I suppose Wyoming has been on my mind since I was eight or nine years old. As you may know from House of Sky, my family mostly ran sheep in west central Montana, and whenever a herder had his band really spread over the hills, sheep from here to breakfast, it was said he had them in a Wyoming scatter. I don't know why it wasn't an Alberta scatter or an Idaho scatter, but anyway, Wyoming and Montana have been linked in my thinking ever since I first heard that phrase.

This is my first time to Sheridan, and I apologize for being slightly late getting here—about three hundred sixty-some days, I guess it is by now. Marjorie Windsor tussled hard over the telephone, trying to get me here last year. I regret that I had to stay holed up in Seattle, working on a book manuscript—but anyway,
that manuscript is now done, which makes me doubly glad I was able to say "yes" to Jan Holcomb and be here this year.
I suppose the reason writers get invited to give speeches is that people are curious to see just how we'll behave when we can't hide behind a typewriter. Early in *House of Sky* there's the story my father used to tell of our home area of Montana that they were so spooked and shy that if you met them on the road and there wasn't any brush for them to hide behind, they'd flop down with their lunchbuckets in front of them and peek out from behind them.

I thought tonight, since I don't have the shelter of my typewriter, I'd take cover behind a topic which might as well be called "storying."
I've been thinking about this for a couple of reasons—first among them, my own work. As best I can tell, for the foreseeable future my books are going to take turns being about the two chunks of the West I happen to know anything about—Montana along the rim of the Rockies, where I grew up, and the Puget Sound country of Washington where I live now. They're of course very different territories—Norman Maclean in *A River Runs Through It* quotes his brother's definition of the main difference: "Practically everybody on the West Coast was born in the Rocky Mountains where they failed as fly fishermen, so they migrated to the West Coast and became lawyers, certified public accountants, presidents of airplane companies, gamblers or Mormon missionaries"; I guess I add hide-typewriters to that list—
Even seeing the storytelling impulse this way, as a social chinook, fits with the notion that storying is a common western theme—the chinook a standard part of your weather here in Montana, deriving its name from an Indian tribe of the West Coast.

What has to be watched out for, of course, is that the storying chinook doesn't become just hot air. But I think the Western storytelling tradition can offer a writer some solid advantages, if he'll accept them.

One is structure for what he hopes to say. The Irish short story writer Frank O'Connor said, "There are three necessary elements in a story—exposition, development, and drama."
An example of exposition might be: "The Seventh Cavalry halted not far from a stream called the Little Big Horn."

Then an example of development: "A scout rode up to report there seemed to be a whole bunch of Indians over the hill."

Then an example of drama: "Oh hell, said General Custer, there can't be all that many of 'em, let's go take 'em on."
That's the quick version. If you set to work on that same set of story elements with imagination and a whole lot of typing paper, you perhaps come up with something like the novel by Douglas Jones, *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer*. 
I think this reliance on traditional storytelling elements operates more directly, for some of us who try to put words on paper about the American West, than is generally recognized. I remember that in the writing of *House of Sky*, when I would get bogged and be trying to think of some fancy format, some kind of literary miracle to conjure onto the page, my wife would say, "just tell me the story." That would settle me down, and the story would begin to get told again.

I know I'm not the only writer out here who harkens to old lessons from storytellers. Listen to Norman Maclean— who I hope is as treasured elsewheere as he is in Montana, for his wonderful story about flyfishing—and life—*A River Runs Through It*. 
"I was brought up in the oral, Western, storytelling tradition. In my day you had to make your own pleasure, and it came out of your work and imagination. You were your own radio station before there were radio stations, and had your own amateur hour between 8 and 9."
And Richard Hugo, in his book about writing, The Triggering Town:

(Hugo)

Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following: (He goes on to list a couple of pages of the kinds of story backdrops he imagines for the poem's sake.)

- The grocer is kind. He gives candy to children. He is a widower and his children live in Paris and never write to him.
- The town was once supported by mining, commercial fishing, or farming.

No one knows what supports it now.

[Birds never stop. They fly over, usually too high to be identified.]
Sometimes this can just be the wonderful lifting sensation of discovery.

When I set to work to write about sheep ranching in the Meagher County 

_Montana_, as backdrop for _House of Sky_, and wanted to give a bit of the 
industry's history, I was overjoyed to find a few pages of anecdotes gathered 
from old sheepmen and forest rangers by the Federal Writers' Project in the 
1930's. It provided material about the immigrant sheepherders who, the 
forest rangers complained, always knew only two words of English, and no two 
nationalities knew the same two words. For the Romanian herders, for example, 
it invariably was "no savvy," and a shrug. For the Norwegian herders, 
it was just the name of their boss—"Martin Grande"—and a shrug.
it invariably was "no savvy" and a shrug—the sort of response, in fact, you might get out of George Gli-gore-eeyuh right now if you asked him for a loan at, say, seven and a half percent. For the Norwegian herders, the two words were just the name of their boss—"Martin Grande"—and a shrug. Since Scotchmen of course were canny enough to own the sheep instead of being out there herding the blasted things, there's no record in these rangers' reminiscences of any pair of words being characteristic of my forebears.
Even when there were more stories than I could use, there was a kind of atmosphere they could add to my work. For instance, one old ranger told the Federal Writers' Project story-gatherer:
"On Sheep Creek I rode into old Mr. Wolsey's place checking on the forest boundary. I asked him how far he owned down the creek. He pointed to an old rifle hanging on the wall and said, "Just as far as old Betsy will shoot."

A useful reminder to me, sitting in my suburban desk chair in Seattle, that some fairly shaggy happenings occurred to people I was plenty old enough to have been acquainted with.

Of course, there's also the bonus that there's never any question of accuracy when a Montanan tells a story. A friend here in the state told me about hearing one old-time describe another, in what I'm sure is general policy out here: "Why," the old-timer said, "that fella was the most honest man I ever knew. He'd tell a story a dozen different ways rather than lie about it."
It's a brief excerpt from the Mormon girl, Patience Loader, coming west to Zion with one of the handcart brigades of 1856. Patience Loader and the weary others began to ford the North Platte River, and in unpunctuated, freely-spelt sentences, she tells us what ensued:

"the water was deep and very cold and we was drifted out of the regular crossing and we came near being drounded---the water came up to our arm pits---poor Mother was standing on the bank screaming---as we got near the bank I heard Mother say, for God sake some of you men help my poorgirls---Several of the brethren come down the bank of the river and pulled our cart up for us and
we got up the best we could—when we was in the middle of the river I saw a poor brother carrying his child on his back—he fell down in the water, I never knew if he was drowned or not, I felt sorry that we could not help him but we had all we could do to save ourselves..."

A diary entry—and as pure a story of adventure and horror as can be written in that number of words.
I said at the start that one reason I wanted to talk about "storying" is its importance to my own work. The other reason is that I think the work of Western writers generally, and the Montana writers specifically, is beginning to gain us a reputation nationally, and I'd like to see the West's tradition of storytelling get its proper credit as that happens.

I suppose part of my reason for this is as a matter of regional pride.
I've read a couple of times recently articles by Southern writers who say they think the motive force behind their writing is the South's tradition of gossip and anecdote—that the Southern love of language propels their work. I easily grant that Southerners probably talk more than Westerners; that doesn't seem to me the same as saying more. I'd like our own storying tradition to have the credit it deserves, even if we haven't spend the past hundred years or so bragging it up.
I say that Western writers, and Montana writers particularly, are getting some national recognition. Of course this recognition is rather startled—something like the moments in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" when Butch and the Kid look back over their shoulders at the posse on the horizon and ask, "Who are these guys?"
Quite a few of us guys at the moment happen, for reasons I'm not at all clear on, to be from Montana.

Just after House of Sky was published, I had a phone call from a bookstore owner in Idaho. He said he'd just been to a magnificent reading Jim Welch had done at the university, from his new novel The Death of Mím Loney and his poetry collection, Riding the Earthboy Forty; and he'd noticed Richard Hugo had a new book of poems coming out, and he reported he was selling a lot of Jim Crumley's latest novel, and of William Hjortsberg's latest novel, and Thomas McGuane soon would have one out, and his copies of House of Sky were selling right and left--finally, "Good God," he said, "you guys from Montana--there must be something in the water up there."
Anyway, whether it's the water or some other western beverage, writers out here are earning those signs of recognition I mentioned. We're starting to hover around the national awards rather regularly. I think I'm right that the last major award to a writer from the upper mountain west was A.B. Guthrie's Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1950—although other Western writers such as Wallace Stegner and N. Scott Momaday, have received prizes since then. But among those of us here in the upper west, Norman Maclean's _A River Runs_
Anyway, whether it's the water or some other Montana beverage, writers here are earning those signs of recognition I mentioned. We're starting to hover around the national awards rather regularly. I think I'm right that the last major award to a Montana writer was A.B. Guthrie's Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1950. But *A River Runs Through It* was chosen for the award by the Pulitzer fiction jury in 1977, only to have it vetoed by the Pulitzer advisory board on the evident grounds that the book wasn't thick enough. Bill Kittredge of Missoula a year or so ago shared the Fiction International award for the year's best first collection of short stories. Richard Hugo has been nominated twice for the National Book Award for poetry, and just a few weeks ago was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize. *House of Sky* was nominated for the National Book Award last year—to what probably
Was an entire chorus in New York of, "Who is that guy?"

Given that it's been a standing joke that literary prizes in this country are scrupulously awarded equally to East and West—the east side of Manhattan Island in New York City, and the west side of Manhattan Island in New York City—this seems to me a considerable record.

Even more signs of recognition: the Master of Fine Arts writing program at the University of Montana is casually mentioned around the nation these days as one of the absolutely best in the country, in the same breath with the University of Iowa or Stanford.
I have a lot of hope that a generation of fine writers, particularly poets from among the students of Richard Hugo and Madeline DeFrees, may come out of the Missoula campus.

A final sign of new respect for those of us out here in the sagebrush: this very month, an issue of Tri-Quarterly, one of the most high-hat literary quarterlies in the country, is devoted entirely to current Western prose, with Kitt Bill Kittredge guest-editing the issue. I haven't yet seen the issue, but from a review of it in the current issue of Rocky Mountain Magazine I see that Montana is moderately well represented--of the 19 authors, at least six are Montanans, the rest are stray Texans and Californians and so on, and of the Montana group, the authors are as diverse as Thomas McGuage, and Dorothy Johnson, and...me.
Rocky Mountain Magazine—where the collection is touted as "regional writing come home to its people—western writing at its best, with the promise of more to come"—I see that among the 19 writers represented are Thomas McGuane, Raymond Carver, Edward Abbey, Leslie Marmon Silko, John Nichols, Cyra McFadden, William Kittredge, Oakley Hall, Cormac McCarthy, Dorothy Johnson, John Sayles, and ... me.
This is a remarkable piece of recognition, this special issue of Tri-Quarterly. Over the years Tri-Quarterly has prided itself on looking at only the latest and most imaginative work, and for it to focus on those of us in the West, I think is simply unprecedented. It's as if Time magazine, say, were to devote an entire issue to dry-land wheat-farming. Any of you who are maintaining special sections of Western literature, or who have patrons or students particularly interested in what's going on right now at our typewriters, I hope will try get your hands on this issue: it does seem to me a literary landmark in Western writing.
It does seem to me likely to be a literary landmark in Western writing—possibly the beginning of recognition such as the Southern writers based around Vanderbilt University, the Fugitive group which included Alan Tate and John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, was accorded, some decades ago.
So the reputation of Western wordsmiths seems to be happening, and as those things usually go, it's probably going to be a reputation based on the wrong thing. My impression is that today's Western writing generally is thought of as a focus on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seem to say so: The Big Sky...Wolf Willow...A River Runs Through It.

The notion, I suppose, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landscape and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in this country, these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.
Every so often, I found that some Eastern reviewer of *House of Sky* would refer to me as having been brought up in the Montana wilderness. Now, we can all grant that White Sulphur Springs, Dupuyer, and Valier may be a little rough around the edges, but they're not that wild.
Characters, I might say, in fact, who have become your tenants here in libraries such as Sheridan's, living as they now do between book covers, on your shelves. This storytelling process I've been talking about of course ends up with you, the librarians and friends of the library. Your own interest in the books which some of us make of the West's trove of stories gets translated into the holdings of your library, and into the recommendations which those of you who are librarians make to your library users. Without you, who operate and support the libraries, we writers and our characters literally are homeless, and I can't pass up the chance to point out that you are as much the conservators, the guardians, of the storytelling tradition of the West as any of us earlier along in the process.
There's one last thing I want to say about the storytelling tradition, because it's the best summary I've found yet about why we deal in stories—those of us who tell stories in Montana bars and cafes, and maybe even Montana libraries, and those of us who try to make writing out of such stories, and those of us who give a good home to that writing.