Dear Ivan -

Thanks much for your letter & glad you enjoyed the Journal of Cultural Geography piece on your Montana work. Great to hear that your next Butte novel is headed this way later in the year too!

Really enjoyed the DARE piece - Thanks for sending that along - I'm going to assign it to my Cultural Geography class when we talk about Vernacular Language this Fall!

On Vern Carlburn at Washington - my PhD advisor (a healthy 88 now) recalled the men at the works - Don Meinig did his degree there (a good while before you did), Don was born and raised in the Palouse - (his book - The Great Columbia Plain) and then went on to write his larger North American "Shaping of America" series. Don remains a fan of your works too so I'll send him a copy of the new Butte book when it appears.

Montana has finally settled into winter. A fine, dry, cold snow drifting by the window - the thermometer can't seem to wake much above zero today, that filmy grey sky above it all - be sure you recall those days!

Great to see you for lunch or a beer next time you are in Bozeman - so give me a heads-up when you are headed in our direction!

Best wishes,

Bill
Dear Bill--

Wow, what a piece of work your *Journal of Cultural Geography* article is. I’m really honored. And my wife Carol gives you just about the highest accolade in this journalistically trained writing-research-oriented household of ours--“What diligence!”

Along that line, I was particularly tickled that you dealt with the vernacular of my books, something I work at all the time. I’m taking the liberty of sending you a small piece I was asked to write for the newsletter of the Dictionary of American Regional English (it’ll appear sometime next summer, I guess). As when you added up my geographic usages and so on, I had no idea what my DARE total of citations was until the editor provided a printout.

Couple of stray things to pass along to you. I don’t know how much it affected my writing eye--I think not a lot, but my general awareness of “country” must have been raised some--but I took my history Ph.D. under a jack-of-all-ideas prof named Vernon Carstensen, who was big on what he called “patterns on the land.” He meant the rectangular survey and grid town plans and so on, and I was never able to get him to entirely get it about strip farming (from my teenage vantage point of driving a cat on that first benchland north of Dupuyer which should never have been farmed—the state highway dept. has a gravel pit right there!) or inventive corner posts for fencing with barbwire (he was from Iowa and thought Osage orange was the most creative fencing ever), but he was a good provocative teacher. I’ve damnably lost it, but he had an old book of essays titled, I think, *Patterns on the Land*, if you ever come across it. A book that’s always been more intriguing for me is one that Carstensen put me on to by one of his Wisconsin grad students, and I wonder if you know it: Frank R. Kramer, *Voices in the Valley: Mythmaking and Folk Belief in the Shaping of the Middle West*. If I remember right, the book came from Kramer’s dissertation, which for my money would make it the most ambitious grad work I’ve ever blinked at, from Hurons to the Cleveland rolling mills. I haven’t a clue whether Kramer’s work holds up—there are dimensions in it literally beyond me—but it starts my head working every time I crack the book open.

All is well here. By about Labor Day (propitiously), my next Butte novel, *Sweet Thunder*, will be out, starring in a manner of speaking the Butte hill, with Anaconda Copper to hiss at and I hope the doughty union newspaper (which I’ve invented) to pull for. Don’t know if we’re going to make it to Bozeman in ’13, but would like to have lunch or a beer with you if we do. In the meantime, all best for the new year, and again, big thanks from me and my books.
Dear Ivan:

I'm enclosing my little piece on you and your work that recently appeared in the *Journal of Cultural Geography*. Thank you again for the background material—especially the maps! As you will see, they help to tell the story. As to the themes, I touch on and illustrate through your fine work, hopefully they resonate....

Best holiday wishes,

Bill Wyckoff
Ivan Doig’s Montana and the creation of place-defining literature

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Cultural geographers explore many intersections between places and writers. This study examines two memoirs (This House of Sky, Heart Earth) and three novels (English Creek, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Ride With Me, Mariah Montana) published by Montana author Ivan Doig between 1978 and 1993. Set in his native Montana, these works have been cited for their powerful place-based imagery and language. Doig’s example is used to explore the concept of “place-defining” literature introduced in 1991 by geographer James “Pete” Shortridge. I identify five qualities in Doig’s writing to mark his contribution to place-defining literature. These include (1) Doig’s accurate descriptions of Montana localities and landscapes, (2) Doig’s descriptions of the seasonal round of activities and weather, (3) Doig’s use of national and global events to shape local narratives, (4) Doig’s emphasis on work and labor, and (5) Doig’s use of vernacular language to connect past and present landscapes within his stories. Doig exemplifies what Shortridge describes as a critically acclaimed writer who provides “penetrating, accurate insights into regional culture” (Shortridge 1991, p. 280). Doig’s Montana memoirs and novels are an invaluable source of insight to those interested in defining the place identity and regional character of Big Sky Country.

Keywords: place identity; place-defining literature; cultural landscape; Montana

Ivan Doig’s powerful connection to Montana’s regional identity is made clear on the opening page of his autobiographical memoir entitled This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind. Doig recalls the geography that shaped his childhood:

It starts, early in the mountain summer, far back among the high spilling slopes of the Bridger Range of southwestern Montana. The single sound is hidden water—the south fork of Sixteenmile Creek diving down its willow-masked gulch. The stream flees north through this secret and peopleless land until, under the fir-dark flanks of Hatfield Mountain, a bow of

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meadow makes the rifled water curl wide to the west. At this interruption, a
low rumple of the mountain knolls itself up watchfully, and atop it, like a
sentry box over the frontier between the sly creek and the prodding meadow,
perches our single-room herding cabin. (Doig 1978, p. 3)

These memories, galvanized in Doig’s imagination at the age of six, begin a
narrative that takes the reader through much of the author’s life in Montana.
The prose illustrates Doig’s literary talent, both to tell a good story and to
connect with his surroundings. The book became the first of many memoirs
and novels published by Doig which explored the Montana landscape.

Doig’s overall fascination with regional character, the importance of
the past, and the power of the landscape intersect in multiple ways with
how James “Pete” Shortridge has explored the cultural geography of the
United States, the Midwest, and the Great Plains (Shortridge 1989, 2000,
2004, 2005). Even more specifically, in his study of place-defining novels in
American popular culture, Shortridge singles out Doig as a “critically
acclaimed” writer who provides “penetrating, accurate insights into
regional culture” (Shortridge 1991, p. 280). In that study, Shortridge
argued that regional novelists can be potent shapers of larger regional
identities, particularly if their works are widely read and become defining
elements of American popular culture. Ultimately, however, Shortridge’s
definition of a place-defining novel depends more on its widespread
popularity and its power to shape national images than the novelist’s
creative ability to capture a sense of place.

This essay revisits that definition in the context of several of Ivan Doig’s
literary works set in Montana. It offers a slightly different approach to the
notion of a “place-defining novelist,” one that puts less emphasis on a
writer’s overall popularity (and thus as a shaper of popular taste) and more
emphasis on a writer’s raw creativity; that is, their ability to capture a sense
of regional character in ways often beyond the range of ordinary
geographical inquiry. After initially exploring Doig’s Montana roots and
his best-known works set within the state, the essay identifies and assesses
five place-centered themes that illustrate Doig’s ability to capture elements
of regional identity. In addition, these five themes might be used as a more
general template to suggest how geographers can utilize works of
imaginative literature in their own studies of regional identity. In that
context, it offers a contribution to a wider body of work within academic
geography that has explored the connections between place and various
literary forms (Darby 1948; Aiken 1977; Salter and Lloyd 1977; Tuan 1978;

Ivan Doig and Montana

Doig’s visceral connections with Big Sky Country began with growing up
in its midst. Born in White Sulphur Springs in 1939, Doig spent most of
his early years on sheep ranches in the nearby Sixteenmile Creek country (Doig 1985) (Figure 1). After his mother died on his sixth birthday, Doig was raised by his father Charlie as well as by his maternal grandmother, Bessie Ringer. Depending on jobs and opportunities, the Doig family moved from ranch to ranch and also spent time in White Sulphur Springs itself. In addition, there were shorter, but formative times spent along the spectacular Rocky Mountain Front south of Glacier National Park, near towns such as Choteau, Depuyer, and Valier. Summer sheep-tending jobs in the area for the Doigs proved particularly pivotal for Ivan as a number of his later literary works focused on the spectacular landscapes and cultural history of the region (Figure 2).

Doig's professional education became an integral part of his larger success as a writer (Simpson 1992). His training as a journalist and historian began in the late 1950s when he left Montana to attend Northwestern University. After receiving bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism, Doig ventured to the University of Washington, where he completed a doctorate in history. Although much of Doig's graduate education took him far from Montana, he often returned by train to visit his father and grandmother and they in turn spent time with him in Seattle. Early on, Doig's professional writing career emphasized his academic background. For example, he coauthored (with his wife, Carol) a consumer's guide to the news (Doig and Doig 1972), edited anthologies on cities (Doig 1975) and utopian America (Doig 1976), and wrote a study [map of Montana with towns and landmarks labeled]
for the U.S. Forest Service highlighting the history of the Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station (Doig 1977).

Ultimately, Doig's literary return to his Montana roots took shape in the early and middle 1970s (Doig 1985). With the death of his father and grandmother, Doig returned to Montana many times from his new home on Puget Sound. He spent time in historical archives around the state, completed extensive interviews with surviving family members and residents, and revisited many of his childhood haunts. The fruits of his meticulous research appeared in 1978 with the successful publication of *This House of Sky* (Doig 1978). Six years later, he published a novel entitled *English Creek* (Doig 1984b) in what became the first volume of a trilogy of historical fiction (*Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (Doig 1987) and *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana* (Doig 1990)), much of it focused on the story of the McCaskill family in north-central Montana's Rocky Mountain Front country. While Doig also became known for essays and fiction set along the coast of the Pacific Northwest (Doig 1980, 1982), most of his later work remained anchored in his boyhood home. These later efforts included a second family memoir entitled *Heart Earth* (Doig 1993), which was based on a collection of letters written by Doig's mother during World War II. The letters inspired Doig to reconstruct a more detailed picture of his mother's strong character and of the rural Big Sky Country she knew so well.
Sources and methods: assessing Doig's Montana literature

I used a three-step methodology to explore and analyze Doig's literary contribution to Montana's place identity. First, I carefully reviewed all of Doig's published Montana work to select the most appropriate material for analysis. Second, once I selected the books and initially examined them, I identified five place-centered themes for further study, based both on the content of the books as well as on earlier reviews and published assessments of Doig's work. I also contacted Doig, querying him on several specific points related to the format and design of maps he uses to introduce Dancing at the Rascal Fair and English Creek. Third, I completed a content analysis of the five books to identify specific examples of these themes within each book.

In the first step of the analysis, I examined the larger collection of Doig's Montana work in order to identify examples for more in-depth analysis. I also consulted book reviews, published interviews with Doig, and other critical assessments of his work. The five books utilized in the study included the two memoirs based directly on Doig's own family. Both This House of Sky and Heart Earth represent Doig's most meticulous efforts to accurately reconstruct elements of family, community, and place.

I also included the McCaskill trilogy of regional fiction in the study. It has been widely recognized both for its literary quality and for its sweeping historical narrative of Montana's evolution (Robbins 1987). Chronologically, the story of the McCaskill family in Montana begins with Dancing at the Rascal Fair when Angus McCaskill leaves Scotland to begin a new life in the American West along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front. The book follows the elder McCaskill's life in the so-called Two Medicine Country of Scotch Heaven, encompassing a period from the 1880s to World War I. English Creek picks up the story in the early twentieth century and follows the McCaskill clan through the creation of the state's national forests and the challenges of the Great Depression. Finally, Ride with Me, Mariah Montana takes a late twentieth century (1980s) look at the McCaskill family, focusing on a statewide road trip that features a lively interplay between aging Jick McCaskill (grandson of Angus) and his high-spirited daughter, Mariah. While detailed place descriptions are fewer in number in this book, I believed it was important to assess all three volumes of the trilogy.

In the second step of the analysis, once the five books were selected, I examined additional published book reviews, essays, and biographical material on Doig in order to identify specific place-centered themes. I also was able to meet and correspond with Doig on how he wove place into his work. I identified five key geographical themes. First, many observers have cited Doig's meticulous fidelity to place, his concern for geographical accuracy and detail in his work, both in his memoirs and in his fiction (Bevis 1985, p. 76; Etulain 1979; Robbins 1987, pp. 139-40; Simonson
1989, pp. 148–55). Given his background in journalism and history, it is not surprising that Doig was keenly concerned with carefully, accurately reconstructing many elements of place in his work. In one interview, Doig noted “when you work at this as a craft, to have it recognized by the people who know the country, who know what you’re writing about—that is gratifying … I try to run as much of my writing as I can in manuscript past people of this sort” (O’Connell 1987, p. 300). Elizabeth Simpson, who has written a book-length study of Doig and his work, has cited numerous examples of Doig’s commitment to “doing it right,” which often included special trips to locations described in his work (Simpson 1992, p. 9).

Second, Doig’s sensitivity to seasonal changes in the landscape has been identified as another way in which he connects his stories to the annual round of weather, economic activities, and community events in a place (Robbins 1987, p. 135; Simpson 1992, pp. 19–20, 124). Particularly in Montana, where seasonal extremes of weather are often dramatic in their power to shape place, Doig effectively utilizes detailed descriptions of seasonal activities and changes. Events such as the arrival of a mid-winter Chinook (mild warm spell associated with southwesterly winds) or a late summer forest fire often play key roles in his stories. Once again, Doig is well aware of the importance of portraying seasonal change and of linking it to the larger narrative. Thinking about the Montana landscape, he notes

You can’t be around that landscape without it being on your mind. The weather governed our lives on the ranch, often determining whether the entire year was a success or not. Our lives turned on the weather, in combination with the landscape … Along with its seasonal life had to go, I believed, description of the country—sense of the country, sense of the past, as people tell stories and listen to stories. (O’Connell 1987, p. 305)

Third, several critics have pointed to Doig’s talent for connecting his stories to larger historical contexts (Simpson 1992, p. 13; Simpson 1993, p. 235). For example, Ken Egan, in his study of Montana literature, cites Doig’s success in integrating “the mining boom, the open range era, sheep ranching, the homesteader rush of the early twentieth century, World War I, and the looming depression” into the novel, Dancing at the Rascal Fair (Egan 2003, p. 165). At the broadest level, historian William Robbins has also lauded Doig for his ability to connect his tales with how “the powerful integrating forces of modern capitalism were transforming rural America” (Robbins 1987, p. 136). Doig’s protagonists and narrators were typically deeply suspicious of those changes, treasuring instead the traditional values of individualism and of rural communities. From his own point of view, Doig has also admitted that “I’m trying to deal with politics historically in my fiction … I try to be political in my books mostly as my characters are political, but they and I both think political
leaders have done a lot of upsetting things, not only in the West but in this society” (Morris 1994, p. 75).

A fourth characteristic of Doig’s writing, his emphasis on the labor of ordinary people, reflects this same affinity for the vernacular elements of culture and for integrating the details of daily work into his narratives. Doig often praised the talents of ranch hands, small town cooks, and grade school teachers and saw an accurate, detailed portrayal of their crafts as critical elements of his work. Doig’s ability to identify with ordinary working people was related to his upbringing and his political bent. Capturing a sense of place through the experiences of working in that place thus became a central part of his success as a place-defining writer. Thinking about the details of ranch life, for example, Doig notes “By God, you ought to do it right, it seems to me…There simply was a right way to build a haystack or fix a fence, in these people’s minds—my dad among them” (Robbins 1987, p. 136). When Doig had not directly experienced an activity, he researched it. For example, he added to his personal knowledge about the intricacies of fighting forest fires (a major focus of English Creek) by completing more field and archive research on the topic (Simpson 1992, p. 48). Doig saw this emphasis as a defining element in his own writing. Concerning the McCaskill trilogy, he observed, “What seems most distinctive about what I’m trying to do is an interest in working people in the American West. Currently, in this trilogy, my interest is in using working language of the area, trying to find a style within it for these three Montana novels” (O’Connell 1987, p. 301).

A fifth characteristic which links Doig’s stories to place is his remarkable ear for vernacular language and his ability to translate it onto the page. For example, in This House of Sky, a rancher describes a fence as “horse-high, bull-strong, and hog-tight,” the Two Medicine country is a “moose of a damn place,” and old gaffers in the small-town saloon were “just waitin’ for the marble farm” (Doig 1978, pp. 59, 93, 179). Doig often enhances this direct, concrete language with imaginative verbs that blend locality with vernacular speech: a cattle rancher fears that herdiers will “sheep this country to death” and he describes the challenges of a “country which had tumbleweed so many families out of desperate foothills ranches” (Doig 1987, p. 231; Simpson 1992, pp. 175–76).

This quality in Doig’s prose, often cited by reviewers and critics, is at the core of his creative talent and comes from growing up in the region (O’Connell 1987, pp. 297–99; Robbins 1987, p. 134; Bevis 1990, pp. 161–63; Bredahl 1997; Egan 2003, pp. 166–67). Doig enjoyed recounting how many phrases and how much local wisdom he picked up from spending childhood time in bars with his father (Doig 1985). He also recognized its importance in the McCaskill trilogy, selecting to write through first-person narrators in order to “use the folk poetry of spoken language from working people in the West” (Morris 1994, p. 76). As critic Elizabeth Simpson states, “Doig’s ability to fuse style and substance and his training
in journalism taught him to write, as he says, "with his ear." All of Doig's works are filled with examples of the "aural logic of spoken language" (Simpson 1992, p. 158). Doig carefully selected elements of slang, pacing, and rhythm in his work and experimented with literary forms that enhanced that characteristic of his prose. For example, in *This House of Sky*, Doig italicizes many of the memories of his father and carefully works these bits of colorful vernacular into the flow of the narrative. Doig, "being deliberately visual," worked carefully with his editors to use the text itself (italics, spacing of words, insertion of maps and diagrams) to "add to the fullness of the reading experience, the geography of the words on the page" (Doig 2010).

Once these five themes were identified, I completed a content analysis of each book to identify each occurrence and relevant examples of the themes. The technique of content analysis and other related qualitative research methods are often used in the social sciences to identify the key characteristics of textual material (Carney 1972; Roberts 1997; Crano and Brewer 2002, p. 245–64). In this case, I identified more than 350 segments of Doig's prose (from single phrases and sentences to longer passages) that illustrated one of the five themes in each of the five books. Some of the selected examples fit into multiple categories. Clearly, some books feature more plentiful examples than others simply based on the stories that Doig was telling as well as the time and place settings for the books. Overall, Doig's best-known works, *This House of Sky* (1978) and *English Creek* (1984b), contain the largest numbers of examples. While precise passages are obviously subject to interpretation, the approach clearly identifies dominant elements within each theme and allows for a more careful and precise assessment of Doig's particular contribution to our understanding of Montana's regional identity.

**Fidelity to place**

Eighty-six passages in the five books exemplify Doig's ability to describe a variety of Montana localities. These passages include both descriptions of specific places (such as a particular street in White Sulphur Springs or the area along the Rocky Mountain Front west of Choteau) as well as more generic descriptions of typical Montana settings (such as the settlement patterns associated with sheep ranching or an irrigated farming landscape or life in a small town). Geographically, Doig's detailed descriptions are overwhelmingly focused in either the White Sulphur Springs area and nearby Sixteenmile ranching community or along the Rocky Mountain Front between Choteau and Depuyer (Figure 1). One exception to this is the much wider range of descriptions offered in *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana* in which the characters travel across much of the state in their RV (Doig 1990).
Most of the detailed descriptions of localities are focused in time between 1900 and 1960, including the years Doig grew up in the state and an earlier period that would have been familiar to Doig's father and other family members. Once again, *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana* was an exception as much of the story is set in 1989, Montana's centennial year (Doig 1990).

Doig was keenly aware of the importance of place in his work and accurate geographical and historical descriptions of those places were essential components of his books. As he reconstructed the McCaskill trip to Montana from Europe in the late nineteenth century for *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, Doig found it necessary to travel to Scotland, look carefully at the landscape and imagine in person what it must have felt like to leave familiar shores behind (Doig 1987; Simpson 1992, p. 9). Similarly, as he reconstructed life in Montana for *This House of Sky* and *English Creek*, he visited the Montana Historical Society archives in Helena as well as the ranching and U.S. Forest Service records at the University of Montana in Missoula. In addition, Doig made extensive use of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) Livestock History Papers at Montana State University in Bozeman. Depression-era researchers interviewed dozens of sheep and cattle ranchers during the 1930s as part of the New Deal Federal Writers Project and many of the stories and characters that appear in the Meagher County (White Sulphur Springs area) files are directly incorporated into *This House of Sky* (Doig 1985; Peterson 1996).

Doig's fiction revealed more examples of creative departures from descriptions of actual localities than was typically the case in the memoirs. In his novels, Doig was much more likely to synthesize multiple Montana places to paint a portrait of a fictional place. In the fictional town of Gros Ventre, for example, which appears in the McCaskill trilogy, many of Doig's descriptions of the town's size, history, businesses, and landscape features parallel those of Choteau (Figure 3) (Doig 1984b, 1987, 1990). On the other hand, its geographical setting in the novels is clearly to the north, nearer the real-world town of Depuyer, a much smaller community. Doig's knowledge of Depuyer was no doubt more detailed because he spent considerable time there growing up. Still, frequent visits to nearby Choteau (only 34 miles away) enabled Doig to spend time in the larger settlement as well. In another example, Doig's descriptions of Scotch Heaven, a community of Scottish émigrés so vividly depicted in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, seems closer in character to what he knew in the Sixteenmile Creek country near White Sulphur Springs versus what was actually present in early twentieth-century Teton and Pondera counties (Doig 1987; United States Bureau of the Census 1920).

One of Doig's strengths as a creative writer is to utilize many different characteristics in describing localities such as the rugged Rocky Mountain Front (Figure 4). His ability to capture the visible aspects of a particular
setting is illustrated in this description from *This House of Sky* that describes a portion of the Front known as the "Two Medicine country":

We came up over the crest and were walled to a stop. The western skyline before us was filled high with a steel-blue army of mountains, drawn in

Figure 4. Rocky Mountain Front southwest of Augusta. Photograph by the author.
battalions of peaks and reefs and gorges and crags as far along the entire rim of the earth as could be seen. Summit after summit bladed up thousands of feet, as if charging the air to strike first at storm and lightning... Peaks, cliffs, canyons, cite anything high or mighty and there it was up on that rough west brink of the world. The Rocky Mountains, simply and rightly named. (Doig 1978, p. 180).

Beyond the visual imagery of topography, Doig also adds detailed descriptions of architecture, the sound of wind, the strong smells of ranch life and the ambient heat and cold of Montana weather.

Most importantly, Doig successfully interweaves characters, their stories, and localities together in a way that captures a sense of place in his work at an amazing variety of spatial scales. Doig’s secret: begin small. For example, his attention to detail can be focused on settings such as the interior of a shepherder’s cabin. He reconstructs the domestic life of a sheep tender’s wife (and that of his own mother):

I tag after Berneta there in the cabin. Follow her eyes while she inventories this domestic side of the sheep deal, the three-month one-room future. The cookstove is frankly puny, a midget two-lid job not much more than kneehigh even on her, but it will fire up fast....The elderly table, scarred and stained from extra duty as a butcher block, at least presides at the proper window, the west one which lets in a good view of the willow course of the creek. Across the room, the canned-goods cupboard for once is huge enough, homemade logic of someone who, like her, has needed to store away most of a season of groceries at a time. (Doig 1993, p. 115)

Doig was also intrigued with small-town Montana barrooms. As a child he spent plenty of time in such settings, often tagging along with his father, Charlie. He offers detailed remembrances of saloon exteriors and interiors in his work, including the colorful profiles of patrons he encountered. In one section of This House of Sky, Doig takes the reader on a leisurely fourteen-page saunter through the watering holes of White Sulphur Springs, a liquid excursion brimming with biographical detail and social commentary (Doig 1978, pp. 54–67). Much of his attention is focused on a family favorite, the Stockman’s Bar (Figure 5):

The Stockman Bar started us for the night. Just walking through its doors stepped you up onto a different deck of life. Earlier the lanky old building had been the town’s movie house, and it stretched so far back from the sidewalk that its rear corners began to sidle up the hill behind the main street of town...With its moviehouse length—long enough, in fact, to make the trip back to the toilet a hazard for a drinker too full of beer—the Stockman at dusk would be as open and uncrowded as a sleepy depot. (Doig 1978, pp. 55–57)
Doig was also fascinated with larger slices of vernacular geography (Ryden 1993, pp. 256–59). He understood how stories became wed to landscape through the experiences of people living in their midst. He remembers:

Anyone of Dad’s generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside…the Vinton Place over this ridge, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn’t hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with the barest of words, place. (Doig 1978, pp. 22–23)

At an even larger scale, Doig also appreciated how a setting such as the Two Medicine area along the Rocky Mountain Front was seen by its inhabitants (see also Figure 6):

The Two, I have been saying, I ought to clarify that to us the term meant the landscape to all the horizons around—that is pretty much what a Montanan means by a “country”…big enough to have several geographies and an assortment of climates and an appreciable population, yet compact enough that people know each other from one end of the Two to the other. (Doig 1984b, pp. 20, 38)
Doig successfully utilizes imaginative sketch maps to introduce Montana localities in his McCaskill trilogy, particularly in the more detailed settings focused upon in *English Creek* and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*. For *English Creek*, even though the setting was fictional, Doig reminded his editors that "the valley is based on an actual one in north-central Montana, in the area along the eastern face of the Rocky Mountains where the land begins to climb from flat plateau to the Continental Divide" (Doig 1984a). He sent his editors sketches and detailed instructions that formed the basis for the published map appearing at the opening of the novel (Figures 7 and 8). Stylistically, he also noted that "ENGLISH CREEK takes place in the late 1930's, so if any effort is made to reflect the period in the art style, it should be New Deal heroic; Rockwell Kent-like maybe. But the more important point is to render the geography understandably" (Doig 1984a). Indeed, the perspective map captures the spectacular "reef" country where the novel was set (Figure 9). Three years later, Doig published *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*. He notes, "when it came time to do the Rascal Fair map, I cut up an English Creek one and pasted up the Scotch Heaven rough to show what I wanted" (Doig 2010) (Figure 10). The mapmaker then developed the published map based on Doig's sketch (Figure 11). Once again, Doig's imaginative cartography was grounded in experience and, as he notes, it "became a remarkable visualization of the land I was writing about" (Doig 2010) (Figure 12).
Seasonal changes in the landscape

Doig's portraits of Montana seasons are another defining component of his place-defining literature. His seasonal descriptions include obvious references to weather events as well as work- and community-oriented activities that are closely linked with particular times of year. Overall, I identified 63 examples of detailed seasonal narratives in the five books.

Winter received a great deal of attention, not surprising given Montana's setting as well as the stories and characters Doig wrote about (sheep herders, forest rangers, etc.). In some cases, historically hard winters were chronicled in detail, such as the winter of 1919-1920 (Doig 1987, pp. 345-400) or the winter of 1948-1949 (Doig 1978, pp. 95-102). Other narratives of winter paint a general picture of rural challenges:

It became the winter which the Basin people afterward would measure all winters against. The dark timbered mountains all around them went white as icebergs. The tops of sagebrush vanished under drifts. And up and around the bodies of bawling livestock, the wind twirled a deadlier and deadlier web of snow. Day upon day, hay sleds slogged out all across the Basin to the cattle and horses as mittened men and boys fought this starvation weather with pitchforks. (Doig 1978, p. 35)
Figure 8. Published version of map used in *English Creek*. Courtesy of Simon and Schuster, Inc.
Figure 8. (Continued) English Creek
Figure 9. Actual range front west of Choteau. Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. Doig’s sketch map of Scotch Heaven for Dancing at the Rascal Fair manuscript. Courtesy of Ivan Doig.
Figure 11. Artist's final sketch map of Scotch Heaven for *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*. Courtesy of Ivan Doig.

Figure 12. Heart Butte along the Rocky Mountain Front northwest of Choteau. Photograph by the author.
But there were also departures from such predictable extremes. Doig describes pioneer life among the homesteaders along the Rocky Mountain Front in Dancing at the Rascal Fair:

You might not think it, but with winter we saw more of the other homesteaders than ever. People neighbored back and forth by horse and sled to escape cabin fever, and no more than a few weeks ever passed without Scotch Heaven having a dance that brought out everyone. (Doig 1987, p. 102)

The shift from winter to spring was one of the least predictable times of year. Doig repeatedly describes the drama of a warm Chinook wind that could thaw the Montana countryside overnight (Doig 1987, p. 387). The transition to warmer weather seems to take forever as Jick McCaskill laments: “Spring can be an awful flop in the Two Medicine country. Weeks of mud, every step outdoors taken in overshoes weighted with the stuff. Weather too warm for a winter coat but cool enough to chill you into a cold” (Doig 1990, p. 32). Finally, spring arrives and it offers the opening imagery for English Creek:

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with runoff. A right amount of wet evidently could sweeten the universe… As is always said, spring rain in range country is as if halves of ten-dollar bills are being handed around, with the other halves promised at shipping time. (Doig 1984b, p. 1)

Both spring and summer were associated with a wealth of work activities and with a busy social calendar. Doig’s own family background in the sheep business permits him to detail tasks such as spring lambing (Doig 1978, p. 163), summer herding (Doig 1978, p. 168), and summer haying (Doig 1984b, p. 219). In addition, annual events such as the July 4th picnic (Doig 1984b, pp. 132–63, 1990, p. 1) and the dusty drama of small-town rodeos (Doig 1984b, pp. 177–95) are detailed from Doig’s own rich and formative remembrances of these seasonal traditions.

But excessive summer heat and drought also can bake the life right out of Montana. In English Creek, Doig captures the rapid shifts in weather that often led to challenges:

All that rain of June, and now July making a habit of ninety degrees. The poor damn farmers out east of Gros Ventre and north along the High Line were fighting a grasshopper invasion again, the hot days hatching out the ‘hoppers faster than the farmers could spread poison against them. And for about five days in the middle of July an epidemic of lightning storms broke out in all the national forests of Region One. (Doig 1984b, p. 234)
Doig also recounts the more visceral elements of blistering summer drought in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, in which his historical narrative explores the bone-dry summer of 1919:

What do you do when the land itself falls ill with fever? ... Throughout that summer in Scotch Heaven and the rest of the Two country, each day and every day the heat would build all morning until by noon you could feel it inside your eyes—the wanting to squint, to save the eyeballs from drying as if they were pebbles. And the blaze of the sun on your cheekbones, too, as if you were standing too near a stove. Most disquieting of all, the feel of heat in your lungs. Not even in the fire summer of 1910 had there been this, the day’s angry hotness coming right into you with every breath. (Doig 1987, p. 351)

Finally, autumn brought cooler, shorter days, the first hint of frost. The last of summer haying and seasonal canning chores shaped the annual round of activities, followed by the fall hunting ritual. In both of his personal memoirs, Doig weaves hunting stories into the fall calendar (Doig 1978, pp. 257–60, 1993, pp. 97–98). As it remains to this day, hunting means much more than simply filling the freezer with meat; it carries with it a host of community traditions and family memories. Doig recalls how the experience of hunting in the fall with his father helped forge his sense of place identity:

September frost underfoot, a testing frost, the lightest dust of white on the broad bunchgrass crest of mountain ... Carrying the light rifle underhand on the side of my body away from Dad, I started along the mountain slope beside him. He had a hunter's voice, which could soften just enough not to carry far and yet be heard clearly ... He showed me herding sites remembered from three decades before, game trails angling up and across the summit like age-lines on a vast forehead, homestead splatters on the saged skirts of the valley far below us. (Doig 1978, p. 257)

**Larger historical contexts**

In addition to cyclical patterns of seasonal change, Doig also utilized the scaffolding of history to anchor his narratives in time and to link particular Montana places with the larger sweep of national and world events. There were 65 passages in the five books that were linked with larger historical contexts. Not surprisingly, the McCaskill trilogy featured the vast majority (51) of these larger historical signposts versus the two memoirs that were more limited in their historical coverage. The set of three historical novels were laid out to cover the McCaskill family’s story from Montana’s territorial days to the state’s centennial year of 1989.

Doig’s successful interweaving of local stories and characters into the larger timeline of world history is illustrated by his treatment of World
War I (1914–1918). In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Doig explores the complex impact of the First World War. On the one hand, "thanks to the endless appetite of the war in Europe, the price of anything you could grow was higher than you had ever dreamed" (Doig 1987, p. 299). High prices meant good times for farmers, renewed vigor for the homestead boom, and vast new areas of the state opening up (at least while prices remained high) to ranching and farming. On the other hand, war for the United States meant losing men in battle. Angus McCaskill was tormented by the thought of seeing his son, Varick, head off to war:

I thought of the maw of trenches from Belgium all across France, and I felt as sick as I ever had. This was the spring Varick would finish high school in Gros Ventre. If the war did not stop soon, a war that had so far shown no sign it would ever stop, Varick in all soldier-age inevitability would go to it or be sent to it. (Doig 1987, p. 301)

Doig also uses fictional stories in the local newspaper to show how Montana communities were being affected by wartime losses. For example, in Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Doig uses the fictional newspaper (the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner) to connect Montana localities directly with the war in Europe:

Any day now, the millionth soldier of the American Expeditionary Force will set foot in France. Nothing would be less surprising, given the quantities of young men of Montana who have lately gone into uniform, than if that doughboy who follows 999,999 before him in the line of march into the trenches should prove to be from Butte or from Hardin, from Plentywood or from Whitefish—or from here in our own Two Medicine country. (Doig 1987, p. 322)

Even more dramatically, Doig also reconstructs the intimate, local devastation wrought across Montana with the flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919. He recounts how "the influenza epidemic now was ripping at family after family," including his own father (Doig 1978, p. 34). In his fiction, the scourge reappears: in Dancing at the Rascal Fair, Doig notes the fickle character of the disease in different rural communities, "sudden and selective in one instance, slow and widespread in another" (Doig 1987, p. 337); and in English Creek, long-time settler Stanley Meixell remembers "death outrunning the hearse capacity, two or three coffins at a time in the back of a truck headed for the Gros Ventre town cemetery" (Doig 1984b, p. 97).

Within the West, Doig also highlights the creation of national forests. By far, the most detailed assessment of the meaning and impact of national forest creation in the West can be found in English Creek, in which Varick McCaskill (Jick's father) is a forest ranger for the fictional Two Medicine National Forest (Doig 1984b). Jick also meets up with
Stanley Meixell, who was the founding ranger ("the forest arranger") on the forest, helping to survey the original forest boundary lines in 1907 (Doig 1984b, p. 99). Unlike some western libertarians, Doig is a staunch defender of the national forests and he had direct experience in working for the Forest Service early in his writing career (Doig 1977). Doig's sympathetic view carries through in his novels. It also reflects his belief that ongoing public lands issues in the West need to be understood in their broad historical contexts and that many of the arguments we have today are deeply rooted in the past. In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, we encounter Stanley Meixell initially meeting with local homesteaders in 1907, making them aware of the new rules and regulations that will be a part of nearby forest reserves (Doig 1987, pp. 227–34). While many of the settlers are deeply suspicious of this new entity ("What in goddamn hell... are we going to do about this national forest nonsense") (Doig 1987, p. 233), Angus McCaskill takes a more measured view:

While the man Stanley Meixell rode away, I stood staring for a while at the mountains. National forest. They did not look like a national anything, they still just looked like mountains. A barbed wire fence around them... A fence around the mountains not to control them but us. Did we need that? Most, no. But, some, yes... without the land healthy, what would those of us on it be? (Doig 1987, pp. 232–33)

In addition, Doig examines the historical disappearance of Montana's small, independent ranchers and farmers, who often fell victim to outside economic events or interests. For example, Doig's populist, anti-corporate politics are made clear in this description of farm and ranch consolidation near White Sulphur Springs:

The large valley ranches, which to my mind had croupiered an area that could have sustained many medium-sized ranches into a single fistful of huge holdings, were beginning to notice a bigness beyond their own: corporate America. Ye know who owns the Dogie now? Dad demanded indignantly when I arrived on one of my visits: A goddamn-Kansas-City-paper-box-company. (Doig 1978, p. 295)

Labor of ordinary people
Montana's regional identity is also explored through Doig's sympathetic portraits of ordinary working people. Doig grew up respecting the virtues of an honest day's work. In his books, he details many aspects of ranching and small-town life, often focusing on accurate descriptions of manual labor and how Montanans themselves related to their work. There were 52 detailed descriptions of activities associated with rural settlement, ranch life and other related occupations. They all
ring with an authenticity that was a function of direct experience, close observation, and meticulous research.

Doig succeeds in capturing the relationship between place, labor, and experience in Jick McCaskill's description of ranch life:

To make a go of the ranch, you had to hard-learn its daily elements. Pace your body through one piece of work after another, paying heed always to the living components—the sheep, the grass, the hay—but the gravitational wear and tear on fences and sheds and roads and equipment also somehow attended to, so that you are able to reliably tell yourself at nightfall, that was as much of a day as I can do. Then get up and do it again 364 tomorrows in a row. Sitting there seeing the ranch in its every detail, knowing every ounce of work it required, Jesus but how I right then wished for fifteen years off my age. (Doig 1990, p. 108)

Doig succeeds in reconstructing many elements of varied Montana occupations, weaving them into his stories. For example, Doig's portrait of Varick McCaskill in *English Creek* is brimming with accurate details of working in a Montana national forest in the early twentieth century (Doig 1984b). Doig's earlier historical research with the U.S. Forest Service no doubt contributed to his fictional portrayal of early-day rangers (Doig 1977). Through Varick's character, the reader gleans an understanding into activities such as forest administration and management, grazing regulations, and fire fighting. At one point, McCaskill's son (Jick) describes the delicate mix of skills necessary to be an effective ranger. He knew that Varick's supervisors in Missoula...

wanted that tricky northmost portion of the Two, surrounded as so much of it was by other government domains, to be rangered in a way that wouldn't draw the Forest Service any bow-wow from the neighboring Glacier Park staff or the Blackfeet Reservation people; and in a way that would keep the sheepmen content and the revenue they paid for summer grazing permits flowing in; and in a way that would not repeat the awful fires of 1910 or the later Phantom Woman Mountain burn, right in here above the North Fork. And that was how my father was rangering it. So far. (Doig 1984b, pp. 54–55)

Not surprisingly, given his upbringing, the day-to-day lives of Montana's sheep-men receive Doig's most frequent and detailed treatment. Doig fills his books with descriptions of shepherder wagons, lambing, sheep shearing, sheep herding, haying, winter feeding, and a myriad of other sheep ranching chores. Doig explores the ecology as well as the economics of the sheep business. Most importantly, he tries to capture how that form of labor wed people to place through their daily experiences (Figure 13). Given the close bond between the shepherd and his flock, there were never any days off in such a line of work. He describes his father's role at the Camas Creek Ranch:
The Camas and its seasons were occupied by the gray thousands of them as if they were some daft race of dwarves, helpless and demanding, their long clown faces staring out in sad alarm from ruffs of wool. The bands summered in the mountains, plump targets for coyotes and bears and snagging branches; spent autumn in mown hayfields where they could do their best to topple into irrigation ditches or Camas Creek itself; wintered near the ranch buildings where in the nightly shed or corral they could try to huddle themselves into injury or suffocation. But it was the first fade of winter when the six thousand ewes drew the entire attention of Dad and everyone else on the ranch: springtime, and lambing time. (Doig 1978, p. 161)

Shearing was another exhausting activity on the ranch, but one that gave everyone plenty of work to do. For Doig, the experience also created memories that were richly linked to the Montana countryside that nourished both man and beast. In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, young Jack McCaskill fondly recalls the scene at the shearing pens:

It stays with me like a verse known by heart, that first ever Two Medicine day of shearing and all it brought. Our site of pens and tents atop the arching grass ridge above the river was like being on the bald brow of the
earth, with the sunning features of the summer face of the land everywhere below. . . . A long prairie swooped from our shearing summit several miles north to Browning and its line of railroad, iron thread to cities and oceans. The chasm of the Two Medicine River burrowed eastward to graft itself into the next channel of flow, the Marias, and next after that the twinned forces of water set forth together to the Missouri. Every view from up here was mighty. (Doig 1987, p. 277–78)

**Vernacular language**

Doig demonstrates how regional place identity can be powerfully tied to vernacular language. Indeed, in dozens of places within his prose, Doig makes specific reference to language, either by exploring the meaning of particular examples of the local vernacular or by the use of stylistic devices meant to highlight and use language in ways that create and enhance place identity. Language that explores the connection between human and natural worlds often adds to the power of Doig’s prose. For example, Jick McCaskill notes the “Two country’s reputation for being a toupee of grass on a cranium of rock” or a crowd of moving people is described as “rivering” (Doig 1984b, p. 107; Simpson 1992, p. 179).

In other cases, Doig simply employs local terminology or wisdom to add a sense of place to his stories. In *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, a “calico” is a female prostitute on the Montana frontier (Doig 1987, p. 42). Jick McCaskill describes a mountain-top “reef” in *English Creek*, named “because they stand out as outcroppings do at the edge of an ocean, steady level ridges of stone, as if to give a calm example to the waves beyond them” (Doig 1984b, p. 14). In the lexicon of shepherding, readers in *This House of Sky* are told that a “tin dog” is a noisemaker useful on the herding trail, and usually fashioned from “a ring of bailing wire with half a dozen empty evaporated milk cans threaded on so that it could be shaken, tambourine-like, into a clattering din” (Doig 1978, pp. 201–202). Folk wisdom is also parcelled out in local parlance: Jick McCaskill notes that “life is one damn thing after another, and love is two damned things after each other”; and Jick’s father, Varick, liked to hold to the doctrine that what he was usually doing in life was “just trying to stay level” (Doig 1984b, p. 29, 1990, p. 207).

Doig was also very conscious of the sound and power of place names in his narratives. As Elizabeth Simpson notes, “Doig emphasizes the importance of places’ having the right names . . . Names, to Doig, suggest history, personality, part of the past that remains to the present; they are a kind of folk poetry” (Simpson 1992, p. 129). In *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, young Angus McCaskill becomes the local schoolmaster and is faced with the formidable task of teaching Montana geography to a roomful of immigrant children:
But geography. The grief of American geography. When it came to geography, my pupils and I had to be strange pickles together. . . Whatever the roll-down map of the world proclaimed, every one of us there came from a different earth and knew only the haziest about anyone else's . . . I had to learn along with them the sixteen counties of Montana and the mysterious town names of Ekalaka, Ubet, Saco, Missoula, Shawmut, Rimini, Ravalli, Ovando . . . (Doig 1987, p. 117)

Later in the story, he endeavors to endear Adair, a new arrival to the settlement, to the magic of her new locality:

I took her through the catechism of the peaks and crags rising above Scotch Heaven: Jericho Reef, Guthrie Peak, Phantom Woman Mountain, Rooster Mountain, Roman Reef, Grizzly Reef. By the time I finished, Adair had turned from the mountains toward me again, "You say them as if they were lines of verse," she remarked almost in a questioning way. (Doig 1987, p. 165)

Finally, Doig highlights the connection between language, place, and the past through numerous stylistic devices in his writing. In dozens of examples throughout his work, he italicizes passages which serve a special function as memories. These memories strongly tie characters with past people and stories that are intimately wed to place. They form a powerful part of his larger interest in Montana's regional place identity. Doig argued that memories are critical because they are so fragmentary, personal, ephemeral, and irreplaceable, small pieces of history that must be woven together in stories to create a useful past (Simpson 1992, p. 19).

The device appears as a major feature in both Heart Earth and This House of Sky. In Heart Earth, portions of letters penned by Doig's mother are italicized, direct fragments of the past that form the narrative anchor for the book. In addition, book chapters begin with a page designed to show a period postmark alongside long-hand examples of the actual letters themselves (Doig 1993). In This House of Sky, all of Doig's remembrances of his father's take on the world and his actual speech are also italicized (Doig 1978).

Doig's other books offer additional examples in which he consciously draws the reader's attention to language. In English Creek, he italicizes newspaper excerpts from the fictional Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner (Doig 1984b, p. 103), lively renditions of traditional barroom choruses (pp. 66–67), and the well-trod lyrics of old-time line dances (p. 211). Elsewhere in the book, Doig varies the approach a bit when it comes to capturing the short barking tempo of the rodeo announcer at the July 4th picnic, all filtered through the tinny megaphone strung up high above the grandstand. The uneven cadence of the amplified speech is well captured by Doig separating and regrouping the announcer's various words and phrases on the page:
The boys are hazing the ponies into the chutes and when we commence and get started the first manout will be BillSemmler on a horse called Connip too. In this meanwhile though did you hear the one about the fellow who goes into the barber shop and… (1984b, pp. 184–85)

Conclusion

Cultural geographers can glean a great deal from imaginative literature in their own studies of place identity. As Tuan (1991) notes, the narrative-descriptive form that literature can take (for example, as memoir or novel) opens the door for more personal, subjective explorations of place. I have identified five specific ways (*fidelity to place, seasonal changes in the landscape, larger historical contexts, labor of ordinary people, and vernacular language*) in which Doig and other writers incorporate place-based material into their creative narratives. Geographers with an interest in studying sense of place can utilize these sources. Certainly in the case of Doig, his connections with place—both the land itself and an awareness of its meaning and value—are defining elements of his work.

Specifically, Doig's examples illustrate the power of using particular individuals and their families to reach a deeper understanding of how people connect with place. While Doig was intrigued by maps and wove them into his books in many ways, he saw individual human beings and their stories as the most powerful avenues to glean a sense of place. In *English Creek*, young Jick McCaskill is struggling to describe his brother and his father. He wonders, "How to lay each onto paper, for a map is never the country itself, only some ink suggesting the way to get there" (Doig 1984b, p. 30). He elaborates on the theme in *This House of Sky* as he struggles to recreate the past his father knew and to offer faithfully a portrait of his father's life:

That is as much as can be eked out—landscape, settlers' patterns on it, the family fate within the pattern—about the past my father came out of. I read into it all I can, plot out likelihoods and chase after blood hunches. But still the story draws itself away from the dry twinings of map work and bloodlines, and into the boundaries of my father's own body and brain. Where his outline touched the air, my Knowing must truly begin. (Doig 1978, pp. 30–31)

While their precise methods for exploring regional character may differ, both Pete Shortridge and Ivan Doig believe that an appreciation for the past and for the landscape itself are two essential components in creating and understanding place identity. Certainly both share a mutual understanding for the other's work. Shortridge was intrigued about the novelist's ability to create place-defining literature, specifically acknowledging Doig's talent as a creative writer (Shortridge 1991). Doig in turn acknowledged the cultural geographer's craft in an interview in 1989 when
he received the Western Literature Association’s Distinguished Achievement Award:

One last thing about maps, and the directions they lead me to think, is that cultural geography seems to have a lot to offer a writer. The cultural geographers are on to something when they talk about signatures on the land….Reading the land seems to me the best way to write about it. (Morris 1994, p. 80)

Doig’s success as a creative writer and Shortridge’s accomplishments as a cultural geographer suggest those worlds are intertwined. This brief exploration of Doig’s work suggests that both creative writers and geographers can benefit from seeing that common ground as they struggle to understand the relationship between people and place. In particular, cultural geographers can benefit from gathering multiple perspectives on place identity, including the use of narrative sources that emphasize how individuals encounter places in their daily lives and how they derive meaning from that experience.

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