I have to confess to you, right off the bat, how impressed I am with you people from Walden's. I don't yet have a copy of English Creek, but every blessed one of you does. How did you do that?

Just on the chance that you didn't all sneak off to your rooms this afternoon and read the whole book, I'll proceed with what Judine asked me here to do—talk about this book of mine. It's one of the most puzzling things a writer is asked to do—to tell what his book is about. John Gregory Dunne once told of the revelation he and his wife, Joan Didion, had when they were starting out as writers years ago. Dunn and Didion were collaborating on a screenplay, what they thought was a strong dramatic story of two young lovers, both of whom were drug addicts—a script they were calling Panic in Needle Park.
The pair of writers tried and tried to interest the movie studios in this script—
they'd get up and describe it as a tale of doomed young lovers, both caught in the
agony of addiction, a powerful parable of modern times—and they got nowhere, so at
last they got an agent. The next morning, a phone call from the agent, who said,
"Well, I sold your screenplay to a studio." Dunne said, "You did what? Already? How?"

The agent said, "I just described it to 'em."

"Described it? What do you mean described it? Joan and I described it to
every movie guy in Hollywood—story of doomed young lovers, both caught in the agony
of addiction, a powerful parable of modern times—and they turned it down flat. How'd
you describe it?"

"I just described it, --Romeo and Juliet as junkies."
So, let me see what I can do about my novel *English Creek*—a story set, as my earlier book *This House of Sky* was, in Montana, along the face of the Rocky Mountains—about a family in the 1930's, trying to pull their way out of the years of the Depression into better times—a tale of a rural valley, of its small town, of its summer of ranch and forest work; an unforgettable 4th of July celebration; a young man and a young woman defiantly saying they're going to get married, against the wishes of their parents; a powerful parable of...

You know, that agent maybe had something there. How about...Romeo and Juliet on horseback?
I don't know that I need to recite the plot of English Creek to you: both the Kirkus Review and the Publishers Weekly review did that, to an extent that both thrills and horrifies a novelist. I spend a couple of years putting all those surprise turns of plot in a novel, and reviewers can just hold up an X-ray of it like that? Yeah, they can, and they do. So let me spend my time instead on some of what went into the writing of this book.

I suppose the first good news, given what's been happening in Montana the past few weeks, is that English Creek has a forest fire as its climax. The Kirkus Review was generous enough to say about this, "Doig's reconstruction of 1930's fire-fighting—from the roar of a tree crowning out to dust and char—is a spellbinder." Well, if there's any truth to that praise, it owes greatly to the retired forest rangers I talked to in Missoula and Great Falls, getting them to tell me how things were done
in the 1930's when you had a forest blazing in up-and-down country, and a crew of ranch hands and drifters rounded up from the skid roads of Spokane and Helena and Great Falls, and orders from Region One headquarters in Missoula to get in there and take that fire by its face.

To me, a vital part of the literary construction job that makes a book is the finishing-work: making sure you the details right. This I try to do by checking and sometimes rechecking, and re-re-checking, with people who know about those details—those old forest rangers who told me everything I wanted to know, and sometimes more, about how to fight a forest fire by hand; a retired rancher's wife in Great Falls garden who was my unfailing source on how vegetables were canned, and what kind of a lunch you fixed to take to a field where a dozen hungry hay hands were waiting, and
what the special cake was that you brought to a 4th of July picnic in the 1930's—a chocolate sour cream.

In all this there was a personal bonus to me, as there so often is when I get involved in gathering lore from living people. English Creek has in it a haying season, when the haying machinery still was run mostly by horses instead of horsepower. When I was a kid in Montana just after World War Two, my dad was a haying contractor every summer, and his crews largely put up hay in that old workhorse way.

So I had my own memories to bring in and use. But, I had to admit to myself, those days when I was a red-headed kid in a hayfield are getting to be a long time ago, in a galaxy far away. So to add other memories to my own, I ran little classified ads in the Dillon and Deer Lodge weekly newspapers.
Books set here on this side of the Mississippi haven't always given attention to the workaday life. It's a little more than 80 years now since the publication of The Virginian, Owen Wister’s famous novel of the West. That book provided millions of people, all around the world, with a version of the west of America. That version is that when a bad guy insults a good guy—in the book, the actual insult is "you son of a blank"—the good guy dangerously drawls back, "When you call me that—smile." But as I remember that book, that sort of thing is about all that does go on in The Virginian—or for that matter, in a lot of the shoot-em-up versions of the West. None of the guys, good or bad, seems ever to do a lick of everyday work—milk a cow, churn butter, plant a potato.
You get the impression that somewhere just out of sight, there must be a catering service, maybe someplace around Omaha, that comes out and feeds everybody, and does the chores.

Nonsensical as that sort of portrait of the west is, it does have consequences: it fudges the terms of life in much of the actual American west—that, east of the Cascades, this is a big, dry, fragile, contentious part of the country which requires a lot of work to make a living—and that, even here on the west side of Mount Rainier, the ecosystem is challengingly complex—as a forestry scientist once pointed out to me, between the crest of the Cascades and the Pacific shoreline there can be as much variation in climate as in the stretch between the Gulf of Mexico and mid-Ontario.
If I am trying to write about the reality of western life, in this book I am also doing it in the voice of a westerner. Specifically, in the voice of my narrator, Jick McCaskill. I'm asked a lot, any more--now that I have two books of each--how come I've gone from writing non-fiction to fiction? Isn't it hard to write fiction? My answer is, well, it ain't easy--but what's hard about non-fiction is not having the freedom to make people say what you want them to. You're bound by actuality. In writing Winter Brothers, for instance, I had to go through a couple of million words of James Swan's diaries to cull out the ten thousand or so words which are his voice in the book. But in fiction, you can bring on the characters and see what they have to say.

It turns out that my Montanan narrator, Jick McCaskill,
14 years old in the summer English Creek takes place, says early in the book: "If I ever get old enough to have brains, I will work on the question of man and woman." Indeed, Jick works on that question a lot, witnessing the McCaskill family situation of that summer, when his older brother Alec has gone against their parents' wishes and declared he's not going to college, he's going to keep his job as a rider on a cattle ranch and marry the local blonde vamp. English Creek is probably the least explicit novel you'll sell this fall, but sex does keep rearing its lovely head to Jick. Here he is in the middle of the book, speaking in his voice of a man now, looking back on that long-ago summer:
"I saw once, in recent years at the Gros Ventre rodeo, a young bronc rider and his ladyfriend watching the action through a pole arena gate. They each held a can of beer in one hand, and the rider's other hand was around the girl's shoulders. Her other hand, though, was down resting lightly on his rump, the tips of her fingers just touching the inseam of his levis back there. I'll admit to you, it made my heart turn around and face north. That the women now can and will do such a thing seems to me an advance like radio."
In this matter of voice, I think I'm working under the inspiration of a couple of great accomplishments of the past few years—G.B. Edwards' novel of life on the isle of Guernsey, *The Book of Ebenezer LePage*; and Russell Hoban's remarkable tale of tribal life after a nuclear holocaust, *Riddley Walker*. Those two first-person pieces of fiction seem to me to succeed miraculously in converting a fluid spoken language into a fixed written one. They make sound visible on the page: and my hope is that Jick's voice is indelible in its own way.

So, a workaday portrait of western life, and a valid distinct voice, were what I've consciously worked toward in this novel. But people tend to think authors always know what they're up to in a book—even authors make the mistake of thinking that—and now that English Creek is between hard covers—
now that the book is really a book—I see some results in it I never intended. One is that, perfectly obliviously, English Creek shares warmth from a new hot topic: hard times down on the farm. Two big movies of it this fall—Places in the Heart, set in Texas during the Depression, with Salley Field and Ed Harris (Norma Rae and John Glenn in the cotton field, you can't beat it)—and Country, with Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard. It's interesting for me as a writer, to look up from my typewriter and discover I'm in some kind of a parade. A more important unforeseen result of the work that went into this book, though a literary one. When I was finishing up with the very last of the writing of English Creek, I happened to read somewhere that the novelist John Gardner used
While I was writing English Creek, I read somewhere that John Gardner used to tell his writing classes there are only two really good stories—somebody goes on a long journey, and a mysterious stranger rides into town. Reading that perked me up quite a bit. I've never taken a class in how to write fiction, so like the bumblebee who doesn't know that it's aerodynamically impossible for him to fly, here I was, blithely buzzing out fiction that has both of those stories in it.

The journey is an early-summer packhorse trip into the Rockies which my narrator, Jick, makes—it constitutes about the first third of the book—and the stranger is a man named Stanley Meixell, a former forest ranger now reduced to tending sheep camp. Stanley turned out to be one of those characters an author wishes he could patent the formula for. He kept appearing unexpectedly on the page,
and saying things I didn't know I knew how to write—and before I realized it, Carol and the friends who read pieces of the manuscript for me were wanting to know what was going to happen to Stanley, this is a real guy, good old Stanley is. So English Creek became not only the book of the McCaskill family, but Stanley's book—the book of a Western loner who, when Jick asks him why he has come back to the Two Medicine country after all these years, replies: "Jick, by now I been every place else, and they're no better."
English Creek

I hope, too, though, that this is a book about community. About my belief, evident in my other books, that we live in a community of time as well as of people. So convinced of that am I, that English Creek will be the first of three novels, covering a hundred years of the lives of the McCaskill family, and of the history of Montana—the last third of this trilogy, in fact, I intend for Montana's centennial year of statehood, 1989. (Which happens to be Washington's centennial as well.)

This business of describing a book stays tough. As much as I say, there's even more that I could say, echoing around in me from the past couple of years of creating this novel. Probably, though, I'd do well just to let English Creek speak for itself, these last few minutes. Here is the scene where Dick begins his summer job—riding horseback every morning from his father's ranger station.
Here is a scene from the forest fire portion of the book. Jick's father, Mac, is the fire boss, and unbeknownst to Mac, the problem of cooking for a fire camp of 75 hungry men has been taken on by 14-year-old Stanley Meixell and Jick. It's their first mealtime, the firefighters have been eating avidly, and Jick narrates:
We have a blurb quote here on the back of English Creek from Wallace Stegner—modestly used—the type isn't near as big as the title of the book. It reads:

"There is no room in the days of the McCaskill family for the cynicism and plain blahs that infest many modern lives and the fiction that reflects them. Hard and limited as it is, this is loved life, and loved country."

I'm glad that shows through. Thanks for inviting me down here tonight.