

The Whistling Season

Discussion Questions: Set I

1. When siblings Rose Llewellyn and Morris Morgan step off the train, what is unusual about their relationship?
2. Discuss the scene by the cliff where Morrie and the boys say the wolf is being chased by Brose Turley.
3. Paul and his brothers had many adventures living out on the prairie. Why was their father so mad at the way they approached the race? And at how they treated Eddie Turley and his father?
4. After Eddie was jumped by the other boys and got his glasses broken, how did his role change in the school room? How did Paul feel about him?
5. The Montana landscape is also a character in the book. How does it shape Paul's life in 1909 and again in 1957?
6. What surprises did the writer take that you were not expecting?
7. Morrie Morgan became such a part of Paul's education. Was it to his detriment? How did Morris surprise Paul?
8. In the end does Paul compromise his integrity by not letting others know about Rose and Morrie's past?
9. What language or turn of phrase caught you off guard or stays with you?
10. What significance in the big picture was Rose's independence? How did she assert it?

Adapted from by the staff of the Bellingham Public Library, Washington, from questions developed by www.siouxlandlib.com

The Whistling Season

Book Club Discussion Questions, Set II

(Questions issued by publisher.)

1. Does the life of a homesteader in 1907 Montana, as it is portrayed in the novel, appeal to you? What is appealing about it? Would you trade the comforts and the disconnection of modern life for the simplicity and the hardships of these characters' lives?

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2. How does Doig foreshadow and hint at the novel's plot twists? For example, when did you first realize that Rose and Morrie might not be who they claim to be? Did you have a theory about their true identities? How does this kind of foreshadowing contribute to the novel's effect on you?
3. Do Paul's dreams ring true to you? Why or why not? Does Doig do a good job of capturing the feeling and content of a vivid dream? What do Paul's dreams say about him?
4. What is the significance of the verse that Aunt Eunice quotes on page 22: "Yet, Experience spake / the old ways are best; / steadfast for steadfast's sake, / passing the eons' test"? Do you think the adult Paul would agree with the gist of this verse? In trying to save the schoolhouses, is he being "steadfast for steadfast's sake"? Is this novel an argument that "the old ways are best," or is it simply an elegy to those old ways?
5. Compare the students' excitement over the arrival of Halley's Comet with the panic over Sputnik and the quality of American education that has led to the adult Paul's being ordered to close the schoolhouses. Why do you think Doig frames the novel with these two events?
6. What do you think of the education that the children of Marias Coulee receive? How does it differ from your own education or the education of children today? What are the advantages and disadvantages of today's educational system relative to that of the one-room schoolhouse?
7. Was there one teacher whose effect on you was like the effect Morrie had on Paul? What makes Morrie a good teacher? Discuss the great teachers you have had, and what qualities they shared with Morrie.
8. In his review of *The Whistling Season* in the New York Times Book Review, Sven Birkerts wrote that Doig's writing answered the question, "Is there any way to write nowadays . . . that can escape the taint of knowingness, of wised-up cynicism?" How would you describe Doig's style of writing? Do you agree with Birkerts? Did you find the (mostly good and decent) characters believable? Compare this novel to other contemporary novels you have read recently. Are there any other contemporary writers to whom you would compare Doig?
9. Discuss the character of Brose Turley. What does he represent, and what purpose does he serve in the novel? Is it significant that he is the only character whom we see at a church service, in the revival meeting? What is the significance of his coming to Morrie when he is frightened by the signs of drought and the appearance of the comet?

10. On page 294, the adult Paul reflects that closing the one room schoolhouses will "slowly kill those rural neighborhoods . . . No schoolhouse to send their children to. No schoolhouse for a Saturday night dance. No schoolhouse for election day; for the Grange meeting; for the 4-H club; for the quilting bee; for the pinochle tournament; for the reading group; for any of the gatherings that are the bloodstream of community." Today, fifty years after the time when Paul is reflecting, do you think other gathering places have replaced the schoolhouses? What have contemporary American communities lost or gained since the days of close-knit rural neighborhoods like Marias Coulee?

11. Do you blame Morrie and Rose for keeping their identities secret from the Milliron family? Does Paul do the right thing in keeping their secret from his father? How does his decision to do so relate to the closing passage of the novel, in which the adult Paul decides to mislead the appropriations committee in an effort to save the schoolhouses?

Whistling Season (Doig)

Labels: Western

[Summary](#) | [Author](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#)

The Whistling Season

Ivan Doig, 2006

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

352 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780156031646

In Brief

Can't cook but doesn't bite." So begins the newspaper ad offering the services of an "A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" that draws the hungry attention of widower Oliver Milliron in the fall of 1909.

And so begins the unforgettable season that deposits the noncooking, nonbiting, ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her font-of-knowledge brother, Morris Morgan, in Marias Coulee along with a stampede of homesteaders drawn by the promise of the Big Ditch—a gargantuan irrigation project intended to make the Montana prairie bloom.

When the schoolmarm runs off with an itinerant preacher, Morris is pressed into service, setting the stage for the "several kinds of education"—none of them of the textbook variety—Morris and Rose will bring to Oliver, his three sons, and the rambunctious students in the region's one-room schoolhouse.

A paean to a vanished way of life and the eccentric individuals and idiosyncratic institutions that made it fertile, *The Whistling Season* is Ivan Doig at his evocative best. (From the publisher.)

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About the Author

- Birth—June 27, 1939
- Where—White Sulphur Springs, Montana, USA
- Education—B.A., M.A., Northwestern University; Ph.D., University of Washington
- Currently—lives in Seattle, Washington

Ivan Doig was born in Montana to a family of home-steaders and ranch hands. After the death of his mother Berneta, on his sixth birthday, he was raised by his father Charles "Charlie" Doig and his grandmother Elizabeth "Bessie" Ringer. After several stints on ranches, they moved to Dupuyer, Pondera County, Montana in the north to herd sheep close to the Rocky Mountain front.

After his graduation from Valier high school, Doig attended Northwestern University, where he received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in journalism. He later earned a Ph.D. in American history at the University of Washington, writing his dissertation about John J. McGilvra (1827-1903). He now lives with his wife Carol Doig, nee Muller, a university professor of English, in Seattle, Washington.

Before Ivan Doig became a novelist, he wrote for newspapers and magazines as a free-lancer and worked for the United States Forest Service. He has also published two memoirs—*This House of Sky* (1979) and *Heart Earth* (1993).

Much of his fiction (10 novels) is set in the Montana country of his youth. His major theme is family life in the past, mixing personal memory and regional history. As the western landscape and people play an important role in his fiction, he has been hailed as the new dean of western literature, a worthy successor to Wallace Stegner. (From Wikipedia.)

Extras

His own words:

- Taking apart a career in such summary sentences always seems to me like dissecting a frog—some of the life inevitably goes out of it—and so I think the more pertinent Ivan Doig for you, Reader, is the red-headed only child, son of ranch hand Charlie Doig and ranch cook Berneta Ringer Doig (who died of her lifelong asthma on my sixth birthday), who in his junior year of high school (Valier, Montana; my class of 1957 had 21 members) made up his mind to be a writer of some kind.
- No one is likely to confuse my writing style with that of Charlotte Bronte, but when that impassioned parson's daughter lifted her pen from *Jane Eyre* and bequeathed us the most intriguing of plot summaries—"Reader, I married him"—she also was subliminally saying what any novelist ... must croon to those of you with your eyes on our pages: "Reader, my story is flirting with you; please love it back."
- One last word about the setting of my work, the American West. I don't think of myself as a "Western" writer. To me, language—the substance on the page, that poetry under the prose—is the ultimate "region," the true home, for a writer. Specific geographies, but galaxies of imaginative expression—we've seen them both exist in William Faulkner's postage stamp-size Yoknapatawpha County, and in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's nowhere village of Macondo, dreaming in its hundred years of solitude. If I have any creed that I wish you as readers, necessary accomplices in this flirtatious ceremony of writing and reading, will take with you from my pages, it'd be this belief of mine that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life. (From the *Author's Introduction*.)

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Critics Say . . .

Doig's writerly ambition is less in plotting than evoking, and it is his obvious pleasure to recreate from the ground up—or the sky down—a prior world, a prior way of being. The land and its people—the family, the neighbors—are laid out before us with a fresh, natural openness. We get uncluttered space, the no-nonsense solidity of things, a close-up registering of weather and the movement of the

sun (and, under Morris's tutelage, the stars in the night sky and the once-in-a-lifetime coming of Halley's comet). Studying his surroundings, Paul notices the "smooth-battered plain leading to Westwater," and, nearer, the "round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around their picket stakes." Earth-seeking writers like Willa Cather and Norman Maclean come to mind.... *The Whistling Season* is quiet and unassuming throughout.... [T]his is a deeply meditated and achieved art.

Sven Birkerts - New York Times Book Review

Doig has been at this for a long time; he's 67 and the author of eight previous novels and three works of nonfiction, including the memoir *This House of Sky*. You can see the evidence of that experience in his new novel: its gentle pace, its persistent warmth, its complete freedom from cynicism—and the confidence to take those risks without winking or apologizing. When a voice as pleasurable as his evokes a lost era, somehow it doesn't seem so lost after all.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

Any writer's work should be judged solely on its own merits, yet in this fine novel by Ivan Doig, one may be forgiven for marveling at the creation of such a work at an advanced stage of this writer's illustrious career. (Wallace Stegner to whom, as with Doig, landscape was character and event in any story, and particularly Western landscapes comes to mind with his classic *Crossing to Safety*.) Like many of Doig's earlier novels, *The Whistling Season* is set in the past in rural eastern Montana and addresses that time and place in distinct, uncluttered prose that carries the full enthusiasm of affection and even love for the landscape, the characters, and the events of the story—without being sentimental or elegiac. The novel is narrated by an aging Montana state superintendent of schools, Paul Milliron, who is charged with deciding the fate of the state's last scattered rural schools, and who, in the hours preceding his meeting to determine those schools' fate, recalls the autumn of 1909, when he was 13 and attending his own one-room school in Marias Coulee. Recently widowed, Paul's father, overwhelmed by the child-rearing duties presented by his three sons, in addition to his challenging farming duties, hires a housekeeper, sight unseen, from a newspaper ad. The housekeeper, Rose, proclaims that she "can't cook but doesn't bite." She turns out to be a beguiling character, and she brings with her a surprise guest—her brother, the scholarly Morris, who, though one of the most bookish characters in recent times, also carries brass knuckles and—not to give away too much plot—somehow knows how to use them. The schoolteacher in Marias Coulee runs away to get married, leaving Morris to step up and take over her job. The verve and inspiration that he, an utter novice to the West, to children and to teaching children, brings to the task is told brilliantly and passionately, and is the core of the book's narrative, with its themes of all the different ways of knowing and learning, at any age. Doig's strengths in this novel are character and language—the latter manifesting itself at a level of old-fashioned high-octane grandeur not seen previously in Doig's novels, and few others: the sheer joy of word choices, phrases, sentences, situations, and character bubbling up and out, as fecund and nurturing as the dryland farmscape the story inhabits is serene and arid. *The Whistling Season* is a book to pass on to your favorite readers: a story of lives of active choice, lived actively.

Publishers Weekly

Doig, a native of Montana, has been celebrating the natural beauty of his state and depicting the pleasures and challenges of frontier life for many years now in books like *This House of Sky* and *English Creek*. Here he returns to Montana to deal with these signature themes once again, with very satisfying results. Set in the early 1900s, this novel is a nostalgic, bittersweet story about a widower, his three sons, and the year these boys spend in a one-room country schoolhouse. The novel begins with the father, Oliver, hiring a widowed housekeeper named Rose from Minneapolis (her advertisement reads "Can't Cook but Doesn't Bite"). She arrives with her unconventional brother, Morrie, in tow. Morrie is something of a scholar, and he soon finds himself pressed into service as a replacement teacher. During the course of the novel, these intriguing and unpredictable characters come together in surprising and uplifting ways. This is an affectionate, heartwarming tale that also celebrates a vanished way of life and laments its passing. Recommended for all libraries. —Patrick Sullivan, *Manchester Com. Coll., CT*

Library Journal

Scenes from an early-20th-century Montana childhood, from this veteran Western author (*Prairie Nocturne*, 2003, etc.). Lured by the government promise of free land for homesteaders, Oliver Milliron forsook his Wisconsin drayage business and brought his family to Montana. Now it's 1909, and Oliver has been able to make ends meet as a dryland farmer, weathering the death of his wife from a burst appendix. He is struggling to raise his three boys single-handedly (13-year-old Paul, the narrator, and kid brothers Damon and Toby) when he spots an ad for a housekeeper. Rose Llewellyn doesn't come cheap; she wants her fare paid from Minneapolis, plus three months wages in advance. Oliver submits, not expecting that pretty, petite Rose will have her brother Morrie in tow. Conveniently, the teacher from the one-room schoolhouse absconds, and dapper, erudite Morrie steps into the breach. Doig's story centers on the impact of these unconventional siblings on simple rural lives. While Rose gets the farmhouse shipshape, Morrie proves a surprisingly successful novice teacher. Overall, it's a sunny tale. The boys ride horseback to school. A dispute between Paul and an older bully is settled with a race, riders facing backwards. The novel is also an elegy for the "central power" of the country school as a much older Paul, in 1957 the state superintendent of schools, is charged, to his dismay, with their abolition. In 1910, the school passes its inspection with flying colors, as Halley's comet streaks across the sky and the schoolkids greet it with harmonicas. Paul hasn't developed an interest in girls yet, but he will have a man-size decision to make. Oliver has fallen for Rose and they are set to marry when Paul discovers that Rose and Morrie are on the run from a scandal. Should he tell his dad? The melodrama is a weak ending for a novel that had so far avoided it. Minor work, carried along by homespun charm.

Kirkus Reviews

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ADD IT: ■

Interview with Ivan Doig

About the Author

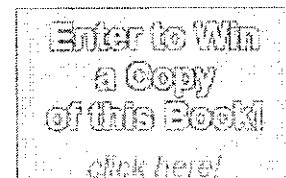
Ivan Doig is the author of ten previous books, including the novels **Prairie Nocturne** and **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**. A former ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor, **Doig** holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. He lives in Seattle.



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Synopsis

Ivan Doig, a prolific writer associated with literature of the American West, continues his exploration of small-town, early-twentieth century American life in his newest book, **The Whistling Season**. A family of men—three brothers and their widowed father—respond to an ad in the newspaper for a housekeeper who “can’t cook but doesn’t bite.” The relocation of the ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her font-of-knowledge brother, Morris Morgan, to Marias Coulee has a profound effect on the lives of the Milliron men, as well as the rest of the community. Narrated by Paul, the oldest son, after he becomes an adult and has to decide the fate of Montana’s one-room schoolhouses, this glimpse into a vanished way of life and eccentric characters is an unforgettable, charming tale of love and loss, truth and lies, and education—conventional and otherwise.



Interview

Q: In *The Whistling Season*, Paul and his brother decide to keep a secret from their father because doing so will deliver the right outcome. Throughout the book, Paul becomes the guardian of an increasing number of secrets. What are your feelings about individuals who withhold potentially damaging information out of a sense of personal justice? Do you sense this type of behavior

Also by Ivan Doig:

was more prevalent a century ago than it is today?

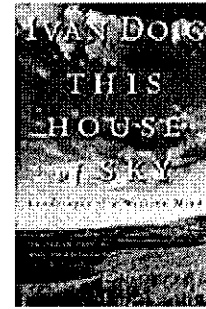
A: Paul indeed starts to feel inundated with secrets, some of them of the slyly funny, schoolyard variety and some vitally serious. He is a very bright thirteen-year-old, who at one point realizes his life is about to change, that he is “less than a man but starting to be something more than a boy.” But in the case of the ultimate secret, he has to draw on instinct and innate decency to reach his decision. So I see Paul’s chosen course as one of compassion, in the name of giving his family a chance to knit itself together and to offer amnesty to someone who has made a misstep in life, but who shows every sign of having retrieved her full worth. To me, and I suppose this is reflected in Paul, there is sometimes not just one justice in a situation but rather a choice, and my hope is that Paul chose wisely.

Paul’s kind of decision possibly was more in line with his time and place—the early twentieth century and a community, rural, but full of nuance toward neighbors and family—than our screen-driven, tell-all era of e-mail, television, movies, and so on. Yet, my belief is that decent behavior is never out-of-date.

Q: Rose Llewellyn is an interesting, endearing character. She works hard and is understanding; however, her motives are suspect and we learn that her behavior—both past and present—is less than respectable. As a woman of the early 1900s, Rose is a bit unconventional. Would her behavior be considered acceptable in today’s society, or would she more likely be viewed as an opportunist rather than as a good businesswoman?

A: Mark Twain, a Halley’s Comet among writers whose spirit is invoked at one point in *The Whistling Season*, liked to refer to his hard-dealing publisher of that time, Harper & Brothers, as Sharper & Brothers. Rose has a bit of that quality of a “sharper.” She is a clever dealer, someone you really don’t want to play poker with. But the incident in her past that left her “less than respectable” was a scam played on a disreputable bunch, much in the same way Paul Newman and Robert Redford delightfully fleece the gamblers in *The Sting*. As I see it, her endearing side—not to mention her capacity for work and caring for others—wins out. If she were in today’s society, she’d still be Rose and we would have to gauge her as individually as Paul, Morrie, and the others do in the book.

Q: On your Web site, www.ivandoig.com, you mention that your initial motivation to be a writer was “simply to go away to college and break out of a not very promising ranchwork future in Montana.” But your talent has led you far beyond those modest goals. In *The Whistling Season*, Paul is an ardent student, yet seemingly destined for the same ranchwork life. How much of yourself, if any, have you infused into Paul’s character?



This House Sky

[See all titles by Ivan Doig](#)

A: My secret is out, sort of, kind of. Maybe more than any other character or, at least any other narrator who I have ever created, Paul has a few of my mental fingerprints. He loves language, even Latin—which I took in high school. He’s an inveterate reader of books. He eavesdrops with his eyes. He admits to a bit of a pedantic streak. He’s his own person, though. I’ve never had his nightly flood of dreaming, and I could not function in politics and government as skillfully as he does. I have never had any siblings. Nor, full disclosure, did I ever attend a one-room school.

Q: Please tell us a bit about your love of “poetry under the prose.”

A: As squarely as I can look at myself and the kind of writing I’ve produced—which on the one hand relies on dogged research and on the other, fancy flights of words—I seem to be something like a poet yearning to be a clerk, or a clerk fumbling around with poetry. In either case, I can tell you poetic leanings caught up with me in an unexpected place—while I was working on my Ph.D. in history. What graduate school taught me in the late 1960s was that I didn’t have what it takes to be on a university faculty. During grad school at the University of Washington, I found myself writing freelance magazine articles—as if I didn’t have any seminar papers due. I also began, to my complete surprise, to write poetry, which I had never even thought of attempting before.

My eight or nine published poems showed me that I lacked the poet’s final skill, the one Yeats called closing a poem with the click of a well-made box. But I still wanted to stretch the craft of writing toward the areas where it mysteriously starts to be art. It was back then that I began working on what my friend Norman Maclean referred to as the secret of writers like him and me: poetry under the prose. Rhythm, word choice, and premeditated lyrical intent are the elements of this type of writing. In the diary I kept while working on **This House of Sky**, I vowed to try to have a “trap of poetry” in the book’s every sentence. I suppose that inclination is visible in all my books.

It maybe hasn’t been generally recognized, but one way I have openly indulged in this is by writing the songs and poems that show up in my fiction, instead of simply tapping into the existing body of music and literature. From the snatches of the nineteenth-century Scandinavian drinking song in **The Sea Runners**, to the old Scottish ballad that provided the book title I wanted to use for **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**, to the “spirit songs” Monty Rathbun sings during the Harlem Renaissance in **Prairie Nocturne**—I have tailored rhyme and rhythm to fit the time period in all eight of my novels. There’s only one dab of singing in **The Whistling Season**, when the Marias Coulee community homesteaders greet the appearance of Halley’s Comet in the

Montana sky of 1910:

*When I see that evening star,
Then I know that I've come far,
Through the day, through all plight,
To the watchfire of the night.*

I seem to be more hooked than ever—note the front rhymes, *When/Then* and *Through/To*, as well as the ending rhymes.

Q: Your first book, *This House of Sky*, is a memoir. Fifteen years later you complemented it with the memoir *Heart Earth*. In the time between the two books you have concentrated more on fiction. The ability to create fiction and nonfiction with the poetic phrasing for which you are known is a rare talent. Do the experiences of the characters in your works of fiction differ greatly from the experiences described in your works of nonfiction? Or is there a point where the experiences between fictional characters and real people begin to blur?

A: I started my writing life as a journalist, and I am devoutly careful to keep real people and my fictional characters separate. True, on a couple of occasions I have used incidents from history as a springboard for fiction—the four men escaping servitude in Russian Alaska in 1853 were reimagined into ***The Sea Runners***. Most notably, my townsman Taylor Gordon's rise to prominence during the Harlem Renaissance was fashioned into Monty Rathbun's singing career in ***Prairie Nocturne***. But even there, the fictional counterparts are sheerly residents of my imagination, as distinctly different from the historical templates as I can make them. My profession as a novelist is to create, not to copy. In an article I wrote for ***The Washington Post*** about creating characters, I counted up some 360 characters I had invented in my fiction at that time, and the head count in ***The Whistling Season*** must be another fifty or more. I make up these people from file cards, historical photographs, books of lingo, and imagination. So, no, I don't let the actual and fictional blur together.

Q: You have recorded several audio books including *This House of Sky*. How does listening to an audio recording of a book differ from the traditional reading experience? Do you feel the listening experience is altered when someone listens to an audio book recorded by the writer as opposed to one recorded by a professional voice actor?

A: I think good writing is as pleasing to the ear as it is to the eye. The main difference I can discern is the delicious ability offered by the printed page: to reread a phrase or a line you like.

An actor certainly can provide a more theatrical reading than

a writer, but there is no reason why a writer shouldn't be a professional voice, too, particularly in this day and age of bookstore readings. I admit to my own personal angle on this—a little-known secret about me is that I majored in broadcast journalism in college, when worthy giants such as Edward R. Murrow still worked in that profession. I also am an inveterate practicer, professional as I can be, before giving speeches and readings. But anything worth doing is worth doing well, so I believe writers should work to become good readers—aloud, too. It has paid off for me not only in the popularity and recognition of the audio recording of **This House of Sky**. For my participation in the recording of Norman Maclean's classic and national bestseller, **A River Runs Through It**, I received an Audie—the audio recording industry's equivalent to an Oscar.

Q: How long does it take you to research and write a new book and what processes help you to successfully achieve this goal?

A: Generally, it takes me three years to put a book together. The processes are many, but I'll cite just one trade secret: when I am rough-drafting a manuscript, I write four-hundred words a day, every day.

Q: Are you currently involved in any new projects?

A: I always have book ideas cooking and, blessedly, the next one is on the burner right now for Harcourt. The novel is set during World War II in the American West and various theaters of combat, and involves a soldier caught in a mystifying duty in the world of war and a hotshot woman pilot who ferries fighter planes from the factory to the flight line. Look for it in three years or, if my sainted editor and I are lucky, sooner.

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