



University of Idaho

College of Letters and Science
Department of English
P.O. Box 441102
Moscow, Idaho 83844-1102

Phone: 208-885-6156

Fax: 208-885-5944

E-mail: englishdept@uidaho.edu

WWW: <http://www.uidaho.edu/LS/Eng/>

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Dear Ivan Doig:

Our paths crossed, I believe, at a Western American Literature Association conference in Coeur d'Alene some years ago, but there's no reason why you'd remember me. I am presently preparing a sabbatical leave proposal for a study of western (mostly northwestern) literary memoir, and I have a couple of questions I hope you will be kind enough to answer:

- (1) Could you name a couple of memoirs that influenced you when you were working on *This House of Sky*? (I've presented this book at regional libraries and have taught it in my Contemporary Northwest Writers class on several occasions, by the way, and it goes over very well.)
- (2) Would you name a couple of memoirs you particularly like?

Of course I'd *like* to add a request for some quotable comments pertaining to the above (like what was it about Memoir X that influenced your writing, or what is it you like about Memoir Y), but that might prove too much of an imposition.

In any event I do hope to hear from you, and I'll appreciate anything you have to say (except maybe some sort of advice like "don't do it").

Cordially,

Ron McFarland
Professor

ronmcf@uidaho.edu

208-882-0849 (H)

885-6937 (W)

P.S. May Blen provided me your new address - I hope that's okay with you.

30 March 2002

Dear Ron--

Glad to hear of your sabbatical project--there's a ton of good writing in recent Western memoirs, and as I'm about to argue to you a little bit, a lot more conscious literary technique than has been generally noted. And on the chance that anything in my own files might be helpful, I'm enclosing some stuff which I'll remark on in the course of this letter.

In my own instance with *This House of Sky* and for that matter *Heart Earth*, I may be less than helpful to your premise that other memoirs inspired my doing of them. First of all, it shouldn't be missed that I was already a professional writer by the time I started on *Sky* in the early 70's--a couple of jobs in journalism behind me, three textbooks in print, author of about a hundred magazine articles, five or six poems published; in short, a full-time writer intoxicated with the various blends of language. Couple that with the fact that I'm a fairly flatfooted step-at-a-time thinker, and my original notion was that of a working professional to write a book of some sort--that is, it would find its own form as I worked on it--about my father and his vanishing generation. I soon realized I could not write about his life without writing about my grandmother's 21-year share of it. Then realized I couldn't write about the two of them without including myself, the stickum that brought their lives together. In the sporadic journal I kept during the writing of *Sky*, the concern is always to try to achieve wondrous language for the book, rather than any frets about fitting it into the "memoir" genre or following somebody else's inspiring example. The anthem I marched to is a January '75 entry:

"It would be magnificent to do the entire book with this slow care, writing it all as highly charged as poetry--but will I ever find the time?"

As you'll see from the sample cover letter, when the time came to try to place the book-to-be with a publisher and you have to try to tell them what it is "like," my approach then was to cite two classic "memory" books--*Old Jules* and *Wolf Willow*--that did not fit within the usual boundaries of memoir. (The cover letter went out under the name of a friend who acted as my agent for the book, but the letter's language is mine.) That is, I did not cite, say, A.B. Guthrie's *The Blue Hen's Chick* or Nannie Alderson's *A Bride Goes West*, more traditionally shaped memoirs and both of which I'm quite fond of. As it turned out, citing the Sandoz and Stegner examples didn't cut any mustard anyway; the reply from St. Martins Press is quite representative of the rejections from twelve publishers before the lucky thirteenth, Harcourt, offered a contract on the basis of my manuscript sample (about a fourth of the final book, and not nearly as polished as the final version). The acquiring editor, a publishing genius named Carol Hill (who besides recognizing *Sky*'s potential also once spotted some promise in a manuscript that entered the language as *I'm OK, You're OK*--versatile, huh?), chose to subtitle it not a memoir but "Landscapes of a Western Mind," and indeed when the book became a finalist for the National Book Award, as is shown by the listing I'm sending along it was selected not for "Biography and Autobiography" but a category called "Contemporary Thought."

All of which is a longish way of saying, Ron, that I think the literary aspect of these Western books of the workings of memory stands out more than their memoirish marshalings of what it was like to grow up out here. If I was influenced by writings of the heart in the making of *Sky*, those writings would be the marvelous bloodpumping language of Faulkner, Jeffers, Eiseley, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Dinesen, Turgenev, and probably dozens of other great conjurors of sentences. In short again, I was a professional reader within a professional writer. I think it was perspicacious of Richard Maxwell Brown, in his remarks when *Heart Earth* got the Evans Biography Prize, to cite the level of education and professional achievement--dare we call it literary and historical sophistication?--behind the "grassroots" memory-retrievals of us Westerners; myself, I just like to point out that, say, Mary Blew and Bill Kittredge and I have eight college degrees and probably a couple million published non-memoir words among us; sure, we started as ranch kids and remember it well, but...

To your second point, memoirs I'm in love with, I'm assuming you mean Western memoirs, although at the end I'm going to try to inflict a couple of others on you to bear on the point that this 'Western' stuff of ours has magnificent brothers, sisters and cousins in other literary locales.

--*Balsamroot*, I'd say, for its contemporary power and cohesiveness of situation, although *All But the Waltz* is also a marvel. I'm passing along a review I did of *Waltz*; unfortunately I've never written anything about *Balsamroot*.

--As a second choice perhaps something from further back in time, maybe Oliver LaFarge's *Behind the Mountains* --I'm not sure it is an actual memoir since it's about his wife's family, but it is surely a work of remembering with great grace to it--or Wright Morris's *Will's Boy*, which stretches the West to Nebraska but then so does *Old Jules*.

Lastly, a couple of memoirs that take place on the turf of the human heart, whether it happens to be located in the West or not. One of my favorite books ever is *Sorrowless Times*, by James Herndon; I'm sending along a Washington Post "Rediscovery" review I once did of it, and you might note before you ever bring it up before an audience that the book's language is sometimes spectacularly raunchy, which fit perfectly with my own memory of military service. And *Bronx Primitive*, Kate Simon's potent coming-of-age in New York in the years after World War I.

I hope some of this helps, Ron; all good luck with the project, and if you publish anything out of it, I'd be keen to see it.

Sincerely,