

Ivan Doig

1939 – 2015

Author and Historian

“Life is Mostly Freehand.” – Ivan Doig

The landscape and people of the American West shaped Ivan Doig, particularly the ranching and farming worlds of rural Montana. A third-generation Montanan of Scottish descent, he was born on June 27, 1939, in White Sulphur Springs, the only child of Charlie and Berneta Ringer Doig. After his mother died when Ivan was six, his father and grandmother Bessie Ringer raised him. Charlie Doig earned a living herding sheep and as a ranch foreman, eventually moving his family to Dupuyer, near the Rocky Mountain Front.

Upon graduating from Valier High School in 1957, Doig studied at Northwestern University, graduating with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in journalism. At Northwestern, he met Carol Muller, his lifelong partner and collaborator. They married in 1965. In 1966, Ivan and Carol moved to Seattle, where Carol taught journalism at Shoreline Community College while Ivan pursued a PhD in History at the University of Washington. He graduated in 1969.

Shortly after receiving his PhD, Doig started work on *This House of Sky* (1978), a finalist for the National Book Award and winner of the Christopher Award. It memorialized his coming of age in Montana’s Smith River valley. In addition to *This House of Sky*, his nonfiction works include *Winter Brothers* (1980) and *Heart Earth* (1993). He soon turned to fiction, writing thirteen novels in all. His oeuvre includes *The Sea Runners* (1982), *English Creek* (1984), *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* (1987), *Bucking the Sun* (1996), *Prairie Nocturne* (2003), *Work Song* (2010), *The Bartender’s Tale* (2012), and his final novel, published shortly after his death, *Last Bus to Wisdom* (2015).

Doig’s work transcends the prevailing myths of the American West, and his training in history brings authenticity to his storytelling. He dedicated himself to foregrounding the stories of ordinary people and examining the ways western lands shaped their lives.



Rocky Mountain Front courtesy of Montana State University Library, 2602-B154-img0093 (1983)

His approach to writing contextualized the western experience within the larger meaning of what it means to be American. In 2007, The Center of the American West honored Doig with the Wallace Stegner Award for making a sustained contribution to the *“cultural identity of the West.”*

A mentor as well as an author, Doig also supported the next generation of aspiring writers with encouragement and constructive criticism. He welcomed the same in turn, asking reviewers of his work to provide *“a hard scrimmage, not cheerleading.”*

Ivan Doig died on April 9, 2015, at age 76. In a note he left, he wrote: *“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.”*



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