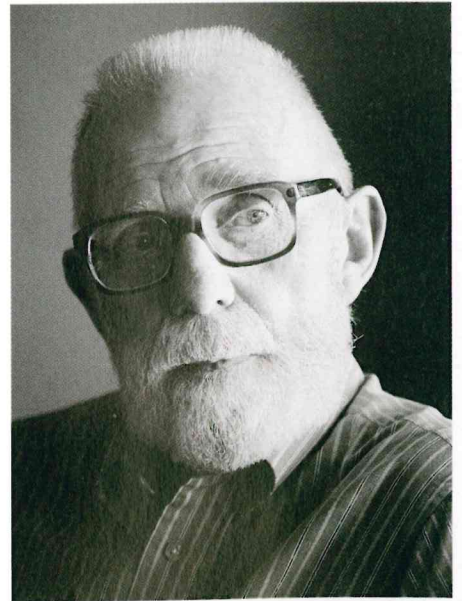
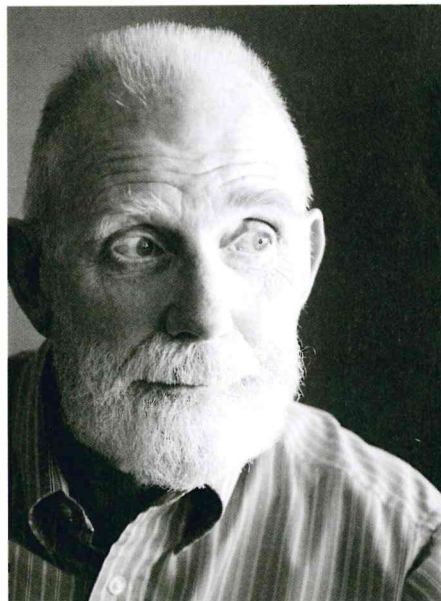
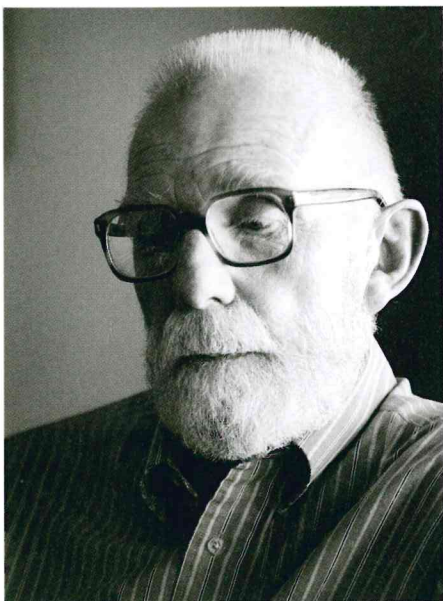


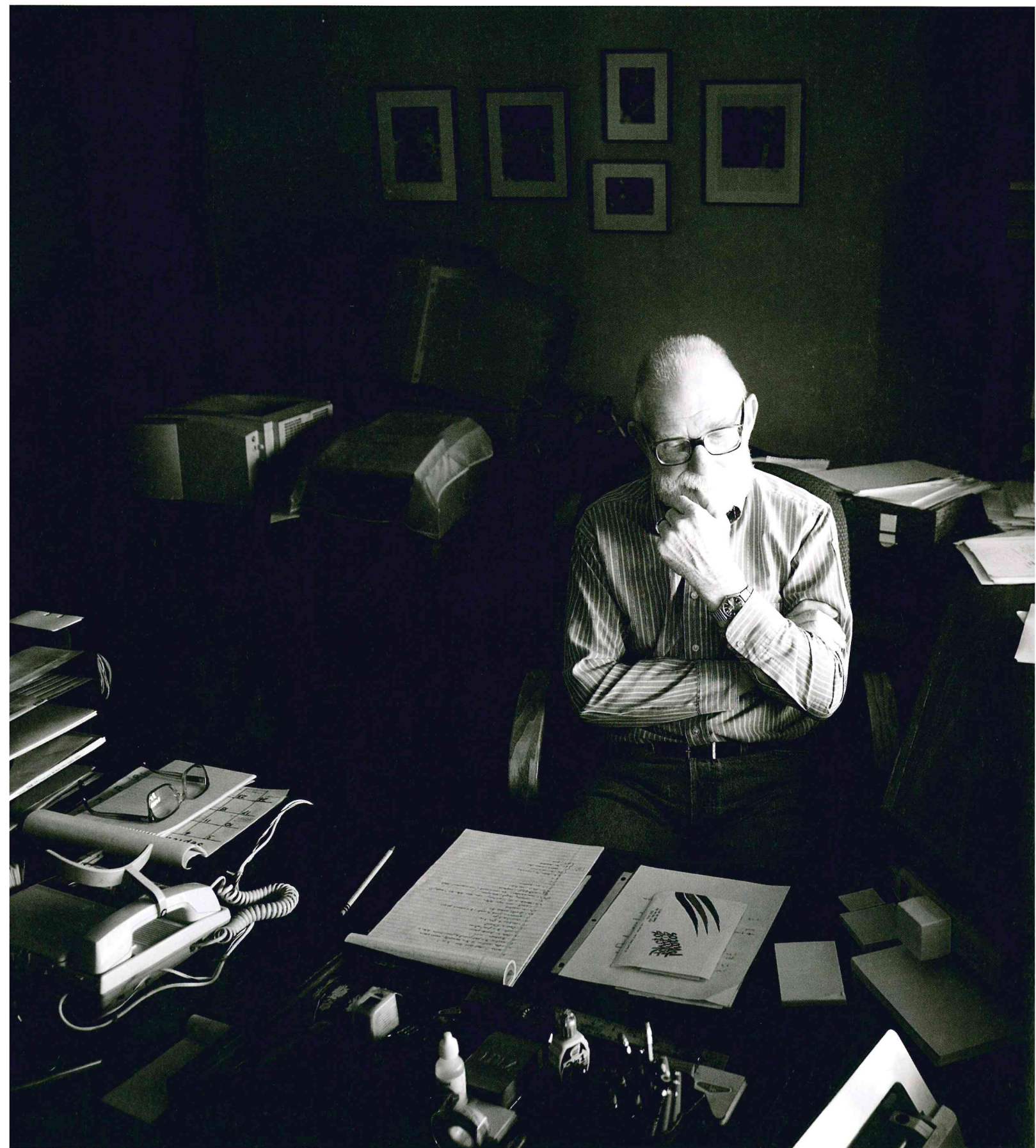
Nearly three decades
after the publication
of *This House of Sky*,
author Ivan Doig is still
telling it like it is

A Voice For Montana

BY MEGAN AULT • PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

SEATTLE — Three decades ago a man began writing a book about a difficult and memorable childhood growing up in rural Montana during the Depression. Nobody had heard of him, and 12 editors rejected his manuscript, many of them apologetically noting that it was a beautiful story, but they didn't think they could make money on it. The 13th editor, from publishing giant Harcourt, accepted the book and changed the life of a man who had been the first to graduate from high school on either side of his ranch-hand family, the first to own and wear out a typewriter, the first to go to college, the first to earn a Ph.D.





Thank goodness that editor did agree to publish the memoir, because few of us who've read Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* can shake the opening lines:

"Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And then stopped.

"The remembering begins out of that new silence."

Doig's voice reading his own words in the audio version of *This House of Sky* is rich and deep. The photo of him inside the back cover of his latest novel, *The Whistling Season*, set in Eastern Montana, is stern and formidable, with the camera looking up past his white beard to defined cheekbones that meet a commanding gaze. Yet to meet 67-year-old Doig in his Seattle home with sweeping views of Puget Sound is to meet an ordinary man from unusually modest means, who has used diligence to make his life a work of art.

If plain old hard work and art seem an unlikely pair, then you haven't met Doig.

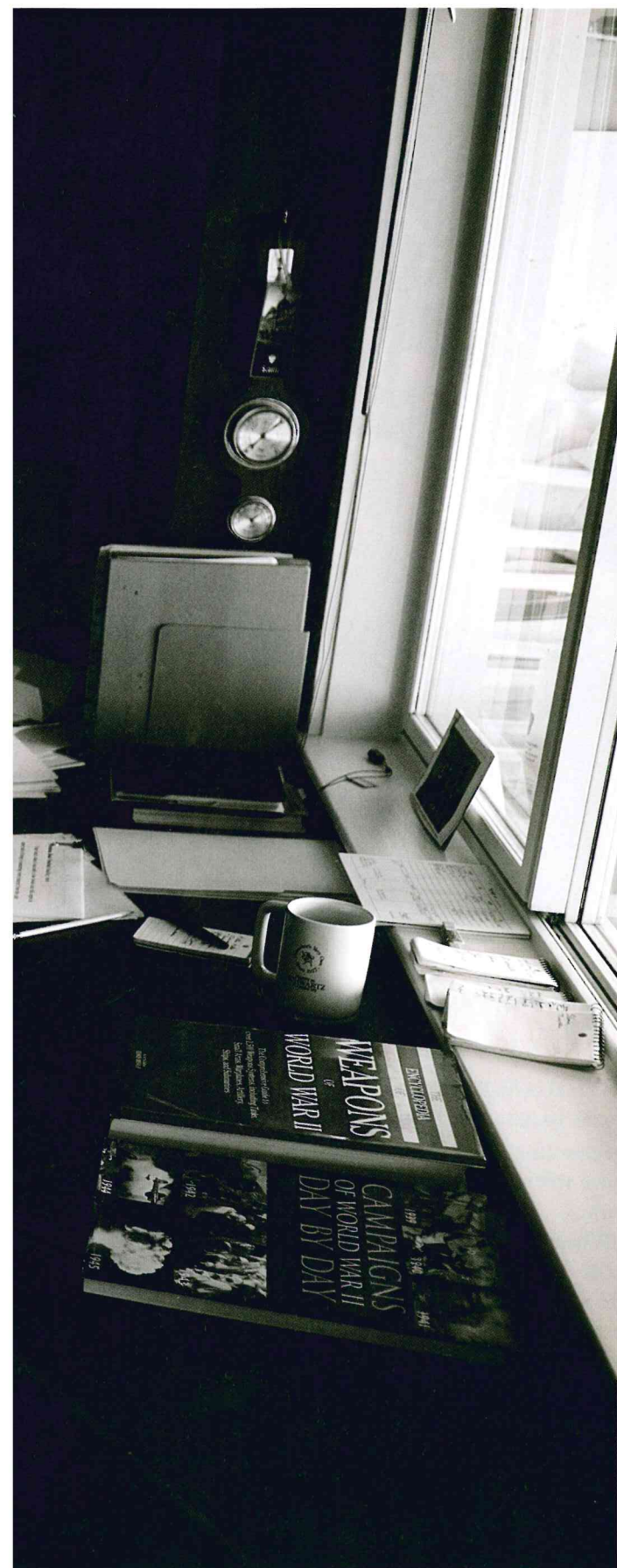
"Inspiration is not the name of the game," says Doig. "Detail and perspiration is. You don't just wander around pretending you're a lightning rod, that literature's going to light you up at some point. You've got to work at it; you've got to be professional."

For Doig, that means waking up every morning at 4:30 to start the day with the newspaper and a cup of coffee. He and Carol, his wife for 41 years, have for years walked the same two-mile loop in their suburban neighborhood, waved to the same neighbors as they head off to work. At around 6:30, Doig heads downstairs to his office. "I write about 400 words," he says. "After lunch we always have a nap. We've had naps all our adult lives — it goes back to the Lyndon Johnson era — and gives me a chance to recuperate for the afternoon. If I don't have the 400 words achieved by afternoon I'll go back and do that. If I do, I'll edit."

Add up those steady words day in and day out and it's a new book or novel every two to three years. This fall, Doig will have sold his millionth book when adding the sales of his 11 books, all of which are still in print. "Some people manage that (selling a million copies) in one book!" says Doig. But it isn't easy to come up with many western authors who still have all of their books, written over a 30-year span, still in print. *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, one of the novels in Doig's trilogy that follows several families through Montana's hundred years of statehood, has sold the most copies of any of his books, though he has been told that *This House of Sky* may surpass it this fall.

Undoubtedly, Doig is one of Montana's most widely read and successful authors ever. Perhaps more than that, though, he has

Writer Ivan Doig sits at his desk in the basement of his home north of Seattle. Doig begins work most mornings by about 6:30 and writes about 400 words a day.





become a voice for Montana, telling her stories with a rare, often brilliant combination of poetry and truth.

It's a measure of success that Carol Doig never would have imagined when she and Ivan first met, teaching summer journalism workshops to high schoolers at Northwestern University in Illinois more than 40 years ago. "We were good, bright people working hard," says Carol, "But that doesn't necessarily mean you'll wind up in a place like this and Ivan with the success he has had."

That success encompasses many literary awards, including his selection as a finalist for the National Book Award for *This House of Sky*. Still, Doig says he never really "felt like he'd arrived," even when *Bucking the Sun*, his fifth novel, set during the construction of the Fort Peck dam, went up for auction to a host of clamoring publishing houses and increased his income substantially.

"I don't think I've ever arrived. I'm just always on the way to the next book," says Doig.

Carol all but scoffs at the notion that following her husband

Doig picks raspberries in his backyard garden — one of his diversions from writing.

to get a Ph.D in history at the University of Washington, supporting his decision to turn down a professorship at a big university, then supporting him when he announced he was going to quit freelance writing to write a book, required any leap of faith on her part.

"When he turned down a really good job at Indiana University, he said, 'Well, I've just learned to use the library here at UW.' So I said to him offhandedly, 'Fine, I like what I'm doing, and in 20 years you'll be the meal ticket,' and so it was."

Actually, Carol taught journalism at Shoreline Community College, a short walk from their home, for 30 years before retiring. She and Ivan have co-written one non-fiction book together, and she often accompanies him on book research trips, taking reference photos along the way. Doig is well-known for his love of research — which perhaps explains how his Ph.D in history figures into his writing, and why even his fiction is peppered

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with factual information about the times he’s evoking.

In her book *Earthlight, Wordfire: The Work of Ivan Doig*, author Elizabeth Simpson writes, “Doig does impeccable research for all of his writing: in his files, for example, are letters to acquaintances in Montana requesting expertise on sheepskinning and forest fires ... Doig traveled to Scotland just to stand on the dock from which the protagonists in *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* embarked to America, to get a feel for the place and an ear for dialect.”

In a 1987 “Wired for Books” radio interview with Don Swaim, Doig said he often “rummages” or “shops” for details and language, always keeping a small notebook with him for anything worth keeping. “In *Rascal Fair*, much of that comes from skimming old letters and diaries; scouting old Scottish joke books for turns of phrase and their dry humor,” he says.

Many of those research trips have also been to Montana, because the majority of Doig’s books are set here. He’s been asked numerous times over the years why — if Montana figures so largely in his heart and imagination — he has chosen to settle in Seattle rather than in his home state.

“Ivan says it’s a young person’s world in Montana,” explains Carol. “He grew up there, he put up with the weather there, and he says you have to devote so much time just to surviving that he can get more done here.”

“Words seem to grow in the damp air,” Doig told Swaim during the radio interview. “Seattle’s grey climate with ever-green forests is a very congenial place for me to hole up.”

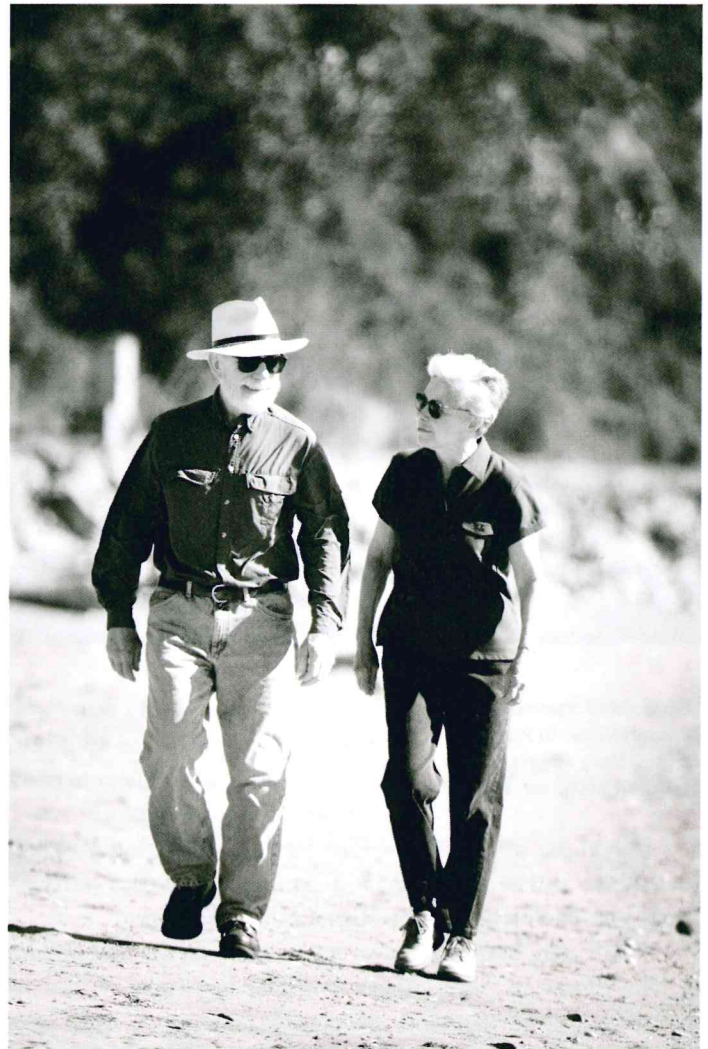
But it seems there’s more to it than that. Perhaps a place associated with memories of struggle doesn’t evoke much longing to return. When asked about the romance of ranch life, Doig explains, “Our ranching roots were actually ranch-hand roots, so we were just wage hands trying to work our way up to becoming share croppers. Dad always told me, ‘Get yourself an education so you don’t end up doing this for these guys.’

“Meagher County was a pretty tough venue for us. That’s why I still prefer the northern part of the state, for a reason I still don’t entirely understand. But Meagher County tended to have big ranches whereas Dupuyer (where he and his father and grandmother later moved) and the area around Choteau and Browning tended to have family ranches and so forth. And you know the bigger the ownership, the smaller the hired hand looks and is treated as, so Meagher was a pretty good place to think

about getting out of ... Dupuyer country gave me a place to live with some measure of stability during high school, and it’s there that I got my leg up on the ladder towards college.”

From there Doig went to Illinois to attend Northwestern University, where he got his degree in broadcast journalism and worked in print journalism before moving west. His father never got to read *This House of Sky*. “He got to see an article I wrote for *The Rotarian* on rodeo,” says Ivan. “He about wore that magazine out passing it around. And he did live to see me get the Ph.D; he came out here for the ceremony.”

Besides the irony of the fact that Doig’s mind still often resides in Montana while writing in Seattle, he is closely acquainted and



Doig and his wife, Carol, take daily walks near their home on Puget Sound.

commonly associated with the big names that have put Montana on the western literary map, making it easy to understand why many book-loving Montanans claim him as their own.

His relationship with the Montana literary crowd began, of course, with *This House of Sky*.

University of Montana English professor and well-known author Bill Kittredge remembers, “Ivan really worked hard to get his first book out. He traveled around the West in his little car with boxes of books.”

“We would go around to Montana bookstores,” recalls Doig, “and walk in with long blue coverless galleys of *This House of Sky* and I would say, ‘This is my first book, it’s being published,’

signing head-on with the University of Montana homecoming game and she called me and said, ‘What are we gonna do?’ and I said, ‘Well, I’m set to come, so let’s see what happens.’ What happened was people began seeping out at half-time...The publisher of the Missoulian came down and a whole bunch of other people came down. In came this guy, build sort of like a 50-gallon drum. Came up and said, ‘Read your book and I just want to say, God. Damn!’ That was Kittredge.

“I didn’t know him, didn’t know anybody. At the party that night Dick Hugo was there, Jim and Lois Welch, (James) Crumley, and on and on. It was a very generous and gracious welcoming.”

“*This House of Sky* came to us in the Inland West as affirmation that we could in fact have an ongoing literature,” says Kittredge. “*A River Runs Through It* (by Norman Maclean) had been published, Hugo was big, and it just seemed like the whole scene in Montana was coming to life.”

A nearly 30-year friendship cemented for the Doigs and Welchs from those early days. Native American writer James Welch is the highly acclaimed author of many books, including *Fools Crow* and *Winter in the Blood*. When Doig agreed to speak at the 2006 Montana Festival of the Book this past September, Lois Welch introduced him and offered context for the couples’ friendship. “Our lives were arranged in a parallel fashion, it turned out. Carol taught college; I taught college; she had a five-minute commute; mine was seven. Our husbands stayed home and wrote. Both Jim and Ivan offered the same advice to aspiring writers

wondering how to make a living at writing: Marry someone with a steady job.”

Asked the emotional impact that coming home to a changing Montana has had on him, Doig acknowledges the impact of development and the like, but says it’s witnessing generational passings that is most unsettling.

Doig grows quiet when speaking of the death of Jim, who died of a heart attack in 2003 after a 10-month battle with lung cancer.

Before the Montana Festival of the Book Doig said, “Jim’s wife, Lois Welch, is going to introduce me and that is emotional.



Silhouetted against a dramatic view of Puget Sound, Doig speaks with a visitor in his basement office.

— and the eyes would roll — ‘by Harcourt,’ and the eyes would roll less. If we could get them to crack the book, they were for it.”

When the owner of The Fine Print bookstore in Missoula read it she insisted on hosting a signing and even a party for Doig, introducing him to the Missoula writing crowd.

“This may have taken over my memory as the first signing of *This House of Sky*— that’s probably not right — but it’s certainly one of the most memorable signings,” Doig says. “Unfortunately, the owner of the bookstore had scheduled the

“*This House of Sky* came to us in the Inland West as affirmation that we could in fact have an ongoing literature,” says Kittredge. “It just seemed like the whole scene in Montana was coming to life.”

I plan to tell a little anecdote while on stage just to give me a way to get through it ... I don't want to cry in front of a thousand people in the Wilma Theatre.”

“Jim's loss was a big, big loss. It affected all of us,” explains Carol. “We wouldn't see them for a year, then we'd take up same way we ever were. And those two were great travelers. Jim was just brilliant. So not only is a good man gone, but there's no more work from him.”



A friend from Doig's Dupuyer high school graduating class of 20 recently passed away as well.

“This guy was also a real loss because his family has been on that land since 1882. His grandfather came from Germany and homesteaded there. So there's this continuing toll that you see,” says Doig.

“All this is like watching the last tree in the horizon fall over,” says Lois. “It makes you feel a little naked in the world. I think it's that kind of feeling that Ivan is dealing with. Death concentrates your mind wonderfully. In a way it makes you more interesting — you cut to the chase more often.”

While Doig isn't slowing down any these days, he agrees that he is “cutting to the chase” more in terms of choosing how he spends his time so that he can focus on what matters most to him, which is and always has been getting good words on paper, telling stories.

“He's got more ideas in his head than the normal lifetime can deal with,” says Carol. “I don't know how many corners are in that mind of his, but it's really endless. I know there are writers who say, ‘What'll I do next?’ ... But Ivan's problem is finding enough time.”

As winter rains begin to blanket Seattle, Doig is hunkering down with his next project, writing a book about a female pilot set in Great Falls during World War II. As is common practice for him, the novel is based on several kernels of truth and fact that he's churning through his imagination.

Asked if he ever envisions a day when he won't write, Doig says, “It looks like I'm going to write until I drop. Carol points out that I don't loaf worth a damn. What am I going to do, just arbitrarily sit around and fidget? I want to be writing.”

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