Northwest Series
Discussion Guide

StoryLines America

A Radio/Library Partnership Exploring Our Regional Literature

StoryLines America:
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Exploring Our Regional
Literature

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Discussion Guide

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
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A Radio/Library
Partnership Exploring Our
Regional Literature

Northwest Series
Discussion Guide
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The Way West

by
A.B. Guthrie

The Way West is A.B. Guthrie's third novel, a Pulitzer-Prize winner and sequel to *The Big Sky.* In *The Big Sky*, Guthrie portrays the life and times of Boone Caudill, Jim Deakins, and Dick Summers, three mountain men who have ventured into the wilderness of the West to trap beaver in streams along the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains near Guthrie's lifetime home, Choteau, Montana. The popularity of this book earned Guthrie much early acclaim, and eventually, of course, Guthrie's home state was nicknamed "Big Sky Country."

Why do stories of the American West appeal to so many readers? This is not an easy question to answer, although a close examination of Guthrie's novels and the works of other western writers gives insight into the character of the American people in general and also reveals the motives, myths and realities of westerners in particular. Guthrie is acclaimed partly for having portrayed the West more realistically than earlier novelists who romanticized Western history, mythologizing mountain men, cowboys and lumberjacks in the tradition of James Fenimore Cooper's larger-than-life frontiersmen.

Guthrie wanted to set the record straight, and to some extent, he did just that: the story of Boone Caudill, Guthrie's main mountain man, is gritty, violent, and tragic. Many scholars argue, however, that Guthrie's vision of the West is clouded by the same idealizations and popular half-truths that he had intended to expose and dispel.

How realistic or how romanticized is *The Way West?* Dick Summers, one of Guthrie's mountain men in *The Big Sky,* is the principal focus of *The Way West,* and Summers's character is the thread on which these two novels are strung. As a mountain man, Dick Summers is simply not made of the right stuff. He's too civilized, too sensitive, and unwilling to kill senselessly. Fittingly, at the close of *The Big Sky,* Boone Caudill, in a jealous rage, has mistakenly slain his best friend, and Boone is left wandering in isolation and self-doubt as the brief era of the mountain man closes in the 1840s. (Top hats were no longer in style in Europe and the eastern U.S., and the demand for beaver felt had declined.)

By this time, however, Dick Summers is married and farming in Kansas. In the mid-1800s, wagon trains are gathering in Kansas for the long trip west to Oregon Territory. These trains were largely comprised of farming and ranching families. If Dick Summers wasn't ruthless enough for life in the wilderness, these greenhorns were even more in need of guidance and protection. Boone Caudill loathed the idea of wagon loads of settlers invading his open spaces. Who could be better suited to leading civilization west across the wilderness than the wise and paternal Dick Summers – in his buckskins and with his mountain man savvy?

What forces drive these settlers to brave the perils of western migration? What are their aspirations and illusions? What events and trials will disillusion them on the trail, and how will the hard knocks of reality modify earlier expectations?

Like the mountain men, the settlers were attracted westward largely by economic opportunity. This is true for many of the families in the "On-to-Oregon Train" of Guthrie's *The Way West*: there's land "free for the taking" in Oregon Territory. That land is often idealized in the settlers' minds as a paradise of plentiful wild game, rivers teeming with fish, endless grasslands for grazing livestock, and soil so fertile no crop could possibly fail.

An old restlessness of spirit and thirst for adventure also motivates some of these people westward. Dick Summers, for instance, may not be entirely suited to living in the wild, but he's also restless in his more settled life on his Kansas farm. After Dick

resolves to guide the train, he dons his buckskins prematurely in anticipation of the adventure. In the heat and humidity of the Kansas summer, Rebecca Evans chides Summers for his garb: "I'd think you'd melt to a grease spot." Summers replies with chagrin, "I reckon I got ahead of myself, sure enough."

Lije Evans also has an adventurous spirit: "I ain't satisfied just to work to keep myself up so's I can work some more. There ought to be more to livin' than that." The adventurous spirit is infectious. "It's in the air," Evans explains to Summers, "like a fever hangs over a swamp."

But Evans is also driven by "patriotism"; for his country's sake, he wants possession of Oregon Territory before some other country gains ownership. Though he may never have heard of the term, Evans believes in "Manifest Destiny," the idea that white European Americans were destined to conquer the continent. This idea eventually became a government policy used to justify the destruction of any obstacle that stood in the way of settlers, developers, and new treasure hunters as they pushed westward.

Brother Weatherby has another motive for westering. "I feel the Lord is calling me to the new land," he says, "perhaps to bring His blessings to the heathen." By the close of the novel, Weatherby has taken a post at a Methodist mission where the former preacher has become disillusioned and wants out.

Underneath these spoken reasons for moving west, there are deeper, more subtle forces at work. One such force is the "work ethic," a belief in the innate goodness and reward of hard work and all things challenging. Evans claims he feels a "fierce unworded pride" to be facing the hardships ahead on the trail:

It wouldn't be easy. It wouldn't be what people call fun. Great was the name for it, the only name he could find in his mind… he felt greatness.

Dick Summers also notices how the settlers revel in hard work. He says that the settlers, in contrast to the mountain men:

… couldn't enjoy life as it rolled by; they wanted to make something out of it, as if they could take it and shape it to their way if only they worked and figured hard enough.

Another subtle force propelling these people westward is the attraction of moving "back to nature" and the notion that in such a setting, humans behave in a happier, healthier, more natural way. This attitude is closely related to romanticized conceptions of the wilderness as a primitive Eden containing abundant God-given game, good soil, and inspirational beauty. In the same way that people today hanker to leave the city, Lije Evans wants to journey with his family to Oregon Territory for the sake of his son, Brownie. It is Brownie who grows and "comes of age" most noticeably on the trail. The key to Brownie's maturation is his mentor, Dick Summers, who schools Brownie on the goodness of nature. At one point in the book, Brownie is overwhelmed with his newly-learned appreciation for the beauty and goodness of the natural world. He wants badly to tell "how it was with him":

…his chest filled sometimes when he came to a rise and looked over the country or how his heart jumped just at the smell of camp smoke or the lonely voices of the wild geese that had nested along the river. He would know then that good things awaited him, great things that he couldn't put a word to or set out in thought.

Just as Dick Summers succeeds Boone Caudill – and as the world around these

characters changes and progresses – Brownie represents the passing of the torch from Summers's era of migration to a new era of settlement in the West. Significantly, Brownie marries while on the trail, and Summers encourages him to do so even though his new bride is carrying another man's child. Brownie chooses to marry despite his feeling that, "A man don't like less than what he'd hoped." He comes of age through his acceptance of imperfect reality. His dreams are not ruined, but they are certainly changed. This is exactly the lesson so many other pioneers on the trail west had to learn before they arrived in Oregon Territory. They had arrived where they set out to go, but they had changed before they got there.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is Dick Summers a believable character? In what ways is he idealized by Guthrie? By the settlers? Through what events or incidents does Guthrie show Summers's shortcomings?

2. Contrast Lije Evans and Irvine Tadlock as leaders. Why was Tadlock unseated as captain? How was Evans more successful? Is the West seen as more egalitarian than other regions like the South or the Northeast, where awareness of social class may be more prevalent?

3. There are many "coming of age" stories in American literature and in the movies. Can you think of some? How are they similar or different to Guthrie's story of Brownie Evans? Similarly, there are many "on the road" novels and movies. Can you name some of these? What do they have in common with *The Way West?*

4. Is there something in the American character that believes "the pasture is always greener on the other side of the hill"? Do we still believe, like the early pioneers, that it's possible to pack up our lives and move else where to make a "new start"?

5. What attitude does Guthrie portray toward women? Was this the prevailing attitude during Dick Summers's lifetime? During Guthrie's lifetime? Did the journey change the relationships between men and women? What about Mr. Mack and his wife? Rebecca and Lije Evans? "So on the trail," Guthrie tells us, "women came to speak and men to listen almost as if to other men." What do you think of that?

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Coyote Stories
by
Mourning Dove

Mourning Dove is the pen name of Christine Quintasket, a remarkable woman in many respects. With little formal schooling and a lot of determination, she became a novelist, recorder of Native American lore, rights activist, and the first woman elected to the Colville Tribal Council. She labored much of her life as a migrant worker in the orchards of Washington, her home state. In the introduction to the Bison Books edition of *Coyote Stories,* Jay Miller describes Mourning Dove's difficult situation:

Even on days when she spent ten hours packing apples, she wrote into the night, long after other exhausted workers had gone to sleep.

Mourning Dove published another novel, *Cogewea,* in 1927, with a good deal of encouragement and guidance from Yakima Valley businessman, Lucullus Virgil McWhorter. McWhorter also edited first drafts of stories Mourning Dove gathered from elders of her own Okanagan Tribe, and these collected tales became *Coyote Stories.*

Cultures all over the earth tell stories. The stories told are as old as humanity and have been passed from generation to generation during long nights around winter fires. They exist in our own modern-day living rooms during holidays and family gatherings, when we participate in the traditions of our people, sharing the stories behind our customs in much the same way that Mourning Dove as a child listened to the lore of her tribe.

Mourning Dove remembers the storyteller, Old Narciss, and how he would "… jump up and mimic his characters, speaking or singing in a strong or weak voice, just as the Animal Persons were suppose to have done." And she remembers Broken Nose Abraham:

He was old and crippled. He came to our village usually on a white horse, riding double with his blind wife, who held the reins and guided the horse at his direction. It always thrilled us to see Broken Nose ride into camp; he had a stock of such fascinating stories. Broken Nose could not dance for us. He could not even walk without the support of his two canes. But he sang exciting war songs, and we liked to sing with him.

As any child might, Mourning Dove and her playmates thought of these events as "all fun and play." Later in life she realizes their larger implications. As an adult, Mourning Dove understands that story-telling was a sort of "primitive education," and she feels compelled to gather her traditions, preserving them in a book for future generations.

Even though these stories may be printed in books like *Coyote Stories*, they cannot be said to have been authored by anyone in particular, nor can they be fixed in time, place, form, or content. These stories are not the work of any individual imagination; they are folklore, anonymous, always changing, coming and going into and out of the hearts, minds and mouths of countless tellers.

Sometimes the stories may seem silly or childish. Indeed, they are often told to children, but scholars remind us that folklore can be a powerful influence in the way we see ourselves and interpret the world around us. Robert Bly, for instance, in his recent best-seller, *Iron John*, examined the wisdom embodied in certain European tales and the value of those tales in the social and psychological maturation of men. Joseph Campbell, a noted folklorist, researched religious mythologies around the globe. His books reveal the commonality of seemingly disparate beliefs, all of them showing the human spirit aspiring toward God.

Many Native American tales are also of religious origin and fulfill a spiritual purpose. It may be difficult for non-Native readers to see religion in these stories; Native American tales are so vastly different from the narratives told in the Bible and other teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Or are they not so different? Readers of *Coyote Stories* may find a deeper appreciation by comparing and contrasting the stories with stories from their own religious training.

The stories in *Coyote Stories* are creation stories, and the Creator has set the characters in motion. The original inhabitants of Earth were non-human—animals of varying unfinished forms. In the stories, these animals interact in order to define themselves and to prepare the world for human arrival. The conduct and misconduct of these early beings serve as models or warnings for humans in the future. Coyote certainly provides adventures enough to instruct and entertain many generations to come!

Coyote is sometimes assigned tasks by the Creator, sometimes plans his own escapades, or simply stumbles into mischief. He is a trickster and a transformer. Like trickster figures in the lore of tribes across the Americas, Coyote delights in mocking others, often making a fool of himself, but leaving behind him a legacy of necessary and meaningful change. In his actions, he defines codes of conduct for tribal life and relationships between tribal people and the nonhuman world.

Coyote's character is similar to the Everyman of early European folklore and to familiar figures in the lore of other cultures. He shares the foibles and habits of humanity. In the foreground of his exploits is the hand of the Creator, helping Coyote to learn the hard lessons we all must learn to coexist, grow and survive on this Earth. Coyote is profane, greedy, lustful, brash, self-centered, and arrogant, but he is also crafty, tenacious, and filled with exuberance.

Coyote is who we all are, but because he belongs to the lore of Native Americans, Coyote's world is also particularly Native American. He learns not to stand above others. Pride and self-importance are the flaws which bring him embarrassment and humility. Coyote lives in a tribal world, a world in which the group is more important than the individual, and the "good of the group" may be damaged by the self-centered actions of individuals. Non-Native American settlers in the American West prided themselves on their "rugged individualism," an idea that runs contrary to the values of tribal life. In both *The Way West* and *Honey in the Horn,* other readings in this series, pioneers of the early West are motivated by selfish ambitions for personal gain. Discovering how to work together for the good of all is a difficult concept for many people.

Chief Standing Bear, in the forward to *Coyote Stories,* says, "... it is good that we bestir ourselves and salvage at least a part of our inheritance." Because Native American ways have helped shape our national identity, "our inheritance" appropriately refers to all Americans. "These legends," continues Chief Standing Bear, "are of America, as are its mountains, rivers and forests, and as are its people. They belong!"

Questions for Discussion

1. Jay Miller, in the introduction to *Coyote Tales,* says that Mourning Dove appears to have altered the facts of her own parentage. He tells us she strove to recount these tales as accurately as possible, although she altered them purposely to suit a broader audience. How much can we trust the authenticity of Mourning Dove's work? Does no one own folk traditions or does everyone own them? Are traditions damaged when people alter them freely? Or are they enhanced?

2. Coyote serves the Creator's purposes, but he also serves his own instincts and imaginings. How do these purposes differ? Or are they the same?

3. Native American cultures value tradition and strive to keep the past, the "old ways," alive in the present. What are your attitudes toward tradition versus progress and change? What traditions do you follow in your family life? At work? In your spiritual practices? In rearing your children?

4. What is the significance of Coyote's talent for resurrection after he has been killed? Coyote's medicine powers were lodged in his intestines and emerged as his feces. What might that mean?

5. Mythologies around the globe have varying stories to explain the sun and the moon or to account for the behaviors or markings of animals. Can biology, physics, and astronomy be considered forms of myth making? Why or why not? What do you have to "take on faith" to believe in creationism? What do you have to "take on faith" to believe in evolution?

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Honey in the Horn

by
H.L. Davis

The title of H.L. Davis's Pulitzer Prize-winning first novel, *Honey in the Horn,* is taken from the lyrics of a folk/ fiddle tune. In the introduction to the book, Merrill Lewis asks the reader to examine how the characters in this wry novel interact, as if their steps were being "called" by the narrator, who choreographs this dance much in the style of Mark Twain, grinning with wit and irony. Like Twain, the narrator is no romantic, but revels instead in debunking illusions by realistically portraying both the confounding mysteries and contradictions of human character and the odd complexities of human interaction.

Honey in the Horn is set in Oregon in the first decade of the twentieth century, during the final years of homesteading, and a generation or two after the wagon trains in A.B. Guthrie's *The Way West* braved the perils of crossing the wilderness in search of a better life in "paradise." Guthrie's characters never found their paradise, of course, but had to revise their expectations when their dreams proved unrealistic. To live in H.L. Davis's Oregon, Guthrie's pioneers would have had to revise their dreams a stretch farther. The reader, like Davis's freight driver, Zack Wall, may be "teetotally snuggered" as to why this "hellhole" appealed to anyone at all.

In recent decades, western historians like Patricia Limerick (*The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*) have become interested in how the "facts" of western settlement may indeed be colored by our collective fancies. *Honey in the Horn* calls into question the myths and lore of western settlement. Davis exposes the elusive, deeper, and perhaps darker and largely unconscious forces shaping these characters. In this way, he himself may be considered a "pioneer," one of the first "revisionist" historians. What are the myths of western settlement, and how does Davis attempt to correct and revise those myths?

On the dome of the capitol building in Salem, Oregon, stands a tall golden statue of "The Oregon Pioneer." Of bronze enameled with gold leaf, he stands twenty-four feet tall and weighs more than eight tons. Though he is more likely a farmer than a mountain man, in his larger-than-life stature he embodies long-standing popular sentiments about the frontiersman as noble and heroic, much like the romanticized characters of A.B. Guthrie's Boone Caudill and Dick Summers. These popular sentiments are created largely in the same way as the tales in Mourning Dove's *Coyote Stories,* not by any one person in particular, but by the collective dreams and self-styled image of a people. They are the stories we tell ourselves: many settlers ventured westward believing in the payoffs of adversities overcome, the just rewards of hard work, the bountiful opportunity of open spaces, the "back to nature" cleansing of the soul.

Popular myths can be good for business. Builders of cross-continental railroads hyped the idea of a western utopia, aiming to populate towns beside the rails. Myths can become government policy; "Manifest Destiny" was the justification for grabbing up territory and dispatching military forces when it was deemed necessary. Moreover, such popular illusions may also become our history; the influential historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, believing in the myth of the noble pioneer, theorized that the American character was perfected as America moved westward, overcoming the trials of the wilderness to become more democratic, more tolerant, more wise, more like Lije Evans or Dick Summers.

Then along come people like H.L. Davis, in the tradition of the boy who saw clearly that the emperor had no clothes, to purposely or inadvertently deflate powerful collective delusions about the western kingdom. In his "note" prefacing chapter one, Davis claims "...no intention... of offering social

criticism or suggesting social reform." Instead, he wants the characters of this fiction to represent "every calling that existed in the State of Oregon during the homesteading period – 1906-1908." The key word here, as Merrill Lewis says in the introduction, is "calling." In using this term, Davis is suggesting the way in which the steps of a country square dance are "called," and that each of us might be dancing to a call much larger than our announced purposes and goals.

Davis used the term 'calling'...to identify not just what people did but what led them to do what they did – not what economically or politically motivated them, but what inner urges moved them toward some activity that became inextricably part of their identity...might be called their obsessive preoccupations rather than their occupations.

What are these callings, these obsessive preoccupations? *Honey in the Horn* opens in Shoestring Valley, at Preston Shiveley's toll bridge. Symbolically, Shiveley settled where he did, not by design, but through marriage. He manages the toll bridge, charging people to cross, but not many people come this way any more because there are new and better ways to get to where most people are going. He is "Uncle Preston" to an array of adopted orphans, and he raises sheep. But his real passions are "a great swad of intellectual interests like writing and inventing and experimenting." He was "death on anything that distracted him" from these pursuits, though none of these preoccupations "had ever brought him in the worth of a mule's heel full of hay...."

Other characters are similarly preoccupied. The "guitar-playing woman" has a habit of rescuing males down on their luck, which never turns out very well for her. Later in the book it is revealed she murdered the man with whom she had wintered. Luce's father is a horse trader on the outside, but what really stirs his juices and propels him from place to place is a penchant for racing his horses and gambling. Luce is driven at all costs to protect her father from himself. In her attempts to recover her father's gambling losses, she commits murder. Covering her crime, in turn, looms as an unseen motive behind the rest of her actions.

Meanwhile, Wade Shiveley is blamed for a murder he didn't commit, and his efforts to prove his innocence only entangle him further. Eventually he is hanged by a mob of do-gooders who would have given up the chase had Old Leonard been willing to abandon his hounds and turn back. Old Leonard wants his dogs returned home more than he wants Wade Shiveley brought to justice, yet Old Leonard dies trying to catch up with the hounds. The mob assumes Wade Shiveley shot Old Leonard, but Old Leonard was actually knocked off his horse by a clod of heavy mud kicked loose from another horse's hoof and trampled to death. This is the way the novel moves from one event to the next. It's a disturbing, though often hilarious, presentation of how the "facts" of history might be merely the nearsighted understanding of those who were there at the time.

Clay Calvert, just a boy, becomes the central concern of this book when Preston Shiveley coerces him into smuggling a pistol into Wade Shiveley's jail cell. Clay is thus implicated in Wade's escape, and he, too, becomes a fugitive from justice. Or at least he believes himself to be a fugitive, and Davis again shows us how the stories we tell ourselves may be more potent than the facts.

Clay's adventures, or misadventures, shape this novel finally into a "coming of age" story in which Clay must overcome various tests and challenges to attain manhood. Like so many of his contemporaries, he is searching for paradise, for the "honey in the horn"

of plenty. He wanders from place to place and moves on again after becoming disillusioned or in some way dispossessed. He is also searching for human connection, for community and for Luce's love, but his attempts are thwarted by the lies he tells about his own identity. He can't be truthful about who he is because he believes he's a criminal on the lam. By the time he discovers the truth, his situation is much more complex than he had earlier imagined. In his wanderings he has caused human misery and added to the overall confusion.

By the close of the book, Clay and Luce are reunited, both recognizing their own responsibility in causing harm. Significantly, in the final scene, the couple pitches in to help the settlers' wagons across a difficult place in the trail. The innocence has gone out of the love affair, if there had ever been innocence in the first place, but Clay and Luce are united in the task of moving on, at last not just for their own sake, but for the sake of a community they have deemed "worth belonging to."

Questions for Discussion

1. After Clay and Luce separate, Clay feels "hollow" and aimless. "It was an old enough feeling, that of realizing whatever you touched changed to something else under your hand... ," the narrator tells us. Can you think of instances in the Northwest, past or present, where we have blindly damaged what we had intended to enjoy?

2. Davis writes, "There are only two divisions of North American animals who can stand in the same light with the buzzard for plain, dull, senseless gluttony. The Canadian wolverine can; he will tear up and befoul with urine any food that he hasn't got room for himself. The other division is a little too tony to bother with spoiling mere food, and that is the one people belong to." This is an indictment of the American character as gluttonous. Are humans self-interested and greedy in general? Are Americans in particular?

3. Rumor and gossip abound in this story, clouding the truth. Yet the characters participate in weaving false realities with relish and exuberance, even though they may damage themselves. Isn't this much like Coyote's behavior in Mourning Dove's book, *Coyote Tales*?

4. How much can we trust the "facts" of history? On the other hand, what "truths" can be found in gossip and rumor and the stories we share?

5. Is Davis's view of human behavior completely dark? Is the way in which he mocks his characters mean-spirited? Is Davis a misanthrope? Or is he simply a realist?

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The Surrounded

by
D’Arcy McNickle

D’Arcy McNickle’s first novel, *The Surrounded,* is in many ways the beginning of a “Native American renaissance” in contemporary literature, and McNickle’s work might be looked upon as the mold from which other modern Native American novels are cast. McNickle’s novels prefigure the writings of James Welch, Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and Louise Erdrich. Each of these authors shares McNickle’s interest in the culture clash between white individualism and Native American tribalism. Each of their protagonists, like Archilde in *The Surrounded,* has come back home for the spiritual nourishment and sense of belonging which is insufficiently available, if not unattainable, outside the circle of tribal life.

D’Arcy McNickle was born in St. Ignatius, Montana, in 1904, but soon after his birth, he was kidnapped by whites. He was eventually educated at the University of Montana and Oxford University, and became an anthropologist, professor, author, administrator, and founder of the Newberry Library in Chicago, which houses a prestigious collection of books by and about Native Americans. Successful in the non-Native American world, McNickle also valued and nourished his tribal heritage. Thus he could write with expertise on the contrasts between these two realities.

In *The Surrounded,* Archilde Leon has come home to the reservation to visit his family. He has been educated in boarding schools far from Montana and now supports himself as a fiddler in a show house in Portland, Oregon. During his absence, Archilde has become estranged from his family and the Native American way of life. At first he has difficulty relating to his own people, reminding himself that “When you came home to your Indian mother you had to remember that it was a different world.” Archilde intends only a brief visit with his relatives and plans to return to his life in Portland soon. However, a complex chain of circumstances prolongs Archilde’s stay in St. Ignatius. Soon – enmeshed in troubles – he cannot leave.

What brings Archilde home to the reservation in the first place? Perhaps it is a basic human need to return from time to time to the place of one’s origin. We trace our family trees to reach some deeper perspective about who we are and from what histories we’ve descended. This “homing” instinct seems particularly strong in Native American cultures. The story of Archilde Leon is similar in this regard to the novels of many other Native American authors whose protagonists return to their native land and eventually – though often unwittingly – to their Native values and perspectives.

So the “why” of Archilde’s return is not to be questioned; he simply *must* go home as if in response to an irresistible call within his own psyche. In the opening of the book, Archilde sits at the creek’s edge and meditates upon his return, knowing that the forces which had brought him home “were nothing that could be touched and yet they had strength and substance. He had come a thousand miles because of their pull upon him; some day they might pull him from half across the world.”

What prevents Archilde from leaving? What circumstances compel him to postpone his return to Portland? Archilde, like D’Arcy McNickle, is a man torn between two contrasting ways of life. He has mastered the ways of the white man’s individualism. He is educated, self-supporting, and is striking out on a path of his own outside the reservation. But his instincts are also tribal; he feels obligated to his people and puts their needs above his own. Thus Archilde embodies the clash of two cultures – he is reluctant to give up his hard-won, self-sufficient individualism in the white world, but he cannot bring himself to completely forsake the collective needs of

his own people, his own tribe.

So the question – What prevents Archilde from leaving? – is an important consideration in understanding the nature of tribalism. It is easy for non-Native Americans to empathize with (and approve of) Archilde's plans for himself in Portland, but more challenging for them to comprehend the forces that pull Archilde back into his tribe and hold him there. In the end it is more than fate, dumb luck, or mere circumstance that binds Archilde to his home. When Archilde's white father, Max Leon, first sees his son after an absence, he exclaims bitterly, "So you've joined the tribe again, eh?" Archilde takes offense at this remark, but chapter by chapter Max Leon's words come true.

Other characters in the book are also drifting away from the laws, customs, and religion of the non-Native American world that surrounds the reservation on all sides. When the government agent commands that Mike and Narcisse, Archilde's two small nephews, be returned to boarding school, the boys resist by fleeing to the woods and living in a teepee. Significantly, the boys are afraid of the "Black Robes" (priests) and the teachings of Catholicism. Mike has been punished at school and suffers episodes of bed wetting and nightmares. He is cured of these troubles when old Modeste arranges to give him special honors at a traditional Salish ceremony. Similarly, Archilde's mother confesses her troubles to the priests, but doesn't feel right within herself until she participates in a traditional Salish "whipping." Although she has been a devout Catholic for most of her life, Archilde's mother rejects the white man's religion entirely by the close of the book, asking on her death bed not to let the priests preside over her.

A concise and readable history of the Black Robes amidst the Flatheads in Montana can be found in K. Ross Toole's *Montana: An Uncommon Land.* Toole tells in greater detail of the Flathead expeditions (1831, 1835, 1837, 1839) which journeyed from St. Ignatius to St. Louis in search of Catholicism and the "power of the crossed sticks." In 1840, the famous Jesuit missionary, Father De Smet, arrived in St. Ignatius to manage the church and convert the eager Flatheads.

For awhile, relations between the Black Robes and the Flatheads proceeded smoothly, but in 1845 Father Ravalli wrote that the Flatheads had suddenly reverted "to savage obscenity and shameless excesses of the flesh." What had gone wrong? Toole maintains that from the start Father De Smet knew the Flatheads believed that the powers of the Black Robes would protect the tribe against the Blackfeet, whom the Flatheads feared and hated. He also knew that the priests had "quite obviously overestimated the depth of the moral and abstract nature of the conversions they had made and underestimated the extent to which the Flatheads thought of Catholicism as a practical protective cloak – in other words, simply as powerful medicine."

The Surrounded, although it speaks of events occurring almost a century after the Flathead apostasy of the 1840s, tells of similar failings of Catholicism among the Flatheads. In conversation with Max Leon, Father Grepilloux admits that Catholicism and the imposition of European values have been more of a bane to the Flatheads than a blessing. "You have least to complain of," Father Grepilloux tells Max Leon, "You lose your sons, but these people have lost a way of life, and with it their pride, their dignity, their strength." Then dutifully he adds, "Of course ... they have God."

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapter four, Max Leon talks of his earliest days as a non-Native American settler in St. Ignatius: “You stood there and what you saw made you over. You were born again. What you had done before that moment was of no consequence.” In chapter six, Archilde is captivated by the stories told by the elders of the tribe: “For the first time he had really seen it happen. First the great numbers and the power, then the falling away, the battles and starvation in the snow, the new hopes and the slow facing of disappointment, and then no hope at all, just this living in the past.” These passages present a stark contrast between the white man’s and the Native American’s notions of the “past.” How do they differ? How are these conflicting notions at work in the story of Archilde’s return to his home?

2. Archilde’s troubles may stem from the expectations other people put on him. His mother expects Archilde to take her hunting. His father expects Archilde to take over the ranch. His brother expects Archilde to join the horse thieves. Think of other characters in the book and the expectations they have of Archilde. Then think of how the consequences of those expectations get Archilde more deeply involved with his people and more deeply in trouble with the law. Is Archilde a weak character? Is he a caring person, or is he simply being used by others?

3. The notion of “rugged individualism” carries with it the idea of “every man for himself,” or that people should strive for self-sufficiency before they even consider taking responsibility for the welfare of others. Tribalism, as set forth by Native American novelists, asserts a much different attitude concerning the individual’s responsibility to others. Using examples from the book, how does the tribe cohere even under domination by outsiders? What role do the elders play? What function do traditional stories have? What are the benefits of individualism? What are the problems? What are the benefits of tribalism? What are the problems? The romantic notion of Native Americans as wildmen in paradise who act as they please without conscience or inhibitions seems far different than the character of Archilde. What things trouble Archilde’s conscience? What considerations both motivate and inhibit his actions?

4. Chapter ten recounts events in boarding school that diminished Archilde’s faith in Catholicism. When others are kneeling to pray before a cloud shaped like a crucifix (“The sign! Kneel and pray!”), Archilde notices a bird flying past the cloud, according the cloud no special notice or regard. The bird recognized no “sign,” and Archilde uses this in his own mind to prove that the significance of the cloud was merely an abstraction, a human invention. What does the Bible say about man’s dominion over the animals? Why might a Christian not be troubled if animals fail to recognize the importance of a religious event? Archilde seems to gather a sort of wisdom from the bird’s flight. Is that paganism? Or is that term a misnomer for Archilde’s relationship to other creatures?

5. The aged Modesto begins the ceremony with the words, “Ho! Let it be as it was in old times!” When Ronald Reagan hosted the “G.E. Theater” on TV, he emphasized his sponsor’s motto: “At G.E., progress is our most important product.” Discuss how these opposing statements embody a vast difference in the values of these two cultures. How do those values affect a person’s lifestyle? How do those values affect a person’s definition of success?

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A River Runs Through It

by
Norman Maclean

On the surface, *A River Runs Through It* is a novella about fly fishing in Montana, but beneath the surface run swirling currents of philosophical and religious notions, and a complex examination of family relationships and responsibilities.

"In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing," begins the tale of two sons of a Presbyterian minister. The events of this story are simple enough: the narrator and his younger brother, Paul, have learned from their father the art of fly fishing, a pastime for which they've both developed an enduring passion. The narrator's wife and mother-in-law ask the brothers to take a n'er-do-well brother-in-law fishing, as if going fishing might somehow cure him of fool-headedness and personal failure. But the fishing expedition gets all mixed up with too much drinking and a loose woman named Rawhide. It ends with the narrator in trouble with his wife and mother-in-law for not having taken firmer charge of the brother-in-law to save him from his own proclivities for drinking and debauchery.

Are we our brother's keeper? The failed fishing trip with the brother-in-law raises this important question about family obligations. The same question is played out in greater depth between the narrator and his brother, Paul. From the first few pages onward, Paul is troubled by demons of his own, drinking and gambling. In this regard Paul might seem inferior to the narrator, whose life flows more evenly. However, the narrator heaps the highest of praises on Paul, especially for his prowess with a fly rod, and for as long as the action takes place beside the river, the older brother walks with reverence in the younger brother's shadow.

In the end, Paul is murdered in the streets, and the implications are that his drinking and gambling have brought him to this tragic demise. The narrator is left "haunted by waters" and wonders if there weren't things he might have done differently in caring for his brother. "It is a shame I do not understand him," the narrator states early in the story. He concludes, "In the end I could not help him." Still, the question of one person's responsibility for another, says the narrator, is one of "the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go."

The narrator is expected to help his brother and his brother-in-law, and the cure he prescribes for both is to take them fishing. In order to comprehend how on earth fishing might save anyone, the reader must recognize the "primitivist" values underlying this novel. Primitivism is a belief in the innate goodness of nature. Man is flawed from the start by original sin, but nature is forever Eden, a perfect place of God's own making. In order for man to get in touch with God, he must go back to nature, return to the natural rhythms of God's wilderness. This same doctrine also implies that outside of nature, in more "civilized" towns, is the dwelling place of all evil. Thus the brother and brother-in-law might be healed if only the narrator can free them from the evil influences of civilization by taking them out into nature.

The preachings of the narrator's father, a Presbyterian minister, are also rooted in a profound primitivism. The father takes the boys fishing between Sunday sermons "to be on the hills where he could restore his soul," says the narrator, and where he could "be filled again to overflowing for the evening sermon." While the boys fish with their father, he asks them repeatedly, "What is the chief end of man?" The boys answer dutifully, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever."

Fly fishing is the perfect way to glorify God and enjoy Him in nature because fishing takes the man out of civilization and back into the innately God-like rhythms of the wilderness. Fishing has always been

looked upon as a more philosophical or meditative sport, but the art of fly fishing is especially linked with what is poetic or divine because it requires great practice and concentration. So the father drills the catechism into his sons with the same "Marine-style" discipline he employs in teaching his sons to cast flies. To the narrator's father, "all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy."

Paul alone seems to make fly fishing look easy. He is the most accomplished fisherman in the book, lordly in his mastery of the art and in his almost mystical comprehension of where the trout are hiding and what is on their minds. He wears all the flies he needs in his hatband and protects his matches and cigarettes under his hat, while he swims against the current, using one arm to propel himself and the other to hold his precious fly rod high above the river. Time and again the reader's attention is focused on Paul's skill with a fly rod, and any close look at the very faults which will eventually undo him is obscured by a myopic attention to the details of fly fishing. "Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart," says the narrator. Possibly something in the narrator, a darker truth he will not face, also tries to make Paul into a fisherman who is more perfect and apart than is really the case.

This darker truth about Paul is also worth a great deal of examination, though the narrator himself only hints at the problem. The narrator characterizes his family as a very close-knit unit. He goes so far as to say he had assumed the words on the Sunday School wall, "God is Love," were meant explicitly for the four members of his family and "had no reference to the world outside." Yet communication between family members seems limited by some sort of censoring that will not allow talk of anything less pleasant than trout. Though the mother still butters Paul's biscuits for him and seems to have had a special liking for him all along, she merely turns away at any talk about Paul's drinking or gambling. The father seems to retreat to high philosophical ground, portraying his son as some sort of divine being – perfect in nature – and thus avoids a closer focus on his son's earthly shortcomings.

Meanwhile, Paul repeatedly attempts to smash through the shell of his family's pretensions – or so it would seem – though he too will only venture so far into intimacies with his brother. The narrator is haunted by a vague recollection of Paul telling tales (such as the story of running his car into the ditch, perhaps drunkenly) that may have been a cry for help. But the cry is so muffled and ineffectual that the narrator is always left uncertain as to exactly what his brother means in his confessions. The narrator makes several overtures aimed at helping his brother, but the brother shrinks from aid. We are all left wondering what, if anything, might have been done to save one of our own.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is nature "good" and man's nature innately "evil"? Why do many people love to hunt and fish? What do we gain from hiking in the woods or fishing along a creek?

2. What is the gospel according to the narrator's father? Why is fly fishing so closely connected to religion? How and why does he use the word "beautiful"? What does he mean when he says, "All good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy"?

3. Toward the end of the book, the narrator comes upon his father reading the Bible. The father says,

> **In the part that I was reading it says the Word was in the beginning, and that's right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water.**

"That's because you are a preacher first and then a fisherman," the narrator responds. "If you ask Paul, he will tell you that the words are formed out of the water."

"No," the father says, "you are not listening carefully. The water runs over the words. Paul will tell you the same thing."

What is the significance of this exchange? What does it have to do with Paul?

4. The narrator concludes that in the end there was nothing he could have done to help his brother. Is this conclusion true or false? What things does the narrator do to try to help? What is he unable to do? Why is it so difficult for the two brothers to talk? Did Paul want help? Are we our brother's keeper? Should the narrator be held responsible for his brother-in-law in the same way he might be held responsible for his brother?

5. Some readers are disturbed by the way women are portrayed in this book. Can you think of examples of things said about women or the things women do in this book that might show some prejudice against women? William Bevis, a University of Montana professor, goes so far as to suggest that if fly fishing is a passage into heaven, then Maclean's everafter may be populated exclusively by males. Where do you stand on these issues?

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No-No Boy
by
John Okada

America was founded on certain ideals that its citizens have ever after struggled to live up to. Racial tolerance, the right to dissent, equal opportunity, and freedom from governmental tyranny are the cornerstones of our Constitution, though in the course of our history there have been glaring inconsistencies between these professed convictions and the realities of our daily lives. Early European immigrants came to this continent in search of religious freedom, but when they could not Christianize Native Americans, they could justify killing the "heathen savages." Liberty and justice for all, regardless of race or creed, proclaims our Constitution, but its authors, such as Thomas Jefferson, were slave owners.

America opened its arms wide to the "huddled masses" of the poor and dispossessed immigrants who crowded through Ellis Island, but the language of our streets abounds with ethnic and racial slurs, as does the literature of some white supremacist groups who have founded new enclaves in the Northwest. America fought the Second World War against Fascism, and its people were horrified by stories of families herded into Nazi "camps" because of their ethnic heritage. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were confined in "relocation centers" in various western states. Amidst the hysteria of war, few Americans saw the irony in practicing at home some of the same behaviors we deplored in nations elsewhere.

Among Japanese Americans today, the relocation and internment camps of the Second World War are not forgotten. The existence of these camps calls into question whether the ideals of racial equality in America are mythical or real. This is the foremost concern of John Okada's novel, *No-No Boy. No-No Boy* is the first Japanese American contribution to the growing body of literature written by America's ethnic minorities, expressing the inner and outer realities of life in America among its various communities.

No-No Boy may be for Japanese Americans what Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man,* was to African Americans, or James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* was to Native Americans. Each of these novels explores the difficulties of ethnic identity in America and the human cost of slavery, the reservation system, and internment camps. These books add to our broader understanding of America as a nation of many cultures. They underscore the differences among people and point the way toward mutual respect.

No-No Boy opens with Ichiro, the central character, returning from prison to his parents' home in Seattle. He and his family had been confined in one of the camps for Japanese Americans during the war. Ichiro was a "No-No Boy," a young man who refused to sign a loyalty oath and enlist in the American military. For this decision, he was sent to a special internment center with other No-No boys and ostracized from his community. Now, upon his return, he is caught more than ever between his parents' Japanese identity and his own American roots.

Ichiro's mother and father, like many other immigrants, had come to this country with the dream of prospering economically and one day returning to their homeland. Ichiro's mother holds on to her Japanese loyalties and the dream of a return to Japan so stubbornly that she refuses to believe Japan lost the war. She is proud of Ichiro's resistance in the camps, and believes her son shares her fierce nationalistic devotion to Japan. Ichiro, however, is not who his mother believes him to be. He is American-born. He knows nothing of life in Japan other than what he hears from his parents, and he is told little of that. Prior to the war, Ichiro was a civil engineering student at the University of Washington. His plans for the future were optimistic and thoroughly "American."

Consciously or unconsciously, he likely subscribed to American ideas about equal opportunity and justice for all regardless of race.

The internment of Japanese Americans in the camps and his imprisonment have changed Ichiro's outlook, causing him to question the reality of American ideals and his own identity as an American. He had wanted nothing more than a college education, a family, a career and the rights of American citizenship. He walks the streets of his boyhood home, thinking about his refusal to enlist and wondering, "Was it possible that he, striding freely down the street of an American City, the city of his birth and schooling and the cradle of his hopes and dreams, had waved it all aside beyond recall?"

The internment camps plunged the dreams and expectations of many Japanese Americans into crisis. Many young Japanese American males chose to enlist rather than resist, and some of these men, like Eto, who spits upon Ichiro, despise the No-No Boys as traitors. Ironically, all of these men are referred to simply as "Japs" by whites in the book who know no better. Thus, Ichiro is caught between worlds. He can't "go back to Tokyo" as people shout at him, because he is American, not Japanese, and he rejects his mother's dreams of return as delusional.

Ichiro's own Japanese American neighborhood is now badly divided by the camps and the war. He is persecuted as ruthlessly by his own people as he is by others, and most of the book details events in which Ichiro struggles not to despise his own kind, thereby not to despise himself. Moreover, as surely as Ichiro once identified himself as thoroughly American, now he feels like an outsider. He is more conscious of his differences, especially the physical differences that mark his ethnicity.

There are characters in the book, however, who by coming to terms with themselves and the realities of their own situations, are also accepting of others regardless of the war. Kenji, a crippled Japanese American veteran, is such a character. Kenji befriends Ichiro, encourages him to not be swallowed up by the hatred and bigotry that has been showered upon him. Kenji is dying slowly of his gangrenous wounds. He savors life with his friends and family, accepting his wounds and eventual death with compassion for others rather than with blame, hatred and feelings of separation. Similarly, the young woman, Emi, continues to tend her gardens at home in the countryside, despite the pain of knowing her husband Ralph, a veteran, will not come back home because of his own brother's pro-Japanese actions during the war. Emi chides Ichiro for his hopelessness and reminds him that as imperfect as his situation is in America, he would have been shot for his actions had he been living elsewhere. She explains:

But this country is different. They made a mistake when they doubted you. They made a mistake when they made you do what you did and they admit it by letting you run around loose. Try, if you can, to be equally big and forgive them and be grateful to them and prove to them that you can be worthy of the frailties of the country as well as its strengths.

The character of Mr. Carrick, a Portland businessman who offers Ichiro a job, teaches Ichiro that not all whites are enemies. Mr. Carrick speaks some Japanese and has lived for several months in Japan. Ichiro returns from Portland to Seattle, having decided to do the difficult but necessary work of being forthrightly himself even toward his mother and in face of his scornful peers. In the final scene, Ichiro comforts his tormentor, Bull, who has also just led Ichiro's friend Freddie to his death. As Ichiro becomes more willing to accept himself and the

difficulties and limitations of his situation, as well as the limited promises of America, he is increasingly able to champion compassion and understanding toward others. The ideals of America are now real, because they are embodied in his own character.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Ichiro refuse military enlistment? Why did other Japanese Americans choose to enlist? Is Ichiro a strong person or is he weak? What are his convictions?

2. Why did Ichiro's mother refuse to believe that Japan had lost the war? What were her plans for the future? "Your mama is sick," says Ichiro's father. What is her sickness?

3. Okada says, " ...you couldn't have loyal Japanese when Japan is the country you're fighting and, if so, how about the Germans and Italians that must be just as questionable as the Japanese or we wouldn't be fighting Germany or Italy? Round them up. Take away their homes and cars and beer and spaghetti and throw them in a camp and what do you think they'll say when you try to draft them into your army of the country that is for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" What causes bigotry and racial hatred? What helps overcome bigotry and racial hatred?

4. Is No-No Boy another example of the familiar American refrain, "You can't go home again"? What separates Ichiro from his parents?

5. Ichiro and other characters in this novel tend to blame themselves and others for their troubles. How responsible is Ichiro for his own suffering? How much is his suffering caused by forces and events beyond his control?

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This House of Sky
by
Ivan Doig

This House of Sky is a book of memories, tracing Ivan Doig's life from birth through middle adulthood. The book opens with Doig's mother's death in a Montana sheep camp when Ivan is only six years old, and closes with the deaths of Doig's father, Charlie, and maternal grandmother, Bessie Ringer. These two people profoundly shaped Doig's childhood; each of these lives was intertwined with the others. Doig eloquently articulates the victories and defeats of their adventuresome years together, drifting from one ranch job to another, eking out a shared survival from one season into the next.

As a memoir of life in the American West, *This House of Sky* distinguishes Doig as a literary craftsman, and the reader may marvel at that achievement after reading this book and appreciating the difficult circumstances of Doig's unusual background. *Hole in the Sky*, by William Kittredge, an Oregonian, is another modern first-hand account of a writer's origins in western ranch life. Both of these books follow a longer tradition of memoirs by noted authors whose books portray not only vivid accounts of regional lives, but also trace the awakening and development of artistic temperaments, such as Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings.*

Doig, like other writers with roots in the American West, is in love with the landscape, and he is careful throughout this book to paint an accurate backdrop for his characters' lives. In any agrarian economy, the weather and the soil and the topographical features of the countryside will of course figure prominently. But Doig's reverence for the Montana landscape of open spaces suggests a greater connection to the land than economic interests.

Some of our country's ideas about the West have originated in romantic myths perpetuated by Easterners who seldom, if ever, set foot beyond the central plains. For instance, the myth of vast tracts of rich crop land beyond the Mississippi led many unsuspecting believers to trek westward expecting to farm for easy profit on a 160-acre homestead. That size may suit the needs of a dairy farm in Iowa or Wisconsin, but Montanans know it takes much more than 160 acres of space to successfully graze sheep and cattle in the arid grasslands of the unpredictable West.

While Doig never romanticizes the landscape and climate, he is profoundly conscious of its power and beauty. Perhaps he is conscious even of its *meaning* as a force in not only the external circumstance of human life but also the internal shaping of human character and values. At one point, Doig recounts his grandmother's precarious struggle to set free a group of drowning cattle in a flooded corral. When finally she succeeds, she simply and humbly states, "A person can do a lot of things like that when you're in a corner."

By the close of the book, Doig has left Montana for good, choosing to make a life for himself and his wife as a freelance writer in Seattle. Although it might appear that this relocation is a rejection of Doig's roots in Montana, from another angle this move is consistent with the way of life Doig has learned through the risks and hardships of ranching. Like his grandmother, he is willing to measure himself against the adversities and the ambiguities of every new day. Moreover, *This House of Sky* is the story of leaving a past way of life behind, and in that respect Doig's memoir is consistent with the works of many other contemporary western writers who also explore this theme. Mary Clearman Blew (*All But The Waltz* and *Runaway*) and William Kittredge (*Owning It All* and *Hole in the Sky*) are notable examples.

Doig is also in love with the language of his family and his neighbors, and he takes pains to accurately capture the wise and humorous

underpinnings of the rural vernacular. Doig calls this language "street voices" and gives us examples such as these:

You could of talked all day and not said that.

Seen anything of that long-geared geezer who was gonna break that gelding for me?

That Swede don't know enough to pound sand in a rat hole.

The benefits to children of being raised in a communicative and literate home have often been touted. But Doig could hardly be said to have come from such an environment. Doig is sensitive to silences, to the voice of the wind and the insects and birds when he is alone in nature, to his father's hesitant and indirect manner of easing into delivering a message, and to all the meanings in his grandmother's pouts and flashing glances. Perhaps without consciously intending it, Doig models a truly democratic and egalitarian relationship to all whom he encounters, even animals and outsiders. He reminds the reader that a lack of formal schooling does not necessarily make a person ignorant, and that the illiterate can sometimes read in the sunset the odds of an approaching storm.

Most of all Doig is in love with his family, though by the "Beaver Cleaver" definition of family, Doig's kin may not appear to measure up. Doig's earliest years are spent in isolated sheep camps, migrating with the flock as shepherds have done since the origins of humanity. His mother dies of asthma and the hardships of life in the wilds, leaving her six-year-old and his father to learn the rhythms of their own peculiar bonding. By current standards, the reader might view the youngster as an abused child when he naps nightly in the seat of the pickup, curling up patiently until his father emerges from the saloon to drive home. The young Doig changes homes and schools seasonally, boarding with strangers for months at a time.

Doig seems to have alarmingly few close friends, no playmates, and no family save for his father and grandmother who team up with each other only in the presence of constant tension and emotional turmoil. As the boy rides in the truck next to these two, he says, ". . . I would look aside out the window touching cold on my shoulder, wordlessly crying a kind of prayer that the mood would get no worse, damning in my head the one or both of these chilly warriors. Or more often the both." Yet it's perhaps the central value of this book for the reader to try to make sense of how this "brink of a family" comes in the end to much love and much pride. This question is the undercurrent of Doig's story.

In the poetic interludes between sections, Doig asserts the power of his memories and dreams, praising his earliest years spent in the open spaces under "a single great house of sky." Doig's history of his "family" is a puzzling mix of tenderness and pain. It's a miracle of sorts the way the events of one's life conspire to create a unique person.

Questions for Discussion

1. Throughout the book, Doig comments on the strange workings of memory over time and space. Doig may be recounting his memories accurately, but could his memories be coloring or clouding the "facts"? Over time, are we likely to look back more fondly or more factually? Which do you think Doig is doing?

2. *This House of Sky* portrays "one writer's beginnings." What evidence does Doig show of his early leaning toward becoming a writer? Is he shaped by his environment, or does he shape the world around him imaginatively? It's the old question of nurture versus nature: Are writers born or made?

3. What events or circumstances in the book might shape Doig's character? How might things have gone differently? What did young Ivan learn from his father's example? His grandmother's? Out of hardship and disadvantage, Doig seems to have gleaned dignity and reverence from his past. Is he romanticizing, looking back through "rose colored glasses"?

4. Does Doig admit to any disadvantages in his early life? What is his attitude toward his family endlessly moving about and starting over?

5. Imagine the story of Ivan's childhood as told by Charlie, or by his grandmother. How might the slant have been changed? What reports would the neighbors have given? How about the local social worker? Ivan enthusiastically appreciates his father's and grandmother's helping role in his life. But could it be that Ivan, even as a child, was a sort of glue that kept the lives of these two adults from splintering?

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Runaway

by

Mary Clearman Blew

The fourteen stories in Mary Clearman Blew's *Runaway* circle a central theme: life on the family farmstead suited some people just fine, others not. These stories explode the myth of rural life as peaceful, simple and wholesome. Blew's characters suffer estrangement from their own background on the family farm; they struggle against isolation, monotony, narrow-mindedness, and the brutality of male dominance. They long to escape, to run away.

In *All But the Waltz,* Mary Clearman Blew recounted events in the lives of her grandparents who homesteaded in Montana, and the lives of her parents who labored to keep the family homestead intact despite unrelenting hardships and disheartening set-backs. Against this backdrop, she tells of her personal struggle to leave behind the ranching culture of her ancestors and make for herself a separate identity in another place. Many of the characters and events in *Runaway* resemble Blew's own life and the lives of her ancestors.

In her own life, Mary Blew lists many hurdles and pitfalls she had to surmount in order to overcome the rules and expectations of the dominantly male society she'd been born into. She asserts, "I was supposed to be my father's boy." She isn't allowed to cry or show fear; when she's thrown from a horse she knows she is expected to remount again and again even at great risk to her own safety. Blew's early interest in books invites ridicule. Her father foresees his daughter's future as continuing the family's ranching traditions, and only reluctantly allows her to go to college with the assumption that she will return to the community to teach in one of the rural schools. "Somewhere you got the idea in your head that you know something," her father chides her, "but you don't know a goddamned thing."

Like the women in the family before her, Mary Blew is expected to marry, have children and tend to the support of the ranching household. Blew finds herself pregnant during her first year at college and is told by her new in-laws she should give up all plans for her own schooling in order to support her husband's education. "But Mary," her mother-in-law exclaims, "How can you expect to go to college and take good care of a husband and a baby?" Nevertheless, like the women Blew most admires, she persists in her education and in building an identity of her own apart from ranching. Her story is the "relentless struggle" to keep alive "what is most mine, my self."

At the center of this struggle is the rejection of the culture into which she is born – the ranching and cowboy tradition – and an ever-growing desire to "escape" into the larger world beyond. Scholars have pointed out that this is a familiar story in the West. In *Ten Tough Trips,* William Bevis discusses stories of "westering" and finds a simple common pattern: dream, disillusionment, endurance or escape. People ventured westward dreaming of riches and paradise and a chance to make a new life in a brand new land. They discovered harsh realities on the trail, or in the day-to-day chores of scrabbling out a living far from civilized comforts they'd left behind. Their illusions died in face of new realities, and westerners were left with the difficult choice to endure and persist or to pack up again and move on, escape.

Those who stayed set their jaws stoically and commenced with the chores. After a lifetime of hard work, they were understandably proud to have wrested a living out of a piece of land they could call their own. They expected their children to feel the same; they not only assumed their offspring would continue on the family homestead, but often they also exerted great pressure against any other option. This is the story of Mary Clearman Blew's life, and it is a dilemma faced by characters of *Runaway.*

In the opening story, "College Bound 1957" the

high school-aged farmer's daughter, Margaret, aspires to a college education, but receives great resistance from her school counselor and her own father. Margaret talks to her counselor about the possibilities of college, and her counselor chides, "Oh, come on, Margaret, do you really want to go to the U and leave Bill Anderson behind?" Bill Anderson is a boy who worked summers for Margaret's father, the sort of boy who might end up farming for the rest of his life. When Margaret protests, her counselor rebukes her more forcefully, "Oh, for God's sake! What have you got to cry about? Who do you think you are? Don't you realize what you're asking your parents to do? ... Do you realize what they've gone through with that dairy? Do you want to ruin it all for them?" Education was Blew's personal escape from the family homestead, and the reader can only wonder how many of the details from these short stories are also the facts of Blew's life.

"Album" is a similar story. A young woman, Jean, has gone off to college but returns to visit two aging old women, her great-aunt and her great-aunt's sister- in-law. As the trio page through an old family album, Jean considers her Grandmother's life on the homestead:

How did she stand it? ... She had eight children and lost five. Two to diphtheria, two to influenza, one drowned. Living out there on the homestead for days and days without seeing anybody, and there isn't even a tree in sight. Carrying all her water a quarter of a mile, and Grandfather never ever talked, to her or anybody else...

The old women answer simply,

Things come to us, and we meet them.
Your grandmother did her duty same as we all did....
Things pass.

Jean recognizes how limited these women's lives have been, and she is comforted to remember her own life in the "outside world" of college and city and job which she holds as a "shield" between herself and the pulls of family history. She vows to return to college quickly so as to "protect" herself from the "decay" of her grandmother and these two old women.

The story "Granddaughters" is also about a woman's ambivalent return from the world outside. Juley, recently divorced, revisits the homestead to attend her sister Caroline's wedding. Juley's uncle is angry with all four granddaughters because they are "too damned independent," too much like their grandmother, the "iron-jawed old despot," first woman to vote in Montana, who had fought all her life to "avoid the salvation of what Everybody Else did ...."

Interestingly, although she struggles (like other characters in the book) with male authority, Juley primarily agonizes over difficulties with other women. "To my mother I was a living contradiction," Juley says, comparing her own college education and "a career that nobody understood" with her mother's "ordinary ranch wifehood." Other women at the wedding view Juley suspiciously:

These women in their best summer dresses were sunburned and creased, drivers of cattle trucks, midwives of lambs, assistant greasemonkeys. Their faces showed what they thought of me, who had run away to the university and depraved living ...

Lou, Juley's youngest sister, is "aggressively traditional," her "father's boy," the only sibling of four who might carry the family homestead a generation farther. Lou is resentful, like other family members, that Juley and her sisters have deserted the homestead. Lou is engaged to a young rancher, and disapproves of Juley's divorce as further evidence in the erosion

of family tradition. Juley, on the other hand, looks with dismay upon her sister:

Now she was three inches taller than I, broad-shouldered, with square sunburned hands. In her battle against femininity, she had followed a pattern; I knew a dozen ranch women who lived in boots and blue jeans and spent their days in field and corral.

Books like Mary Clearman Blew's *Runaway* and *All But the Waltz* are important also because they tell of the experience of women in the West. Today, many historians are conscious of how so much of our recorded past has focused on war and politics, until recent times the domain of men. Similarly, popular notions of life in the West are of gunslingers and mountain men and guitar-strumming cowboys. Now we understand the West was bigger than that, more diverse, more complex. Books like *Runaway* help to set the record straight.

Questions for Discussion

1. In Mary Clearman Blew's stories, men, too, are seeking escape from the homestead. In the story, "I Beat the Midget," what significance does Jimmy find in having physically beaten the horse? In "Forby and the Mayan Maidens," what significance does Wayne find in persecuting Forby? How are these stories similar? How are they different?

2. In "Kissing My Elbow," why is Juley's father angry at her for shearing the sheep? Why do the women try to dress the Hutterite girl?

3. In "Last Night As I Lay on the Prairie," Juley laments, "I chose to leave this place too long ago, and now I have raised a son to whom all this is inexplicable." When we break with tradition, what do we gain? What do we lose?

4. "The Snowies, The Judiths" is based on real events in a rural Montana high school. Why had Mary Dare's father moved the family back to his childhood home? What did he expect to find? ("The old high school wasn't even there anymore.") Is it true that, "You can't go home again"?

5. Where are the women in western history? Think of women in your own family. How significant were their roles? How limited?

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Owning It All

by
William Kittredge

Owning It All is a book of autobiographical essays, a determined and clear-eyed reexamination of western myths and realities as experienced first-hand by the author, William Kittredge, who lived all of his boyhood and a good deal of his adult years on one of the largest and most famous ranches in America, the MC Ranch of southeastern Oregon. Kittredge's grandfather had purchased the MC during the Great Depression, "twenty-odd thousand acres of peat-soil swamplands in the valley, and what seemed in those horseback days to be endless summer range out east on the desert." Kittredge's father, Oscar, earned an engineering degree at the state college and returned to the MC with ambition and know-how enough to revolutionize the operation, irrigating croplands by bulldozing literally mountains of earth into a seventeen-mile diversion levee and a complex system of gates and pumps.

Meanwhile, Grandfather had also accessed another million acres of government grazing land, and the MC – miles from telephones and paved roads – now irrigated better than eight thousand acres of cropland and grazed thousands of cattle. Grandfather and Oscar could drive all day and never leave the ranch. They felt a sense of power. They could change the shape of the land itself, drain swamplands, dam mountain run-off, clear away boulders, build roads and waterways. They felt a sense of "owning it all." It was a prosperous, progressive paradise, or so it may have looked from the outside.

"So, I ask myself," says the author, "if it was such a pretty life, why didn't I stay?" Like Mary Clearman Blew's books and the works of other contemporary western authors, *Owning It All* is the story of disillusionment with ranch life, and escape to the world outside. Kittredge's more recent book, *Hole in the Sky,* also traces the rise and fall of the MC Ranch. Both books are driven by the author's quest to understand what went wrong. Why, in the midst of success, do fathers and sons, husbands and wives, turn away from each other, silent and resentful?

To answer what went wrong, Kittredge explores the myths and stories he and his family told themselves as they feverishly aimed their lives "into the dream of power over nature and men." First, there's the American dream, as Huck Finn says, of "lighting out for territory" and the possibility of starting a new life elsewhere – the notion of economic opportunity in the wilderness, taking charge of the land, turning crops to cash. This was the author's grandfather's vision, and he set himself to the task of land acquisition with locked-jaw resolve. Sadly, somewhere, acquisitiveness becomes greed, and in the end his obsession with the ranch brings material wealth but a bankrupt heart. "By the time I was grown," laments the author, "my father had stopped speaking to his father, and my mother had left them both behind."

Oscar Kittredge, with his engineering degree and diesel-powered 'dozers, intensifies the fires of obsession, epitomizing another myth: if a little science and technology is a good thing, more is even better. Believing such, Oscar assumed he had a perfect right to literally reshape the earth around him because he was doing things scientifically and in the name of profit and progress. "We tried to manage our ranchlands with efficiency we thought of as scientific," explains the author, "but our actual model was industrial .... It was a way of thinking which distanced us from everything we might have loved, like each other, and the place we lived."

Deeper, underneath the empowerment of both of these myths, is a more subtle, though perhaps older and more pervasive dream of the "pastoral yeoman." This is a mythology rooted in the Bible, where in the Book of Genesis the Lord gives man "dominion" over all flora and fauna with the implicit understanding

that man will manage the earth with benevolence and wisdom like His own. Trouble is, some of us, like Kittredge's grandfather, will consciously or unconsciously adopt this mythology as a personal right to "play God." Grandfather takes an inexplicable dislike to magpies on his property, and, although other birds are much more bothersome, he decides to rid his land of magpies simply, "Because they're mine."

Down by the slaughterhouse my grandfather used to keep a chicken-wire cage for rapping magpies. The cage was high as a man's head and mounted on a sled so it could be towed off and cleaned. Those iridescent black and white birds could get in to feed on the intestines of butchered cows ... but they couldn't get out.

About once a week, when a number of magpies had gathered in the trap, maybe 10 or 15, my grandfather would get out his lifetime 12-gauge shotgun and have someone drive him down to the slaughterhouse in his dusty, ancient gray Cadillac, so he could look over his catch and get down to the business at hand. Once there the ritual was always slow and dignified, and always inevitable as one shoe after another....

He would lift the shot gun and from no more than 12 feet, ... he would kill them one by one, taking his time, maybe so as to prove this was no accident....

"Bastards," my grandfather would mutter, and then he would take his time about killing another, and finally he would be finished and turn without looking back, and climb into his side of the Cadillac, where the door still stood open.

So there's trouble in paradise, and the problem is us, beginning with the sorts of dreams we dream and the stories we tell ourselves to explain who we are and why we do what we do. The author comes to the realization that, despite the grandest of intentions and a good deal of materialistic success along the way, something has gone wrong on the ranch. He feels dislocated, out of touch with himself and his surroundings. He looks around and realizes that the thousands of migratory birds that once flocked to his home have stopped coming now that the wet lands have been drained. "But never again," William Kittredge says," ...will it be possible for a child to stand out on a bright spring morning in Warner Valley and watch the waterbirds come through in enormous, rafting vee-shaped flocks of thousands – and I grieve." Nor has technology proved to be all it once seemed to promise:

We sprayed 2-4-ethyl and malathion and the World War II German nerve gas called parathion (for clover mites on the barley), working to shorten our own lives. We baited the coyotes with 1080 and hunted them from airplanes; we wiped them out. The rodent population exploded and field mice destroyed our alfalfa. We irrigated and re-irrigated, pumped and drained; our peat soil began to go to saline.

Is the story of the pastoral yeoman, in which we see ourselves as God's chosen caretaker of this planet, no longer a viable mythology? In this book of essays, William Kittredge shows how some of us, instead of caring for this place, have exploited it heedlessly, ruthlessly, self-righteously, plundering paradise for personal gain. Now, says Kittredge, "In the American West we are struggling to revise our dominant mythology, and to find a new story to inhabit."

What new story, new mythology shall we inhabit? For himself, now that he can no longer pursue

business as usual on the ranch, Kittredge thinks maybe he could find his niche in being" ...an intellectual rancher who did bookish things like archeology on the side." Also he entertained thoughts of"... buying the weekly newspaper over in the county seat and being the rancher/newspaper guy who wrote a fascinating column every week with cowshit on his boots."

Both of these personal options are connected to a larger, more significant revision in the story he wants to inhabit. Contrary to the old myths of dominion, of owning it all, of territory to be taken and tamed, of rugged individuals who fence themselves off from the rest of society, Kittredge has come to a hard-won understanding that we must work together in spaces we share. He concludes, "We have no choice but to live in community." Furthermore, we must keep in mind that real ownership of the land belongs to a power greater than any of us alone. "We are part of what is sacred," says Kittredge in the last few lines of *Hole in the Sky,* "That is our main defense against craziness, our solace, the source of our best politics, and our only chance at paradise."

Questions for Discussion

1. In "Leaving," the author tells how he climbed to a cave on a hillside overlooking the valley, suspecting that Indians had long ago camped there. He discovers evidence of fires in the caves and unearths a woven mat. What's the significance of this discovery? How does it fit into the author's quest for a new story to inhabit, a new reality?

2. In "Redneck Secrets," Kittredge argues that there exists a "spiritual equivalency" between Redmen and Rednecks. He says, "Both, with some justice, feel used, cheated and disenfranchised. Both want to strike back." Do you agree or disagree?

3. "That which is not useful is vicious," says the American colonist Cotton Mather. Why does Kittredge quote Mather? How does this idea pertain to ranching? How is this idea rooted in our attitude toward progress? Where might such a belief lead us?

4. "Overthrust Dreams" examines the society and economy in an oil boom-town. Kittredge quotes one of the old-timers of the community: "The sons-a-bitches, he said. I got some of their lease money, and I like it fine. But Goddamn. That was country I knew, each and every rise and fall of it, and now she is roads and derricks and a lost cause. The only pretty thing out there is those towers at night, lighted up like Christmas trees." What's the significance of this statement? Who is responsible for exploitation of the land?

5. What in the character of Ross Dollarhide does the author admire? How does Dollarhide epitomize the "Buckaroo"? What's the significance of the scene where the author witnesses Dollarhide in trouble in the saddle, "pulling leather like a child"? Dollarhide recovers, sees Kittredge watching and says, "Boy, this ain't no time to get killed. Not for wages." Why is Dollarhide a legend? "Property," the author says, "in that old world, did not make the man, but rather something about being centered in life, in what was happening right at the moment." What does this mean?

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One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

by
Ken Kesey

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the story of R.P. McMurphy's humorous and tragic exploits as an inmate in an Oregon mental institution. McMurphy describes himself as a "bull goose catskinner for every gyppo logging operation in the Northwest," and as the novel opens, McMurphy implies he has conned his way into the mental institution, believing this to be an easy alternative to serving a sentence on an Oregon work farm where he had been incarcerated for various petty crimes. He soon learns, however, that life in a mental hospital can be even more treacherous than prison.

In the hospital, with fast talk and feisty good humor, McMurphy wins the admiration and trust of his fellow patients:"...if I'm bound to be a looney," he asserts, "then I'm bound to be a stompdown dadgum good one." He boldly organizes card games, a basketball team, and a fishing expedition, taking charge of entertainment on the ward and generally encouraging the otherwise timid inmates to question institutional policy and to stand together in opposition to the tyranny of Big Nurse, a sadistic middle-aged ex-military nurse who governs the ward. Inevitably, McMurphy and Big Nurse come to blows.

"Chief Bromden" narrates this novel. He is the son of the leader of a small band of Indians who once subsisted by building complex scaffolds over the falls on the Columbia River to spear salmon climbing inland to spawn. With the construction of large hydroelectric dams, the tribe lost its traditional way of life, and the Indians sold their land and dispersed. As a child, Chief Bromden had witnessed his father's helplessness against the construction of the dams and the destruction of his family and tribal way of life. In the hospital, Chief Bromden has similarly collapsed in helplessness; he pretends to be deaf and dumb to avoid confrontation. The reader first glimpses Chief Bromden suffering the taunts of "three black boys in white suits," abusive ward attendants who serve as Big Nurse's henchmen:

"Here's the Chief. The soo-pah Chief, fellas. Ol' Chief Broom. Here you go, Chief Broom..."Stick a mop in my hand and motion to the spot they aim for me to clean today, and I go. One swats the backs of my legs with a broom handle to hurry me past. "Haw, you look at 'im shag it? Big enough to eat apples off my head an' he mine me like a baby."

Much of the time Chief Bromden spends in a fog, sweeping the floor aimlessly, but because Big Nurse and other staff believe him to be deaf, he eavesdrops on the inner workings of the institution, which allows him privileged though muddled insight. In contrast to McMurphy's tragic downfall, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the story of Chief Bromden's triumphant recovery of his lost personhood and his eventual escape from the institution. McMurphy is the flame that reignites Chief Bromden's pilot light. The two first come into contact on the day of McMurphy's admission to the ward. Chief Bromden hears McMurphy's spirited laughter "... in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward." Thus begins his long road toward re-awakening; "I realize all of a sudden," says Chief Bromden, "it's the first laugh I've heard in years."

What makes McMurphy and Chief Bromden heroic? Why, as readers, do we sympathize with these two and cheer for them? What makes Big Nurse and her henchmen so villainous? The answers to these questions may reveal fundamental assumptions and values shared by many of us in the Northwest. Also, considering the popularity of this novel (and the subsequent movie, starring Jack Nicholson as McMurphy), the answers to these questions may well suggest characteristics of a collective

American identity. From books like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* we learn who we are.

This novel was published in the early 1960s; writers like Ken Kesey, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter Thompson were expressing in their work a growing dissatisfaction with American society as they had experienced it in the 50s. They campaigned against conformity, regimentation, the sterility of suburban life, and the threat of too much governmental control over the citizenry. They favored individuality and non-traditional life styles. They thumbed their noses at authority, especially the pettiness of institutional functionaries who mindlessly enforced strict adherence to meaningless rules. In a highly organized, industrialized, and technological society, they warned the American people not to become robots, not to lose their humanity. Ken Kesey is himself a character like this in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.* Kesey and a small group of friends dub themselves "The Merry Pranksters" and set out on a cross-country journey, critiquing American society, searching for alternatives. Kesey's fictional character R.P. McMurphy is the embodiment of these same attitudes.

Big Nurse is villainous because she has become a robot, a cog in a machine. She is obsessed with control, insisting on her absolute authority over the patients, gaining power through humiliation, intimidation, and brutality. Instead of serving the patients, she insists on being served; the patients spend more time mopping and scrubbing the woodwork than they do in therapy. She is herself overly controlled in her responses to the world around her, uniformed, sanitized. She represses her own emotions, presenting a cool exterior of pure reason when underneath she's driven by fear, rage, and hatred. She is sexless, binding her breasts tight beneath her uniform, equating femininity with weakness. Chief Bromden describes her as if she were a mannequin: "Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel .... "

McMurphy witnesses Big Nurse's skill in humiliating patients during group therapy, and afterwards he likens these sessions on the ward to chickens at a "peckin' party":

The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to peckin' at it , see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers. But usually a couple of the flock gets spotted in the fracas, then it's their turn. And a few more gets spots and gets pecked to death, and more and more. Oh, a peckin' party can wipe out a whole flock in a matter of a few hours, buddy, I seen it. A mighty awesome sight.

McMurphy understands that Big Nurse feeds on the fears and weaknesses of those around her.

Whereas Big Nurse is villainous because she makes people weak so she can control them, McMurphy is heroic because he empowers people to set them free. In this way, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a cowboy western: McMurphy, the lone cowboy/ gambler, comes riding into town looking for fun but stumbles upon trouble. He must defeat the local gang of bad guys (Big Nurse and her henchmen) to liberate the townspeople (the patients). McMurphy is a mid-twentieth century continuation of the heroic cowboy myth:

We made him stand and hitch up his black shorts like they were horsehide chaps, and push back his cap with one finger like it was a ten-gallon Stetson, slow, mechanical gestures – and when he walked across the floor you could hear the iron in his bare heels ring sparks out of the tile.

Chief Bromden, the voice of this novel, is heroic because he is an Everyman, a common individual who suffers under the control of the society around him, and yet manages to rise, fight, and victoriously free himself. He is pretending to be deaf to hide from persecution, but he remembers clearly, " ... it wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all." In grade school, in the army, Chief Bromden felt the dehumanizing forces of the institution. When he was a child on the reservation, men came to negotiate with his father over the sale of Indian land to build the dams. The young Bromden saw these men looking at his home and his family with disdain:

Inside that squalor? Why, I'll just bet you anything that place is acrawl with black widows. They say these 'dobe shacks always house a regular civilization in the walls between the sods. And hot, lord-a-mercy, I hope to tell you. I'll wager it's a regular oven in there. Look, look how overdone little Hiawatha is here. Ho. Burnt to a fair turn, he is.

But the child knows these men are ignorant and wrong:

I let them say another thing or two about the heat and the house; then I stand up and tell the fat man, in my very best school-book language, that our sod house is likely to be cooler than any one of the houses in town, lots cooler!

Still, the men won't even acknowledge his presence, let alone his thoughts. These men are big government and big business, and, like Big Nurse, they bluster across the land blindly, without regard for the people whose lives they destroy.

Bromden is also heroic because he is a man who stands apart from the evils of the society around him. In his distance from society, he is, in his own crazy way, clearsighted. He recognizes how the institution works as a factory for what he calls "the Combine," the forces of dehumanization in a technological world. Big Nurse is a robot for the Combine; she has foresaken humanity for institutional efficiency, routine, and control. During the ride to the coast for McMurphy's fishing trip, Chief Bromden looks out the car window at all the Combine had accomplished:

... a train stopping at a station and laying a string of full-grown men in mirrored suits and machined hats, laying them like a hatch of identical insects, half-life things coming pht-pht-pht out of the last car, then hooting its electric whistle and moving on down the spoiled land to deposit another hatch.

Thus, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* asks, in a society gone mad, who among us is still sane? McMurphy is not blinded, cowed or twisted by the forces that have dehumanized Big Nurse and her henchmen. He manages to set others free, but at the cost of his own life. He is the American cowboy-hero who saves the day and shows us how to live, but he is more mythological than real. It's Chief Bromden in the end who gives the reader a model for how to stand apart from the forces of dehumanization and totalitarian rule. Bromden escapes with the spirit of McMurphy inside him; he frees himself by carrying his hero's wishes forward. "But it's the truth," Chief Bromden tells the reader early on, "even if it didn't happen."

Questions for Discussion

1. Has our contemporary world gone mad? Can you think of examples in which the efficiency of technology has distanced us from ourselves and others? Can you think of instances in which you were dealt with in a faceless, impersonal way by government or big business? Is schooling a dehumanizing experience? Work? The military?

2. What is the significance of Big Nurse asking the patients to spy on one another? What is the significance of routine? Of the white uniforms and the green uniforms? Of Big Nurse's glass enclosure?

3. Why did Kesey choose to have three Blacks as henchmen for Big Nurse? What does this say about human nature? When in history have the oppressed struggled together? When have they struggled in opposition?

4. Many foreigners seem to understand the American "cowboy mentality" as more brutal than heroic. What good has come into the American character from the image and reality of the western pioneer and cowboy? What negative traits or potential dangers are attached to those images?

5. Why is it an important moment in the book when McMurphy tries to lift the control panel and fails? Why is it so disturbing to McMurphy when he discovers that many of the patients have been institutionalized voluntarily?

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Housekeeping

by

Marilynne Robinson

Most small towns in America have at least one household that just doesn't fit in. The house itself may sit at the end of the street, its yard overgrown with shrubbery and thistles, shades drawn day and night, cats and dogs beyond count climbing and digging everywhere. The residents of such houses are seldom seen or spoken to, but they are the subject of endless gossip and rumor. We may laugh at misfits and eccentrics, yet they are slightly frightening, especially if they don't seem to care if they are laughed at or not.

We worry that these people signal too loudly the unraveling of our social fabric. In their refusal to participate, they cause us to examine our towns, our schools, our jobs, our plans, and, disturbingly, they nudge us to question the worth of whatever we hold dear. Writers like Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and many others have written about small towns and the oddballs in these towns who fascinate and worry those who consider themselves appropriately ordinary. Usually in these stories we see or hear of the small town eccentric through the eyes or ears of some other character. *Housekeeping,* by Marilynne Robinson, is especially intriguing – in turns hilarious and disturbing, sometimes baffling – because the story's narrator, Ruthie, is as endearing as she is quirky and eccentric.

Ruthie's grandfather had come to Idaho because he wanted to live in the mountains. That's the only explanation the author gives us of the grandfather's need to leave his boyhood home in the Middle West: he clipped and saved magazine images of mountains, and he simply had a hankering to go there. Enroute by train, he befriends a conductor, and soon he has a job himself on the railroad. A marriage and three daughters later, one wintry day the train plummets spectacularly over the edge of the bridge near Fingerbone, his new home.

No sign of the train can be found, the hole in the ice freezes over, and the facts of the event become mixed with lore, suspicion and outright lies, until the train crash itself seems too surreal to ever have happened. So much for the best laid plans. So much for Ruthie's grandfather whom she never knew anyway because he died before she was born. But this event sets the tone of the entire novel, reminding the reader early on that the world is precarious, tomorrow is chancy at best, and none of us are going to last here long.

The three daughters grow up and leave Fingerbone. One becomes a missionary to China, one marries and moves away, one becomes a drifter, a transient. "One year my grandmother had three quiet daughters," Ruthie explains matter-of-factly, "and the next year the house was empty." The married daughter, Helen, has two daughters of her own, Lucille and Ruthie. Their father disappears so early in the little girls' lives that neither can remember him, and they quarrel over which imagined version of him is to be believed.

After seven-and-a-half years away from Fingerbone, Helen returns in a borrowed car, deposits the two girls on their grandmother's enclosed porch, and inexplicably commits suicide by crashing her car off a cliff into the lake where her father had drowned in the train wreck. She leaves Lucille and Ruthie with nothing more than a pat on the head and a box of crackers in a town they had never seen before, at the home of the grandmother they'd never known. And this all happens in the first chapter.

On the first page of the next chapter, the grandmother simply "eschews awakening" one morning after having cared for the girls for five years. Two spinster great-aunts, Lily and Nona, are summoned from Spokane to care for the girls in Fingerbone, but soon it's apparent they, too, will not last long. Ruthie again explains this matter-of-factly, having by now

accustomed herself to loss and instability as the normal order of the world:

Lily, and Nona, I think, enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day after the next. This was not to be achieved in Fingerbone, where any acquaintance was perforce new and therefore more objectionable than solitude, and where Lucille and I perpetually threatened to cough or outgrow our shoes.

Once again there is question as to who will care for the girls, and give them a "sense of home." This challenge falls, ironically, on the girls' aunt Sylvie, a transient who one wintry day returns to Fingerbone in opened-toe shoes and a long overcoat. The remainder of the novel depicts Sylvie's odd ways of caring for the girls and keeping house. Ruthie dreams one night of her grandfather's train wreck. This dream, coupled with so many other sudden and dramatic changes in her life, created in her mind the"…conviction … our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections in water." Life with Sylvie – a woman who tells the girls she likes to ride on trains, "especially in the passenger cars" – only adds to Ruthie's growing sense of comfort with homelessness.

Then one spring the lake rises and Fingerbone is flooded. Sylvie and the two girls camp for the duration of the flood in the second story of their house while most of the other townspeople are forced to flee. Like so much else in this novel, the flood is a symbolic event, recalling the great flood in which Noah had to dismantle his house board by board to build an ark. The flood destroys the old world and makes room for the new.

In Fingerbone, the flood enters Sylvie's household, setting the furniture adrift in a strange new world in which the distinctions between outdoors and indoors are irreversibly blurred. Sylvie's housekeeping willingly admits whatever leaves blow through open windows and doors, and soon birds, bats and cats move about as freely as if the walls of the house were not solid. So too, Sylvie and the girls spend increasing hours outdoors, even sleeping overnight at the lake, resting wherever they may be, just like the leaves blown about Sylvie's living room.

Day by day, Ruthie is drawn deeper into Sylvie's dreamlike existence outside the conventions of normal households, even outside time. Ruthie and Lucille miss a lot of school, and soon concerned townspeople question the appropriateness of two children raised by an "unredeemed transient." Lucille finds a home for herself with her home economics teacher, after having been uncomfortable for some time with Sylvie's unconventional housekeeping. Lucille wants to be more like everyone else. "We've got to *improve* ourselves!" she insists to her sister, but Ruthie, like Sylvie, simply does not see the need to live any other way than one moment to the next. Eventually, when the court threatens to take Ruthie from Sylvie, the pair escapes over the railroad bridge into the night, burning the house behind them.

Housekeeping calls into question the much talked about notion of a "sense of place," a term that writers and critics often use to define the characteristics of literature from a particular region. Part of our own identity, the thinking goes, is the identity of the place in which we live. *Housekeeping* causes the reader to wonder – in today's world of people moving so often from place to place – if it's possible anymore for us to claim a particular address as "home." Certainly the history of humanity includes much wandering, and similarly the history of America is the story of populations moving, pushing westward. Is there a Sylvie in many of us, *Housekeeping* asks, who can't settle for long?

Questions for Discussion

1. There are no villains in this book, no one forcing Sylvie to live as she does and no one forcing her to change. Sylvie simply prefers to live this way. Why? What are the benefits of such a lifestyle? What are the drawbacks?

2. What is it in human nature that causes restlessness and the need to keep moving? What caused Ruthie's grandfather to hanker for mountains? This novel, like *Huckleberry Finn* and so many other American novels, doesn't end with coming home, but rather with the decision to hit the road, to "set out for territory." Whatever became of "and they lived happily ever after"?

3. What makes a "home"? In the end, have Sylvie and Ruthie made a home for themselves? Can they be called a "family"? Why or why not?

4. "It is better to have nothing," Marilynne Robinson writes, "for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing." Do you agree or disagree? Would Gandhi have agreed? Would Donald Trump agree? How might such a belief shape a lifestyle?

5. "Families should stay together. Otherwise things get out of control," Sylvie tells us. So much is written these days about the breakdown of the family in America and the decline of "family values." If it's true that families are in decline, is this one more symptom of decay in our social fabric? Or is it simply that our model of the family is changing naturally over time?

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by
Barry Lopez

Of Wolves and Men is a book about wolves. But, as the title implies, it is also a book about men, about human nature, about the human struggle to understand our position in relation to other species with whom we share this planet. “The truth is, we know little about the wolf,” Lopez asserts. In learning more about the wolf, as in learning about any other species, we might learn lessons critical to our own survival, and, of equal importance, we might learn the trick of co-existing. “What we know a good deal more about is what we imagine the wolf to be,” continues Lopez. What we imagine the wolf to be makes all the difference in how we interact with this other species. Examination of our stories about wolves, our dreams, fears, imagined attractions and horrors, will expose some important truths about who we are.

Early in the book, Lopez demonstrates the way in which cultures differ in their attitudes toward the wolf. Native American cultures, the Eskimo most notably, have tended to view the wolf with awe, reverence, and respect, the same attitude they might have toward a highly successful hunter or warrior among their own kind. Westerners (meaning immigrants and settlers of European ancestry) have tended to take a contrasting stance: the wolf is a vicious beast, harmful to livestock and deserving of little short of extinction. In this century, conservationists like Lopez have seen the danger in such thinking. This book is an attempt to open the western mind to alternative ways of understanding other species.

In the Northwest especially, with the controversies over the spotted owl and other endangered species, a book like *Of Wolves and Men* is a good way to keep the dialogue open. In discussing these topics, participants might gain greater insight by focusing on the larger question of how men and other species should relate, rather than debating the particulars of local issues. It may be, indeed, that local issues can be better clarified and resolved if we first come to an understanding of differences in values and attitudes.

Also, as Lopez emphasizes in his chapters about wolf research and behavior, before we can decide how to relate to a particular species, it is necessary to study species as best we can. *Of Wolves and Men* may in this light be seen as a model for exploring not only the difficulties in co-existing with other species, but also the related difficulties of co-existing with other races, other nationalities, other life-styles and persuasions.

Two other books in this discussion series give a clear picture of the differences between the Native American and the western mind, especially with regard to how humans and animals should interact. Mourning Dove’s *Coyote Stories* talks of human beings who see themselves as descendants of animals. Animals today are still considered powerful “medicine” to protect people from harm. In traditional Native American stories, animal behaviors and the consequences of those behaviors often instruct humans in their own conduct. Contrast these attitudes with the rancher’s view in William Kittredge’s *Owning It All.* Kittredge writes of his grandfather, who slaughtered magpies simply because he took a disliking to the creatures and didn’t want them around. After years of witnessing such senseless destruction, Kittredge (like Lopez) warns his readers of the dire consequences:

We sprayed 2-4-ethyl and malathion and the World War II German nerve gas called parathion (for clover mites on the barley), working to shorten our own lives. We baited the coyotes with 1080 and hunted them from airplanes; we wiped them out. The rodent population exploded and field mice destroyed our alfalfa. We irrigated and re-irrigated, pumped and drained; our peat soil began to go to saline.

Similarly, Lopez sees danger in the unquestioned destruction of wolves.

Western attitudes toward wolves and toward many other things have been shaped largely by religion and science. In the Book of Genesis, humans are granted "dominion" over all flora and fauna by God. Moreover, man himself is a little God, made in the image of the Creator. Thus, in this story, man is put in a superior position to other species. The inferiority of other species makes them more easily expendable, more easily ignored, and more easily misunderstood. Certainly such thinking justifies hunting and animal husbandry, but carried to an extreme it can also become a twisted rationalization for the brutal annihilation of a species simply because – as in the example of the old rancher slaughtering magpies – we dislike them.

Also, in this assumption of man's superiority to other creatures is a dangerous distancing of human beings from their natural surroundings. In our modern world we often hear complaints, especially from urban dwellers who feel disconnected from nature, alienated from even their own species. "We who have lost contact with wild animals," warns Lopez, "...can easily miss the significance of such a view [Native American] of the human world in which the natural world is so deeply reflected." The benefits of seeing a closer connection between man and nature may be experienced as an "...utter calm, a sense of belonging."

Science, too, says Lopez, separates man from nature. Of course science has been a great boon to man in understanding the particulars of nature. But Lopez points out that scientific method and collection of data is simply not enough to grasp wolf behavior that is as complex and mysterious as our own:

The mistake that is made here, with consistency, it seems, only to the educated Western people, is to think that there is an ultimate wolf reality to be divined, one that can only be unearthed with microscope and radio collar. Some wolf biologists are possessed of the idea of binding the wolf up in 'statistically significant' data. They want no question about the wolf not to have an answer.

Moreover, wolves are so difficult to observe, and what we see is so clouded by our own expectations and interpretations, that scientific studies often lead us to little more than good guesses about wolves, while more clearly indicating "... how incomplete is our sense of worlds outside our own."

For a larger understanding of the wolf, Lopez turns to the Native American way of seeing and understanding the natural world. He tells the reader of some tribes in which certain men can actually "be" the wolf to perform healing or divination, concepts that are for the western mind very difficult to comprehend indeed. Lopez describes the Native American mind as one in which there is a "strong sense of the inter-dependence among all creatures," and he advocates this sense of community between species as a model by which we might shape our human future:

The interrelationships between one's allegiance to self and household on the one hand and one's duty to the larger community on the other cannot be overemphasized; it was a primal, efficient system of survival that held both man and wolf in a similar mesh.

Questions for Discussion

1. How much can we really know about other species? How can science blind us? Religion blind us? Our stories and customs blind us? How can we best throw off the blinders? Why should we want to throw off these blinders?

2. Should man allow space for all other creatures to survive? Or should man take possession of all the earth, even if it means extinction for other species? Does it have to be all one or all the other? What are your feelings and thoughts in regard to man's relationships to other species? What influences have shaped your thoughts and feelings?

3. Lopez does a good job of helping the reader understand why people feel or act as they do toward wolves. He blames no one in particular, but rather sees the complexities of human emotion, economic necessity, and limited information that lead people to advocate destruction of wolves. Is he too forgiving? Who is responsible for the consequences of ignorance?

4. Were you surprised by what you learned about wolves in this book? How? What were your preconceptions? Does Lopez romanticize the wolf?

5. Have you ever had a feeling of closeness to an animal? What have you learned from that relationship? Is it true that when you learn more about animal behavior it is easier to be tolerant of behaviors you had previously judged bothersome? If so, how might the same sort of learning be applied to human behaviors, and to understanding individual, cultural, or racial differences?

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The Business of Fancydancing

by

Sherman Alexie

The Business of Fancydancing, Sherman Alexie's first book, received highest praises as an authentic voice of contemporary Native American reservation life. Historically, from earliest contact with Europeans, it has always been difficult to know who might speak most accurately about Native American perceptions and experience. Non-Natives seldom have gotten it right, though many have tried; some non-Native writers like John Neihart (*Black Elk Speaks*) and Frank Waters (*People of the Valley*) have devoted entire careers to the study of Native American life and history.

Most agree, however, that Native Americans themselves would best be able to give insight into the Native American way of life, because a first-hand account of any experience is bound to be more valuable than information gained second-hand. But Adrian Louis, another Native American poet, points out that "...many 'Native American' writers publish books that prove their ignorance of the real Indian world...."In other words, Indian blood flowing in one's veins is not enough – some writers who are known as contemporary Native American authors have little experience with daily life on the reservation.

Born and raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, Sherman Alexie is as authentic as they come. His youth was characterized by poverty, isolation, and the generally depressed conditions of reservation life. His father suffered from alcoholism and was often absent from the family. Meanwhile, his mother sold her hand-sewn quilts at the local trading post to help save the family from financial collapse.

Sherman Alexie showed a love of learning early on; he is said to have read every book in his school's library, including auto mechanics manuals. Eventually he attended college and began writing. Many of the characters in *The Business of Fancydancing* , like Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Lester Falls Apart, also appear in Alexie's later books: *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *Old Shirts and New Skins* (1993), *Reservation Blues* (1995), and *Indian Killer* (1996).

Sherman Alexie's poems and stories are not difficult to understand if the reader approaches this book as if it were a collection of snapshots or home movies of reservation life. Just as other contemporary American poets write about the ordinary daily events of their lives, so too Sherman Alexie writes about family, friends, basketball, and pow-wows. Anyone can tell about their daily life, but poets have a special knack of doing more. Alexie's poems, for instance, in talking about the mundane, grow beyond themselves to expose the emotional life of their characters and to examine their values, conflicts, and particular versions of human life in a vast spectrum of possibilities.

The title poem, "The Business of Fancydancing," is on the surface a simple and lively, straightforward narrative of traveling to a nearby reservation to dance at the pow-wow. Fancydancing is a type of pow-wow competition in which the dancers are dressed in especially ornate costuming and the dance steps themselves are similarly ornate, fast and emphatic. A photo of the author in fancydance regalia appears on the cover of the book.

Like any skilled athlete or dancer, a good fancydancer makes difficult footwork look easy. This poem works much in the same way. The language and details seem as if the poet were simply talking in a casual manner with friends, but there's much more to the poem than that. For instance, consider these lines: "We/got our boy, Vernon Wildshoe, to fill our empty/wallets and stomachs, to fill our empty/cooler. Vernon is like some promise/ to pay the light bill, a credit card we/Indians get to use."

These words, on the one hand, simply tell the reader Vernon Wildshoe is a successful fancydancer who wins money and foots the bill for gas, food, and drinks for his traveling companions.

But there is also a lot of pride in those words, the feeling of satisfaction one gets from independence and financial empowerment. Thus, inside a culture that is still largely disenfranchised, fancydancing at the pow-wow becomes a vehicle for advancement which belongs particularly to Native American culture. In modern reservation life, money is scarce, and the opportunity to win it in a dignified manner is much valued: "Money/is a tool, putty to fill all the empty/spaces, a ladder so we can reach/ for more."

Moreover, the easy flow of the language in this poem is deceptive. There is a highly organized poetic structure invisible to the casual reader. Notice that each of the first six stanzas contain six lines. The words at the end of the lines are the same six words repeated at the end of the lines in each stanza, though these words rotate in order according to the pattern 6-1-5-2-4-3. The last three lines also contain each of these six words, but this time there are two per line. This pattern is called a *sestina*, a form developed by French poets centuries earlier and thousands of miles from Wilpinit, Washington. Surely this is the only sestina on earth written about fancydancing at the pow-wow.

Or, consider the poem "Distances." At first glance it seems like a loose gathering of wit and wisecracks. But there's more; each of these snippets adds to an accumulating sense of alienation from the world beyond the reservation boundary:

I know all the mothers of America have told their kids: 'Clean up your plate. There are people starving in India.' When I was young, living on the reservation, eating potatoes every day of my life, my mother would tell me to 'clean up your plate or you sister will get it.'

The irony here is that there are starving people a good deal closer to home than India, but most Americans are blind to poverty in their own back yard. Also there's ironic humor in using the word "India"; Columbus dubbed Native Americans "Indians" because he erroneously believed he had arrived in India, and the name stuck as a sort of mistaken identity. Similarly, the lines, "I do not speak my native tongue. Except, that is, for the dirty words. I can tell you what I think of you in two languages," speak of the author's distance from both the traditions of his own culture and the non-Native American world outside the reservation.

Read these poems slowly and perhaps aloud to a friend. Read them several times each and monitor how your first impression of each poem changes upon further reading.

Questions for Discussion

1. There's a lot of humor in these poems, but it is humor of a dark sort, gallows humor: "...I tell him everyone knows but the police ain't going to do anything about it because when one Indian kills another Indian, that's considered natural selection." Can you find other instances of this sort of humor? Why would people joke about such things?

2. In the short vignette, "Gravity," the author has returned to his home after an extended stay in Seattle feeling somewhat estranged from his family, and maybe feeling guilty for having made a life for himself off the reservation. What's the significance of this exchange with his father:

Chief Victor walks into the kitchen, pulls a few pieces of fry bread out of the refrigerator and pops them in to the microwave, works the controls without hesitation.

"Nothing ever changes, does it? I ask him.

"Just a little bit of assimilation, enit?"

3. As these poems portray them, what are the defining characteristics of life on the reservation? It may be easier to list negative characteristics. Can you list the positive also?

4. "Translated from the American" deals with the difficulty of trying to live in two cultures. What is the significance of the baby's blue eyes? What is the significance of the narrator of this vignette not speaking his native language? What does it mean that the grandmother cannot translate because "it doesn't make any sense that way"? Why does the narrator wish for "a ticket for a Greyhound traveling back or ahead five hundred years"?

5. In the poem "Futures," how does the epigraph by Lucille Clifton pertain to the poem? Are the "good times" recalled in this poem meant to be ironic? Is the "future" bright or dim?

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Notes

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