

I realize

I'm here today as the extraterrestrial being of this conference--as the shaggy example of what ~~life~~ a Dupuyer life-form transmogrifies into when it's transplanted away from the character-building ^{winters} ~~climate~~ of the world off Montana. As I savvy it, I've come wuffling down out of the dark echoing canyons of space beyond Montana to try and deal with the great cosmic question--is there literary life west of Missoula?

Because it is ordained somewhere that a speech is supposed to have a title, I told Margaret Kingsland I'd be talking today about "Browning, Conrad and Other World Centers."

What I have in mind when I say "world centers" are not the cosmopolitan capitals of the planet--although any of you who know something of my past, or who have spent time up in the Two Medicine country, will have some idea of how uptown Browning and Conrad ~~came~~ ^{seemed} to a kid on a Dupuyer sheep ranch. No, the type of "world centers" I have in mind are those centralities from which each of us looks out at life--the influences that are at the core of what we end up doing in life. My belief is that part of the gauging of where we are--where we stand now, each one ~~of~~ us a personal pivot point that some larger world of existence does its orbiting around--part of that gauging of ourselves means taking a look at where we ~~came~~ from. In "Dancing at the Rascal Fair" my narrator's closest friend spoofs him about his interest in the ~~past--~~ ^{past--} ~~Blackfeet and Lewis and Clark and~~

"Angus, you're a great one for yesterdays." And Angus says back to him, for himself and me, "They've brought us to where we are."

~~in~~ in that same vein, think I I ought to begin here by looking at ~~these~~ examples of Browning and Conrad as "world centers" to me, in the way, say, that a biographer would rummage into my early years in Montana, in search of the influences that eventually brought forth my books. Of course the danger of biography is that it can become a kind of literary taxidermy, but I'm going to use just a minimum of my own stuffings here today. Just ~~a~~ ^a pair of basics, that in my teen-age years, whenever I tried to see over the horizon from Dupuyer Creek, the two significant towns waiting there were named Browning and Conrad. As the county seat of Pondera county, and the nearest town to buy repairs for ranch equipment or to go to a doctor or dentist, and as the larger arch-rival of my high school,

Valier, in sports, Conrad was, yes, a place I looked eastward to, a city of the plain. Then when my family ^{and I} trailed our sheep north to the Blackfeet Reservation every summer, Browning became the center of our prairie world--the town actually was always within our sight, beneath that hypnotic line of granite icebergs which ~~were~~ ^{are} the mountains of Glacier National Park, from the high ridge above the Two Medicine River where we ran our sheep. Our groceries came from the Buttrey's in Browning, the gas for our jeep came from its Conoco station, on its streets my father and my grandmother and I tried not to gawk at braided Blackfeet.

Conrad my winter capital, Browning my summer capital, that biographer might say. In their rough streets, you can hear him going on, the boy Ivan met the farmers and ranchers whose summer jobs helped to work him toward college and a writing career, and whose lore and lingo would ~~remain~~ stay with him.

Indeed, the biographer now gets down to minute particulars, and tells us ~~that~~ it was in Browning that this incipient Ivan met his most interesting employer of those summers--the grizzled Scotch bachelor farmer Alec Knox, who after hiring the man-sized youngster put to him the philosophical inquiry, "Do ye ever take a drink?" The biographer may or may not know, that, right then, I reached some sort of maturity by realizing that neither "yes" ^{nor} ~~no~~ "no" was the ^{wisest} ~~proper~~ answer to so subtle a question, and so I ^{craftily} ~~just~~ said back to Alec, "Once in a while." What a diligent biographer would point out, inevitably, is that old Alec Knox's turn of phrase so impressed the young Ivan that the same line appeared some thirty years later in English Crick, Scandinavified by the Danish minor character Isaac Reese in that book into, "Do you effer took a drink?"

So that accounts for Browning as a lasting influence, and next the biographer sights along ~~the~~ ^{of Conrad,} ~~Conrad's~~ tree-shaded streets, where people from the sun-hard farms and ranches around go as if to an oasis to retire, and there he finds Ivan the young man talking with the one-time ditch rider Albert Warner, about Albert's years of moving the water on the Valier irrigation project. And again, inevitably, the fictional Two Medicine ditch rider Toussaint Rennie grew in Ivan's mind when he came to write English Crick, the tribute to gumboot irrigators shows up in Beth McCaskill's Fourth of July speech--"The irrigator is the lone lord of his field....He smells the odor of life as the land's plants take the water in green embrace..." and next, in Dancing at the Rascal Fair, the Valier water project itself appears as a historical event.

So, that biographer, looking at the towns of Browning and Conrad and how they found their way into my books about Montana, would be insightful and logical in citing them as the vital "world centers" for me and my writing. (pause) He would also be full of hoey. Because the fact is, the Conrad most vital to the writing I've done about Montana happens to be the great novelist Joseph Conrad. Memory by itself is not a book; it is ^{merely} ~~only~~ the loose pages of experience that need, somehow, to find their way into permanent words. The writing that makes books out of lore and lingo is a craft that has to be learned and worked at, and Joseph Conrad was waiting for me there in the pages of his sea stories after I became a working writer.

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The ends of my fingers, unlike James Joyce's, unfortunately are not writing a Ulysses, but they are trying to tap out a fictional trio of books that will give glimpses into my own created world of Montana during its first hundred years of statehood. Up to this point, I've been talking about how a writer goes about creating his fictional world, and how he can look around him, on the geographical outskirts, to see how others have found their creative equilibrium. But it also seems to me worthwhile to take a look at how the actual world affects the place and the time that's being written about. In my ^{final} ~~last~~ ten minutes or so ~~now~~ now, I'd like to think out loud to you how one writer--he happens to be the one I know best, since I meet him in the mirror every day--tries to go about this.

But, staying carefully within my own habitat of novelists, I can take a look around and believe that I see, ~~if I squint like a literary critic,~~ ~~with just a minimum of critical squinting,~~ ^{the technique of} concentrated and that James Welch used minimalism ~~was~~ the way it ought to be used--~~some~~ essential language instead of merely flat and passionless--in his great reservation novel Winter in the Blood, and that Wayne Ude successfully used magical realism in his fine book of that same Highline tribal country, Becoming Coyote.

What is happening, I think, is that these and probably ^{a lot of} ~~some~~ other so-called Montana ~~novels~~ ^{books} go beyond the boundaries of Montana, both in what they're trying to say about life and in their central imaginative forces. In no way does this diminish either Montana or the books--for my utter belief is that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country, life.

Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression--we've seen them both exist in William Faulkner's postage-stamp size Yoknapatawpha County, ~~the~~ and in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's nowhere village of Macondo, dreaming in its Hundred Years of Solitude.

And in my view, we're seeing this more and more strongly in the universe of fiction--writer after writer whose work, at first glance, seems to be far away from the self-appointed literary capitals--such as New York, London, Paris, the usual suspects--but in fact their work has moved the central powers of fiction to where they are.

Let me read you, from ^{two} works of fiction which have ~~not~~ been published this year, ^{a short} a pair of ~~three quick~~ samples of the prose that is being made in the outback corners of the world these days:

"The laws made of skin and hair fill the statute books; their gaudy savagery paints the bodies of our diplomats under their three-piece suits and silk ties. The stinking fetish made of contrasting bits of skin and hair, the scalping of millions of lives, dangles on the cross in the place of Christ. Skin and hair. It has mattered more than anything else in the world."

Nadine Gordimer,
A Sport of Nature, p. 177

"It's such a terrible proportion of the human population to hang in one afternoon," the Provost Marshall protested. "More than one half of one percent ~~of the population~~ the colony. ~~of New South Wales~~." Further, he argued that--in number terms--to hang three in a swipe was equivalent to hanging two thousand Londoners. His Excellency the Governor waved his hand, saying the court had not taken the trouble to consider percentiles and that therefore neither could he. So the conference ended with a solemn shaking of hands and the idea lying between them that when Lovell and Freeman and mad Tom Barrett were hanged and socketed away in the earth with the marks of civilized execution around their necks, the place would be confirmed as a European town."

Thomas Keneally, The Playmaker,
ppi 110-111

brilliant passages,

The first of those of "the laws made of skin and hair," was from Nadine Gordimer of South Africa, whose new novel "A Sport of Nature" is a potent work on the inhumanities of her country's ^{apparatus} ~~system~~ of apartheid. The second, about the proportion of the population that it's proper to hang in one afternoon, is from the new novel The Playmaker by the Australian writer Thomas Keneally--Keneally here taking a look at the convict-colony origin of his country where a later Australian governor would speak, in all seriousness, of "the natural progress of the aboriginal race towards extinction."

There are others and others, of these writers who have originated in what the major metropolitan conglomerations of the world would consider to be the outback, the far corners, the back pockets of the planet - ^{Nadine Gordimer of S. Africa,} V.S. Naipaul of Trinidad, Valentin Rasputin of Siberia, Salman Rushdie of India, Keri Hulme of New Zealand, Wole Shoyink-a of Nigeria, who has the first Nobel Prize among this outback group; younger newcomers such as Timothy Mo ~~from Hong Kong~~ and B. Koko Laing from Ghana; for that matter, my hunch is that the leading Canadian writers, such as Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood, have more in common with this literary foreign legion than with the main literary camps down here on our side of the border.

Australians, my god, - cousins - David Malouf, Tim Winton, Thia Astley, Elin. Jolley, Rodney Hall, Thia Kaneally, Robert Drewe - to name just a sample in N. of Engd, Pat Barker; over in Ireland, Roddy Doyle

The arrival of this new world class of writers--who in my opinion are proving that contemporary fiction can have character as well as characters--I think has some significant reverberations for those of us trying to write about ^{the} Montana and ~~other~~ reaches of the American West. ~~First~~, there's the always useful reminder that we are not alone--that others too have faced landscapes dauntingly bigger than themselves, have come to terms with remoteness, have been tempered instead of broken by ~~economic~~ hard times. ~~I'll be saying more about this in a few minutes,~~ but it's notable that so many of these strong new "outback" writers come from former outposts of the British Empire, and that their novels are skeptical of governance from afar--of the tendency for those on the geographical fringes to also end up with the thinnest shares of the society's wealth.

Maybe the existence of such writers and their unflinching books in fact is going beyond skepticism to assertion. If so, I think what's being asserted is along the lines the historian Leften Stavrianos talks about in his book of recent world history--Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age.

"A global economy first took shape in the fifteenth century," Stavrianos says, "as the new capitalist economy of northwest Europe began expanding abroad, first to Eastern Europe and then to the Americas, Africa and Asia. These overseas lands were made subordinate to, and dependent upon, the industrialized metropolitan centers. In other words, they became the underdeveloped Third World of the periphery as against the developed First World of the center. The traditional dichotomy between periphery and center now is being undermined....The inhabitants of all regions now are becoming subject peoples--that is, peoples subject to the imperatives of the global market economy."

Stavrianos, Global Rift,
pp. 26-7

Significantly, Stavrianos points out in his introduction that from his global viewpoint, ~~states and~~ ^{and states} regions can become colonies--in what he calls "dependent and exploitive relationships"--just as much as Third World countries have been.

Another message I think we can take from the outback writers is to look at ourselves and our everyday lives more closely than we're used to in modern American fiction. Somewhere back around John Cheever, a lot of American fiction got the notion that it's hell to live in the suburbs--all that burden of success and only gin to float it in. Well, I live in a Seattle suburb because it's the easiest place I've ever found to live, and so I'm partial to the idea that the real stuff of life--the salt and pepper and tabasco sauce--is in our origins, and what we do with them. Let me sketch a couple of ways I think the world's off-the-beaten-path writers have been helping to show us this.

Half a dozen years ago, a long, rambling, fascinating novel about life on the Isle of Guernsey in the English Channel showed up--The Book of Ebenezer Le Page, by a native Guernseyman named G.B. Edwards who died before his saga of Ebenezer Le Page managed to get itself published. That novel, written on not just one periphery but several--a speck of island between England and France; between the Nazi Germany which occupied the island in World War Two and the westward Atlantic nations trying to take back territory from Hitler's army; between traditional rural life and modern times of tourism--that novel had considerable to say to those of us who are trying to sight along the center of our world from literary angles. One reminder was that the voice we were born with has some literary magic of its own, if we can figure out how to work it. G.B. Edwards had his old bachelor narrator Ebenezer tell the story in Guernsey dialect, and through the alchemy of a

novelist's craft and a lot of years of effort, The Book of Ebenezer Le Page magically manages to convert a fluid spoken language into a fixed written one. There on the page, it makes sound visible.

That capture, in fiction, of the prance and play of a community's everyday language seems to me vital to know the world of that place. In the case of my books, it's on my mind a lot, often in odd little ways. I've been trying to pay attention in these novels, for instance, to what my Montana characters say when they're about to hoist a drink. ↓ Chronologically, in Dancing at the Rascal Fair,

one of my characters has hung onto a drinking toast he brought with him from Scotland: "Broth to the ill, stilts to the lame." In English Crick, the voice of my dad's generation in the Stockmens and the Mints is heard, *saying in simple demonstration* "Here's how." *and salute,*

[The influence of old Alec Knox lives on.]

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And in the final novel, set in 1989, somebody probably will utter a line I've been saving for twenty or twenty-five years--the guy drinking with his buddies looks down at the crowd of empty glasses in front of them, and he yells over to the bartender, "Better give us another round of jelly sandwiches here."

Besides the piquant flavor of a place's language, there's a larger strength in distinctive localness. John Fowles, the author of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, defines this in his ~~introduction~~ preface to *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*: "To those who want a homogenized world--because such worlds are easier to manipulate--Ebenezer is an eternal thorn in the side....He is much more against that he is ever for, and that kind of againstness, or bloody-mindedness--(We un-British types I guess would call it plain old orneriness)--however irritating it may be in some circumstances, is a very ^cprecious human and evolutionary commodity."

Fowles goes on,

Provincialism is not merely lacking city taste in arts and manners; it is also an increasingly vital antidote to all would-be central tyrannies."

would-be

Central tyrannies, and their follies. Those of us out here on the periphery the White House from ~~Washington, D.C.~~, have had a lot of cause to think about that, in this summer of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North and his military notion of a neat idea, that the way to bring peace to Central America was to provide missiles to the Ayatollah Khomenei. You have to wonder how that was supposed to work--what, ~~were~~ the Sandinistas going to die of laughter? Once again, a writer ~~with~~ from an outer world has something to say to us on the topic. The British playwright Tom Stoppard, who was born in Czechoslovakia and spent his childhood in Singapore and India, took on the topic of the military view of things in a scene of his play, *Travesties*.

Just after World War One, a character belligerently asks James Joyce, "And what
Stoppard has Joyce reply:
did you do in the Great War?" ~~Joyce replies,~~ "I wrote Ulysses. What did you do?"

While Joseph Conrad was working on me, Robert Browning's poetry had long since made the acquaintance of Norman Maclean. It is part of Montana's literary history now, of how Norman--after he retired from the University of Chicago--decided that, at age 70 or so, he might write a story, and that story began, "In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." and went on, in its final page, to the line, "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." Several years ago here in Billings--I think in this same room--I heard Norman talk about what he called "the poetry under the prose." I sat up real straight, in tribute and recognition. Norman and I have never talked to each other about our respective ways of writing--we didn't even know of each other's existence until our books came out--and I'd never had the common sense to think about what I was trying to do as "the poetry under the prose." Yet I did have a diary entry, from back amid my years

, that diary entry reads,
 of working on This House of Sky, hoping to myself that I could write the whole book
 "with slow care, writing it all as highly charged as poetry." Norman Maclean of course
 taught the poetry of a lot of poets in his classes at the University of Chicago, but
 once when Carol and I visited him at Seeley Lake, he told us of his liking for the work
 of --the one named Robert--
 of Robert Browning--"I always kind of favored the realistic poets," he put it--and I
 can see how a story writer who set out to achieve "poetry under the prose" would feel
 an affinity for Browning, who →

I've heard called the most realistic and prose-like of major 19th century British poets. If you are to write of the haunting memory of your fisherman brother, as Norman so wondrously did, ^{Robert} ~~confront~~ Browning is a guy who can urge you to ~~face~~ it and do it, in his lines: "That one face, far from vanish, rather grows--Or decomposes but to recompose--Become^s my universe that feels and knows."

The larger point here, about creating a memorably eloquent ^{prose} style, belongs not to me but to the Colorado writer Russell Martin, who was the editor of the anthology of current Western prose, a few years ago, titled Writers of the Purple Sage. Martin pointed out that what he called "native" writers--writers born and raised in the neighborhoods of the West they write about--tend to have a rich, elegaic quality to their prose; he thought it was more than coincidence that the three Indian novelists in the anthology--N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko

and James Welch--were successful poets as well as prose writers. Martin went on to say that other native-born types among Western writers--he specifically cited Norman Maclean, Bill here, and yours truly--share this attention to language: "Each of the native writers seems intent on creating a simply^e, lyric, and elegaic prose, a self-conscious writing that is meant to be heard while it tells its story." I can't speak for Norman or Bill, but ^{yeah} ~~yes~~, I am ^{definitely} writing to be heard.

Montana-born writers

I think Norman Maclean and I are not the only ~~ones~~ who have centered our writing worlds around lodestones we've found out there in the universe of --the Brownings and Conrads of the world as well as those of Montana. literature In the presence of Bill Kittredge, who has written more short stories than I have postcards, I'm not about to open my mouth on that particular literary form.

The ends of my fingers, unlike James Joyce's, unfortunately are not writing a Ulysses, but they are trying to tap out a fictional trio of books that will give glimpses into my own created world of Montana during its first hundred years of statehood. I'm only able to report to you how one writer--he happens to be the one I know best, since I meet him in the mirror every morning--tries to go about this business of creating his fictional world. But from my own "world center," myself, I can testify how valuable it has been to be able to look around, on the geographical outskirts, to see how others have found their creative equilibrium.

So, finally, in looking at Montana and the world--and the world and Montana-- I'm reminded of what another of those "outback" writers once said, about what he hoped was the worth of his own fiction. He was an African novelist, named Camara Laye--born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in exile in Senegal, where he died in 1980. Camara Laye once told an interviewer that he thought the cultures of the world, as expressed in their fiction writers, were all participating in one vast dance, each with its own special movement, each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm. ^(pause) I can hear that, in our own Montana pages. The jukebox saloon tunes in the background of the prose of Bill Kittredge and James Crumley, maybe the exultant songs of square dance in my own books, ^{certainly} ~~definitely~~ the poetic balladry under Norman Maclean's words,

the dignified tribal rhythms of the Fort Belknap reservation behind the writing of Wayne Ude and James Welch--if we are doing them right, they are something more than words, they are heartbeats of the world.

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