Salt Lake next Tuesday for a speech, and then we can escape

to Vermont, which from here looks like a cool green sanctuary.

Ah wilderness. There is too much frenzy and noise around here.

Give me my scallop shell of quiet/My staff of faith to lean upon.

And nine bean rows.

See you in December, I hope.


Not the least of Wallace Stegner's miraculous qualities was that
the December of his life ended in springtime.

Age and illness, he had wintered past like the sturdy square-cut
Westerner he was; it took accident to do him in, and when the injuries
from a Santa Fe car wreck two weeks before finally claimed him last Tuesday, Stegner left amid a late, luminous blossoming of public and critical appreciation for his life's worth of books—29 of them across the spectrum of essay and history and fiction and biography, and at last people were seeing his work as the vast natural resource it is.

Better late than never, I suppose is the thing to say next. Wally Stegner himself, born in 1909 and thus a witness to every haywire development in the American West since then, maintained an almost preternatural patience with his fellow humanity—"the West...is the native home of hope," one of his most memorable sentences sang. But temper is a western commodity too, and right now mine can't help saying that in undervaluing for so long such an important body of work as Stegner's, the American literary establishment and the U.S. reading public and the western states of America collectively shot themselves in their tangled trio of feet.
Pray up a little rain for all of us, if you know the chants.

We're starting our seventh dry year, and God knows what Egyptian plagues will come down on us if we don't get some rain this winter. God knows how many Californians will flee off to the better-watered Northwest, too. It's in your own best interest. Pray, man.

--Wallace Stegner in a letter to Evan Doig, Nov. 10, 1992

Over and over he said it, compellingly, passionately, honestly--"ad nauseam for fifty years," he chuckled in his final book and then said it one more time: "The whole west, including much of California, is arid country." (In an aside, he admitted that the Pacific Northwest is "a narrow exception;" but another year or two of unreliable rain here and we're going to be wondering how damply unique we really are.) In trying to review that last book of Stegner's, Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs, I swiped from the Greek poet Archilocus and the philosopher Isaiah Berlin the notion that strong writers, the enduring hedgehog type, are said to know one big thing, and Stegner powerfully always knew his:

"I really only want to say that we may love a place and still be dangerous to it."
He and his irrefutable voice for the land made the right enemies.

Ronald Reagan saw fit to bestow the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Frank Sinatra and Whittaker Chambers, but not on the most distinguished voice for the natural glory of his own California. Nor did the Jefferson Award, the National Endowment for the Humanities' distinguished career award, ever make its way to this most obvious candidate during the regimes of Lynn Cheney and William Bennett.

...Good stand of wavy gray hair, rugged square-cut face, bifocals in either horn rims like mine or what used to be called tortoise-shells; I don't know what western genes account for the two of us standing there in don't-give-a-damn heavyframe glasses....


In person, he looked like a one-man Mount Rushmore.

Scandinavian

That solidity, Stegner's West-Saskatchewan-Montana-Utah-etcetera mem of flatfooted common sense and endurance, went much more than skin-deep. He knew his stuff, and he knew that he knew it. An academic interviewer once tried to get him to pontificate on "what it is that
western writers will have to do to produce a crop of distinguished novels." Stegner looked at him and said drily:

"Write good books."

It took a little self-prodding, but Stegner could laugh at himself. I remember hearing from both him (ruefully) and A.B. Guthrie Jr. (indignantly) the tale of the Stegners making an overnight stay at the Guthries' near Choteau, Montana. Trying to be helpful about breakfast-time logistics, Stegner said: "We get up around seven." and Guthrie, to whom morning existed only to ameliorate the night before, glowered at him and rasped: "Well, we don't."

Stegner once tallied up that in his hyper-western boyhood, he lived in "twenty places in eight states and Canada" (the state of Washington among them; part of his novel The Big Rock Candy Mountain is set in Puget Sound country) and one of my regrets is that my home state of Montana was among his unfondest memories. His main recollection of the Stegner family's short time in Great Falls was "humiliation," he told me with a wry face but obviously meaning it. Fresh from a Saskatchewan homestead, he'd started junior high school there wearing mocassin-like elkskin shoes
and a sweater with a broad band around it which he suspected made him, a pudgy boy at the time, look like a striped pig. Oddly but honestly, Stegner always bore an unnecessary burden on himself from his family's pattern peripatetic situation: "We turned tail and disappeared, and I never got over the faint residual shame of quitting. I admired the stickers, and I still do." Maybe it was out of that iron tumbleweed past that he himself learned the stick-to-itiveness of his writing and thinking.

Wolf Willow, The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Beyond the Hundredth Meridian, Angle of Repose, The Sound of Mountain Water, The Spectator Bird, Crossing to Safety....

—a sampling of the book titles of Wallace Stegner.

None of us is going to replace him, and it's just about as doubtful whether any half-dozen current writers and thinkers at this end of the country can produce a combined rainbow of work to equal his.

So, in the West, this ever-old, ever-new part of the American land, we resort to the lessons that shaped Wallace Stegner and that he wrote so long and eloquently about. Go on with what you got. Start over when you have to. Our advantage is that we have his lifework to
draw on. In his last years, when the national bestsellerdom of Crossing
to Safety and his Collected Stories inspired paperback publishers to pour
his earlier books back onto the bookstore shelves, Wallace Stegner was
getting mined as a bit bemused at becoming a new literary resource. "I'm a land of
opportunity," he laughed, "just like the West." Was he ever.

Ivan Doig's books include This House of Sky, Winter Brothers and
the forthcoming Heart Earth.
Dear Donn--

Here it is, about 1200 words' worth. (Note that it's triple-spaced, about 200 wds/p.) I don't know how you'll want to set up the interspersed letter and diary material, but I simply marked it into boldface w/ italic attribution lines to differentiate it for you and whoever punches the story in.

On Stegner's never getting the Presidential Medal of Freedom, I'm 95% sure but can't come up with a list of those award winners to be 100%; I did look at Reagan's awardees in the NY Times index, but complete list of names wasn't always there. Stegner's WHO'S WHO listing has no mention of getting the MED, either. So, I'm pretty sure but not dead-sure.

Anyway, I hope this is the sort of thing you wanted. Could you have a copy aide mail me 3 or 4 tearsheets? Thanks.

best,
[Signature]
To: The Seattle Times

Invoice for 1st serial rights to Wallace Stegner remembrance article: $150.00

Please remit to:

Social Security #516-hh-hh10
Dear Ivan,

Thanks so much for the review; I've enclosed a couple tear sheets. It was a pleasure to read—the review had a "literary" quality that too often is missing from our pages (a "swatch" of language; a "sniffish Londoner").

I would love to get together for lunch. I'll drop you a line early next month and perhaps we can arrive at a date. Or, if something opens up for you, don't hesitate to give me a call—my schedule is quite flexible.

I'm also enclosing a publisher's blurb on a novel I thought you might be interested in reviewing. The bound galley is available for reading right now; the book itself should be here in two or three weeks. I realize, of course, that it may seem too close to home, considering your own work. If that's the case, I'll keep my eyes open for other possibilities.

Once more, thanks for your lovely contribution.

Best regards,
28 April '86

Dear Donn--Thanks for the nice play--and what I guess was top pay--for the Tall review. I have to say no on The Blind Corral; it is, as you thought, just too close to home. I'm still game to try for lunch in May/June, give me a call in a couple of weeks and we'll see what we can do.

best
The Blind Corral
Ralph Beer

A novel that captures with subtlety and precision the conflict between the old West and the new

"Foothills climbed to meet the mountains until we were flying over the actual bald ridges and spruce-blued canyons of the Continental Divide. But the land made little more sense from above than it ever had from below." Jackson Heckethorne doesn't intend to make sense of that Montana land. He grew up there, saw his brother, his father, and his grandfather sweat over it, curse it, lose their wives and friends and nearly their sanity to it. But the mystery of the land and its people grips Jack and makes The Blind Corral a novel of stunning simplicity and power.

Much of what Jack finds at first seems foreign to the Montana he knew; discos and trailer camps, his grandfather, Harley, watching Star Trek, his father, Smoke, leaving with a date whose latex-tight jeans have never seen the back of a horse. But even in the new West he recognizes the terribly familiar: Harley and Smoke's unyielding loyalty to a ranch that has given them only lines in their faces and broken bones, the cold and terrible winters, the bitter memories of a brother killed in Vietnam.

As we learn about the men and women who live on that land—and those who are killing it—we feel the turning of the seasons, and the beating of a horse's heart. And we learn with Jack what it feels like to lose everything except the strength and hope that is born on the Montana range.

Ralph Beer is a rancher in Montana. He is a contributing editor of Harper's magazine.

Fiction • 5½ x 8¼ • 240 pages • LC 85-40790

Rod Carew's Art and Science of Hitting
Rod Carew
Armen Keteyian and Frank Pace
Foreword by Reggie Jackson

From fundamentals to fine points, baseball's premier hitter leads the way to peak performance at the plate.

Since winning Rookie-of-the-Year honors 20 years ago, Rod Carew has been recognized as baseball's finest artist with a bat. Now, in this unique instruction book, the seven-time batting champion explains his ten essential principles (Carew's "Bill of Rights") of good hitting and takes players and coaches at all levels through every aspect of the hitter's craft. The essentials—from grip, stance, and swing to reading the pitch and the pitcher's mind—are detailed in a clear, straightforward style and illustrated by more than a hundred action photographs.

A simultaneous Viking Penguin publication

Sports • 6 x 9 • 224 pages • 100 black-and-white illustrations • LC 85-40799

(over)
Dear Donn--

Okay, here's the Tracks review.

The bit on p. 3 about Best Queen's 10 weeks on the NY Times list, I got from Blanche Berman at Holt publicity. If your library can doublecheck that, I'd appreciate it.

Give a call about lunch, anytime Sept. but the week of the 12th, okeydokes?

best
"We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall."

From that diamond-hard opening line of this compressed saga, Louise Erdrich's prose is never less than poised and elegiac. And frequently terrific:

"Fleur's shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow. And a green dress clung to her waist, worn thin where she sat. Her glossy braids were like the tails of animals, and swung against her when she moved, deliberately, slowly in her work, held in and half-tamed. But only half."

Told alternately by the Chippewa tribal elder Nanapush and by young Pauline Puyat, who feels whipsawed between her tribal background
and her hunger toward "Christ's ways," Tracks traces a dozen years (1912-1924) in the lives of the forebears of the Kashpaw-LaRonne-Morrissey-Lamartine family tapestry woven by Erdrich in her two previous novels. In this seminal story of westering white America cutting into the forests and ways of life of a North Dakota Indian reservation, however, much of the action pivots on Fleur Pillager, the last of a family "who knew the secret ways to cure or kill." What befalls Fleur when she goes into the town of Argus and takes work among the ham-handed men of the butcher shop, what Pauline does in revenge on Fleur's behalf, what Fleur does in revenge, and then the beautifully spoken years of sorting out, by Nanapush and Pauline, of Fleur's mythic powers and their consequences on the lives of all she comes in touch with—Erdrich's fiction here is a fabulous performance, in all senses of that adjective.

Oh yes, and the bear. You meet him on the cover of Tracks, so here is a preview, narrated by Nanapush, of the book's ursine star:

"...The drunk bear rambled past. She sniffed the ground, rolled over in an odor that pleased her, drew up and sat, addled, on her haunches like a dog. I jumped straight onto the top of the woodpile, I don't know how, since my limbs were so stiff from the wet cold. I crouched, yelled at the house, screamed for the gun, but only attracted the bear. She dragged herself over, gave a drawn-out whine, a cough, and fixed me with a long, patient stare."

"Margaret flung the door open. 'Shoot it, you old fool,' she hollered. But I was empty-handed. Margaret was irritated with this trifle..."
This author has always had a breathtaking ability to make things happen in her storylines; am I the only reader who was left stupefied when Adelaide Adare in The Beet Queen went up for a ride in a biplane and flew out of her children's lives? On page 12? The quicksilver quality of Erdrich's earlier novels, with their jumps across years to a different narrator in each new chapter, is more controlled, more deeply assured and deft, in Tracks. Here she gives us time to grow fonder and fonder of wily Nanapush and to stay intrigued with the spookily servile Pauline as the voice of one and then the other of them choruses the story along.

Similarly, this seems to me the most evenly accomplished Erdrich novel yet. Of her many high skills, one particular knack of Erdrich's ought to make every short-story writer in America sob in dismay: her material gets published bit by bit, as freestanding short stories in The Atlantic Monthly and Esquire and the loftier literary quarterlies, and then abradadabra, she alchemizes them into a novel that wins prizes (Love Medicine, the National Book Critics Circle award and the Los Angeles Times award) or best-sells (The Beet Queen, copies sold in hardback). Two chapters of Tracks, the slambang introduction to Fleur and her wondrous powers and a midbook take featuring Nanapush and Fleur in a duet of resourceful vengeance, were chosen in their original incarnation for annual best short story collections. Yet the other seven chapters of Tracks do not dim out in comparison. It's a remarkable writerly achievement of balance, ballast, to have each chapter of a novel as complete unto itself and portioned to the others as these are.
All too rarely, we are granted writers who hit their stride and deliver us one mighty book after another. Willa Cather blossoming forth with *O Pioneers!*; *The Song of the Lark,* and *My Antonia* between 1913 and 1918. William Faulkner, with *The Sound and the Fury* one year (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* the next. Perhaps most colossal, Joseph Conrad in his prodigious 1898-1900 when he was writing *Lord Jim* while *Heart of Darkness* still was being serialized, then while *Lord Jim* was taking its serialization turn, he dashed off *Typhoon.* In a galvanizing combination, Louise Erdrich and her writing partner and husband, Michael Dorris, have published since only 1988: *Love Medicine,* *The Beet Queen,* Dorris's novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water,* and now *Tracks*—their own swift but memorable canon already and, hallelujah, with more books in the making.

###

Ivan Doig's novel *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* has just been published in paperback.
Dear Donn—

Before the summer gets away from me entirely, I do want to pass along a few bits to you. First, congratulations on the new format and your column, both looking real good. Next, I thought I'd better tell you I'm not likely to be able to take on a review for you, or probably anybody else, until maybe the end of the year. I may have told you I've had a strange and aggravating eye problem—eyelid, really—and I'm having another siege of it, my fourth in the past year. What it comes down to is that I can't get much reading done, and certainly none on a definite schedule, beyond my day at the typewriter. I've just written to Reid Beddoes at the Wash. Post Book World to say I'll have to delay the "Rediscovery" column he wants me to do, and I wanted you to know at the same time. Sorry, damn it, but there it is.

The better news is that I've been wanting to tout to you that Bellingham cable tv show, "The Reading Room," that I was on last spring, and maybe mentioned to you. I've now had a chance to see the videotape, and it confirms my impression at the time, that it's a pretty damn well done show. I haven't been able to lay my hands on the names of the guys involved, today, but Chuck Robinson of Village Books (671-2626) is the sponsor and knows more than I do anyway. I think you'd get a kick out of seeing them do a show, the only serious book discussion I know of around here on the tube. One last thing, the Missoula novelist James Welch recently passed through here—we're good buddies—and it's evident by now that Viking truly thinks it has something in Jim's book this November, FOOLS CROW. They're doing a first printing of 25,000, exquisite art on the cover and some inside, promoting and advertising and so on. I don't know how familiar you are with Jim's reputation, but along with Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday he's at the top of American Indian writers, as well as his prominence among us in the Northwest; and as I read his manuscript last spring to provide a blurb, I can testify this is an exceedingly ambitious book by Jim, a rare try by an already successful novelist to do something new. Anyway, just wanted you to be aware of FOOLS CROW on the off-chance you aren't.

all best—see you.
Dear Donn—

I don't know when your Wash. Post BOOK WORLD catches up with you—mine takes about 10 days to arrive—but here's a copy of that review I mentioned to you, from a special mailing to me by the ass't editor at B WORLD. It's the only review I intend doing for them for awhile, maybe even the rest of this year; anyway, I thought you ought to have a pronto look, given the "spring" feel of the book involved.

best
Quicksilver 'Tracks'

ERDRICH'S LATEST ELEGANTLY TRACES THE LIVES BEFORE 'LOVE MEDICINE'

"Tracks" by Louise Erdrich
Henry Holt, $17.95

by Ivan Doig

"We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall."

From that diamond-hard opening line of this compressed saga, Louise Erdrich’s prose is never less than poised and elegiac. And frequently terrific:

"Fleur’s shoulders were broad and curved as a yoke, her hips fishlike, slippery, narrow."

Fleur’s behalf, what Fleur does in revenge, and then the beautifully fully spoken years of sorting out, by Nanapush and Pauline, of Fleur’s mythic powers and their consequences for the lives she touches—Erdrich’s fiction here is a fabulous performance, in all senses of that adjective.

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Similarly, this seems to me Erdrich’s most evenly accomplished novel yet. Of her many high skills, one particular knack ought to make every short-story writer in America sob in dismay: Her material gets published as free-standing short stories in The Atlantic Monthly, Esquire and the loftier literary quarters; then, abracadabra, she alchemizes them into a novel that wins prizes ("Love Medicine," the National Book Critics Circle award and the Los Angeles Times award) or best-sellers ("The Beet Queen," 16 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list).

Two chapters of "Tracks"—the slam-bang introduction to Fleur and her wondrous powers, and a midbook take featuring Nanapush and Fleur in a duel of resourceful vengeance—were chosen in their original incarnation for annual best short-story collections. Yet the other seven chapters of "Tracks" do not dim in comparison. It’s a remarkable writerly achievement of balance, ballast, to have each chapter of a novel as complete unto itself and proportioned to the others as these are.

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In a galvanizing combination, Louise Erdrich and her writing partner and husband, Michael Dorris, have published since only 1984 "Love Medicine," "The Beet Queen," Dorris’s novel "A Yellow Raft in Blue Water," and now "Tracks"—their own swift but memorable canon already and, hallelujah, with more books in the making.

Ivan Doig’s novel "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" has just been published in paperback.
Dear Ivan,

I'm just back at my desk after two months away—a little vacation but mostly gallivanting around Tanzania in pursuit of some stories for the Travel section... also touching old bases—I lived there in 1965-66 as a Peace Corps teacher. The trip was a mixture of exhilaration and depression, which will probably all come out in the stories. Five weeks in the Third World (almost the Fourth, in Tanzania's case) was enough to last me for another 22 years, I think.

What have you been up to? Besides saying hello again, I'm wondering if you'd be interested in reviewing Louise Erdrich's new novel, "$Tracks," for The Times. I have a copy I can shoot you in the mail if you'd like. (I can pay $150 for about three pages double-spaced). Perhaps we can get together for lunch and talk over what we've been doing (I've put in a proposal for a weekly Times books tab, among other things.)

Best,

Donn
Dear Donn--

Here's the review of "The Island of the White Cow." My Social Security number, if needed for the payroll dept., is 516-44-4410.

I'm also sending off, either today or tomorrow, my Washington Post review of "A Country Year," by Sue Hubbell, and it'll likely show up in Book World sometime this month. That book seems to me quite a lovely performance, and I hope it's a review you'll like enough to pick up. In any case, I do appreciate your efforts with the book page, and if it'd be useful for us to have lunch sometime to swap ideas and gripes, I'm game in May or June.

Could you send me a couple of tear sheets of the "White Cow" review, please? Thanks.
"The Island of the White Cow"

by Deborah Tall

Atheneum, $14.95

by Ivan Doig

Would he, the white-haired blue-eyed visiting Irish poet, come talk to her dormitory group about Yeats?

No, but would she, young and lissome, come have a drink with him?

So began the romance/affair/relationship (make your own generational choice of term, but what so richly ensued with Deborah Tall and the poet she calls Owen seems to merit all three) which took the pair of them away to five years on an Irish island with an indigenous population of 230. "The sense of isolation is marvelously acute," Tall exulted, "the deep silence unnatural to my ear, the rest of the world suddenly something to contemplate from a distance, or ignore. I am drunk on it, a natural for islamania."

Here in her first book of prose—by now she too is a poet and poetry teacher—Tall deftly persuades her reader to become an islamaniac, too. Which is no small trick, if you have ever stared out over the Atlantic's frothy edges to those rock spatterings, stony leftovers of Ireland and Scotland, and wondered how anyone but
gulls and lighthouse keepers live there. Those who do live there, Tall discovered, may look as if they came from central casting—Tommy the gabby drinker, Theresa the flighty but good-hearted neighbor—but they and their roles in life emerge as distinct and singular as we like to think our own are. "Their lives have for the most part been bitterly poor and monotonous, but they're still willing to be surprised."

Four lives in particular come vivid in Tall's telling of her island residency, near Achill in the West of Ireland, from 1972 to 1977:

--Catherine, the innkeeper and nurse, "the only woman on the island I can come close to talking honestly to."

--Jack, captain of the boat that plies the seven miles of water to the mainland and luckily the least mercurial person on the island.

--Sean, the tragic bachelor farmer who readily befriends Deborah and Owen.

--And Owen himself, whom Deborah affectionately sees through, at his best in the great public role of refereeing the Gaelic football match between their Island of the White Cow and the neighboring Island of the Boar but fretful as a sinning altar boy when he fears the neighbors will catch Deborah and him skinnydipping.

This captivating memoir received sniffany treatment in The New York Times Book Review from a British reviewer who called it "disappointing," largely because of its language and because she thought the author hadn't been hard enough on ex-lover Owen. I
concur that Deborah Tall allows herself—deliberately, I think, to convey the dewy young seeker she was at the time—to be seen as more earnest and less retributive about falling for an Irish charmer than if she were, say, a sniffish Londoner. But as to this book's language, try a swatch for yourself, such as Tall's scene of attempting to fathom the island's post office and postmistress:

"'Is this a parcel or a packet, would ye say?' (A distinction I've yet to comprehend.) 'Because if ye'd call it a small packet...' 'It's a packet, I'd say.' 'Oh, then...well I suppose that'd be 38p.' '38p? Good Lord!' 'It's right here, see--' She proffers a mottled scrap of government type. 'It's not that I was questionin' ye, Mrs. O'Malley, but the prices of things!' 'Sure they're goin' up faster than ye could count. Desperate.' Mrs. O'Malley searches through several folders containing the various denominations of stamps that might add up to thirty-eight. When she's finally assembled them, she spits onto the back of her hand and rubs the stamps across the spittle, then pastes them onto the 'packet' haphazardly, angles all askew. Then she tosses the packet to the floor to be dealt with later."

If that's disappointing language, we're in need of more of it, as Mrs. O'Malley would say, desperate.

Ivan Doig, at work on a fictional trilogy about a Scottish family's emigration to Montana, is a writer who lives in Seattle.
Modern Fables

Wise tales in UW professor's collection hold lessons for grown-ups

"The Sorcerer's Apprentice" by Charles Johnson
Atheneum, $9.95
by Dean Stahl

Many of us grew up having fables read to us when we were sick and confined to bed. They were meant to entertain and to persuade us to feel more philosophical about doctoring. The tales themselves, often told through animals, may have been enlivened by brave deeds or exotic settings, greed or intrigue, but they were united under one banner: Creatures must learn to face the consequences of their actions.

Such insights may be lost on children, but as we age we come to know more of contradiction and paradox; the stone-simple truths of fables gradually reveal themselves—and become simply complex. Enter Charles Johnson, a University of Washington creative-writing professor, whose short stories—intricate modern fables, really—resonate with generous spirit, good humor, authenticity and wisdom.

In "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," Johnson's new collection of stories, things have the power to shape humans; philosophical reckonings surface unexpectedly, like ferns uncurling from muck; magical spells are as real as soap; and dreams come true—then straightaway transform the nature of truth, as in the story "China."

The wife in "China," achieving a kind of comfort in the knowledge that her ailing husband of 35 years would be the first to die, finds herself betrayed by his sudden and successful plunge into the strange world of martial arts and radiant health. Their spiritual separation becomes nearly as final as death, yet nothing is as she expected it to be, not even her grief.

With "The Education of Mingo," 19th-century farmer Moses Green buys an ignorant and naive (just how naïve we are left wondering) young slave and proceeds to make him over in his own image, "like standing, you might say, on the sixth day, feet planted wide, trousers hitched, and remaking the world so it looked more familiar." Moses comes to learn that this is an imperfect world, and Mingo (Latin for "make water"); Johnson has a knack for using names to illuminate his characters) reflects this precisely, becoming the executioner for his master's alter ego.

In "Exchange Value," two young thieves tally the power of a miser's wealth: "It put her through changes, she be spell-bound, possessed by the promise of life, panicky about adequation, and locked now in the past 'caused every purchase, you know, had to be a poor buy: a loss of life.'" Is knowledge power? Not always; having insight doesn't keep the thieves from making the same mistake as their victim.

Johnson's characters often think themselves living by a specific creed, then unexpected circumstances grab them by the ears and drop them deep into an alternate reality.

In "Aelita," for example, a philosophy professor who is a self-proclaimed "skeptical old man," finds himself the target of a rather mindless blackmail scheme. He crumbles. Finding himself drawn by a streetwise student into a world of the senses allows him to take the measure of his hidden nature.

Some of the eight stories in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (three of which use Seattle as a regional backdrop) are extended fugues on themes broached in Johnson's superb 1982 novel, "Out-herding Tale," which is a slave narrative in modern form, experimental in style and subject, tracing the life of a mulatto bondsman in the antebellum South.

"Popper's Disease" and the title story, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," seem tuned to a chord from that book: the right-thinking man "asks how the heart might find peace in a world where the spirit seemed exiled."

Johnson tells an interesting story, no exceptions. Only one, "Moving Pictures," seems less than whole, perhaps because the prose works more for effect ("you'd shelve the novel, the Big Book, for bucks monitored by the Writers Guild. . .") than revelation.

Johnson's accomplishment is such that one might conclude that he is a born storyteller—or that he cut a deal with one of the vapors of the nether world. Somerset Maugham wrote that such feats come of hard work and writing what you are and what you perceive in the world about you. This seems a likely explanation.

Dean Stahl is a Seattle-based free-lance writer.

Author gives a vivid account of life, love on a tiny island

"The Island of the White Cow"
by Deborah Tall
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by Ivan Doig

Would he, the white-haired, blue-eyed visiting Irish poet, come talk to her dormitory group about Yeats?
No, but would she, young and lissome, come have a drink with him?
So began the romance/affair/relationship (make your own generational choice of term) of two from the Atlantic's frothy edges to those rocks to fathom the island's post office and postmistress:

"Is this a parcel or a packet, would ye say? (A distinction I've yet to comprehend.) 'Because if ye'd call it a small packet. . . . It's a packet, I'd say,' 'Oh, then . . . well I suppose that'd be 38p. '38p? Good lord!' It's right here. see -on. She professes a mottled scrap of government type. 'It's not that I was questionin' ye, Mrs. O'Malley, but the prices of
“Children of Light” by Robert Stone
Knopf, $17.95

Robert Stone’s reputation as a writer of great force is safe. “Children of Light,” although it portrays what are commonly called “creative” people rather than the soldiers, hipsters and drastics of his previous novels, shows us a world in which intro- poetic, anti-romantic, ritualistic habit leads away from self-knowledge.

Stone’s characters, as critic Roger Sale of the University of Washington noted of “Dog Soldiers” (winner of a National Book Award and the basis for the movie “Who’ll Stop the Rain?”), are entirely unlovable — and entirely too convincing to be dismissible. “Children of Light” also avoids the occasionally too-heavy plotting of “Dog Soldiers.” Here, characters and plot are inextricable. Stone’s astonishingly clear, precise writing takes us into a fast, downhill ride in a plot without brakes. We see the cliff ahead, but we can’t stop.

Gordon Walker, a writer and actor who has just completed a run in Seattle as Lear, decides to go to Mexico to watch his former wife’s “The Awaken- ing.” Walker’s wife has just left him; Verger has just stopped taking the medication that controls her schizophrenia. We know the reunion will mean disaster, and Walker ought to know it — but he is accustomed to denying his whisms.

The mental damage Walker does himself with alcohol and cocaine is Verger’s natural state. In their confusion, fragments of their previous roles emerge now and then, momentarily controlling them.

While Walker is driving to Mexico, Verger struggles to channel the intensity of his hallucinations.

In the climactic scene, Verger is absorbed by his movie persona, unable to think or to even exist outside the confines of his role. As she runs toward the ocean, toward self-destruction, Walker tries to stop her but fails as he has what he thinks is a heart attack. It isn’t the only failure of heart in the novel. The moment, both shocking and expected, both catastrophic and disheartening, largely because of its language and because she thought the author hadn’t been hard enough on ex-lover Verger. I concur that Deborah Tall allows herself — then, in truth, to convey the dewy young seeker she was at the time — to be seen as more earnest and less retributive for falling in love with a man who is no longer a Christian than if she were, say, a sniffig Londerot.

But as to this book’s language, try a swath for yourself, such as Tall’s scene of attempting to get a divingBitte boy when he fears the neighbors will catch Deborah and him skinny- dipping.

This captivating memoir received snippy treatment in The New York Times Book Review from a British reviewer who called it “disappointing,” largely because of its language and because she thought the author hadn’t been hard enough on ex-lover Verger. I concur that Deborah Tall allows herself — then, in truth, to convey the dewy young seeker she was at the time — to be seen as more earnest and less retributive for falling in love with a man who is no longer a Christian than if she were, say, a sniffig Londerot.

But as to this book’s language, try a swath for yourself, such as Tall’s scene of attempting to get a diving Bitte boy when he fears the neighbors will catch Deborah and him skinny-dipping.

At the end, Walker is berated by a woman who looks just like his sometime-lover for his part in the catastrophe that befalls Lee Verger. Walker in his heartache, he announces that he would like to do her, that she accepts without dropping a beat. Where emotions are a commodity, depth of feeling can be a liability. The best defense is superficiality.

Richard Wakefield is a professor of English at Tacoma Community College.

Robert Stone’s “Children of Light” is a bleak tale about bleak people.

Voices bring verse to life in a series of taped poetry

by Joseph Keppler

Literature has been inside books for so long that it seems to have always been there. But think of Homer, bearded and blind, reading his "Odyssey" or "Iliad" to a gathering of Greek fishermen. Like the ready today, such as the voice — actual spoken voice — has returned to poetry.

A leading publisher of contemporary poetry on tape, the Watershed Foundation recently released several new titles, available for $19.95 each from Watershed, P.O. Box 50, 145, Washington, D.C. 20004, or from Seattle bookstores, such as Elliott Bay Book Company and Black Books.

In Watershed’s latest outsourcing, Denise Lever- tov’s important tape, "The Acolyte," presents her voice urging us not only to end injustice in this world but also to appreciate what’s already beautifully present.

Appreciation, in fact, is the theme of "The Acolyte". As she reads her work, her wry, sometimes humorous insights become malleable, as when she insists that her own tongue is a white water" give us two more absorbing voices. Williams depicts urban life with a figurative painter’s determination. "Tar," describes "the first country of Three Mile Island" and how, coincidentally, roofers are repairing his building. Finished, they leave behind "leftovers carats of tar in the gutter," and later that evening: "every sidewalk on the block was scribbled with obscene and hearts." Life goes on, for a while at least.

Wright, with a slight Southern accent, reads poetic memories of relatives, observations from travel and homages to other artists.

Three other titles complete Watershed’s recent releases: Philip Booth’s "The Cold Coast," a slow, satchel of "Meadow of the Glee Club," a responsive course through America’s changes; and X.J. Kennedy’s "Is Seeing Believing?" a professor’s humor and satire performed before an audience and in a studio.

Joseph Keppler, a Seattle poet who publishes the journal "Poets and Poets," reviewed these recordings for the American Library Association magazine Booklist.

BEST SELLERS

Here are the hard-cover best sellers for the week ending April 11, compiled from sales data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide.

FICTION

4. "The Virgin of Shroud," John Rechy
5. "Break In," Dick Francis
7. "Seasons of the Heart," Cynthia Freeman
8. "Neruda’s Story: A Peruvian Adventure," Anne McKeown
9. "The Handmaid’s Tale," Margaret Atwood

NONFICTION

1. "Fit for Life," Harvey and Marilyn Diamond
2. "The Biology of Old Age," Osawa
3. "Callanetics: 10 Years Younger in 10 Hours," Callan Pinckney
4. "Bus 9 to Paradise," Leo Buscaglia
10. "The Rise and Fall of a Mobster," Nicholas Pileggi

(Reprinted from Publishers Weekly)