

This first appeared in the San Jose Mercury News Books section

By Larry F. Slonaker

Ivan Doig's writing issues out of Montana like a squall out of the mountains. He constructs misty sheets of prose that alter one's sight lines -- you're looking at the same place, the West, but under the manipulation of his gauzy and refracted light you see it entirely differently.

The view is reflective, too. Exposed to Doig's meticulously researched detail of the land and its inhabitants, and especially of the language they use -- "the lilt of Westernisms, " it's called in his latest book -- his readers, whether inhabitants of the West or the Western world, find themselves reviewing how they fit into his vast setting.

Doig visited the Bay Area recently to plug "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana, " the third novel of a trilogy concerning the loves and losses of a clan in northern Montana. The title refers to Mariah McCaskill, daughter of narrator Jick McCaskill, and a tour of the state in the centennial of its statehood.

A Winnebago is what drives the narrative -- Mariah travels as photographer for a Missoula paper; her ex-husband, Riley, goes as columnist; and Jick goes as driver and concerned curmudgeon. As they travel, their knowledge of themselves and the people they meet widens into thematic terrain, which, coming out of this stretched and diverse land -- soaring in pride and beauty, weighted by hardship and impending change -- is wide country indeed.

Doig is a master at pointing up human vicissitudes and their sometimes subtle shadings, which he takes painful lengths to portray exactly. From the up-close view of a bison ("To look at up close, the hide on a buffalo is like a matted mud rug that hasn't been shaken for many

seasons"), to Mariah's photographic techniques, to the complexion of the tiny towns his characters dive into, Doig tries hard to make it right.

Of his research, which for a section of the trilogy took him to Scotland, he says: "I hope it's exhaustive -- it's certainly considerable. It seems to me it lends a power, an authority. . . . Accuracy in the small things, you hope, is going to tincture all through the bigger things, the entire piece of writing. Nothing turns a reader off quicker than to be reading along and find something and say, 'Jesus, I know that's not right.'

"Also, my imagination, whatever sparks it does create, comes off the flint of actuality."

This is a quality that's endeared the affable, soft-spoken writer both to readers and writers. "He knows that country, " says Wallace Stegner. "The difference with someone who knows and someone who doesn't is particularly important in books about the West, " because the landscape plays such a big role.

"He's honest. He's a real Westerner writing real books about real people -- not some hoked-up Hollywood version."

Stegner took note of Doig with the latter's first book, an evocative, deeply felt memoir called "This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind." Although the two have met only once, they've corresponded over the years; and Doig dedicated "Mariah" to Stegner.

Doig, and of course the elder McCaskill, carry a deep and searching affinity for the land. Jick treasures his small ranch in the Two Medicine country, and resents the constant pressures he feels to sell out to the voracious outsider conglomerates that eat up places like his for tax write-offs. Certain turns of the screw, such as a plan to use a section of the desolate eastern plains for a gunnery target range, or the peculiarly yuppie advent of fly fishing, drive him nuts.

As the land stirs Doig, so does the sound of the language. The trilogy's second novel, "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," traces through dialogue its characters' progress from speaking as Scots to established Montanans, who have a dialect of their own. "Language, and the music and dance of it, are why I am a writer," Doig says. "This trilogy represents a deliberate gamble that it's worth it to spend most of a decade writing three books in what I hope is a representative voice of the region."

Doig says he feels no compulsion to reinvent form, and "there's not that many plots. So it's in the language that we find the running room."

But he wants the running to carry him beyond Montana. That is where Jick and Doig differ; Jick at 65 remains determined to make a go out it in Montana. But Doig, 51, left the state after high school, pushed out by an eagerness to see and learn new things, and pushed over the edge by a vicious July storm, which literally killed off the profits of a long summer's worth of raising sheep.

He went off to study journalism at Northwestern University in Illinois. He returned to Montana to do ranch work in the summers. After he got his master's degree, he returned to operate the binder, a machine that bundles grain. "I'd get occasionally roasted by the other ranch hands. They'd say 'You got yer master's, you can run the binder. Go get yer Ph.D. you can come back and run the tractor.' "

Doig laughs when he tells it; he also adds, "When I got the Ph.D., I did not go back and run the . . . tractor."

Instead he's ended up in the Seattle area, where he lives with his wife, Carol, a journalism teacher. He wrote a couple of books set in the Pacific Northwest, but he seems drawn continually back to the setting of Montana. He defends his emigration. "I don't particularly consider that I'm

writing about Montana. I consider I'm writing about the larger country life. Great writers have given us the example that you can be grounded in a specific land and lingo, like Faulkner, and yet be writing colossal stuff."

His writing is not nearly so mannered and onerous as Faulkner's, but his fiction hasn't yet approached Faulkner's consistent height. "Mariah, " for instance, sometimes gives the palpable feel of a writer trying too hard. Every slice of dialogue, it seems, is curlicued with an "elucidated" or "intoned" or some sore-thumb modifying clause. The characters never lack color, but they sometimes do lack dimension; one thinks of the wildly disparate but emphatically flat targets that pop up in a shooting gallery.

But the few shortcomings shouldn't put off any lover of writing from reading Doig, who consistently achieves the tricky combination of feeling deeply and seeing clearly. And relevant as he is to the diminishing rural West, his stuff touches just as surely urban Californians, living at the very edge or maybe even off the edge of the Western experience. The exuberant love he bears for the land, the people, and their eternal rebirth is an inspiration and a comfort.