



This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind

Ivan Doig

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Ivan Doig grew up in the rugged wilderness of western Montana among the sheepherders and denizens of small-town saloons and valley ranches. What he deciphers from his past with piercing clarity is not only a raw sense of land and how it shapes us but also of the ties to our mothers and fathers, to those who love us, and our inextricable connection to those who shaped our values in our search for intimacy, independence, love, and family. A powerfully told story, *This House of Sky* is at once especially American and universal in its ability to awaken a longing for an explicable past.

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind Details

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Sandy says

I did not want it to end! I absolutely love Ivan Doig's language and to have it grace his memoir was wonderful. I was in Montana in the early 1900's - I could feel the characters and touch the landscape. His description of his father's death is incredibly moving. I saw the genesis of his fiction that I so enjoy. I think I enjoyed this as much as *The Whistling Season* - and that's saying a lot!

Judy says

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind paints the history of the Doig and Ringer families amidst the taming of the wild Montana hills. This isn't only a story of battling the elements but cobbling together a family for young Ivan after the death of his mother. This meant Grandmother Ringer and his father, Charlie, drawing a truce after years of harsh words and stony walls of resentment towards one another.

What I liked:

- *Doig is a gifted, polished writer not content with using a basic vocabulary, but one who is able to create word pictures with ease.
- * This book portrays the rough Montana life of the first seventy years of the 20th century. There is no glossing over the bad or for that matter the good.
- *Doig's honest appraisals keep the highs and lows of the book in check.
- *Doig doesn't put too much detail into describing methods of sheep-herding, etc., but he puts enough so the reader can feel like they understand the procedure without being bored or overwhelmed.

What I didn't like:

- *I listened to this on audio-cassette. It took 1 1/2 cassettes to become engaged in the story.
- *Number 3 on my "what I liked" list is also a negative. Although the honest appraisals and steadiness are wonderful, I think the book may have been more compelling if the reader was allowed to become more emotionally involved in the story.

Final rating: ***1/2 stars

Kathy Halsan says

Ivan Doig's memoir of his young life in Montana is one of the best books I have read. I am traveling to Montana soon and thought I would read this before I go. Doig is one of my favorite authors and I wanted to visit some of the sites and see scenery found in his books. His characters are always complex, interesting and "salt of the earth". In *Sky*, Doig writes of his father and Grandmoher who raised him. His Dad was a ranch hand and Grandma was a crew cook. My Dad, Mom and Grandparents were farmers who lived close to the earth. They worked hard and expected little back. Like Doig, I was one of the first to go to college and my

parents did whatever it took to make that happen. He ends the book with the passing of his Dad and Grandma. He spoke to my heart with this chapter. This book is a treasure.

Alyson says

An absolutely beautiful and prosaic account of rural Montana, family, carving an identity for oneself, and the process of acceptance. This is the first Doig I have read- after hearing praise for years from my father and others. If ever there was a memoir to read, this is it. As a semi-native Idahoan familiar with rural lifestyles and landscapes, I was moved to tears and beyond with his painful and glorious story.

Diane says

Diane C:

This House of Sky is a memoir written by Ivan Doig. It is a book to be savored, read slowly and then reread to fully absorb his beautiful language. It reads very much like a novel and covers Doig's life in Montana after his mother's death when Doig was only six years old. It's a hard-scrabble life but rich with imagination, grueling work and love. This is also a story of family, particularly fathers and sons. The surrounding characters on the ranch and in the neighboring town are like your favorite character actors. My choice was Mrs. Tidyman, the gruff and caring high school English teacher. "For her the language held holy force, and she shuddered at any squander of it. In what must have been her fullest spate of forgiveness, she once apologized about one of the townswomen: 'Once you get used to her split infinitives, you'll find she's a very nice person.'

Doig is a master at characterization and gorgeous prose. Don't rush through this lovely book. Stop, absorb and FEEL the words (If you haven't read *The Whistling Season*, you might try that one first!)

Stephen Rossetti says

This summer some friends and I planned a trip out to Montana. Why? Simply because we've never been and we wanted to see what it was like. In researching what there was to do out there, I found a website that said that *This House of Sky* is a must-read for anyone wanting to know what Montana is really like. It is a memoir by Ivan Doig, who was born in White Sulphur Springs and grew up with his widowed and devoted father. Doig's writing style can take a little getting used to, but I've never read anyone else who uses language so beautifully to conjure up images, scenes, and feelings. What I was expecting to get out of this book was a feeling for the Montana landscape. What I got was a lot more - the sense of what it was like to actually live, grow up, and work in this landscape. A father's devotion and sacrifice, a son growing up and aiding in his father's travails, harsh weather, toil with little payoff, strained relations forged out of necessity between disparate family members. All of these are deftly laid out in the pages of this story.

I had not yet finished the book by the time we set out on our trip, but I felt like I was somewhere familiar once we arrived in Montana. Along the way, we actually drove through White Sulphur Springs and got to see some of the places where Doig and his father made their lives. We even stopped for a beer at *The Stockman*, a favorite bar of Doig's father, and therefore of some influence in Doig's development.

This House of Sky truly is a wonderful work. I loved these people and their idiosyncrasies, reveled in their triumphs, suffered in their pains, and felt as if I'd lost cherished friends when the book was over. I highly recommend this book, even if you aren't going to Montana.

Lisa says

Just beautiful. I can't even remember the different reactions I had when I read this book. I just remember being captivated by the writing, and I went on to recommend this (and Doig's fiction) to book-loving friends.

Ciara says

One of the best books I have ever read. His prose is incredible! I would recommend this to anyone interested in pioneers or Montana.

Paul Falk says

I had a previous introduction to Ivan Doig with his wonderfully well-written book "Last Bus to Wisdom". At the time, it was just what I wanted. From beginning to end the book did not fail to entertain. When I found an earlier book this same author had written, much earlier, namely "This House of Sky", I jumped on it.

Not always but on many occasion I had come to learn that an author's first book had been many a time a learning experience. There is no Golden Rule. That's just been my observation. Seldom do I throw in the towel for a book and call it quits. Sadly, this was one of those times.

This book did not possess the appeal of a fascinating, historical nonfiction biography - as hoped. Instead, it lumbered through with the appeal of a catatonic diary. Bland at best. Again, not entirely a surprise for a first attempt.

Larry says

Ivan Doig is my wife's favorite author. I'm certain she's read every one of his books, and there have been several. And since he lives in our area, she has taken me along several times to listen to him read from his new work as it came out. As a result, I tried to read one of his fictional books some time back and immediately ran into what seems a trait of Doig, a trait of starting the reader out with an avalanche of descriptive text. To me, it feels like a lifetime to work through a single paragraph. So I gave up. This book was no different, but (1) it was nonfiction, and (2) it was perhaps his most highly regarded book, so I persevered. It was very good I did. True, this is a memoir, a man telling about his life growing up in rural Montana, a place that could just as well have been Turkey or the Australian outback, as far as the typical American would think. So, yes, there's an element of travel adventure to it. (There are a number of very memorable scenes.) Ultimately, however, this is Doig's reflection on the complex dynamics that constitute a

family, no matter how "normal" or out of the ordinary it may seem. After the initial descriptive flood, Doig settles into a flow of seeing life to which the reader can easily relate, no matter how foreign it may be at first glance. Each scene, each setting flows so well from one stage of his life to another, the reader moves through the years without hesitation. At some point, as the author's life takes him away from the reader's home base of Montana, Doig's writing style changes. As Doig is now in college (Northwestern University), the writing abruptly switches to a series of brief tales, often one not at all related to the other. And just as I'm starting to tell myself that I do not appreciate this loss of narrative flow, Doig pulls out some of most moving narrative I have ever read, a narrative that could never have had the impact it had without all that had gone before, with all of the patience that Doig had brought to bear to get us to that point. I was so moved by the writing at that point, that I found myself reading it to my wife, the true Doig disciple. Doig soon returns to his flowing style and takes us to the eventual end of his childhood family. It was a journey well worth taking.

Matt says

A beautiful book about a place and people that I love dearly.

Chrissie says

Have you read the novels of Ivan Doig – those, such as *The Whistling Season* and/or *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*? If you have and enjoyed his writing, then I believe you will enjoy this too. I would recommend reading the novels first. These novels are really not novels! One comes to understand as one reads about Doig's and his father's and his maternal grandmother's life, as they are presented in this biography, that his fiction talks of his own true life experiences. In his novels you get a tightly woven plot line with the extraneous information removed. You get a good story. Here in the biography you get all the details that lie behind the scenes that you remember from the stories. Many of the places and events and prime forces (weather, park authorities and ranchers) are common to both. The setting of the novels feels so genuine since it is anchored to real life events.

This book goes one step deeper. It is primarily about three people and their relationships with each other: the author, his father and his maternal grandmother. His mother died when he was very young; the role his maternal grandmother played is unusual. The feelings these three people harbored is perceptively and honestly portrayed. Again, real life is often more strange than fiction. I found the relationship between his father and his maternal grandmotherwell, you have to read the book to understand it!

Warning: if you do not enjoy Ivan Doig's novels, you will not enjoy this book. For me, Doig's portrayal of teachers is the high point of his writing skills, probably because he himself is no rancher, no homesteader, no sheep herder. He was a man of books.

I listened to the audio book. The narration was fine. Not exceptional, not bad, just fine. The vocabulary used is that of Montana ranchers. I didn't understand every word, but certainly got the gist of it just fine.

Mark says

“On that ranch where dreams were trapped in rock...”

This is a wonderful memoir about Doig's life growing up, in the rugged wilderness of western Montana. It captures a time and place that seem so distant now and his incredible recollections of working as a shepherd and the brutal struggles, of living on a ranch, are poignant and unflinching. The true heroes of the story are his father, Charlie and his grandmother, Bessie. Pioneers, with big hearts and thick skins. I love this description of a young Bessie:

“But it was her look to the world that changed most, and in the few photos from about her thirtieth year, her tenth in Montana, a newcomer now gazes out from where the new bride had been—a flinchless newcomer who has firmed into what she will be all the rest of her life.”

Matt says

One of the best reads I've had in a long time. Touching, brilliantly and vividly descriptive. Ivan Doig's words are textures, fabrics. You are transported through time and place to his memories, his fantastically detailed memories, reaching back to six years old, his mother's tragic early death. Doig and his father and grandmother are a somewhat unlikely trio, but their lives are filled to the brim with Montana, ranching, growing up, and endless copious amounts of love and tolerance.

This story touched me strongly. Mainly, in particular, due to Doig's interactions with his father. His father was a good man, a lifelong smoker and occasional drunk, but a hardworking, self-taught man who transferred his skills to his son, encouraged him in his schooling, always trusted him and knew when to be cantankerous. Bluntly put, Doig's father was a simple man. And herein I was touched. Doig loved him with all the love a heart can muster. Theirs is a truly special bond, between Doig—a future writer with a gorgeous touch for expression and an envious vocabulary, but a person that Doig Sr. just plainly saw as his son—and his father—a simple man who worked all his years as a ranchhand and ranch manager, a man who can be numbered hundreds of thousands of times over, a man who would be forgotten otherwise. A simple man, but a remarkable man. Doig spectacularly captures this soul, along with his grandmother's near-equally amazingness. There is palpable love here. Plain relationships that are familiar to us all, but that we envy regardless. These are everyday, American, western relationships, yet they're also universal, spreading, ignorant of boundary. Captured here is the true heart and soul and *meaning* of what it is to be family. To stick together.

Tale upon tale, this book will always haunt me. It has inspired me like nothing since probably Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. As a father, I strive now, harder and more conscious, to pass along that which is worth passing along, to be a father work remembering—simple or not. To love love love.

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"Life was to be lived as it came. If it came hard, you bowed your neck a bit more and endured." (116)

"Memory is a kind of homesickness, and like homesickness, it falls short of the actualities on almost every count." (239)

"the constant clasp of keeping me at your side, whatever the place or the hour or the weather or the mood or task or venture" (273, said regarding his father and his childhood)

Nancy says

Elegant and yawning narrative of growing up in the west at a time when to be literate meant knowing how to tame the challenges that animals, land and weather brought. He imparts a simple communion among his extended family that is articulated in few words but an unflinching understanding of their mutual love. Doig writes about his somewhat fractured childhood, how his father tried raising him alone after his wife's death. Doig deeply respects his father's Montana roots. The ties to that way of life are something he could escape physically but not in his heart. He is drawn to the world of journalism in his college and professional years, but this past is in his bones. The book ends with Doig's journey toward his father's death. The impact of that loss, not just one of a father. A loss of a mind that carried the last remnants of a different time and landscape.

Not all of the book rates a five star, but ultimately it stands alone in its beauty. This is much better than his fiction.

Sharon Huether says

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind By Ivan Doig I was intrigued by this book because Ivan Doig is a writer from Montana. I think this is his best book so far. I read it a few years ago. Where he grew up was a place I was familiar with. He grew up with the land. It dictated their lives. He learned responsibility at a young age. At the time of his youth there were many characters in the small local towns. He brought out the scenes of times that were simpler. This is one of the best books I've ever read.

Linda says

I've read some of Ivan Doig's later novels but had never taken the time to read This House of Sky, a memoir of his years growing up in Montana in the 1940s and 50s. Doig's death this past week (April 9, 2015) made me turn to his 1977 memoir, and I'm so glad I did. Beautifully written descriptive of the Montana landscape and the characters who formed his early world, especially a tribute in part to his father and maternal grandmother.

HBalikov says

I do have relatives in some remote places and when I talked to this one about discovering Ivan Doig, she said that he was a great writer, known far beyond his native Montana, and that she had read several of his books and was glad I was finally starting to catch up.

This House of Sky is a memoir that begins with a very young Ivan and his father Charlie's loss of (respectively) mother and wife and Ivan's growing up in some of the most remote country in the lower states during the post-World War II period. The first section of the book is driven by Charlie's determination to

raise Ivan on his own. Charlie, a traditional cowboy, had been making an attempt to ranch on his own after years of hiring out to other ranchers. He bore all the scars (both physical and mental) of this tough life. It was Charlie's streak of ornery determination that had him quitting many a job in the past. But, now he had a son to look after. Ivan, for lack of any child care, must either follow his father around learning his skills or sit alone reading. He does both. The author expresses no regrets for this hard life.

Then, as things get more difficult, Charlie has to decide whether to attempt a rapprochement with his wife's mother. When he successfully gets her to join Ivan and him in his rural life, it marks a significant third section of Ivan's growing up. In her fifties, Grandma is still strong and focused and needs to keep busy. She is ready to take on any job, but most frequently it is cook at a ranch on which Charlie also has a job. Charlie has seen a lot of changes and he tries his hand at sheep ranching and running a café. Doig is particularly good at providing interesting descriptions of the work and the people with whom this "family" comes in contact. Often, because school is important and ranch locations are remote, Ivan is boarded with a family in the town where his school is located and he only gets weekends and vacations with his father and grandmother. And, those times are not vacations since there is all manner of work to be done whether Ivan is eight or eighteen.

The remaining sections of the book are less detailed, while no less significant, as they chart the intertwining of aging Grandma and Charlie with the life away from home for Ivan. College and graduate school, teaching and writing, marriage and loss are all chronicled. Some find the language elaborate or Doig's style "over written." I am not one of those. Rather than trying to present a range of excerpts, let me leave you with this one. Ivan is finishing high school and trying to determine what he wants next.

At this point, Charlie is managing a sheep ranch with about 4000 sheep. He is splitting "the profits" with the owner, and he and Ivan and Grandma are the only ones available to do it all. The summer has gone well enough to let each think that there will be significant profit in a few short weeks. Then a cold, wet thunderstorm comes up and they have to act fast in order to prevent panicked sheep from a lemming-like run over a cliff. The only alternative is a four mile trek to a river in a sheltered canyon....Three people, 3500 sheep, one horse and cold rain. "We reached it in almost-dark, and the sheep spewed down beneath the juts of cliff to the river's sheltering brim of willows and cottonwoods. In a dozen hours, we had managed to flog 3500 desperate sheep a little more than four miles. A hundred or more carcasses spotted the prairie behind us, dozens more strewn the base of the cliffs which the runaway clump had avalanched toward. If this was victory----and we had to tell ourselves it was, for we could have lost nearly all the sheep in a pushing massacre off the Two Medicine cliffs---I knew I wanted no part of any worse day. I remember that I looked back from the mouth of the coulee toward the dusky north ridges, still smoked with gray wisps of the storm. As much as at any one instant in my life, I can say: here I was turned. "How long such a moment had been in the making, I am the last to judge, because once made it seemed to have begun farther back than I could remember and yet to have happened like an eyeblink..."

This is a passionate story of loss, of family, of inner strength and exterior bonds. Doig is a gifted storyteller who illuminates both the extraordinary and the mundane with touching details. Through the arc of one life, he gives us the world of those who live in the most rural (and disappearing) parts of this big country.

Jeanette says

This book is exceptional. It's slow, and needs to be read patiently. Preferably in chapters over many days.

And there is description excellence far beyond my poorer degrees of explaining in succinct reaction.

The language used, the names appointed, the locales are exquisitely placed. Sometimes in wordy and anecdotal flourish, but ironically also accomplished in a way in which there are actually no extra words. Each verbal phrase or dialect nuance for the sheep and cattle herding country drills a meaning for which there is no excess redundancy. So as slow as it is, it never has "extra".

It's a boy's life as he matures to a man's life. His memoir and identity formed. And within the smaller family sense and yet also beyond that to the very separate world of the Montana ranchers of the 1940's- 1950's.

This is his very personal masterpiece. Few people can demonstrate the exact cognition and emotive flux of a 7 or an 11 year old, for instance. Ivan Doig does. But even more astonishing is that he grabs the core of that Montana challenge and the grit of its every day to a 5 star degree.

There are other books of far less expression and literary style that I have enjoyed more, to be truthful. It was never a fast or "need" to find out- read. This book was very, very real. And like reality, it sometimes shows us views our "eyes" would rather not see. He is one of the very few American writers who can impact the truth of that vast aspect in the West's plains.

That winter is long and extremely difficult. Still is.

Todd says

I couldn't agree more with the review given:

This haunting, magnificently written memoir introduced an important American writer. Now, in its Fifteenth Anniversary Edition, Ivan Doig's preface provides stirring details of the making of this memorable book. Ivan Doig grew up in the rugged, elemental Montana wilderness with his father, Charlie, and his grandmother, Bessie Ringer. His life was formed among the shepherders and characters of small-town saloons and valley ranches as he wandered beside his restless father. Doig's prose resonates as much with the harshness and beauty of the Montana landscape as it does with those moments in memory that determine our lives. What Doig deciphers from his past with piercing clarity is a raw sense not only of the land and how it shapes us but also of the ties to our mothers and fathers, to all those who love and loved us, to those who formed our values in our search of intimacy, independence, love, and family. This powerfully told story is at once especially American and quietly universal in its capacity to awaken a longing for an irretrievable past.

In reading the book I reflected on my life and the relationship I had with my father. He's gone now but his influence is profound in my life. Doig reminds me of that as well as fond childhood memories of my father. His presentation of the relationship between his Grandmother and father and it's evolution reminds me of my grandparent's as well. My first recollection of the tension between my grandparents was in my teens. It has been hinted that my grandfather wasn't as loyal as he probably should have been(drinking,etc.) but toward the end of their lives I recognized a truce and then a deeper affection for one another similar to Bessie and Charlie in Ivan's memoir.
