

Part I: Describe your new book.

Can't cook but doesn't bite. It is only the line atop a classified advertisement in a weekly newspaper, that of "an A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" seeking to relocate to Montana early in the twentieth century. But for young Paul Milliron, his two younger brothers and his widower father, and his rambunctious fellow students in their one-room school, it spells abracadabra.

Paul's is the voice of the book: a bit wry, contemplative, and literally bedeviled by dreams--lifelong, he has had the disturbing knack of vividly recalling the episodes of imagination that swirl in his mind at night. Paul has risen to become the state superintendent of education, and at the vantage point of 1957, strapped for budget in what he knows is going to be a changed world of education because of the Soviet launching of Sputnik, he is facing what is more like a nightmare, everything he has believed in "eclipsed by this Russian kettle of gadgetry orbiting overhead." In his heart he knows the powerful political pressures on him to "consolidate" the rural one-room schools, which will be the death-knell of those perky idiosyncratic little institutions such as the one that produced him at Marias Coulee.

Before his crucial convocation of rural educators to give them his decision, though, he impulsively drives out to Marias Coulee, now a scatter of mostly abandoned homesteads just beyond the northern fringe of a successful irrigation project. There the story begins, with Paul swept back in memory to 1910 when the Milliron family's hard-bargained new housekeeper, Rose Llewellynn, and her unannounced brother step down from the train, "bringing several kinds of education to the waiting four of us."

Rose as a sharp character...

Mark Twain, a Halley's Comet among writers whose spirit is invoked at one point in *The Whistling Season*, liked to refer to his hard-dealing publisher of that time, Harper & Brothers, as Sharper & Brothers, and Rose has a bit of that quality of a "sharper," a clever dealer, someone you really don't want to be in a poker game with. But note that the incident in her past that left her "less than respectable" was a scam played on a disreputable bunch who deserved it, the same way Paul Newman and Robert Redford delightfully fleece the gamblers in *The Sting*. So, her endearing side, not to mention her infinite capacity for work and caring for others, wins out, as I see it. If she were in today's society, she'd still be Rose and we would have to gauge her as individually as Paul, Morrie, and the others do in the book.

The 'secret' world of childhood...

Paul starts to feel inundated with secrets, some of them of the slyly funny schoolyard variety and some vitally serious, as the story goes along. He is a very bright thirteen-year-old, who at one point realizes "the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy," but in this case of the ultimate secret he has to draw on instinct, innate decency, in reaching his decision. So I see Paul's chosen course as one of compassion, in the name of giving his family a chance to knit itself together and to offer amnesty to someone who has made a misstep in life but shows every sign of having retrieved full worth. To me, and I suppose this is reflected in Paul, there is sometimes not just one justice in a situation, but a choice, and my hope is that Paul chose wisely.

Paul's kind of decision possibly was more in line with his time and place--the early twentieth century and a community rural but full of nuance toward neighbors and family--than our screen-driven tell-all era of e-mail, television, movies, and so on. Yet my belief is that decent behavior is never out of date.

To what extent is Paul me?

My secret is out, sort of, kind of: maybe more than any other character or at least narrator I have ever created, Paul has a few of my mental fingerprints. He loves language, even unto Latin (which I took in high school; then Russian, in college); he's an inveterate reader of books; he eavesdrops with his eyes; he admits to a bit of a pedantic streak, and at least can admit it. He's his own person, though; I've never had his nightly flood of dreaming, could not function in politics and government as he skillfully does, have never had any siblings, nor, full disclosure, did I ever attend a one-room school.

The Whistling Season

It's about three dozen kids in a one-room school. Three brothers, including my narrator, are newly motherless, trying to cope with that. Then a quicksilver teacher arrives at the school, and everybody's life ~~changes~~ takes off in interesting new directions.

The Whistling Season

The fun of it: the spirit of Mark Twain, that Halley's Comet among writers, is briefly invoked in the book, and I hope if time could be rewound and he could have read the book, he might have got a chuckle out of it.

family and community

I generate my fiction from historical set points--the biggest homesteading landrush in American history, in this case--but I do absolutely make up my plots and people. So, within the wilder boundaries of my imagination there are historical laws of gravity, events and details I go to great trouble to be accurate about. A schoolful of kids all riding horses to a one-room school, for instance: what do you do with all those horses all day? Barn? Corral? A lot of hitching rails? Whenever I interviewed anyone who had attended a one-room school, in my research for my earlier novels (English Creek, Rascal Fair), I made sure to ask them how were the horses handled at the school: picket ropes were the frequent answer, and I used that and the circle-patterns (of grazing) in the grass in a scene. (p. 120, end of graf)

Everything counts.

--Plot: "Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul," my narrator and I say early in this book. So, there is the 'license' to tell the story of Paul Milliron's childhood, made up by me out of "what ifs". What if--his homesteader father, tired of trying to cook and housekeep in their womanless household, spies a newspaper ad from a housekeeper who stipulates "Can't cook but doesn't bite"? What if, when she shows up to their little homestead community, she doesn't show up alone?

Dialogue: how the people of my pages talk is meant to make a shimmer under the story--to have a poetry of the vernacular quietly there.

Each character has little distinctive touches in how she or he speaks:

--the housekeeper Rose has a tendency to not finish certain sentences: trying to explain why she is so bereft of money she's had to become a housekeeper: "Our family enterprise," she said sadly, "it--" She gave her head a little shake. "After my poor husband--" This time she drew a chest-heaving breath. "Everything went."

--Paul's brother Damon uses "old" as an all-purpose derogatory adjective: "Her and her old taffy. Be lucky if we don't break out teeth on it."

The Whistling Season

It's about the magic of learning. Gaining knowledge about something, whether it's in school or in life generally, is a lot like magic--at some point, abracadabra, and you get it, about the multiplication table or why someone behaves as they do. My narrator, Paul Milliron, is hungry to learn--he loves books, he loves words--and it carries over from school with him: in the course of the book, he learns from his dreams. So I think the enjoyment of thought, the sense of wonder at what this (Geld) conglomeration between our ears can produce, is woven through the story.

Lux desiderium universitatis: light is the desire of the universe.

--an ancient Latin phrase that I made up.

Latin is Paul's Internet.

possible children's book, on basis of the remembrancer segments ~~wrote~~ written into Dancing at the Rascal Fair. Sandra Boynton as illustrator?

--ending, as suggested by C, of this bk about a ga-gag king whose language is splendid but who is forgetful: The king lived in memory ever after.

--draw on all the notebooks, poetry attempts, and file cards of all the books for this one, a chance to use accumulated wordplay of 20 years.

--The two Dancing segments, despite my not knowing exactly what I was doing, were each written in a day (though the first one had considerable mulling first), i.e. abt 200 words/day. Both came of file card phrases I was trying to use-- "One more sun" and thunder falling into the earth to become stone; so any further scenes maybe ought to be triggered the same way.

--This could be an interim book between big efforts; a way to have a book come out in '90 or '91, say, after the Mont. trilogy.

"If that is so, we'll soon overflow! Puddles of memory will follow us everywhere like shadows! Think of it all, rememberer! The calm of a pond lazing as it awaits the wink of a skipping stone. The taste of green when we thumb a summer pea from its pod. The icicle needles of winter. The kited fire of each sunrise. How can our poor heads hold the least little of all there is to remember? Tell me that, whoever can."

phrasing notebook entry: surf sanding away the shore

The king: "Tell it to stop..."

Rembr: "The sand..."

The king had a voice the size of a dictionary.

(possible lead?)

"The law of, of--cavity, did you call it?"

"Gravity, sire.

"Time goes and it doesn't go?"

"That is the situation (case, way of it), sire.

nick name (a kind of name with a nick out of it)

hair white as swan feathers

morning pulling itself from night

the wind sipping dust

a robin gathering straws near the garden; they stick out of his beak like cat's
whiskers

The birds made morning with...

ducks bibbling their bills in the water

used in
Marah?

"Do you mean to tell me, R_emembrancer," cried the king, "that the moon is not a balloon, making its rounds among the cheese depots of the Milky Way?"

"One more sun," sighed the king at evening, "and now another darkness. This has to stop. The days fly past us as if they were racing pigeons. We may as well be pebbles, for all the notice life takes of us or we of it. No one holds in mind the blind harper when he is gone. No one comemorates the girl who grains the geese. None of the deeds of our people leave the least tiny mark upon time. Where's the sense in running a kingdom if it all just piffles off into air? Tell me that, whoever can."

"If you will recall, sire--"

"Why is it that the moon keeps better track of itself than we manage to? And the seasons put us to shame, they always know which they are, who's been, whose turn now, who comes next, all that sort of thing. Why can't we have memories as nimble as those? Tell me that, whoever can."

"Sire, you will recall--"

"Oblivion has been the rule too long. What this kingdom needs in the time to come is some, umm, some blivion. There, that's it, we need to become a more blivious people. Enough of this forgettery. But how to do it, it will take some doing. What's to be done? Tell me that, whoever can."

"If you will recall, sire, this morning you named a rememberer."

"Eh? I did? I mean, I did. And what a good idea it was, too. For a change things are going to be fixed into mind around here. Send me this remembering fellow."

"Bring forth the king's rememberer!"

"As sure as thunder falls into the earth and becomes stone," cried the king the next morning. "I am struck dumb by what you are saying, Rememberer! You can stand there in truth's boots and say time will flee from us no matter what we do? The sparks as they flew upward from the fireplace last evening were not adding themselves into the stars? The whipporwee of the night bird did not fix itself into the dark as reliably as an echo? The entire night that has just passed is, umm, past? Where's the sense in all this remembering business, then?"

"Those things yet exist, sire. But in us now, not in the moments that birthed them."

DARE, 182

beak - to talk maliciously (Black)

possible use: They beak & claw it."

ought've

oughtn't

ought have been

Bucking the Sun:

--The Fort Peck Dam was the story of the American Dream--bootstrapping your way up-- but pushed to world-size, by the record expense of the dam and the extent of the Missouri River Valley it flooded, and by the quandries of the Depression and by the spectre of World War II beginning to lurk. (Depression measures were a dress-rehearsal for mobilizing America.)

--Bucking the Sun is my deliberate effort to write a book as big as the times (more than 350 scenes, compared w/ 260 in Martin Scorsese's movie Casino; big cast of 11 prime characters, scenes of work on the biggest dam in the world and the boomtowns).

--The contemporary resonance: the New Deal and projects such as Fort Peck were the invention of the safety net.

social

Bucking the Sun--

--About a Montana family trying to pull itself out of the Depression.

Along with 10,000 other victims of the dust storms and hard times of the 1930's they get hired on at Fort Peck, to build the largest earthen dam in the world.

--The story is about the family and the sheriff they bedevil, who keeps trying to figure out what went on with them. (A couple of them come to a spectacularly bad end, which is the mystery within the plot.)

--So I suppose the book is about love and tragedy. In one of the great pieces of writing of that time, the Russian poet (Vladimir) Mayakovsky wrote to his lover Lili Brik, "Love is the heart of everything."

--As I always do, I try to give a sense of what life was like; so there are ~~scenes~~ events in the book based on actual happenings at Fort Peck, such as a pair of young guys (straight off a Missouri River bottomland farm) being hired to lay the floor of a saloon in one night, at the boomtown of Wheeler was springing up near the dam project. And one of my ~~woman~~ characters is a hairdresser in Wheeler, so I had to learn about 1930's hairstyles. (Marcelling, croquignole permanent wave machines...)

Technation: interstate highway system
or bridges over. or in river

Bucking the Sun:

--I've invested all I've worked at in previous books:

--poetry of the everyday vernacular ("riding the tension spiders")

--craft of work (diving, electrical dredging, snakecatcher)

--big consequences of a Port Peck Dam even in "ordinary" lives

"letting
daylight into
snake"

In summary, an epic of ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives.

--a novel about traveling with the century (the sheriff, b. 1900)

- humor: dam workers were young people, risky, funny.

- spirits were up @ having \$

- boomtowns encouraged night life, anything goes

- vibrancy: - Chron & 1/2, characters talking all time,
or dancing or singing, or all 3 at once.

- drama & fun of people's lives