

## **My Montana Story**

### **Big Sky Country State Fair**

#### **Ivan Doig: A Life of Remembering**

##### **By Gary Porter**

My Montana Story is inextricably tied to the shepherd's son from White Sulphur Springs. For it is he who is to "blame" for my love affair with the Treasure State.....

A.B. gave us the Big Sky. Not literally of course, but in the most figurative of ways. A generation later, it was left to Ivan Doig to give the brilliant sky that Guthrie so aptly described a house underneath it. Again, not a literal one, but an abode of the imagination. *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* was Ivan Doig's haunting memoir of a boyhood spent under that big sky, under the watchful eye of his widowed father Charlie and his maternal grandmother Bessie. Ivan's playground was the grassy knolls in the shadows of the Bridgers and the Belts.

My introduction to this "Dean of Western Writers," successor to Wallace Stegner, wasn't with his memoir. In the early 1990s my wife and I took a ski trip to Big Mountain and found ourselves one evening browsing the stacks in a Whitefish bookstore. Although it wasn't directed to me, I took Ivan up on his offer to *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana*, the final novel in his trilogy of the McCaskill family in the Two Medicine country. Eventually I backed up, meandering along up *English Creek* and then *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*.

But it wasn't with the fictional Scots in the Two Medicine that I lay the blame for my love affair with Montana. That rests directly on the shoulders of the author himself, courtesy of his heart-wrenching memoir. My licit love affair can be traced to the first time I picked up *This House of Sky*. Who would not be drawn in on the first page, when Ivan recalls the death of his beloved mother, happening as it did on his sixth birthday, "The remembering begins out of that new silence."

The remembering. Only a writer with the skill of an Ivan Doig could take a verb, add an ING, and turn it into a noun. With each new Doig novel, I eagerly looked forward to the clever nouncing of his verbs.

Lucky for us, Mr. Doig was not only a rememberer, but one of a rare breed of writers who could take the mundane of everyday life and turn it poetic, lyrical. Whether describing the inside of a sheep wagon or the inside of the Stockman Bar in White Sulphur Springs, Ivan took you along for a magical ride. And he brought along his true-to-the-bone father Charlie Doig and gave him a voice. At once the gruff voice of a shepherd, the next that of a grieving widower, “Godamighty, Ivan, I did miss your mother.”

It was Ivan who taught me what it means to fall in love with a place. My wife and I met in school in Boulder, Colorado, fell in love, and then began our careers in San Diego, California, lovely places both. Midwesterners by birth, we eventually made our home in the heartland. But like moths to the flame, we are always drawn back to the blaze of the mountains. Not just any, but those under the Big Sky.

Now that he is gone, it is with some regret that I never had the chance to meet Mr. Doig. Would I have had the courage to tell him that he was to blame for this affliction? So much so that we now intend to spend the rest of our years in Big Sky country. A place where my remembering may not have begun, but where it will end, thanks to Ivan Doig.