The National Book Foundation has moved

OLD
260 Fifth Avenue
Room 503
New York, NY 10001

NEW
95 Madison Avenue
Suite 709
New York, NY 10016

The Foundation’s phone number, (212) 685-0261, and fax number, (212) 213-6570, remain the same.

The National Book Foundation, Inc., is a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation under section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code.

Organizations and individuals wishing to make a tax-deductible contribution to support the work of the Foundation, or wanting more information about its mission and educational programs, are welcome to contact our new address, or e-mail us: natbkfdn@mindspring.com.

Please visit our website www.nationalbook.org.

The National Book Foundation is the sponsor of the National Book Awards (established in 1950).
June 24, 1999

Mr. Ivan Doig
17021 Tenth Avenue N.W.
Seattle, WA 98177

Dear Ivan:

As you may know The National Book Awards is currently celebrating its 50th Anniversary. As part of our celebration we are working on a new feature for our website, www.nationalbook.org. This section, The Book That Changed My Life, will highlight National Book Award authors and the works that impressed them both as writers and readers. In preparation for this new website specialty I would be grateful if you would provide us with the title(s) of the book(s) that have changed your life and a brief description of how one work in particular influenced your own writing.

The Foundation is highlighting this theme through the Windows on the Writing Life program, which is underwritten by a major grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. The only project of its kind in the nation, Windows on the Writing Life was designed to provide opportunities for readers to explore — both in cyberspace and in selected public libraries — the ways in which the experience of reading informs the act of writing. Through this program, Reading Circle members explore the works of National Book Award-winning authors in tandem with the books that changed their writing lives.

We at The National Book Foundation thank you for your assistance and hope to hear from you soon. Please feel free to contact me at the Foundation office if you have any questions: (212) 685-0261.

Best wishes,

Meredith Kennedy
Program Officer & Website Director
2 July '99

Meredith Kennedy  
Program Officer & Website Director  
National Book Foundation  
260 Fifth Ave., Room 904  
New York NY 10001

Dear Meredith Kennedy--

I appreciate being asked to contribute to your website feature The Book That Changed My Life. Here’s the material, and a bio sheet in case you need supplementary information.

And if you’d please note for the NBF’s address file, I’ve moved. My new address is 17277 15th Ave. NW, Seattle WA 98177

Best wishes,
In college I gained a room of my own, the first of my life. The ungainly old house where Northwestern University stashed those of us who were financial-aid students had a few odd leftover nooks which had been made into single rooms, and I wangled the tiniest but most solitary of these, a tight fit aptly nicknamed the Shoe. One entire end of the room was taken up with a desk I’d quickly managed to pirate, disassemble, and put back together inside the Shoe like a galleon in a bottle—a massive, handsomely-shelved oak shrine for books. Textbooks on the desktop, and on the shelf above, “my” books, the writers I was reading on my own. I see them yet: Out of Africa by Isak Dinesen, a comely and enchanting Modern Library edition; and any and all from our greatest literary squire, William Faulkner, from The Sound and the Fury to the dearly bought hardback of his latest and last, The Reivers; and Fathers and Sons by Ivan Turgenev, a literary sorcerer’s tome I wished upon and a quarter century later would have that dream come true when a Washington Post review, perhaps carried away by the coincidence of our first names, called me “an American Turgenev”; and Homage to Catalonia and the collected essays of the bard of the proletariat, George Orwell.

And one I hear:

“Trains cross the continent in a swirl of dust and thunder, the leaves fly down the tracks behind them...”

The train was the vehicle of change for me in those college years. In another of my ranching family’s financial defeats and retreats—we of the lariat proletariat—my father and my grandmother, who had helped raise me, moved from the handsome high country of northern Montana to a cheesebox house at a railroad shipping point named Ringling, population 45. The three round-trips a year I was making between the West and the Midwest became passages in more ways than one. Each time a day and a half to myself there in the absorbing lean and jostle of the Milwaukee Road coach cars, as if a more restless gravity worked within those coaches than in the outer world. A day and a half to gaze and doze, doze and gaze; to read, from the maestro of locomotion himself, Thomas Wolfe:

“The great trains cleave through gulch and gully, they rumble with spiked thunder...I will go up and down the country, and back and forth across the country on the great trains that thunder over America. I will go out West where States are square; Oh, I will to go to Boise, and Helena and Albuquerque. I will go to Montana and the two Dakotas....”

That Wolfe novel, Of Time and the River, put into me an everlasting awareness of life’s gallant rhythms. The ceremony of coming and going, for instance. I am here to tell you, it was a royal feeling to be the only person getting on or off a train when it stopped in Ringling. For those few minutes you commanded the entire great power chain of the railroad. Trainmen, section crews, depot agent paused in their day because you were of Ringling. The engine hummed there in orange and black grandeur while you placed your foot on the metal step of ascent or descent. The whole dauntless trellis of ties and rails between Chicago and Ringling had been created for this.

Trip upon trip, the tussle of home earth and livelihood grew and grew in me, with Thomas Wolfe now lending a hand against Montana in his next novel that traveled with me, You Can’t Go Home Again. Even a god can misspeak. I was to find, as a writer, that the makings of my first book, This House of Sky, and several novels since would all arise from back there in time and memory. But when it most counted, Wolfe had it wondrously right for me in Of Time and the River when his resounding love of language and piston-power energy of imagination carried me back and forth across the continent between the home I was born to and the home I would find in writing.

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