exaggerating when you said the typing part would take some time. Ye gads. I hope to have the text to you in a couple weeks for editing. Any and all will be fair game for your red pen. Hopefully, you've already received your photos from Colleen. If not, you should see them soon. In ohter news, I'm applying for a position at SShoreline CC-- is it possibly Carol's old job? Dare I ask for her blessing? From our brief discussion, I had the impression that her experience at Shoreline was a good one. NOw I'm running out of space...

look over "Technique" file cards in Eng Crk/Mariah file box in prep for interview?

--also Sea Runners cards?

E. Smith interview (Tape in hall closet)

Side 1

55 - technical reasons done well enuf became aesthetic
76 - use set elements for creativity
144 - end of Eugene's surmise o my curiosity o · West.
242 - trellis of Mt. history, Mcc storylines growing on it.
370 - task, task, task — chew & spit out
480 - if I do this, who will happen? ...
806 - make sure he is not some war chant

212 - X/M instead of Arig.

Side 2

22 - richness of Mt. colloquial
74 - restlessness as writer
93 - working within · sentence
140 - outside America
273 - leveling things thru
318 - era of outback writers

Derek Sheffield • 5 N. Franklin Wenatchee, WA 98801 • dsheffield@wvcmail.ctc.edu

October 7, 2000

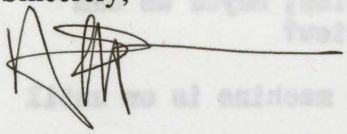
Dear Ivan Doig:

I am an editor of The Seattle Review, a literary magazine housed at the University of Washington. My editor-in-chief, Colleen McElroy, and I would like to do a retrospective on you and your work in an upcoming issue. A retrospective is typically about 40 pages comprised of photographs, new work, old work, an interview and/or an essay. Different retrospectives have varied in which components they've included. For the retrospective of Richard Hugo, we asked James Welch to write a remembrance. For Carolyn Kizer's and Sonia Sanchez's, we included an interview. In addition to these writers, we have done retrospectives on Nelson Bentley, Diane Wakoski and David Wagoner.

I'm enclosing our most recent issue which includes Kizer's retrospective. I hope this project tugs at your interest; if it does, and you'd like to be interviewed, I, a fan of your writing, would get to ask the questions.

Please let me know as soon as you can if you'd like to let us put you and your work in our spotlight. I'm enclosing an SASE, but email also works.

Sincerely,



Derek Sheffield

P.S. I'm a recent graduate of UW's MFA program, where I worked most closely with Linda Bierds and Colleen McElroy. I met you briefly at a gathering after Linda's 1997 Elliott Bay reading. Since finishing the program, I've been teaching English at Wenatchee Valley College. My first book of poems was just published in August by Blue Begonia Press.

27 Oct. 2000

Dear Derek--

You bet. I'd be greatly pleased to have you do a Seattle Review retrospective on my work. An interview would best suit me; give me a call and we can figure out what's most mutually convenient, okay? I'm pretty deep into work on my next book through November, but could look at a time in December. As to other content, there won't be any new work available, sorry to say. For reprint rights on excerpts from my books, I can put in a good word at the rights department but you never know if they'll waive a fee. One excerpt that has seemed to stand pretty well on its own is "Winter of '19," from Dancing at the Rascal Fair, which Craig Lesley used in his Dreamers and Desperadoes western anthology; there are plenty of other possibilities, of course. And I have a limited number of extra copies of family pics; maybe we can do a selection from those at the time of the interview?

Looking forward to hearing from you; the phone machine is on until about 2 p.m. each day.

Best wishes,

29 Dec. 2000

captions for **Seattle Review** photo assortment:

#1--Ivan and Carol Doig
photo by Marion Ettlinger
(Permission must be obtained from photographer; info with photo)

#2--Ivan Doig
photo by Carol Doig

#3-- Ivan Doig and Norman Maclean at Seeley Lake, Montana
photo by Carol Doig

#4--Ivan Doig taking notes in Virginia City, Montana
photo by Carol Doig

#5--Berneta and Charlie Doig at their sheepherding camp on Grassy Mountain, 1934

#6--Ivan Doig, age 2, with his father and uncle and their winter's kill of coyotes in 1941.

#7-- Ivan Doig with his grandmother, Bessie Ringer, on a Montana ranch, 1942

#8-- Ivan Doig at age 12

Please return all photos to:

Dan McV –
David Barclay –
e-mail address

Derek Sheffield – Dec. 15 / 1:30
– interview date
– excerpt: 10-15pp?
– 509-665-0170
– 60 a. Dad Salem–Albany
– send ms #
– 4-6 /

Derek Sheffield • 5 N. Franklin Wenatchee, WA 98801 • dsheffield@wvcmail.ctc.edu The Seattle Review

November 8, 2000

Dear Ivan Doig:

Fantastic. Thanks for agreeing to the retrospective. I'll be calling you soon to work out the details. Meantime, it occurs to me I didn't tell you that we pay for this sort of thing--$200. I think I can get the check to you shortly after we do the interview and pick out family pics.

Colleen McElroy wants everything by early January so we can feature the retrospective in our Spring issue. I'll let you know which excerpt we would like to use; currently, "Winter of '19" is in the running. Can we meet in mid December? Between the 15th and the 18th? As I said, I'll call soon and we can work out a day (either one of these or another).

Best,

Derek Sheffield