

## Tough Paradise: the Literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West

# Who is I?

*Much of the literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West lies in narratives of landscape and personal experience.* Written by Ron McFarland (1995)

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Of the twenty–some books listed in the program for Tough Paradise: The Literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West, six are anthologies of some kind and of the remaining twenty two titles, twelve are narrated in the first person; that is, with the writer himself or herself speaking from personal experience. What are we to make of this apparent infatuation with the self? What happens in a text when the distinctions between subject and object are blurred? How does the first person, I, as speaker affect the reader?

Here are a few hypotheses regarding the infatuation with self, which appears to be at an all–time high these days (autobiographical writing in particular, and especially the kind known as the memoir, has been especially popular during the past twenty years): (1.) The objectivity demanded by much technical and practical writing has produced a backlash, a thirst for the personal. (2.) The enthusiasm for self–examination goes back to the Romantic reaction against rationalism and so may be traced to Jean–Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (published in 1781). (3.) The subjective or personal modes have always existed as counterpart to the objective or impersonal modes. (4.) All such reflective writing is grounded in nostalgia, a longing for simpler (and presumably happier, despite hardships) days of our parents or grandparents. (5.) Confronted with an overabundance of data (the information explosion) some writers feel confident only about what they themselves, and perhaps close friends or members of their family, have experienced. And some readers feel more at ease when they believe a writer is telling a true story, which is what they may assume, given a first–person narrator, whether the story is true or not. Arguably, the writer gains an important advantage when he or she declares I, implicitly saying, I am the authority here.

The phenomenon of autobiographical writing includes formal autobiography like Mary Hallock Foote's *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* (written in the early 1920's and covering most of her life), memoirs like Mary Clearman Blew's *Balsamroot* (published in 1994 and concerning her relationship with a favorite aunt who is stricken with Alzheimer's), and journals like Osborne Russell's *Journal of a Trapper* (concerning incidents recorded between 1834 and 1843, published first in 1914). Often, as in Nelle Portrey Davis's *Stump Ranch Pioneer* (1943), Grace Jordon's *Home Below Hell's Canyon* (1954) and Janet Campbell Hale's *Bloodlines; Odyssey of a Native American Daughter* (1993), the writer focuses on the family, but the resulting books vary considerably in tone and message. Coincidentally, all three writers I've just mentioned are women who live in north Idaho, but their stories and visions engage us or arouse us differently.

In his prefatory comments to *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (1976), which he insists is fiction, Norman Maclean says he wrote in order to let his children know what kind of people their parents are or think they are or hope they are. Nearly all autobiographical writing has an implied theme, thesis, or moral. It tends to be didactic; that is, the writers try to teach us something. They are not simply telling how they lived or endured certain hardships, but what it was about themselves and their family and friends that brought them through. Annie Pike Greenwoods' *We Sagebrush Folks* (1934) and Susan Hendricks Swetnam's *Lives of the Saints in Southwest Idaho* (1991), which she describes as LDS pioneer life stories, focus on the values, including a sense of humor, that carried families through hard times in the tough paradise of Idaho.

Another hypothesis about the recent popularity of such writing may be that it constitutes a response to the fragmentation of the family in the United States over the past fifty years. In *Lochsa Road* (1991), for example, Kim Stafford reflects on the break-up of his seventeen year marriage, turning to the landscape of the inland Northwest for consolation. William Kittredge's *Hole in the Sky* (1992) concerns not only the failure of his own two marriages, but also the strain in his east Oregon ranch family and their misuse, grounded in their misunderstanding, of the land. Significantly, he writes in his first chapter that he means his book to be useful. Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* (1991)

celebrates a Utah family's mutual love and support in a time of crisis, her mother's impending death from cancer. Reflecting throughout on the many species of birds living around the Great Salt Lake (some of them endangered by human encroachment), she subtitles her book *An Unnatural History of Family and Place*.

As the essays in this tabloid will demonstrate, it is, of course, that vague and yet at the same time familiar thing known as place that all of the books in this series have in common. The thirty-five short essays that make up William Studebaker and Rick Ardinger's *Where the Morning Light's Still Blue* (1994) are all personal reflections on certain places in Idaho that have some special meaning for the writer. The St. Joe River is becoming my stream of consciousness, begins an essay by Julie Titone. Alan Minskoff opens, For a decade two friends and I owned a ranch in Boise County. The sentiments and ideas about place that emerge in these two essays and throughout the anthology have at least as much at odds as they do in common, and if there were no such variety, we would not likely be inclined to read more than one of the books.

In the myths and legends of Idaho's Native Americans pulled together in Deward Walkers *Myth of the Idaho Indians* (1980) and Rodney Frey's *Stories that Make the World* (1995) and told on tapes in Jane Fritz's *Keepers of the Earth* the land is often a source of spiritual and moral vision. The personality of the teller may have entered these traditional stories in ways we could only guess, and Frey undertakes to recreate something of the oral experience in his printed versions. Louie Attebery's *Sheep May Safely Graze* (1992) and Robert Laxalt's *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) are written from quite different perspectives, the former being mostly the view of an outside observer, while the latter is a memoir of the writer's father. In these books the land is a way of life, a culture on the edge of extinction, it could be argued, Idaho comes to mean something very similar.

Writers of what we conventionally call literature (in this case, fiction and poetry) create plots, characters, dramatic moments, and lyrical descriptions of the land in which the self may be fictionalized or at least apparently altogether deleted.

In an interview, Sherman Alexie has noted that all three recurring characters in the stories that make up *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), that is, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin, and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, embody certain facets of himself. Tom Spanbauer may have much in common with thirteen-year-old Jacob Joseph Weber, the first person protagonist or main character in *Faraway Places* (1988), which is set in the Pocatello area where he grew up. The sixteen stories that comprise Gino Sky's *Near The Postcard Beautiful* (1993) may be said to straddle the fence between autobiographical essays told in story form and the literary genre of the short story. Many of the poems in Ron McFarland and William Studebaker's anthology, *Idaho's Poetry* (1988) could be called autobiographical or even confessional, and the same is true of several short stories in High Nichols' anthology, *Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity* (1989).

Other literary works (the distinction as to what does or does not qualify as literature is presently the subject of considerable scholarly debate – thus the quotation marks) feature characters who are fabricated on historical persons. This includes those in Carol Ryrie Brink's *Buffalo Coat* (1944), which concerns love and murder in a small Idaho town; Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, which tells the story of Polly Bemis's life in Idaho's gold rush days; and Vardis Fisher's *Mountain Man* (1965), in which the famous Jeremiah Johnson, appears as Sam Minard. These three novels focus on landscapes and historical periods in Idaho that range from Yellowstone country to Moscow and from the 1840's to the turn of the century.

What is left after this are the stories, poems, and novels in which the writers do what all writers do to a greater or lesser extent; that is, those works in which the writers fabricate characters, plots, and settings from reality at hand. H.L. Davis provides a note in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Honey In The Horn* (1935), stating that all of the characters in this book are fictitious, and all of the incidents are either imagined or taken from very old legends of the country. Davis's novel is often regarded as historical, whereas Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981) is lyrical, a novel that relies so much on imagery and the music of words for its effect that some readers have difficulty knowing what to make of it. Robinson goes so far as to rename her hometown of Sandpoint as

Fingerbone. One might argue, however, that all those fictitious characters and imagined events and renamed towns are nevertheless, and inevitably, grounded in experience.

Some current critical theorists have argued persuasively that language itself constitutes not reality but a re-presentation of it. As soon as we tell a friend the story of how our day went, we have created a fiction, even if we try to retell an event exactly as it unfolded. Maybe that's why it happens so often that someone says the funniest thing occurred to him the other day, but then insists that his wife can tell it better than he can. The words she uses to tell it make it a better story, but also in ways a different one, a fiction. Such an explanation may account in part for Norman Maclean's insistence on defining his stories as fiction rather than autobiography or memoir.

Leslie Leek's stories in *Heart of a Western Woman* (1987) and John Rember's in *Cheerleaders from Gomorrah* (1994) differ so much in style, narrative voice, and setting that one might be surprised to find both books are the products of Idaho writers. Leek's characters, as the title suggests are usually women and we generally encounter them in the countryside and the mountains of eastern Idaho. Rember's main characters are usually men living in a resort town that could well be Ketchum, and the world they live in is fast-paced and hectic and maybe a bit scary. The future of Idaho may follow the direction implicit in Leek's stories or in Rember's, or it may lie somewhere in between.

The other two questions I posed in the opening paragraph should be answered by the readers themselves. We should remember, however, that regardless of the writers' intentions, when they write from the first person (I) they do become characters in the text. Maclean plays with this metafictional concept (that is, when the writer writes about writing fiction) in *USFS 1919: The Ranger, the Cook, and a Hole in the Sky* (from *A River Runs Through It*): Somewhere along here I first became conscious of the feeling I talked about earlier the feeling that comes when you first notice life turning into a story. Perhaps it is sufficient to say here that first person narration always involves the implicit question of the narrator's reliability. What is the speaker telling us about himself or herself? Should we credit what the writer says? Why should we? Every writer knows, after

all, that what is told is what the story is all about, and of almost equal importance is what is not told.

The nine essays that follow differ from each other in style and format almost as much as do the poems, stories, novels, essays, and autobiographical writings that provide the texts for *Idaho: Tough Paradise*. Louie W. Attebery, author of *Sheep May Safely Graze* and professor of English at Albertson College of Idaho, addresses the use and misuse of the terms way of life and sense of place as he moves toward an appreciation of what regionalism means from a folklorist's perspective. One way a sense of place manifests itself, he concludes, is through the stories, both the act of telling and the content.

English professor David Barber, from the University of Idaho, examines the experiences of three women in Idaho during the Victorian Era: Mary Hallock Foote and Annie Pike Greenwood, whose books are included in the series, and E. Jane Gay, a photographer who accompanied anthropologist Alice Fletcher when she came to the territory in 1889 to assign lands to the Nez Perce (their own ancestral land, as Barber puts it) under the Dawes Alloydment Act. Barber points out that all three of these women lived their Idaho lives intensely, but at a certain point each had just had enough of her Idaho experience.

Project director Susan Swetnam, author of *Lives of the Saints* and professor of English at Idaho State University, describes Idaho as a place of redemption in her comments on the works of Latter-Day Saints, Nelle Portrey Davis, and Grace Jordon. She observes that these Idahoans held conservative frontier virtues and were conscious that the outside world was falling away from those virtues. The contemporary political conservatism of the state is clearly anticipated by these writers.

A life is opaque and dull compared to fiction, begins William Studebaker in his essay, *Writing Close to Home*, Former professor of English at the College of Southern Idaho and co-editor of both *Idaho's Poetry: A Centennial Anthology* and *Where the Morning Light's Still Blue*, Studebaker, one of the state's best known poets, writes on the impact of Idaho geography on the personal lives and writings of Tom Spanbauer, John Rember, and Gino Sky. Disguise the facts

with fictions, or the fictions with facts, as they may, Studebaker concludes, their work is rooted in Idaho.

Professor of anthropology and Director of Panhandle Programs in Coeur d'Alene for Lewis–Clark State College, Rodney Frey, editor of *Stories That Make the World*, elects to demonstrate how Indian oral narrative works by presenting a story about the storytelling process (that is, a meta–story of sorts). In his essay a grandson converses with his grandfather, asking again and again why he tells stories. Instead of answering directly, the old man simply tells one story after another until the boy (and the reader) gets the point.

Dennis Walsh, professor of English at Idaho State University, comments on the autobiographical elements in the stories of Sherman Alexie and Janet Campbell Hale's novel, *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture*. At the same time Walsh surveys the evolution of Native American literature, emphasizing work that has appeared since N. Scott. Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 with his novel, *House Made of Dawn*. What he concludes about Alexie's first book of poems, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), may be true of most Native Americans writing: While it is sometimes individual, it finally is performed communally, in a circle, and to the beat of the drum, the pulse of the earth.

Barbara Meldrum, English professor at the University of Idaho, surveys the life and work of Idaho's most prolific author, Vardis Fisher. In her essay she grapples with the issue of Fisher's faded reputation and with his sometimes difficult personality. Although she concedes that Vardis Fisher can be annoyingly didactic and even tedious and dull at times, Meldrum notes that his descriptive writing can move us to a sense of awe for the wonders of the natural world and that his often shocking realism can jar us from complacency.

Ford Swetnam, professor of English at Idaho State University, reflects upon nature and culture in Idaho's poetry. As he observes, the world is in a constant state of flux, and it is not only the population of Idaho that has altered over the past twenty or thirty years, but things change too rivers, landforms, even light. Swetnam touches on poems from each of the *Idaho's Poetry* five sections, from the work of Native and Pioneer poets to the Contemporary. Cultures may change landscape, he notes, and landscape can also change culture.

Finally, Janne Goldbeck, who teaches English at Idaho State University, examines the particular set of qualities...shared by writers of the high desert northwest even though the writers themselves William Kitteredge, Mary Clearman Blew, Kim Stafford and others are quite different. She observes that their awareness of landscape comes from their own direct experiences and from stories, both from their own families and those who came before them. Family histories often lead to a sense of duality, Goldbeck insists, as writers are aware of the wrongs committed in the establishment of those histories. A sense of duality also exists in the writers' awareness of the landscapes untamed beauty, on the one hand, and of its harshness on the other. She concludes that the great distances lead the writers to express their reaction to the landscape while traveling so that for them place and motion are inseparable.

The bibliographic entries that accompany some of these essays may be used for research or may be drawn upon by those looking for further information about the subjects covered in the essays.

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