

died in that epidemic--an approximate five thousand fatalities. (The Mullen and Nelson article, incidentally, is in the current issue, spring '87, of ~~the~~ Montana the Magazine of Western History.) Again, I felt I had to try to portray, from sources of the time, what the flu epidemic seemed like to my created characters: (p. 338, begin "You couldn't"; End with "a barn door.")

Although I'm writing fiction in this Two Medicine trilogy, I believe that my characters' lives ought to respond to what might be called the historical law of gravity. To the pulls and pushes of the larger universe than the one in their heads. ~~of worlds.~~ My novel that's just been published, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, goes across the period from 1889 until just after World War One. Years ago, early in my research, I noticed this paragraph in the standard history of Montana--Mike Malone and Rich Roeder's comprehensive book, Montana: A History of Two Centuries:

Montana demonstrated its support of the war—World War One—by surpassing all other states in enlistment rates and draft quotas for the armed forces. 12,500 young Montana males volunteered for service. And due apparently to confused population estimates, the Selective Service drafted nearly 28,000 more. So nearly 40,000 men—about ten percent of the state's population; not just of the military-age men, but of the total population—about ten percent of Montana's population went to war, a rate of contribution that no other state even approached.

That rate of course is astounding. Did Sparta ever send such a proportion of young Spartans off to its wars? If the U.S. had sent military forces to the Vietnam War at that rate, the total would have been twenty million soldiers. So if I'm to write fiction about Montana during World War One, there is the colossal impact of that war to keep in mind. ~~Again, an obscure voice from a library shelf spells it out for me~~ *Big Horn County in the World War*, the title of the book said when I browsed across it ~~in the UIW's Northwest Collection—a dark brown book, about the size and shape of a high school annual, with an eagle on the cover.~~ Published by the local newspaper editor in ~~the county seat of Hardin, out east of Billings~~

✓ even more.

58 down here

a dark brown volume, about the size and shape of a high school annual, with a patriotic eagle on the cover.

it wasn't really much of a book, ~~and Big Horn County wasn't much of a place then as now, its main claim to fame is the Custer Battlefield.~~

*in World War One*

But start through that book, with its oval photos of men in uniform and a paragraph apiece about their military service, and you begin to notice it goes on and on and on. There are 202 soldiers from that Montana stretch of grassland, in this section of the book. And then you find there are even more—a section called The Men Who Gave All:

Clifford A. Ross, contracted influenza and died three days later, at Camp Dodge, Iowa.

Daniel C. Schutte, while returning from a furlough in France, was killed in a train wreck between Paris and Brest.

Emmett C. Smith, killed in action at Cantigny.

Leonard J. Tudor, saw front-line service in France, died of wounds.

Spencer D. Willey, saw service in France, taken ill with influenza, died in hospital of lobar pneumonia.

Albert Dent, fought in the Battle of the Argonne, died

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of wounds.

Louis A. Gemuent, killed in the battle of the Marne.

Stephen Chief at Night, entered the service at Salem Indian Training School in Oregon, died of tuberculosis at the Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco.

The names, and the ways of death, go on—there are several more—until the final one:

Walter W. Kollmar, killed by a high explosive shell two days before the signing of the Armistice.

Given the vivid actuality of World War One's toll on Montana, did I try ~~place~~ to place its historical effect into my novel? You bet your ~~bottom~~ <sup>bottom</sup> dollar, I did. My narrator, who has watched his own son go off to service at Camp Lewis in the state of Washington, ponders to himself: (p. 324, begin "Suddenly..." End "over there.")

And yes, Dancing at the Rascal Fair eventually has its own list of "The Men Who Gave All."

There was devastation of another kind in Montana--and worldwide--at ~~the~~ <sup>that</sup> same time: one that is certainly not historically unknown to this audience, the influenza epidemic. Historians Pierce Mullen and Michael Nelson, in studying Montana's experience with the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919, find that Montana ranked as one of the four hardest hit states in its rate of infection, and that evidently one per cent of Montana's population

(pause)

Comes now the critical question, out of these musings about place and my efforts to use it in my work. Why the hell go to all that trouble?

The answer seems to be that the people of my books, the language of my books, have to have a place. A place that means something to them. Of course, I'm not the first guy with pen and ink to have thought of this.

his books

Ronald Blythe, who in *Akenfield* achieved high literature by catching the voices of villagers in East Anglia, cites the power of Thomas Hardy whenever Hardy got down to describing worklife in the west of England. The chapter in *Far From the Madding Crowd* when the sheep-shearing takes place in a splendid four-hundred-year-old barn, asserts Blythe, "directs us towards a vision of fundamental labor that contains within it satisfactions that are usually searched for in poetry and religion. Scenes such as this are the permanent cliffs in ~~his~~ writing, stalwart headlands against which melodrama and suspense can fret and dash without any danger of their becoming merely sensational movement. They steady his story-telling and fill it with meditation." Then this: "In such episodes we are made to share in [Hardy's] strangely divided intelligence, on the one hand seeing life as the countryman himself sees it and, on the other, through a private imagination which depends upon certain basic everyday matters to fuel it for his flights."<sup>18</sup>

✓ Hardy's

Well, I concur.

~~Concurred~~. Montana's basic everyday matters — i.e., work—seem to me to be perpetual fuel for a writer. James Welch's description of the lackadaisical bale piler, Raymond Long Knife: "He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on. . . ."19 Mildred Walker's terse and eloquent scene of a family pausing for lunch in the field during wheat harvest: "We stopped at noon and ate by the combine that gave the only shade in all that blazing sun. Mom had a thermos of cold milk that tasted best of all. And then we were back at it."<sup>20</sup> I like such instances of characterization intelligently brought forth from western task. (Truth be told, I like them better than Hardy's Wessex efforts.) And they instruct me, whenever I start to assemble a cast of characters, to get out into the workaday world and recruit some shepherders, ditch riders, forest rangers, bartenders, hay hands . . .

in his novel of Reservation life, *Winter in the Blood*,

in her 1940's novel *Winter Wheat*

Thomas

and so on.

p. 23A below

American

So, to try to sum this up a bit--or at least, end it. Richard Hugo, our great  
 Northwest poet of place, and head of creative writing at the University of Montana  
 until his too-early death a few years ago, has done the best job I know of, in  
 explaining this creative energy that comes from a sense of place. <sup>"If you ain't no place, you can't go nowhere."</sup> In his book,  
 The Triggering Town, Hugo writes: "A poem can be said to have two subjects--the  
 initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or 'causes' the poem to be  
 written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean,  
 and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing." ~~He talks of the~~  
 "place that starts a poem for me (the triggering subject)" as "a base of operations  
 for the poem."

"You mean we're out of...ice cream?"

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~~Western~~  
~~Montana~~

✓ Hugo not only preached the best sermon of placing yourself in western time and space, he practiced it. The producer of <sup>the movie</sup> Heartland, Annick Smith, once made a film about Hugo, and during it got the idea one Sunday of shooting some footage in the old mining town of Philipsburg in Montana. It must have been a mopey Sunday-- and nobody could mope as wonderfully as Dick Hugo--anyway, Hugo said, "What d'ya want to go over there for? That's just a mining town and I don't know anything about mines..." But he went, and a few hours were spent wandering around Philipsburg, and some footage got shot, and everybody went home. Then, as Annick <sup>Smith</sup> recalls, at six the next morning the phone rang and it was Hugo--he was excited, saying "I woke up really early, and I have this poem, and I've got to read it to you--and it's called, Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg..."  
✓  
1

(258 on KUFA tape)

46  
WAMI/25

~~For the <sup>same</sup> of time here, this is a shortened version:~~

Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg:

"You might come here Sunday on a whim.

Say your life broke down. The last good kiss  
you had was years ago. You walk these streets  
laid out by the insane, past hotels ~~that didn't last~~  
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try  
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.

Only churches are kept up. The jail  
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner  
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

Degrees of gray/2

47  
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The principal supporting business now  
is rage. Hatred of the various grays  
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,  
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls  
who leave each year for Butte. One good  
restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out. ...  
Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss ~~is~~  
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat  
so accurate, the church bell simply seems  
a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?

Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium  
and scorn sufficient to support a town...?

~~Say no to yourself.~~ The old man, twenty  
when the jail was built, still ~~is~~ laughs  
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,  
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.  
You tell him no. / <sup>pause</sup> You're talking to yourself.  
The car that brought you here still runs.  
The money you buy lunch with,  
no matter where it's mined, is silver  
and the girl who serves you food is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

All of that--one of ~~the~~ Richard Hugo's most famous and striking and imaginative poems--because he was semi-dragged to an old mining town, a place he didn't want to go to.

So, these are a few of the notions that come to mind in me, when "a sense of place" is mentioned. Not just geography, [~~unmatchable as so much of the landscape of the west of America is.~~] But "place" as something to work from, and work on, and work toward. <sup>#</sup> In one of the best recent Northwest pieces of writing, a book called Sky People by Jack Nisbet, <sup>a few years ago,</sup> who was living north of Spokane when he wrote it, there is a story about one of his neighbors, a wiry rancher in years-old blue jeans,

Thank you for coming today to listen.

sitting around the kitchen with his hat on, drinking coffee, and the rancher says something like, "I haven't been all that many places. But I've seen things where I've been." To me as a writer, and a westerner, I ~~think~~ think that's what counts. Thank you for coming tonight to listen.

alternative material from other versions of "Sense of Place"

I've been imported to talk to you here tonight about place--a Western writer's sense of place, in the literary currents of the world; and my own sense of place from having been born and raised in rural mountain country, in a place called Montana.

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific Montana sense of the word--place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920's or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

Over-rated, in that because a sense of place constitutes quite a lot in the work of today's serious western writers, it's sometimes thought to constitute damn near everything.

In short, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in western literature, but let's don't think it's the whole ~~supper~~ supper.

For there are other senses of place than the merely geographic. A bunch of them. The word place has so many meanings it takes up about three and a half pages in the Oxford English Dictionary--and in my own American Heritage dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of place as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place--which is a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

So, I have my own senses of place, as a writer with a Montana upbringing. Let me try to bring out three of them, and to think out loud at you about how they seem to affect me.

18  
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pretty good

And at one of the first mealtimes, somebody said to me, "Well, you're doing ~~okay~~ <sup>there</sup> on the binder with that master's degree of yours--maybe if you get a Ph.D. you can get to drive the tractor." At the time, I laughed with everybody else. But I know now what was happening, in those mealtimes at that ranch, with the constant question-- which place is mine? I did get a Ph.D.--but I did not go back and ask to drive that tractor. Those places among the hired hands at that table--none of them were mine, or ever going to be, if I could possibly find any way to be on my own in life.

(pause)

Now to the third sense of place I'm aware of in myself, the one that has been making itself known to me ever since I sat down, more than <sup>a dozen</sup> ~~ten~~ years ago, to write something I called my Montana book, which turned out to be This House of Sky.

Some of it can be done <sup>merely</sup> by experience, savvy, ~~practice~~—whatever you want to call it.

When John McPhee went to write about the basketball player Bill Bradley, at Princeton <sup>years ago</sup>,

Bradley had a blind, over-the-~~shoulder~~ <sup>shoulder</sup> shot that fascinated McPhee. McPhee asked

how Bradley could do that, without even looking. "When you have played basketball for a while, you don't need to look at the basket when ~~you're~~ <sup>you're</sup> ~~you are~~ in close like this,"

Bradley said, throwing it over his shoulder again and right through the hoop. "You develop a sense of where you are."

In my case, I haven't been around sheep <sup>full-time</sup> for <sup>more than</sup> twenty-five years and yet when I sit down to write about ~~how sheep ranching was~~ <sup>at least I still know a bit</sup> I seem to have <sup>some</sup> a sense of where I am. ~~I know at once~~

<sup>about</sup> what a sheep rancher's mood <sup>was</sup> is, late in lambing, when his feet <sup>were</sup> are aching from all those weeks of living in overshoes.

And I can see again, from my own times of trailing ~~our~~ our little town of sheep through Dupuyer on our <sup>north</sup> way to the summer grass of the Blackfeet Reservation, the mess a band of ~~sheep~~ nervous --such as my created one of Gros Ventre--in Eng Crk-- sheep makes going through one of those small towns where the highway doubles as Main Street. And in not the most elegant fashion, but pungently, let us say, this kind of ~~my book.~~ automatic savvy ~~man~~ gets used as in this scene from English Creek. An old sheep rancher who's just been through a hard lambing is in the bank in GV --the live one-- cashing a check, and the banker's wife comes in and says something about all the pellets of sheep muss on the streets, from the band that's just passed through. The rancher looks her up and down and advises: "Don't think of them as sheep bleep, Cornelia. Think of them as berries off the money tree."

26  
min

WAM 1/14

Personal experience isn't always an available tool. When it's not, and I'm attempting to write about something to do with the American west--or for that matter, Scotland--I try to go out and take a look. First for This House of Sky, and now for the two novels so far in the fictional trilogy I'm doing, English Creek and Dancing at the Rascal Fair, my wife Carol and I have gone back to Montana summer after summer to take a look and a listen. Part of that research has been to wander around various towns and choose buildings for my fictional town of Gros Ventre--Carol taking photos for me while I made notes. The mercantile store of "Gros Ventre" is from Augusta, for instance, the creamery from <sup>the town of</sup> Conrad, the library from Lewistown, and so on. We're on our way to Montana again in the morning, for the sake of my next novel--a book about Montana at the time of its centennial of statehood, in 1989.

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And, beyond taking a look, for the sake of trying to evoke place in my books, I stop every now and then to take a think as well. Although I'm writing fiction in this Montana trilogy, I do want my characters' lives to respond to what might be called the historical law of gravity. The book I've just finished, Dancing at the Rascal Fair, goes across the period from 1889 until just after World War One. Early in my research I came across this paragraph in the standard history of Montana--Montana: A History of Two Centuries--by Michael Malone and Richard Roeder:

was born, so I had to create the town where he goes to school, his family does their buying--the narrator's father is the ranger on a nearby national forest--  
<sup>the town</sup> where his best friend lives, where the 4th of July rodeo is held, and so on. The town, in all the meanings of that western phrase, I've got to go to town. The only way I knew to create this was to draw on actuality, so let me now make this, for a little while, the tale of two towns. My fictional one and what it's based on.

Okay, first a Montana town, along the eastern face of the Rockies, between the Missouri River and Glacier National Park--I won't name it yet--let's see how much of <sup>this town</sup> ~~it~~ any of you who've traveled that area to Glacier Park might recognize of it. A Montana town, whose Main Street in the late 1930's, I've been able to find out, looked like this as you walked along it:

Helwig's grocery and mercantile, a place with an old-style wooden square front, big plate glass windows, either side of the door. <sup>- a Helena bakery of the time -</sup> An Eddy's bread sign in ~~the~~ one of those windows.

A clothing store named The Toggery--I don't know how many of these there were in Montana, I guess not quite as many as there are bars ~~named~~ called The Stockman; I can remember the Toggery in Livingston, the nearest clothing store when I was a boy in <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ wide spot in the road called Ringling. Anyway, The Toggery of this town you would recognize ~~and remember it~~ at once--a neat pale-brick building with terra cotta along its top like cake frosting.

The drugstore, one of those which are pretty much gone now, with a soda fountain which had a mirror on the back wall.

You could sit <sup>in</sup> there with a milkshake or a float and keep track of the street traffic behind you.

The garage and gas station, with the old pumps where the gas came into the glass container on top...

A business ~~which~~ you rarely see any more but which small towns used to have-- a saddlery and leather repair shop. This one was run by a man named Dale Quint. Maybe it could be said that a mark of <sup>this particular</sup> ~~the~~ time is that this town still had a leather man, but not yet a dentist. A person had to go to the county seat, twenty or so miles, for tooth work.

Saloons, bars, three of them in town--the Pastime, the Medicine Lodge, and Spenger's, named after its owner.

The movie theatre, at that time the one place in town with its name in neon script. It reads, Odeon, O-D-E-O-N, as in nickelodeon. The movie theatre lends ~~and~~ this town another modern touch--at this point in the Thirties it has begun to show the movie twice on Saturday night; first at 7:30, then the "owl show" at 9.

Continuing the look around this town--the post office, the only new building downtown at the time--a New Deal project. Another sign of the times, where there used to be a tailor shop, run by a man named Gene Ladurie, that has become the WPA sewing room.

The town has a library. A small one, but with a big front entrance, a fancy portico.

Only a couple of eating places--people didn't down their food in public nearly as much in those days.

One of these is in the hotel--the other isn't, is about the best thing that can be said for it. Oldtimers remember that oyster stew from a can, with a big blob of butter melting in the middle of the bowl, was about the closest thing to a delicacy at this old cafe.

A doctor's office and a lawyer's office, close together. Maybe for professional company--the town has only one of each.

A few sidestreet businesses should be mentioned--a creamery, a lumber yard and hardware combination, And a kind of sign of change, a trucking business, started by a man named Kerz, *- he painted it big on the door of his truck - Kerry* K-E-R-Z; ~~who~~ found a business hauling coal and fenceposts to this town, and is beginning to haul livestock for a few of the ranchers around.

--like the ones here in town on the SENior citizen's center and the OVERland cafe--

Two banks ~~in this town~~--a live one and a dead one. They sit cattycorner from each other, at the main intersection, and the style in banks when they were built, around the time of World War One, was to have a fancy doorway set into the corner <sup>of</sup> the building nearest the street intersection--these two banks stare down each other's throats in this fashion. The bank that went belly up--half of the banks in Montana failed in the early 1920s, when the --this "dead" bank building homestead boom fizzled--was taken over by a barber; and he simply painted his barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting that fancy doorway.

*Just*  
1 A few more downtown businesses that deserve mention--

the office of the little weekly newspaper, with its ~~plate~~ plate glass window so the editor can see out, and a beauty shop, probably the newest business in town there in the 1930s. And at the far end of Main Street, a big, big stone hotel--which I'll say more about in a minute.

So, in this quick tale of two towns, the Montana main street of the 1930's I've just described to you--I'm now prepared to reveal--is a community named Gros Ventre. G-r-o-s V-e-n-t-r-e, as in the name of the northern Montana Indian ~~Gros Ventre~~ tribe, <sup>Gros Ventre.</sup> And if you still can't place it, in your travels through Montana, it may because Gros Ventre is my fictional town, not the actuality.

24 min

The actuality exists, piece by piece, in a dozen or so Montana towns.

My home-made town of the 1930's, Gros Ventre, is my attempt to place the past-- recognize it to the extent I can, then fit it into the lives of my characters.

Just as a carpenter does more than stand in one place and drive nails into the same board all day, I went about this town-building in various ways.

Comes now the critical question. Why the hell go to all that trouble?

In my own case, the answer seems to be that the people of my books, the language of my books, have to have a place. A place that means something to them. I've described to you ~~my~~ <sup>the</sup> town of Gros Ventre, built by my typewriter for this latest novel, and I mentioned that a big hotel sits at the end of its main street. Listen for a minute or two now, to what this hotel, its presence and its history, triggers in my narrator. <sup>My narrator</sup> ~~He~~ was a 14-year-old in this summer of the 1930's when the book takes place, and he is telling the story from now, so he is a man of around sixty, doing some thinking about life.