

ON WRITING IN MONTANA

By Craig Lancaster

Some months ago, I flipped through an issue of The Montana Quarterly and came across an interview with Walter Kirn, the author of “Up in the Air.” (http://www.amazon.com/Up-Air-Walter-Kirn/dp/0307476286/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287386741&sr=1-1) Of particular interest was his take on being a writer in Montana vs. being a writer of Montana:

“Montana for me is a place to write, not a place to write about. There’s a lot of Montana writers whose subject is Montana, but frankly I don’t yet know enough about the place to feel comfortable writing about it; maybe I will in five years.”

I grew nervous. Just a few pages over in that very magazine was a complimentary review of my first novel, “600 Hours of Edward.” (http://www.amazon.com/600-Hours-Edward-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1606390139/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1287386777&sr=1-1) By this time, the book had been selected as a 2009 Montana Honor Book and would go on to win a High Plains Book Award. Though perhaps not a typical Montana novel – if such a thing even exists – it is set here and was intended to be a faithful representation of a time and place in Billings, the state’s largest city.

Ratcheting my nervousness further was the fact that my second novel, “The Summer Son,” (http://www.amazon.com/Summer-Son-Craig-Lancaster/dp/1935597248/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1287386817&sr=1-1) which was released last week, was finished and soon to be shipped to the publisher. It, too, is set largely in Montana, as are my current project and most of the ideas I have queued up behind that.

I’ve lived in Montana for four and a half years. If two decades of being here isn’t enough to write about Montana, as Kirn contended, what kind of charlatan must I be? A fine psychological line divides writing with abandon and seizing up in insecurity, and for a while there, I was in danger of falling on the wrong side of it. The simple fact is that I don’t know the state as well as I should. I haven’t put in the time in its cities and small towns, its churches and bars, on its mountains and prairies. I’m not hardwired into Montana in the way that I recognize and envy in many of my friends. I carry too many of the influences I rubbed up against in two decades of job-hopping – from Texas, where I was reared, to Alaska, back to Texas, to Kentucky, to Ohio, back to Alaska, to California, back to Texas, to Washington, back to California and, finally, to Montana.

I dreamed of this place as a young man; I read Ivan Doig and yearned for a place in the Two Medicine Country. In my late teens and early twenties, I carried my keys on a Montana ring. In my youth, I knew it as a destination for family vacations, a place where I would visit cousins and

aunts and uncles and my grandmother, and I recognized even then that the rugged landscapes and wide-open spaces called out to me in a way that the cramped suburbs of my home region never could.

But there's a family connection, too: My mom and dad, years before my birth, met at a party on the Rims above Billings, which makes for a nice introductory story when I meet folks here, if nothing else. My father was born in Conrad and raised on a dairy farm on the Fairfield Bench, but until I took him there more than a year ago, it had been nearly fifty years since he'd been back. Montana is part of us, but it doesn't define us, because the preponderance of our lives has been meted out elsewhere. Consequently, there's no part of the state I can make come alive the way Kevin Canty conjures Missoula, or Richard Hugo distills the small towns of the state, or Mandy Broaddus Smoker evokes its native people. I would be foolish to even try.

Instead, the characters I've drawn – Edward Stanton in “600 Hours,” Mitch Quillen in “The Summer Son” – come at Montana with a sensibility that I can get my arms around. Edward, who has Asperger syndrome, knows his hometown of Billings as a series of facts; he knows where the streets go and a basic history of the city, and those are things readily accessible even by a newbie like me. Mitch, who comes to Billings to reconcile a long-held grudge against his father, knows it as the place where he lived until he was three years old. He feels a connection to the city without having any concrete memories of it. It's a feeling I know well. In Mills, Wyoming, sits a house that I lived in until a similar age. Whenever I'm in that town, I swing by and take a look and think not of time spent there – because I don't remember it – but of what my life might have been like had I stayed.

In other words, I'm the outsider who lives on the inside, and thus far, my characters have occupied a similar realm. That's the Montana I'm qualified to write, until such time as I've burrowed deeply enough into this place to really be a part of it. I'm all in, for however long that might take.