

WRITING THE WEST INTO A STORY By Craig Lancaster

In my late teens and early 20s, as I began cutting my teeth on the literature that spoke most to me with the most resonance, I found myself drawn inexorably West – into the seaside shanties and other-side-of-paradise locales of John Steinbeck’s California, into the mind of Wallace Stegner’s Lyman Ward, and into the shadow of Ivan Doig’s Two Medicine Country of Montana, among other literary destinations. I marveled at these great writers and their ability to cast a story against a backdrop so vivid that it became a character unto itself. They led me into places I wanted to see with my own eyes.

In the first few sentences of Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck does this masterfully, setting the scene of the infinite sadness to come. His descriptions are full of color and the shape of the land. By the time the two itinerant workers at the center of the story, George and Lenny, appear a page later, they’re trudging through a world that is splashed brilliantly across the reader’s mind:

It’s conceivable that Steinbeck could have set the core story anywhere – a cattle ranch in New Mexico, a dairy farm in Oregon, a feedlot in deep West Texas. But it wouldn’t be the same. Central California, snug against the mountains separating the verdant Salinas Valley from the sea, is where the story belongs. Steinbeck made it so.

I suppose that those of us who write start out idolizing certain authors to the point of mimicry and then, if we’re lucky, develop our own voices and zero in on the stories we want to tell. In the 20 years that lapsed between my first reading of *Of Mice and Men* (or, for that matter, of Doig’s *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*) and my writing of my debut novel, *600 Hours of Edward*,

I found myself drawn to an aspect of the West that is different from those that I had been absorbing through others' words. As my main character, an obsessive-compulsive Aspergian named Edward Stanton, confronts the rapid changes that transform his life, he does so in a small city (Billings, Montana, where I live) that is very much his milieu. Edward is acutely aware of his place in the world – its rhythms, its geography (he doesn't like left turns, and so whenever possible he plots a driving route that doesn't include them), its politics (his father is a powerful elected official) and such. The West with which I'm most familiar – the one that plays out in this regional hub city that constantly strains as its borders – becomes part of the story's fabric.

Here's a small section of the story that illustrates what I mean. This comes about midway through the book, as Edward prepares for an online date that he has managed to wrangle as he begins to deal with the world that is crashing into his front door:

Here are a few things you should know about Rimrock Mall, so you'll understand why I am dreading today's visit there.

Rimrock Mall is the biggest mall in Montana. Because Billings is such a geographic oddity — at 100,000-plus people, it is the largest city in a 500-mile radius — it isn't just Billings people who come to the mall. I read somewhere, maybe in the Billings Gazette, that half of northern Wyoming does its monthly shopping in Billings, and it stands to reason that a good number of those people end up at Rimrock Mall.

If you walk through the Rimrock Mall parking lot on a weekend — I would rather not, but I am setting up a hypothetical statement — you will see license plates from all over Montana and Wyoming and even other places. Montana makes it easy to pick out where license plates are from: The first number is the county code, and the counties are numbered by the population size of the counties when the system went into effect. Yellowstone County plates have the number 3 on

them, because it was the third-largest county, population-wise, back when the system started. It should be No. 1 now, but that would make the people in Butte-Silver Bow County angry, so it stays at No. 3.

Anyway, when I am driving in Billings and someone in front of me makes a wrong or erratic turn, I get angry if I see a 3 on his license plate, as he is from here and should know better. If I see a 27 — that's Richland County, an agrarian (I love the word "agrarian") outpost in far Eastern Montana — I don't get so mad. That's someone who perhaps doesn't spend much time in Billings, and I have to be a good person and remember that Billings can be confusing to outsiders.

I am dreading today's visit to Rimrock Mall.

Setting isn't just a place to drop a story. Done right, setting becomes something like a story's center of gravity, an anchor to which plot lines can be tethered and held in place, allowing for a book's architecture to stand strong. While I'm partial to the writers of the West, they certainly don't have the market cornered on brilliant use of setting. It matters not whether you get lost in Anne Rivers Siddons' Maine or Pat Conroy's South Carolina or Larry McMurtry's Texas. They're all worthy destinations.