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Montana 1948: Where Stories Come From

Excerpts from Preface Talk, Fall 2008

Larry Watson

Montana 1948 was published in 1993, and it was not my first novel, although many people thought it was. The mistake was understandable, since it had been thirteen years since my first novel was published. A university course in Midwestern Literature I taught helped me formulate the ideas for the novel.

On the first day I brought in a map of the United States, and we tried to define the Midwest—a task that turned out to be more difficult than any of us anticipated, mostly because regions don't always line up neatly according to state borders and because frontiers shift, extend, open, and close over time. You might recall that in *The Great Gatsby*, a novel published in 1925, Nick Carraway occasionally refers to his home state as being in "the west," and Nick, like Fitzgerald, came from Minnesota. However once we came up with something we could agree on (or gave up on the definition altogether), we proceeded to do what teachers and students usually do in literature classes. We analyzed structure and imagery and style; we examined themes and symbols; we looked for and found recurrent themes and metaphors.

Among the novels on the syllabus were O. E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, Evan Connell's *Mrs. Bridge*, William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. We also read poems, essays, and short stories.

In addition to those usual literary classroom activities, we also had discussions that were frequently personal—yet still relevant to the material of the course. A student might offer an additional insight into a character in *Mrs. Bridge* because she seemed so similar

to her Aunt Irene. Someone else who was raised on a farm might see something in the Nebraska plains of *My Antonia* that wasn't apparent to the rest of us. A young woman who had grandparents living on a reservation helped us comprehend some things about Native American heritage—and the characters in *Love Medicine*. I felt as though I had a new understanding of and appreciation for my hard-working Swedish grandfather after reading about the adventurous homesteaders in *Giants in the Earth*. And I came across a scene in *Love Medicine* that seemed to be set on the Fargo street my grandparents lived on (once they sold the farm and moved to the city).

Since so many of us were native Midwesterners, we were seeing the plots, characters, settings, and themes of the literature through eyes similar to the makers'.
Now, I don't want to make it sound as though a light bulb suddenly went on over my head, but I do know that that class played a role in my being able to see that where I came from offered possibilities for my own fiction. And that phrase—where I came from—can mean many things. It has to do with place, of course, but it can also refer to time, to self-knowledge, to perspective, to identity. You don't hear the phrase much any more, but not long ago, people would often say, "Do you know where I'm coming from?" and the question had to do with understanding, as in, "Do you understand me?" And I did feel as though there was a time and place—a setting, in other words—that I understood in that special way that can lead to literary production. Once I had that setting, the story of *Montana 1948*, its plot and characters, began to take shape, and I was soon committed to writing a fiction that would be close to my own roots--my heritage, both regional and familial. It would be easy enough to conclude that I was about to do what fiction writers are so often advised to do—to write about what you know—and I won't dispute that. But I was also embarking on a fictional project in which I would be writing about what I *didn't* know.

The connections between my own background and the novel's will, I hope, soon be apparent. I was born in North Dakota and lived there until my mid-twenties, and though I grew up in a small town and a small city, I am descended from prairie homesteaders. That fact didn't seem particularly remarkable to me when I was growing up, but now I think, Is it really possible that in the 21st Century I'm only a generation removed from that movement that had such a profound effect on the Great Plains region? (And by the way, I don't consider that profound effect to be triumphal; the history of the homesteading movement is, I believe, a history of failure and disappointment as much as it is of success. But that's a subject for a different time.)

My maternal grandfather was a cowboy in western North Dakota and eastern Montana for many years before filing a homestead claim in North Dakota, and my paternal grandfather also homesteaded in North Dakota. Both families had branches in Montana,

and when I was a boy we visited that state often and they us, friends and family passing freely back and forth across the border.

But remember what I said earlier about our problems in the Midwestern Literature class with determining where the Midwest was and is? My home state is another example of why such determinations can be difficult.

A novel set in Fargo, on North Dakota's eastern border, would be classified as "Midwestern"; a novel set in Medora, on the state's western edge, would be a western. I grew up in Bismarck, near the middle. (And to make an even larger claim to middle-ness, I was born in Rugby, North Dakota, the Geographical Center of North America.) There have been many attempts to say just where the West begins, and that designation can be based on anything from annual rainfall to kinds of livestock to distance from population centers to the types of heels worn on boots. In his book *Travels With Charlie*, John Steinbeck said that the West began in Mandan, North Dakota, right across the Missouri River from Bismarck. When I was growing up in that city, I was as likely to see a fedora as a Stetson on the city's streets, and brogans were as common as cowboy boots. My lawyer father's attire illustrated the dichotomy: He wore cowboy boots with his three piece suits.

But while western North Dakota and eastern Montana are very similar, in the story that was taking shape in my mind, I wanted a frontier feeling, a Wild West undertone, that Montana could provide and that my home state could not. Western North Dakota can as rightly claim a frontier heritage as any state, but it doesn't send out those signals as strongly to the popular imagination as Montana does.

Suffice it to say, I felt—and feel—as though I knew the region and that both North Dakota and Montana (at least parts of both states) were available to me as settings for my fiction. John Updike has said: "I am drawn to writing about southeasten Pennsylvania because I knew how things happen there, or at least how they used to happen. Once you have in your bones the fundamental feasibilities of a place you can imagine freely there." Much of this northern plains region was in my bones. I was familiar with the landscape, the climate, the flora and fauna. (Or at least I thought I was; after *Montana 1948* was published, a reader in Wyoming took me to task for having the wrong kind of tree growing in my fictional soil. My chagrin worsened when this reader revealed that she was a graduate of the College of Natural Resources at the university where I was teaching at the time. In the future, she advised, I should take my fiction over to the Forestry Department and have them vet the manuscripts. I never did that, but I continued to set my fiction on the Great Plains, where trees are so scarce there are fewer arboreal mistakes to be made.)

I've never felt however as though I know the native grasses as well as I know the natives. And perhaps this is the time to mention that the region I grew up in had—and still has—a significant Native American population. I took the name "Little Soldier" from

a grade school classmate, and Ollie Young Bear was modeled on a friend of my father's. Sadly, when I was growing up in North Dakota I didn't have to look far to see examples of prejudice and discrimination.

As varied as the population of the region is, I feel I know something about the people—and not just their prejudices, but their values, their tastes, their strengths, their weaknesses, their walk, their talk, their dress. I know how men of that region hitch their trousers and wipe their boots on the porch step. I know how women lick their fingers in order to wipe dirt from the faces of their children. I know how teenagers unerringly find long flat paved stretches to cruise endlessly back and forth. I know how for older citizens talk about the weather is more than idle chatter since they remember all too well a time when a drought or a hailstorm could mean economic ruin and a blizzard could mean literal death. I know which subjects are usually considered off-limits—sex and money, chief among them—and how comfortable many of the people of the region are with not talking about anything at all.

Years ago, I was invited to give a talk at the North Dakota Heritage Center on the topic "The Language of the Land." I was tempted simply to stand at the lectern for an hour without saying a word. For any number of reasons—the immensity of land and sky, the tendency among certain ethnic groups to taciturnity (this could be an opportunity to tell my favorite ethnic joke—"Did you hear about the Norwegian who loved his wife so much he almost told her?"—but I'll resist), the smothering effect of weather, the low population density (even today certainly no more than five people per square mile)—silence could easily be designated the official language of the northern plains. Most of the residents understand it and most of them don't speak it with great eloquence. As "Home on the Range" has it, seldom is heard a discouraging word—or any word at all. The writer Kathleen Norris has written about standing on the prairie near Williston, North Dakota—very near my fictional Mercer County—and feeling as though it was the quietest place on earth.

Many of the residents of the region appreciate silence, they're comfortable with it, and it undeniably has its virtues. I tried to represent this in the novel with the scene in which David plays football with Marie Little Soldier and Ronnie Tall Bear. The incident represents one of David's happiest memories, but it's a scene without dialogue.

But just as geographic borders can be problematical, the line dividing strength from failing is also tricky.

Because of course there's another kind of silence that is also unfortunately present in this region, and that's the silence of repression, of ignorance, of keeping quiet so nothing and no one will be disturbed—and truth itself can be disquieting. Avoidance of truth isn't the only reason for keeping silent. There are other pressures—fear of embarrassment, of challenging authority, of not being believed. It was this unhealthy silence that I

felt I was exploring in *Montana 1948*—and in the subsequent books *Justice* and in *White Crosses*, if I might mention a couple other titles. All three books are concerned, in varying degrees, with decisions about breaking silence. In fact, in one sense the real villain of *Montana 1948* might be silence. If this silence has its way, if certain matters don't get talked about, don't see the light of day, that will mean a triumph of evil.

I said at the outset that a writer's sense of where his ideas come from can also occur after a book's publication. I heard one of the best statements of *Montana 1948*'s theme from a reader in a bookstore when I was on tour to promote the novel.

In the discussion after the reading, a young woman said that she knew what the novel was about. Of course I was curious, so I asked: What would that be? She said that it's about the secrets that everyone knows. Initially I wanted to argue with her—aren't secrets what no one knows? But a moment's reflection told me that she was exactly right. In small communities there are secrets that everyone knows and perhaps gossips about, secrets that might have to do with which spouse is cheating, which parent is beating his kids, which business owner is falling behind on his bills. Or which doctor is abusing his patients. But these secrets are not to be shared with outsiders, and they're not to be discussed in any kind of official public forum. They can be talked about over the backyard fence or at the kitchen table, but they can't be acknowledged in the local newspaper or in any official civic gathering. These are, in other words, the secrets that everyone and no one knows.

So far I've been talking about setting in terms of place, but obviously events occur not only in place but in time, and every fiction writer has at least two decisions to make: where will this story happen and when. A writer's choice of a decade, a month, a season, even an hour of the day can be as crucial to a narrative as latitude and longitude.

Who people are, individually and collectively, depends as much on when they live as where. The Manhattanite of 1908 has more in common with the Montanan of the same year than with the New York city dweller of 2008. In addition to affecting character and plot, a writer's decisions about time-setting can also say something about the writer's personality.

When I headed west for my fiction I also headed into the past.

My decision might have had to do with nothing more complicated than the fact that there's much I don't understand about the times I live in. Pride in victimization. The eagerness to confess in public what was once deliberately kept private. Politicians who run for office by denigrating their own profession. Media who believe their purpose is to make us feel rather than know. Artists for whom ugliness and senselessness are worthy aesthetic goals. Literal reality gives me enough trouble, so you can only imagine how hopeless I am when it comes to virtual reality. I have no Facebook, MySpace, Linkedin, or Twitter relationships.

I wouldn't be comfortable writing fiction in which I simply ignored those elements of the contemporary world that I didn't understand. For a fiction writer to say, "I see all these things around me, but I'm deliberately going to leave them out of my fiction," seems to me an invitation to trouble. For many writers this poses no problem; they're confident enough of their ability to pick and choose, to say, "This I'll deal with, but not this. This is important; this is not. I can look here; I don't have to look there." I don't have that confidence.

Furthermore, to write about the present seems always to force writers into a critique of their times. I'd rather leave that job to social philosophers, cultural critics, and other nonfiction writers—whose work I often admire.

So my personal solution has been to retreat to the past, in *Montana 1948* and in other novels, back to where history and memory have already done some of the writer's work of selecting, winnowing, separating the important from the trivial, the momentary from the universal, back to where the file is closed. (I know, I know. The file is never really closed; history is constantly being reexamined and rewritten. But the picture has stabilized somewhat. Compared to the present, the past is not as shifting or as shifty.)

But while that may be an argument for writing about the past, it doesn't do much to answer the question, "*Which* past?" With all those centuries, all those decades, from which to choose, why would I choose the middle of the twentieth century?

The most obvious reason is that the era is available to me. I was born in 1947, and though I don't have any memories of the 1940s that I can trust, many of the family stories that I grew up hearing are of that period. My own first memories, and the first can be the strongest because we live with them the longest and because an emotional aura so often surrounds them, are of the early to mid-1950s. We like to give each decade its own name and personality, but the years can be as untidy as state borders. What we like to think of as the sixties, for example, is probably more like a span of years that began around 1965 and ran into the early 1970s. The late 1940s and the 1950s were not so dissimilar as decade markers might have us think. That was especially true of the region in which I grew up.

North Dakota is a progressive state in many respects, but it's slow in others. In technological matters, its 1950s were like the 1940s in other regions. In fact, when the film rights to *Montana 1948* were first optioned, I received a call from the director of North Dakota's Film Commission. (My first thought was, Do North Dakotans know that their tax dollars are supporting a film commission?) He wanted me to put in a good word with the producer for a couple North Dakota towns as locations for the movie. They made such great sites, he said proudly, because they hadn't changed much since the 1940s—and our conversation was taking place in the 1990s! Time may pass at the same pace everywhere on the planet, but paved roads, electricity, and indoor plumbing do not come to all communities at the same time.

To some extent, when I write about the 1940s or 1950s, I am recapturing my childhood. Or trying to. Thomas Wolfe was wrong, but Proust was right. We can go home again, but the only paradise is the paradise lost. I can return to Bismarck, North Dakota, but I can't go back to 1956.

Earlier I talked about how setting in place afforded me themes. If reticence, taciturnity is a characteristic of the region then that quality must be played out in the characters as well. *Montana 1948* is about the devastating consequences of silence, of covering up, concealing. But notice—the novel has both place and time in its title. And if the region worked well for this theme, the setting in time worked equally well.

The narrator says of 1948 that it was "a blessedly peaceful time." So it was. Perhaps as quiet as an era can be for a country as brash and cacophonous as ours. But perhaps that calm was purchased at a high price. The late 1940s slid into the Fifties, that buttoned-down, buttoned-up decade of quiet conformity. As long as our ship was sailing smoothly, no need to make waves. (And then Sixties came along. . .a social and cultural hurricane that made the recent Hurricane Ike look like a breeze.) The "Tranquilized Fifties" Robert Lowell called them, but what were those tranquilizers for? If the era was as becalmed, as innocent, as it is often depicted, why were tranquilizers necessary at all? No, something was churning in America's hearts and minds, something that a portion of the population wanted kept in the dark and didn't want talked about. Something that needed to be repressed.

But you must be wondering—this guy said he was going to talk about personal sources for his fiction, but so far he's only revealed that he was born in North Dakota in 1947. . . . Nothing very personal there. Well, bear with me; I'm coming closer. . . .

Although I might be able to recreate, via memory and imagination and a little research, a plains community of the 1940s, the era is not really mine, not in the way that adulthood and maturity are necessary to claim possession. It was my father's time.

During the 1930s and 1940s, my father was a small town sheriff, and he was preceded in office by his father. Because there was a limit on the number of consecutive terms a sheriff could serve in office, my father and grandfather traded the job back and forth. Like the Haydens, they also shared a deputy. Following his years in law enforcement, my father was elected to a few terms as his county's state's attorney. My father's professional life was successful, and he moved from one good job to another, usually working as an attorney for a government agency. Nevertheless, I believe it's fair to say that he never had a job that gave him the special satisfaction and reward that he received from being chosen, by the citizens of the county in which he was born and raised, to be their chief law enforcement office, the man elected to see that wrongdoers were arrested and, later, charged, brought to trial, and, if possible, convicted. The fact that such jobs carry a measure of cultural cachet did not impress my father, but it did others.

Including me, although I didn't know him when he was a sheriff. He—and my grandfather—held the post years before my birth. My father was relatively old when I was born, and one of the lasting regrets of my life is that I didn't ask him more about what it was like to be a sheriff and a district attorney in that small Dakota town in those years. I do know that, like Wesley Hayden, my father didn't carry a gun. Years later, I had occasion to meet the sheriff of Missoula, Montana, and he said, about my father and his decision to patrol the streets or make arrests without a weapon, "Sounds like my kind of sheriff."

But I didn't ask enough questions of my father, so perhaps one of the reasons I go back to that era and that profession in my fiction is to fill in another father's past and to understand his life. Wesley Hayden is not my father and Julian Hayden is not my grandfather, but they share a few features and qualities. Perhaps most important, from the perspective of a fiction writer, is that having known those men, I could proceed to write about a sheriff with a degree of confidence. What kind of man runs for the office of sheriff in a small town? Well, my father was one kind. And my grandfather was another. Greek myth and Freud tell us that sons symbolically (if not literally) slay their fathers. Perhaps so. But writers have another, and opposite, power; they can create fathers and give them life, albeit of the literary sort.

I began to write about the past when I reached the approximate age that my father was when I was born. Writers go back to another time and place to pay homage to their ancestors, their heritage, hoping to better understand the place, the people, the time from which they came. And thereby to better understand themselves.

None of the events in *Montana 1948* really happened, but in the process of writing the novel, I realized that the story had a metaphorical basis in my family's relationships, a tension in the family that I translated—sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously—into the novel's plot.

My father didn't have *a* brother, but three brothers, and although none of them was a criminal, they were scoundrels, in and out of trouble of one kind or another throughout much of their lives. My father was the white sheep of the family, the youngest and best-behaved of the Watson boys. I remember a conflict in him—and a resulting tension in our family—as he felt himself pulled in different directions, one toward his ne'-er-do-well brothers and the family he was born into, and the other toward decency, morality, and doing the right thing. Which is very similar to the situation that Wesley Hayden finds himself in.

I'm not sure I entirely agree with Annie Proulx who said, "If you get the landscape right, the story will come from the landscape," but if she could be persuaded to add "time" to "landscape," I'd sign on in a minute.

As I move toward a conclusion, I have to say that even in this recursive, categorically-mixed examination of sources, I've made it sound as though the process of "getting

an idea" is more formal and orderly than it really is. In the opening pages of *Montana 1948* are a series of images, and the narrator indicates that they should not be viewed as sequential or chronological but simultaneously. That's how I feel about the steps or stages in this creative process. They can occur all at once, yet develop at different rates, some slowly, some quickly. Sometimes it seems as though an entire novel is there for me, quick on the heels of a single image or a single line of dialogue. At other times the connections must be made and unmade slowly. Maybe an even better visual analogue of the process is the Moebius strip, crossing planes, doubling back on itself, the beginning and ending undifferentiated. Perhaps for other writers the procedure is far more orderly and predictable, but for me it's messy, experimental, and unceremonious. And ongoing. I *have* gotten ideas for fiction when I have deliberately sought them, when I have consciously, systematically thought on a problem in a quite specific way, and then come up with a conclusion, a solution, or an answer. But what is more likely to happen is that an idea will just come to me. Then I try it out. I carry it around for a while, to see how much it interests me, to see how much is likely to be there. Ideally, the idea will keep opening up, a rose with an almost infinite number of petal-layers. I want and like the feeling that I'll be able to write and write and write on this subject, this premise, this conflict, and never exhaust it or come to the end of it.

Most ideas are, however, discarded at this stage. After five minutes or five days of thinking I realize that, nope, there just isn't enough there. Or there isn't a form or a voice—or a personal passion--that will match the idea and that it therefore isn't "write-able."

But some ideas make this cut and survive to the stage where they are made into language. Then, after five pages, or fifty, or 150, I sometimes find that, no, this one won't work either. This recognition often comes with the feeling that the story is one that I'm *willing* into being. And I have occasionally come to this conclusion only after I've written an entire draft of a novel.

None of these things will happen, however, neither the abandoned starts nor the completed, published novels, unless I keep my antennae up, ready to receive the signals that yes, here--in that scrap of conversation, or in that image, in that odd feeling that accompanies the sound of rain hitting a window screen, in the taste of burnt toast, the sound of an old song—here is a story.

Scott Fitzgerald said that a writer doesn't have to be the smartest person in the room, just the most observant. Hearing that came as a great relief to me, since I've long known that only when I'm alone am I assured of being the smartest in the room.

But I am observant. And perhaps the most observant in many rooms, though I can lay claim to being the least observant at the same time. I might notice what brand and model of running shoe a man is wearing and how the wear pattern indicates whether he pronates or supinates. . .yet miss the fact that he and the woman he's with would like to

strangle each other. More than once my wife and I have returned from a party, and she's asked, "Did you see what was going on with John and Mary?" And I have to say no, but I did notice that John has switched from Nikes to Adidas.

I have to keep noticing and then try to see what it is that has struck me in my observations. Saul Bellow said, "Taking note is part of my job description." In one of his late poems, "Notice," Robert Lowell made a command of this activity for all of us: "But we must notice—we are designed for the moment."