Ivan Doig, the 11th of 12 Writers in Residence this year, remains best known for his 1980 debut, "This House of Sky," an account of his youth on a ranch in Montana. It was a finalist for the National Book Award and has come to be regarded as a classic Western memoir. This piece, written expressly for the P-I, examines his relationship with two eminent writers, Wright Morris and Loren Eiseley.

The P-I Writer in Residence for December: Ann Rule

P-I Writer in Residence

Ivan Doig

Once there were two ambitious writers under one roof. It was a duplex, luckily – the promising young novelist Wright Morris and his wife Mary Ellen on the ground floor, and the imaginative young anthropologist professor Loren Eiseley and his wife Mabel directly above, there in a Philadelphia suburb in the last summer of World War II. The two couples clicked, sat on the porch in the evenings of that last pre-Hiroshima summer drinking and talking, and having known Wright Morris myself, I'm sure the talking was nimble and extensive.

Talk is famously cheap, however, and writing is famously lonesome, so you have to wonder about the nature of fate – the dice of chance – that ever threw these two together as inescapable neighbors and fortunate friends. They were both Nebraskans, from childhoods with hard corners – Morris's father was a drifter, Eiseley's mother was deaf and tormented – but there all resemblances ceased.

I can personally testify that Morris was antic, quick-witted, mischievous, formidable energetic. He used every day of his life and travels in his writing, and he wrote much: 33 books, among them 19 novels and three memoirs. Eiseley by all accounts was melancholy, not particularly good with people, never went anywhere, a “bleeder” as a writer and evidently as a soul. Sometime during those Philly evenings Morris nicknamed him “Schmerzie,” short for “Weltenschmerz,” world pain as we all learned back there in Philosophy 101.

About Ivan Doig

Ivan Doig has been an author of both fiction and fiction in a prolific career that included stints as a ranch hand, a newspaperman and a magazine editor. He holds a doctorate in history from the University of Washington. Although a resident of Seattle for four decades, Doig often is thought of as Montana writer because so much of his work has been set under the Big Sky. His most recent novel, "The Whirling Season," is another Montana-set work. In September, Doig was named 2007 winner of the Wallace Stegner Award for his contribution to the American West.
Ivan Doig
FROM E1

An odd pair, then, for me to have held continuing conversations with — one set of the actual sort, the other one the communing you do with pages that magically speak back to you — all across my own writing days. Yet the magnetic poles that those two authors amounted to seem to me the force fields that any of us in the last craft of words must choose to navigate between.

I owed Wright Morris a lot. When The New York Times Book Review woke up to the fact that my first book, “This House of Sky,” had become a finalist for the National Book Award, it hustled a copy off to Wright for review, six months late. His generous appraisal led to some book-swapping and then ongoing correspondence, quick and funny, always barn-burners from his end. If he hadn’t fired off to me one of his scrawled postcards in a while, one would arrive with an explanation, say, that the San Francisco Bay Area (where he lived the later part of his life) was short on ink, “due to an epidemic of fingerprinting.”

And his inscription in my copy of “Photographs and Words,” his remarkable photo-and-text book reprising the farmhouse scenes he shot when he went back to his home places in Nebraska in 1940, still bowls me over.

“There is a kith and kinship between your House of Sky and these earthy unearthly objects which this occasion moves me to acknowledge. Can all this grandeur perish? No, no! I say no, no! Watch it drift out of sight, no, I (we) can’t do it. — Praternally, Wright.”

Then came the invitation for my wife Carol and me to visit him and his second wife, Jo, the next time we happened to be in the ink-deprived Bay Area.

It has been my good fortune to spend at least a little time with several intriguing figures of the American 20th century literary pantheon — Richard Hugo, Norman Maclean, Mary Lee Settle, Isaac Bashevis Singer, William Stafford, Wallace Stegner — but there never has been anything in my experience quite like afternoon tea with Wright Morris.

We were given elaborate phone instructions to what Jo Morris called not Mill Valley proper but Mill Valley improper. Sure enough, somewhere mystifying up a grown-over sidehill and up again a sharp skinny driveway, we at last parked and went past an imposing Beware of Dog sign. No dog, just the sign.

Over a handshake, Wright turned out to look properly prophetic, with an aureole of thick white hair from about the middle of his head back and clear blue eyes that seemed to see through you like an open window. At 77, he was very trim, which made him appear taller than his 5’8” or so. He was wearing a prominent turquoise ring and tannish chamois-like shirt, with thermal undertop and a short blue scarf peeking out the neck. He told us that ever since he hit 70, his circulation had made him cold all the time, from the fog pouring down over the Bay hills “like Victoria Falls.”

Wright poured the tea with majestic disregard for floating tea leaves, apple turnovers were heated up and served up, and the conversation perked along. I’m absolved to say that as usual in get-togethers with literary figures, literature pretty much got left out. Talk was of places we’d been, mostly the Western destinations we’d been so fond of.

He goes on to tell of reaching the verge where that prairie “halted before a great wall of naked sandstone and clay,” and how, there on that day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America he went down into a crack in the earth—a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had inserted himself into it, “was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time.” An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley was hoping to find bone remnants of some sort. What he found instead, he tells us, was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human — some creature pre-human, Eiseley says, “a low, pinched brain case . . . and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged.”

Under the prairie sky, Eiseley stares down at that skull. The skull stares, sightless, up at him. And he writes of that moment:

“This creature had never lived to see a man — and I; what was it I was never going to see?”

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Carried away by the vigor of Wright's appearance and words, toward the end of the visit I made the mistake of asking what writing was forthcoming.

Jo instantly said, "Jesus Christ, the man has written 30 books."

I just as quickly said, "We can't get enough of the man."

Wright then said, well, he'd tell us - he was working on a "masterstroke," a new work of fiction, in such a highfalutin way Carol and I could not decide whether he was on the level or not. In any case, no more books came into print from that prolific man in the remaining 11 years of his life.

Loren Eiseley I never met, but I did hear him deliver a speech at the University of Washington, in a voice so profoundly resonant he sounded like Jehovah's older brother. He has echoed in me more times than I can count.

Eiseley's great knack was being a questing lyricism, words romanced by a romping intellect in the ceaseless fields of nature. Time and again, his power of phrase has spoken to me at unlively but perfectly right times. In the London below-stairs garden apartment where I began the long march of words that became "This House of Sky," I would look up at my daily visiting companion, the alley cat who padded across the glassed-over porch ceiling to settle onto the warmth cast by the light fixture above my head, and the same line of Eiseley faithfully arrived as well: "In the days of the frost seek a minor sun." And here on our bluff high over Puget Sound, Carol and I can never hear the approaching slish of a high tide without one of us intoning a variation from Eiseley's essay on creatures creeping from the sea along evolutionary eons, "Something is coming ashore."

Those lines and practically a Bible's worth of quotable others are to be found in Eiseley's masterpiece, "The Immense Journey," his 1957 collection of essays - lucky 13 in number - meditating on nature and humankind, always through some encounter with creature or cosmos framed by his own insomniac stargazer personality.

Such was the pair, then, who went on to very different career paths from that duplex. Wright Morris advanced all the way to the National Book Award in 1957 for "The Field of Vision," a remarkable kaleidoscopic novel set in a bull ring in Mexico - and to the cup of major literary reputation. A superb photographer, Wright's eye for detailed realism made him into the literary breed called a writer's writer, more admired within the craft than warmed to by readers. With that quicksilver mind and a compositional hand almost as fleet, he could write like an avenging angel. Here are the opening sentences of his novel, "The Works of Love."

"In the dry places, men begin to dream. Where the rivers run sand, there is something in man that begins to flow. West of the 98th Meridian - where it sometimes rains and it sometimes doesn't - towns, like weeds, spring up when it rains, dry up when it stops. But in a dry climate the husk of the plant remains. The stranger might find, as if preserved in amber, something of the green life that once lived there, and the ghosts of men who have gone on to a better place."

But Loren Eiseley, as it turned out, Loren Eiseley could write like an archangel, the recording one. This is the opening of the first story in "The Immense Journey."

"Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features of profane old age. Rocks are wrenched up and exposed to view; black pits receive the sun but give back no light."

"It was to such a land I rode, but I rode to it across a sunlit, timeless prairie over which nothing passed but antelope or a wandering bird."

He goes on to tell of reaching the verge where that prairie "halted before a great wall of naked sandstone and clay," and how, there on that day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America he went down into a crack in the earth - a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had himself inserted into it, "was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time." An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley was hoping to find bone remnants of some sort. What he found instead, he tells us, was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human - some creature pre-human, Eiseley says, "a low, pinched brain case . . . and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged."

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It is going to be hard for any of us, ever, to sum up the immense story of humankind better than Loren Eiseley managed to in that single sentence.

Two writers, starting from roughly the same place, two careers of words for us to look at. My splendid friend Wright Morris now looks like a cold distant star on the page. The technical brilliance, the sentences that one by one can be luminous - his books still always hold me to their surface. But the nature beneath, human or planetary, never quite comes through. Wright seems to have been listening to the lens clicks of his high-powered mental camera, not the ticktock of existence.

Loren Eiseley, by contrast, unhesitatingly put into unforgettable words his immost nature, full as it was of night sweats, spells of broodiness, and his abiding sense of being a human grain of sand in the reaches of the star ocean forever over us. I believe Eiseley's words have lasted because he was willing to openly risk, for himself and us, the feeling of mortality, the place in the heart that knows we are part of the immensely long passage of things. Almost in spite of himself, perhaps, he turned out to be a reader's writer.

The gravitational pull of this odd conjunction of wordsmiths has had one more lasting effect on my own writing trajectory. After Wright Morris ushered me so fraternally into the Sunday pages, The New York Times stayed with the habit of pursuing what I do, and upon due consideration of a recent novel of mine, the book reviewer there asserted that when I write I wear my heart on my sleeve. I took it as an immense compliment.
11/30/2007

Ivan,

What a thrill to read Ivan Doig in the Seattle P-I. I’m lobbying for regular appearances, but if you saw our budget these days you’d understand how unlikely such a luxury would be. There’s also the no-small matter of your day job.

The newsroom reacted extremely well to your workshop, as the buzz afterwards reflected. I heard the word “inspiring” several times.

You mesmerized us into a sense we were participating in a conversation, right from the opening. Reading and analyzing the opening lines of This House of Sky was, at a minimum, instructional, but for me it renewed a love for that book.

Your excerpt from the World War II book sold the maximum copies that room could afford, I’m sure, and left me figuring that you are going to eclipse The Whispering Season with the next one.

Seeing Carol again was the frosting on it all.

Thanks so very much.

— Eric Nalder
David McCumber  
Managing Editor  
Seattle Post-Intelligencer  
101 Elliott Ave. West  
Seattle WA 98119-4220

Dear David--

Here we are, nearing the far end of the calendar, so I thought I’d better provide you my piece in your monthly writers’ showcase, for the sake of your planning and mine. The piece is enclosed, in word-processed but not transmittable form (hey, you knew you weren’t getting any e-mailer in me, right?) and I hope it’s the kind of thing you wanted; it’s two thousand words, I think on the nose.

Give me a call and we can work out a date for me to do the session with your staffers—I assume you don’t want to run too deep into the holiday season with this, nor do I. My wife Carol shares my affection for newspaper folks, from her early career at the Asbury Park Press, and would like to come along. Also, we want Nalder on hand to pep things up, don’t we?

Lastly, a pic for the rogues’ gallery of writers you’ve been doing: any chance you can just use one of fetching writer-in-a-hat publicity shots I’ve provided John Marshall recently? Any more, having been shot a hell of a number of times, I flinch pretty hard at cutting into the daily writing schedule to pose for a photog yet again.

Look forward to hearing from you, David; the writer’s series has been an estimable literary contribution in an estimable publication.

Best,
DAVID McCUMBER  
MANAGING EDITOR

Ivan Doig  
17277 15th Avenue NW  
Seattle, WA 98177

Jan. 10, 2007

Dear Ivan –

Getting yr. Royal-written missive warmed my heart and caused me to go over and caress my L.C. Smith, which holds a place of honor in my office. It was my first typewriter in my first newsroom and I bought it when they converted to electric. I’ve used it in four newsrooms and I still write poetry on it occasionally.

Thanks so much for the kind words about the P-I. I really appreciate it.

In view of your response I have a big favor to ask. I understand your position regarding your current novel. We have a very strong lineup and I’m about to announce it in the paper – I hope next week – and I wonder if we could list you as one of the writers in the program without pinning you down to any date. I understand perfectly that you couldn’t do it until late 2007 at the earliest. That of course would be a fine time for us, and I’ve blocked out October, November and December in the hope you might have a day in any one of those months. 2008 is a different concept; I honestly can’t say for sure we’ll be publishing then because of the current legal dispute (I think we will, but I can’t say for sure).

In any event your name would add considerable luster to our announcement and it would be fun to see you included with the following list: Pete Dexter, David Guterson, Ann Rule, Jonathan Raban, Sherman Alexie, Charlie Cross (I believe he’s your neighbor?), Ellen Forney, Tim Egan and Charles Johnson. We still don’t know if Tom Robbins will be able to participate (he wants to but has health issues) and I’ve also invited Erik Larson, but have not heard back yet.

So if you could see your way clear to letting us list you as one of the writers in this program down the road, it would be great. If not, the invitation stands and we’ll hope to work it out later. I’d greatly appreciate a call: 206-948-1780 – this week if possible.

Thanks!  

phoned him Jan. 12, told him to put me down with understanding I might have to call it off; put in my claim for sometime around Thanksgiving.

David
Dear David—

There is this about hanging onto a Royal manual, it is not dependent on the Puget Sound power grid. Quite a windstorm last night, wasn't it. (Just for the record, I do have a computer and would be on it chugging away at my next novel except for powerless circumstances—so the outage does give me a chance to catch up on your letter.)

As to your commendable offer: for probably most of the coming year I can't take you up on it—this next book takes all my loyalty—and beyond that I can't promise you anything, but if you want to ask again toward the end of '07 or into '08 I'll be glad to take a fresh look for you. It really is a hell of a good idea you have, and ideally I'd pitch in with you—it's a matter of all else that I'm committed to. Tell Nalder to hold onto his intro, on the basis of a long "maybe."

Ah, Meagher County. I just cited our mutual old stomping grounds in an interview in Montana Quarterly magazine as an incentive that got me out of ranchwork and into wordwork; as you no doubt know, the big ownerships I grew up around are the burr in the way I look at things back there. I don't remember having any quibble with The Cowboy Way. What you may have heard was some echo of a ritual grumble I have about Jamie's "Ivan Dodg Room" at Birch Creek. (I think Jamie, whom I've actually liked okay the couple of times I've been around her, has heard it from me too.) The fact of the matter was that my dad and I were bunked in that room in the big house only because you can't have an eleven-year-old kid in a bunkhouse, so there's always been a whiff of Potemkin Rancho to me when that room is ballyhooed. In any case, the more the merrier when it comes to bookish places like Meagher County, yours was a good one, and the P-I under your hand is a damn fine newspaper. Thanks for thinking of me on the Writer in Residence gig, and I look forward to the time when our paths can cross personally.

Sincerely,
DAVID McCUMBER
MANAGING EDITOR

Nov. 30, 2006
Ivan Doig
17277 15th NW
Seattle, WA 98171

Dear Ivan --

This is a late thank-you for the copy of "Whistling Season" Harcourt sent me at your gracious behest. It's an absolutely wonderful read, and of course I would have expected no less. I suppose that's a blessing and a curse -- "Oh, here's another fantastic novel from Doig," reviewers must say across the country. Of course that's a problem most of us scribblers would give significant body parts to have.

Along with the belated thanks, my bad manners extend to having my hand out. I'm wondering if you would give any consideration to joining some of Seattle's other beloved writers as a part of a Writer in Residence project I'm starting in 2007 here at the Post-Intelligencer.

In exchange for a horribly modest, barely four-figure honorarium, I'd ask for a piece of writing we could publish (a novel excerpt, a short story, an essay, preferably but not necessarily with Seattle setting or reference) and your participation in an informal discussion with P-I staffers. I'd love to have Eric Nalder introduce you -- something he said he'd be honored to do!

The piece of work could be something you've already done -- for many writers this works best -- and no actual "residency" here other than the talk is required (although some writers will probably spend some time writing in the newsroom.) What I've found in the past is that often a writer will have an existing piece that never quite fit elsewhere, or for whatever reason is unpublished (or unpublished in a considerable time.) Other writers have a subject they'd like to write about given the opportunity. I'd love to discuss what might be possible if you have the time and inclination to participate.

As your local newspaper editor, I'm shamelessly hoping to trade on your relationship with the P-I. I'm hoping this infusion of literary culture will help the paper -- I believe readers will welcome it -- and at the same time inspire our outstanding staffers, who would learn much from a chance to discuss writing with you. I know I would. This is modeled after a similar program I ran years ago at the San Francisco Examiner, where we had an eclectic but distinguished group of writers featured, including Jan
Morris, Ed Abbey, Tim Cahill, Roy Blount, Ken Auletta, Pete Hamill, Nancy Friday, Pete Axthelm, Mimi Sheraton, Aaron Latham, and Chuck Bowden.

True to the P-I's identity and mission, I'm much more stressing local voices in this program.

I'd be most pleased to discuss this at your leisure. I'd also love to discuss Meagher County, Montana with you if you'd ever like to. I heard sort of third-hand that because of the Wellington Rankin connection to the Birch Creek story I told in The Cowboy Way, it may not have found favor with you. Which saddened me greatly because I'm a huge fan of your work. I mentioned to Eric that I actually got to do a reading at "This House of Sky," now the ranch house of Jock and Jamie Doggett, during the Meagher County Literary Festival a couple of summers ago. It was a great thrill to read there, and to realize that the big beautiful old house I had trailed cattle past during my year at Birch Creek Ranch was the house I had read about with such joy and admiration years before.

Now, here in Rain City, I enjoy my life but miss Montana every day. Whistling Season took me back there, in a wonderful way. Thanks again, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

David McCumber
for the Seattle P-I

2,000 words

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The Writer’s Writer and the Reader’s Writer

by Ivan Doig

Once there were two ambitious writers under one roof. It was a duplex, luckily—the promising young novelist Wright Morris and his wife Mary Ellen on the ground floor, and the imaginative young anthropology professor Loren Eiseley and his wife Mabel directly above, there in a Philadelphia suburb in the last summer of World War II, 1945. The two couples clicked, sat on the porch in the evenings of that last pre-Hiroshima summer drinking and talking, and having known Wright Morris myself, I’m sure the talking was nimble and extensive.

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But Loren Eiseley, it turned out, Loren Eiseley could write like an archangel, the recording one.

This is the opening of the first story in The Immense Journey:

“Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features of profane old age. Rocks are wrenched up and exposed to view; black pits receive the sun but give back no light.

“It was to such a land I rode, but I rode to it across a sunlit, timeless prairie over which nothing passed but antelope or a wandering bird.”
He goes on to tell of reaching the verge where that prairie "halted before a great wall of naked sandstone and clay," and how, there on that day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America he went down into a crack in the earth—a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had inserted himself into it, "was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time." An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley was hoping to find bone remnants of some sort. What he found instead, he tells us, was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human—some creature pre-human, Eiseley says, "a low, pinched brain case... and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged."

Under the prairie sky, Eiseley stares down at that skull. The skull stares, sightless, up at him. And he writes of that moment:

"This creature had never lived to see a man—and I; what was it I was never going to see?"

It is going to be hard for any of us, ever, to sum up the immense story of humankind better than Loren Eiseley managed to in that single sentence.

Two writers, starting from roughly the same place, two careers of words for us to look back at. My splendid friend Wright Morris now looks like a cold distant star on the page. The technical brilliance, the sentences that one by one can be luminous—his books still always hold me to their surface. But the nature beneath, human or planetary, never quite comes through. Wright seems to have been listening to the lens clicks of his highpowered mental camera, not the ticktock of existence.

Loren Eiseley, by contrast, unhesitatingly put into unforgettable words his inmost nature, full as it was of night sweats, spells of broodiness, and his abiding
sense of being a human grain of sand in the reaches of the star ocean forever over
us. I believe Eiseley’s words have lasted because he was willing to openly risk, for
himself and us, the feeling of mortality, the place in the heart that knows we are part
of the immensely long passage of things. Almost in spite of himself, perhaps, he
turned out to be a reader’s writer.

The gravitational pull of this odd conjunction of wordsmiths has had one
more lasting effect on my own writing trajectory. After Wright Morris ushered me
so fraternally into the Sunday pages, the New York Times stayed with the habit of
perusing what I do, and upon due consideration of a recent novel of mine, the book
reviewer there asserted that when I write I wear my heart on my sleeve. I took it as
an immense compliment.

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put himself and his inmost nature into facing his own fate, in that place in the prairie.

The book was ecstatically reviewed and instantly beloved--former Secretary of State Dean Acheson bought a thousand copies to give as Christmas presents--and diminished not at all by the fact that

If that little story shows what I think is the value of risk for a writer, of sometimes going beneath and beyond the landscape for a sense of place, it's probably time I stick my neck out a bit and take you into the territory where the people of my imagination live.

But writers of quality also try to reach beyond that ground that gives them their foundation--out there into the territory of "trying to place" the face of time and fate. To show us, through their words on the page, how our deep emotions connect with the map of nature, human and otherwise.

There is career risk in this. A New York Times book reviewer once said of me that as a novelist I wear my heart on my sleeve--I don't think he intended it as a compliment, although I took it as one. But let me step aside from my own work, and that of my contemporaries, to try to illustrate what I mean about the great stakes involved in a writer "trying to place" something vital for us in the nature of things.
Writers under the globe

12 of the Northwest’s top writers are coming to the pages of the P-I

BY JOHN MARSHALL

A dozen of this region’s finest writers, including three winners of the National Book Award, will publish work in the Post-Intelligencer in the coming year under a yearlong program of P-I Writers in Residence.

The new program kicks off next Friday with work by Pete Dexter, the Whidbey Island resident who won the National Book Award in 1988 for “Paris Trout.”

Each month, the work of a different writer in residence will be spotlighted in the P-I. The program was inspired by a similar program at the San Francisco Examiner that was run by David McCumber, now the P-I’s managing editor.

McCumber wanted to resurrect the popular Examiner feature, believed to be the first such newspaper program in the country and still one of the few to feature a series of writers. But he vowed to make a significant change in the program at the P-I — focusing on the strong community of writers in the Northwest.

“I’m really thrilled that we’ve gotten a great response from many of the best writers in this area,” McCumber said. “This is a wonderful way to recognize their talent and also give P-I readers something very special.”

Indeed, the roster of P-I writers in residence includes some of the best-known and most respected of Northwest authors: Sherman Alexie, Rebecca Brown, Charles Cross, Dexter, Ivan Doig, Timothy Egan, Ellen Forney, David Guterson, Charles Johnson, Jonathan Raban, Tom Robbins and Ann Rule.

McCumber pointed out that each of the writers in residence has agreed to take part in an informal meeting with the newspaper’s writers and editors, so that they also will benefit from the authors’ knowledge, experience and expertise.

“It’s a great opportunity for the staff as well,” he said.

Pieces to be published in the P-I by the writers in residence are expected to be new work, unpublished past work or work excerpted from upcoming books. They will vary in length and range through several different genres in fiction and non-fiction. Forney, a young graphic novelist from Seattle, likely will contribute something in that increasingly popular format.

COMING UP

What do “crunch,” “baco” and “badong” have in common? Each was created by combining two or more other words. And there’s more where those came from.

TOMORROW

IT’S IN T.H.E.P.

FOR BIOGRAPHIES OF THE P-I WRITERS IN RESIDENCE, SEE D3
Brief biographies of the P-I Writers in Residence

Sherman Alexie

Rebecca Brown
Best known for "The Gifts of the Body," a haunting novel about an AIDS caregiver published in 1994 that went on to win a Lambda Award. A resident of Seattle, Brown was the first writer in residence at Richard Hugo House and has taught writing often at that literary center on Capitol Hill. She now directs the literature program at the Centrum Foundation in Port Townsend, including its popular summer writers conference. Brown's wide-ranging work has probed such little-explored literary territory as a dance opera, a quasi-dictionary and a collaboration with a visual artist. Brown's writing is known for its spare language and powerful imagery. Her most recent book is "The Last Time I Saw You," from 2006.

Charles Cross
Best known for "Heavier Than Heaven," a biography of late Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain that won the ASCAP-Timothy White Award for outstanding biography in 2002. A Seattle resident, Cross rose to local journalistic prominence as editor of the much-praised alternative-music magazine The Rocket, which he headed for 14 years. Also a recognized authority on Bruce Springsteen, has published freelance articles on such major publications as Rolling Stone, Esquire, Playboy and Spin. Cross followed his Cobain biography with one of another Northwest icon, Jimi Hendrix, and is at work on another, of Bruce Lee. Plays no musical instruments and cannot sing, although wishes he could. His most recent book is "Room Full of Mirrors," his Hendrix biography in 2005.

Pete Dexter
Best known for "Paris Trout," winner of the National Book Award for fiction in 1988. Dexter, a resident of Whidbey Island, worked as a much-hailed newspaper columnist in Philadelphia and Sacramento while also branching into writing novels and screenplays. His syndicated column ran for three years in the P-I. A 1991 TV film version of "Paris Trout" starred Dennis Hopper and Ed Harris. Dexter's work is known for its grittiness and its mix of mordant wit and raw violence. His most recent book is the just-published "Paper Trail" (Ecco, 289 pages, $25.95), a powerhouse collection of his newspaper and magazine work.

Ivan Doig
Best known for "This House of Sky," his 1980 debut that is regarded as a classic. Western memoir about growing up on a ranch in Montana; it was a finalist for the National Book Award. Doig's background includes stints as a ranch hand, a newspaperman and a magazine editor. He has a doctorate in history from the University of Washington. Although a resident of Seattle for four decades, Doig often is thought of as a Montana writer since so many of his novels and memoirs are set under the Big Sky. His work is known for its humanity and its attention to historic detail. When the San Francisco Chronicle took a poll to name the West's best books of fiction and non-fiction in 1999, Doig was the only writer to make both lists. His most recent book is "The Whirling Season," published last year to some of the most enthusiastic reviews of his work in years.

Timothy Egan
Best known for "The Worst Hard Time," his riveting account of the Dust Bowl that won last year's National Book Award in non-fiction. Egan's early reputation was built largely upon "The Good Rain," his 1990 debut that has long been regarded as one of the pivotal accounts of the present-day Northwest. A one-time reporter for the Post-Intelligencer, Egan moved on to The New York Times, where he long has been a national reporter based in Seattle and shared in the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for a series on race in America. An unrepentant Northwest chauvinist with a passion for the region's outdoors pursuits, muscular cabernets and sports teams (Mariners, Huskies), his most recent book is "The Worst Hard Time," currently the No. 1-selling trade paperback in Northwest independent bookstores.

Ellen Forney

David Guterson
Best known for "Snow Falling on Cedars," winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction in 1994; a high-profile film version was released in 1998. A former high school English teacher, he is a longtime resident of Bainbridge Island. Guterson has written a collection of short stories, a non-fiction book on home-schooling and three novels, all set in the Northwest with many evocative descriptions of the region's varied landscapes. Named in 1996 by Granta magazine as one of 20 Best Young American Novelists. Mentor at the University of Washington was Charles Johnson. A newspaper carrier for the Seattle P-I when he was a youth. His most recent book is "Our Lady of the Forest" published in 2003.

Charles Johnson
Best known for "Middle Passage," winner of the National Book Award for fiction in 1990. Started his career as a cartoonist who satirized race relations. A longtime resident of Seattle, Johnson holds an endowed chair in creative writing at the University of Washington. A prolific writer of short stories, essays, screenplays and novels, including a richly imagined look at the last two years of crisis in the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. ("Dreamer"). Johnson is a recipient of a "genius grant" from the MacArthur Foundation, as well as an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A martial-arts expert. His most recent book is "Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories" published in 2005.

Jonathan Raban
Best known, perhaps, for "Bad Land: An American Romance," winner of the National Book Critics Award for non-fiction in 1996. A native of England, Raban has lived in Seattle since 1990. Much of his early reputation was based upon a series of first-person travel books that helped fuel the remarkable resurgence in the popularity of that genre of literary non-fiction. A frequent commentator on American affairs in British and American publications. Known for his incisive wit and his perennial outsider persona in his writings. An avid sailor who chronicled his voyage to Alaska in "Passage to Juneau." After two decades devoted to non-fiction, he returned to the novel in 2003 with "Waxwings," a portrait of Seattle in the dot-com era. His most recent book is "Surveillance," another Seattle-set novel published this month.

Tom Robbins
Best known for "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," his 1976 classic that became a 1993 film by director Gus Van Sant. A native of Blowing Rock, N.C., Robbins moved to La Conner in 1970 on April Fool's Day and has been there since. Has become an automatic denizen of the best-seller lists, with his past seven books in a row achieving that level of popularity. Work translated into 22 foreign languages, most recently Lithuanian. Named among "100 Best Writers of the 20th Century" by Writer's Digest magazine. Spent four years early in his career as a fill-in copy editor at the Seattle P-I. Deadly serious about "playfulness" in his richly comic work. Collects children's toy motorcycles and vintage canvas circus banners. His most recent book is "Wild Ducks Flying Backwards," a 2005 collection of his non-fiction pieces that Robbins vows is the closest he will ever venture to memoir.

Ann Rule
Best known for "The Stranger Beside Me," her chilling 1980 book that recounts working in the Seattle Crisis Clinic with a handsome and personable young man who turned out to be Ted Bundy, the notorious serial killer. A longtime Seattle resident, Rule worked for the Seattle Police Department before turning full time to writing in 1969. Has had 20 books on The New York Times best-seller list on her way to becoming one of the country's most popular and prolific writers on true crime. Won a Peabody Award for TV miniseries ("Small Sacrifices") based on one of her books. Took an exhaustive look at the Green River murders by Gary Ridgway in 2004's "Green River, Running Red." Devoted collector of antique bottles, teddy bears and police paraphernalia. Her latest book is "No Regrets," the 11th in a paperback series of "Ann Rule's True Crime Files."