

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind Study Guide

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind by Ivan Doig

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Plot Summary

The author lives in the American Northwest, the city of Seattle in the state of Washington. Seattle is a port city. The Puget Sound has bays large enough to receive ocean faring vessels and yet at the same time, the area is protected from any direct effects of the ocean. This has the greatest benefit during stormy weather.

The book is a memoir. The writer gives a crucial definition early on. He defines a relic as something for which the cultural surroundings and supports no longer exist. He writes of discovering this about relics, which directed his intention in his memoirs. He expresses throughout the work that he is now is a relic, though his life was not always that way.

Ivan has an unusual family which was marked by the early death of his mother. He was only six years old when his father became a widower. He recounts that he and his father were with her at the time of her death. This is worth noting because one of the cultural changes has made it so that many people die apart from the members of their family. The way that the family was affected by their grief plays a major role in their lives.

Ivan's father was debilitated by his grief and relatives saved them by taking them in. While this helped financially it was very clear that the greatest need was emotional. After approximately two years, Chris- Ivan's father, though still very affected by the loss, was able to go on living in a more normal manner.

Nearer to the end of the book, the transition into the educated white collar man that he has become is made.



Chapter 1, Time Since

Chapter 1, Time Since Summary and Analysis

This book is a memoir, detailing both the history of a man and a lost way of life in the American West. He begins by describing Montana. This takes readers into the Northwestern Midwest. His family had a place to live, which he refers to as a cabin. He was there with his parents. Ivan's parents were experienced at herding sheep. Of course, this is still done today, but for many Americans it is regarded as a "lost heritage." He begins to share old family stories that came to him via his parents. The type of shepherding that they conducted was nomadic, herding from one place to the next, like cowboys.

He describes his father as a big, strong, handsome man of the country. After this, he contrasts the look of his father to that of his mother. His description of her is that she is reasonably pretty, but his focus in her case is with how delicate she is. Highly able, she performed both women's work and man's work rather than only one kind or the other. She was fast on horseback and still a tender, sensible mother who knew to entertain her child on a hot day by reading to him and keeping him in the shade.

The author admits his inability to avoid strong memories of pain associated with the death of his mother. She was only 31 at the time. Upon her death, the father wept openly. Ivan was present at her death, which took place at home rather than in the sterility of a hospital. Readers may or may not be shocked: this occurred on 27 June 1945. Life for Ivan and his father has not been the same since.

The Valley is the second chapter. Ivan's father is a widower in his 40s. His thinking is changing so that he can accommodate his boy's needs. Ivan emphasizes that these needs are mainly stability and money. He is a poor, simple country man. The boy and his father were taken in first by a favored Uncle. After that, the two were brought home by Ivan's father's best friend from way back.



Chapter 2, The Valley

Chapter 2, The Valley Summary and Analysis

This section of text begins after the author has provided readers with further details about how one Scotsman persuaded another back in the old country to come to Montana and homestead. A prominent figure emerges, but in this case it's a man who is wealthy but rapidly becomes notorious in the region. His name is Rankin and he introduces cattle ranching on the largest scale ever known. The problem is that his cattle and his cowboys are underfed, worked hard but not well provided for or looked after.

The author reverts back to a time prior to the birth of either he or any of his siblings. He begins to tell the tale of how his father had developed his own reputation learning ranching as a family member and then that fateful day when he met, and even danced with, the woman who was to become the author's mother. She was an asthmatic and they intended that the fresher air of the location would actually cause her to live better and longer than she might do back in Wisconsin from where they had migrated. The girl was well protected by her mother, and the man was given the choice to show the seriousness of his interest and exhibit both patience and persistence or to beat it, and quit pestering the "too young for him" girl. They married 6 years later, when she was 21. She died at an age which is now viewed as quite young- 31 years.

The short version of Charlie Doig's life was that he was born into this wild Montana plain. His family was among what he calls 'real diehard settlers'. They managed to be landowners part of the time, and learned all about what it takes to homestead out there. They experienced a lot of failure. Charlie wound up being landless, but was able to become a sharecropper which is a kind of ranch manager.

The author displays the changing times with the cultural variations of lifestyle when he informs readers that he went with his parents to Arizona where his father became the foreman in an aircraft manufacturing factory. They tended 1000 sheep that summer and at the end of it, the woman died. During this time, the original settlers were dying out. This was a transformation that in many more Easterly locations had taken place a century or more earlier.

The next chapter is called Flip. The author explains that his father helped to heal him after the mother's death by bringing him along more at times. This way, he visited more adult male territory, with his father's presence and protection. Ivan writes that it made him feel as though his father was letting him act like an adult. The author describes the first time that he nailed another boy with a fist. The other's name was Kirkwood and he made the dreadful mistake of teasing Ivan rudely in front of his father and Ruth.

Ivan's Dad and Ruth went into business together, running a 'Grill'. It was the third place, in a location where the author claims there was only enough business for two.



The main location at this point in the story is White Sulphur Springs, Montana. It is a valley dominated by ranching.



Chapter 3, The Flip & The Lady

Chapter 3, The Flip & The Lady Summary and Analysis

The author states that to him it seemed all-too clear that the community wanted to somehow blot out the relationship between Ruth and Charlie Doig once it was over. The reason is probably because they had a relationship that did not turn into a remarriage. Perhaps people weren't sure what to make of their business venture or this strange situation involving "nonmonogamous" people.

Ruth was a woman from a poor family who had needed to or chosen to work. The options for women were even more limited than those of men. Therefore she worked as a cook and housekeeper. Unmarried men often found that they needed to hire a woman who was not their lover to take care of the women's work whenever there was not a wife. Ruth was a woman of Montana, close the Charlie Doig's age who was hired by Charlie to help him with his own home life, which included Ivan. Their business relationship became personal.

Ivan Doig began a new stage of his life that is described during this portion of the book. Their little trio called it 'boarding out'. It meant that Ivan explored life and avoided some of the hardships of his father's style of life during the time, by staying with other people. His father continued to provide for him under these conditions. The first time they tried this, he stayed with friends of Ruth's. There were other children there, including a another boy named Curtis with whom he shared both a bed and plenty of jokes.

Ivan describes the adults as having been busy, both strongly associated with work activities. In the man's case, he was covered in coal related to his job driving a train, and the woman was frequently known to be baking bread or else washing dishes.

It was also true that there was some concern surrounding the workability of Ruth and Charlie's marriage to one another. Ivan writes that there times when they got along better with one another and times when they argued frequently and had trouble with one another. Ivan expresses that during the time that Ruth and his father went to Battle Creek, they either did or seemed to have an easier time of each other.

Ivan Doig shares more details of this Midwestern lifestyle with readers. Here it was well into the twentieth century, and during the time at Battle Creek, the two or three of them were still in a position to use an outhouse, rather than indoor plumbing. What really hit these two hard, in the winter of 1948- 49, was the intensity of the weather itself. There was so much snow, without the much needed equipment, that the road that could take them from where they were back into the town where Ivan was hoping for weekend reunions together with his father and Ruth, was often blocked. Ivan writes of how sad he was when he was let down by his father. Charlie had promised to fetch him at the weekends and for weeks in a row he did not arrive as promised. One can readily



imagine how distressing this must have been particularly without any phone calls or any other more modern form of communication technology. Just a disappointed boy.

Finally, when the man did show up, he revealed how hard it had been for him to get there. Later in life, maybe Ivan did a little research and learned how true it had been. The roadway had been blocked by snow for weeks. It snowed, it piled up. It didn't melt away. His father was a loving and responsible man, however and so he offered his son a deal. If the boy would get ahead in his school work, then his father would come and let him stay at the ranch for a couple of weeks at a stretch since the traveling part was so tough. The boy complied and true to his word, his father turned up.

After a falling out with Ruth, it turned out that people were tending to take his father's side. She remarried again, and yet again. Perhaps the women of the region couldn't handle her 'feminist' insistence that the man help her in the kitchen or simply frowned upon with suspicion that she kept trying with another man. By the time she disappeared Westward, Ivan notes that other people in their lives didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that she was gone. His father seemed to view this as a good thing. Mainly, Ivan admits to readers that this was his perception of the situation and that he himself harbored some perfectly good memories of her despite the 'public outcry' about her.

The following chapter is entitled Lady. The author begins by going further back in time again, which is always possible when using the gift of memory. This time, he begins writing about Bessie Ringer - this is his paternal grandmother, in 1914, long before he was a firm idea in anyone's mind.

Mr. Doig describes his grandmother's best friends- the Kreb sisters. He explains that they were 'iron and granite together' making a formidable force which was apt to 'leave bruises' on the world. He says that his grandmother's relative softness was reassuring.

Bessie had a father who stood out more as frightening than as anything else. He did provide, but had a reputation at home of being short-tempered. Upon analysis it is because much of the patience and tolerance required for gentle child rearing runs directly counter to some of the 'exclude due to error' approach of life in the workforce. As a consequence, he did much more than nothing for his family, but the remaining mark was that the father was a frightening figure to be evaded or worked around or obeyed as best one could. He recommended that his daughter marry a man named Tom Ringer. No one knows why: the man was nearly as old as her father and not particularly fortunate nor exceptionable able. Ivan Doig does not even report him as having been one her father's friends. Bessie did this, anyways. Well this was an accident caused her father's excessive drinking or an accuracy that Tom and his daughter would be able to endure one another's oddities and remain together - and hence, an act of surprising wisdom, remains unknown. At least, at this part of the story.

Her marriage was not without difficulty. There were things her husband did, and things he didn't and she did the best she could with the circumstances she had. Ivan writes clearly and unmistakably about how she learned some skills because her husband did bring her along with him, and did have her help him and allowed her to help him. She



was an active sort of woman, and a bit insecure due to her lack of schooling, of which she had had rather little. Even so, it is shown again, that her husband did function as a provider and something of a personal leader- whether for good or ill or a bit of both. He had some bad habits and was not terribly impressive to people in general, and did get drunk and could be unpleasant and at times he would run off for a few days without discussion. He was a functional lover, whether a good one or not was probably considered too private to share, but the couple did produce children. Ivan also admits that the wife, his grandmother did seem to grow stronger during the marriage but that her feelings towards her husband were really not that great. In fact, they were often not very good at all. This reality festered like a wound. They parted ways, but not until the kids were grown. The report is that Bessie broke the marriage on purpose; that one day her husband left but this time he didn't come back. This made her need a job, although thanks to her husband she did have a home.

She took a job as a cook for an old farmer and while it took a little doing, they worked the natural gossip about whether or not they had clandestinely become lovers. They were seen together often, and were known to be friendly with one another. This was sincere and continued to be restricted to appropriate behavior. This was set in contrast with the whole marriage between Ruth and Charlie which had started the same way: the widower had hired a woman to be the family's cook. Although, they were strictly friends and business associates, Bessie's boss seemed to get drunk less often and his over all well being improved probably due to the combination of food, company and help with the domestic chores. It is ironic: he hired her and paid her to do the bulk of the 'woman's work' or 'wife's work' that was simply outstanding when there was not an actual wife who did these things.

Ivan also explains that there were challenges in his father's relationship to Bessie, his now evidently beloved grandmother. Readers won't wonder, after reading what had happened to her, why Bessie was so protective of her daughter. She did not just send her daughter off to some suspect man. She did not permit her daughter to marry prematurely. She wanted to make sure that her daughter only married 'someone Good' , a fellow who would really love her, treat her well and the like. The author shows little understanding of long courtships, although the present trend shows that during an age where divorce and changing relationships out of dissatisfaction with a partner have become commonplace, longer courtships have been leading to marriages that don't end in divorce whereas more of the ones with the shorter courtships fail later on. Of course this only applies about half the time, but Bessie took the trouble to discern which half- so to speak, she was dealing with.

That being written, the truth is that Ivan sent his son to visit Tom Ringer, while Charlie and Bessie went through a patch of years during which they refused to speak with one another. Ivan reports that visiting his grandfather was okay with him.

Later, when Ivan's health took a turn for the worse, Charlie swallowed his pride and set out to make amends with Bessie. She was receptive to his call, despite the gap in years. This led to regular visits between them for some time. This at least permitted Ivan

to cultivate a familial tie that had been neglected for a few years, which, in a child's life, is a long time.



Chapter 4, McGrath & North

Chapter 4, McGrath & North Summary and Analysis

There is no break between book chapters during this change in the summary's chapter. The opening scene is a bit surprising, in that the author has moved on to a discussion of a man named McGrath. This was one of the Scottish descendants. By this time, circumstances have changed so much, that Grandma, Charlie and young Ivan are all traveling together through life. They are seeking a location where there are two ranch openings, one for each of the adults as well as available schooling for the boy. They come upon the Camas and the McGraths.

The author gets into describing McGrath and his 'ways'. He was a ranch-crew foreman. He hired peculiar people, to an extent that was noticeable. These included a Finnish man who they called Finnegan because they could not pronounce his actual name. This also included two men who had been with him for a long time, so much so, that both names were rattled off as a unity. Ivan informs readers that there was an extent to which this was most strange indeed due to the radical differences in the ways that each of the two men related to McGrath. One of the two was named Rudy; he was treated very badly by McGrath but stuck with it anyways. The author is very clear about this. At least once weekly, McGrath shouted at Rudy. In his turn, the mutterings of an angry but obedient subordinate were the kind of comments that sprang from Rudy. McGrath gave him the lowliest of the tasks there at the ranch.

The other fellow was named Mickey. He would say 'yes' to whatever McGrath told him to do, and then would go do whatever he personally felt was highest priority. McGrath did not give him much grief for this. The over all feeling that McGrath gave off was that, as a foreman, he was a bully. The author explains that Charlie and Bessie made numerous observations to determine whether or not they were willing to really work with McGrath and Camas.

Sure enough, the two worked at the Camas, which meant frequent involvement with McGrath. During this time, the author 'boarded out', meaning that he was often restricted to including his father and his grandmother at the weekends. He refers to the dynamic at this time as being 'on the brink' of being a family. There was a great deal of tension between Bessie and Charlie. They were quite able both to get along well and to disagree strongly.

The author also writes of being taken into account when a decision is made. His father tells his son that he wants to take 'two bands of sheep for McGrath' as he loves this kind of work. He wants to let the boy Ivan choose whether to come along or to be boarded out, or whether it is so important that his father should turn this opportunity down for the sake of Ivan's stability-of-location. Ivan decides to go along, somewhat to his own surprise. They also invite Grandmother, who Charlie has continued to call Lady ever since their reconciliation after his divorce from Ruth. This is the real mother-in-law, but



as he host his wife, and she her daughter, they have been trying to work out their kinship to one another. She agrees to go along. Ivan writes that both he and his father are pleased by this, and although they have some misgivings they are quite glad that she is this attached to them now.

This batch of sheep ran into serious trouble. The winter was holding on, turning out to be long and so the ewes were not as well fed or as strong at the lambing season as was needed. The lack of nourishment in their milk was causing lambs to die to such an extreme that Charlie called a veterinarian to find out what might be done. He was fortunate because they found a solution. This small crew of people then had to implement the solution which in this case was to hand feed a little cod liver oil to every one of the two thousand sheep. They did it, but it was as tiresome as readers are apt to imagine.

After this, the section comes to a close. The author recounts a few other tidbits about shepherding. One of these, is that the conditions improved with the seasons and they had the opportunity to take the sheep to a Blackfeet Reservation where the claim was that the grass was fabulous. It was a 4 day walk, and therein the author gives readers some indication of what sheep are like. He says that in every sheep's brain there is a panic sensor and much of the shepherd work is to keep them moving without ruining the effort due to their having been panicked by something, whether it be a barking dog or a passing car.



Chapter 5, Two Bands of Sheep

Chapter 5, Two Bands of Sheep Summary and Analysis

Here readers are given greater details about the actual tending of sheep. The group is moving them along to what will be a summer residence. They are working with a Jeep. There is a small trailer attached to the back which they will be living in. This has been provided by McGrath who the author informs readers, "flimflammed it from somewhere," (p. 201).

The herd of sheep actually moves mainly in front of the vehicle. Much of the time, one of the people needs to be on the move and on the look out. One task is to keep the sheep moving, another is to catch an stragglers and help them along. In this case, the lambs were often picked up and carried in the vehicle so that could rest when they had become exhausted from what it took to keep up with the adults. This part of the true life story takes place in 1954.

The first day, they had to travel 16 miles. The reason for this is that they had to bring the sheep to good stopping locations where they could safely feed and drink and rest. During this, the main issues were navigating the sheep and dealing with their anxieties combined with their lack of understanding about why they were being sent a certain way.

The dogs were in a strong position under these circumstances to be quite useful. The author emphasizes the difference between the two types: yes, indeed, those are sharp toothed animals, the dogs are, and built to be quite aggressive when compared with the sheep. He shows this with respect to seeing how it helps make the dogs useful as shepherds. Now and then, Ivan Doig explains, a ewe might step out of the band, wanting to go another way than the rest but get quickly intimidated back into place by one of the attentive hounds. Charlie, Ivan's father, had to restrain the dog whenever this happened. The first part of the dog's work was right, but his tendency was to get carried away and harm the ewe, which ran counter to the goals of the mission. Luckily, the well trained dogs would obey the human and hold off at such times. This way, the ewe was simply safely back into the group and moving forward.

For the first time, the author describes the way they related to natives- at this time they were still called 'Indians' but as time goes on and more original Indians move to the Americas, the more the alternative Native American becomes a clarifying modernization as the need to differentiate one group from the other has surged. He explains that he knew almost nothing about them, but what he did know wasn't very good. They would come into his town during the week, get drunk, and then drive. This was causing people to get killed. He recounts the story of one man who was simply described as having been able to keep out of trouble when he stayed on the reservation but got into trouble



when he left it. Then, the situation worsened and he had begun to make this same 'trouble' even when he was on the reservation.

The author was very glad to be able to bring the sheep onto the Blackfeet's Reservation territory as there was fantastic grazing and water there. He hasn't written with malice but with a kind of accepting self-centered indifference that one readily sees can easily lead to 'evildoing'. He did wonder what the tribal people thought of the white men.

Ivan Doig describes the location in very broad terms. The Rocky Mountains lay to the West, which tells readers a lot. The rest, he wrote, in the other directions, was all open prairie.

There was a new problem. There were sheep dying and it was up to them to decipher why. It turned out to be the way the sheep were attempting to solve their 'tic itch' difficulty. There were no trees in the area so they had no choice but to roll around on the ground to alleviate the problem by rubbing and scratching. The issue was that not all of them could get back up, and for those that became stuck the situation turned suddenly lethal.

For the first time Ivan writes of having been more actively involved in the incident, handling carcasses and asking of his grandmother- what might they do to take care of this?

There was nothing else to do; they had to tend the flock vigilantly and step-in to help them back up whenever one of them had this problem. There was no other way to deal with it; it was one sheep at a time, very personal work in this way. This was made far worse by the fact that McGrath had not sprayed the sheep to prevent tics- in other words, in his effort to 'cut corners' , to save time and money he created for himself a more serious problem further on down the line of time. McGrath chastised the Doig group for the sad loss of sheep lives. Grandma hollered back for a bit, but then was 'called off' by her son-in-law. What really cleared matters up was that McGrath covered the same bands of sheep for part of one day while the others went into town. By the time they came back, he had lost 3 sheep to the tic-flipping, overheating, death problem. No more needed to be said at that point.

The author observes something striking. They didn't see any Blackfeet on the Reservation, at least on the part they were using. They saw one. Then again, most of the time, they didn't see other white people either. It was the three of them and the sheep except for occasions when McGrath showed up. Doig reveals a rather natural but strange reaction to this. They went ahead and fished and otherwise used the land rather freely after having been there on their own for a while. What he doesn't discuss at that point is the reality that this is what it was like. This was how it really worked. The land was left to itself often enough to replenish whatever was taken and now and then someone would be there. If people turned up and one observed to the other that this was 'my turf, not yours' well, then, this was the sort of thing that in extreme cases would lead to warfare or a skirmish. The rest of the time whoever was there could use the land and this may or may not go unnoticed.



By the end of this section of the text, the author has himself matured to the point of trying gainful employment for himself. After some experience he brings up to his father the idea of alternatives. Unlike what some men and women have met with, Ivan's father Charlie was entirely supportive. He told his son that he would only be able to help so much, but within those limitations he was entirely in favor of his son pursuing whatever line of work he considered best for himself.



Chapter 6, Ivory

Chapter 6, Ivory Summary and Analysis

The story has become more about the author himself. He has sprinkled in occasional remarks as the work has progressed that he tested best; he was more amenable to giving the desired responses to the teachers, enthusiastic about being right as well as persistent and energetic in giving the needed attention to learning whatever it was the teachers wanted.

His relatives were perfectly in favor and agreement that it would be okay for him to be 'the one' to cross the family over from those who had not been university educated to people that were. There was a great deal of paperwork involved. He felt challenged by a few matters. One of the difficulties was funding. He decided to apply to some of the most prestigious schools even though they were relatively poor since he had heard that sometimes places such as Harvard will cover the fees and expenses for exceptional students.

There is drama when a person in some position of respect discourages him. He turns to his family who overturn the improper verdict. He is urged to continue. In the end he chooses to attend Northwestern despite the fact that Missoula, which is closer to home there in Montana, offered him a scholarship. Not only that, but in reality he was graced with another blessing. Missoula sent a Dean out to him, they even delivered a Rhodes Scholar right out to the farm field to invite the author to attend, for free. Not even these powerful overtures caused Ivan Doig to stay in Montana.

The parting from his father and grandmother with whom he had become quite a unit, was intense. It may have been a little easier for two reasons. He had assurances that they would keep in touch and reunite. Also, they had practiced this kind of separation with all of that 'boarding out' he had done during his childhood.

He endures the shock of receiving a very bad grade for the first time, there at Northwestern but his merciful professor has him in for a visit at the office. Instead of the axe, which is delivered in some fields of study or to some students, Doig was redirected, re-educated, clued-in and encouraged. Effectively his teacher explained that this was not high school, where all that was required was memorization and giving out facts. He was going to think on another level and learn to write essays.

Next he writes of his journeys - the staying away and the visits 'back home'. The distance was vast. He crossed the land by taking the train. This took nearly two days each way. These giant travels became part of the new stage of life he had entered.

The life of his father and grandmother changed again. They left McTaggart's ranch, and moved to Ringling. The author includes an actual letter or the paraphrasing that stems from imperfect but clear memory- they were moving to Ringling. Another faithful letter

from Grandma reveals that they have secured a summer job for the author. This is a case where in order to spend time together, they have to work together.

Again everything changes. The author finds an opportunity that is more along his lines where he is. There is a tremendous emotional impact because this means that where he needs to be to pursue his goals most effectively and where his father and grandmother are are not the same place. His father encourages him to endure separation for the sake of pursuing his goals while readily admitting that they will miss not being able to personally include him because of this.

Ivan Doig begins getting published. He does so well as an undergraduate at Northwestern that he is granted a scholarship for graduate school. He takes a graduate course in journalism. Part of his graduate research results- known as a thesis, is published in the altered form of an article.

Such events are in fact, first 'symptoms' of success.

After that, another similar event, one that is related to it takes place. The author lands an actual professional position but it requires a commitment that will cause him to forgo many of his visits 'back home'. For readers who have lived through such transitions themselves, this is not even surprising, but to those who did not see it coming, it bode both well and a bit frighteningly. His own father encourages the younger man to continue to pursue the success by observing that he has been offered a better paying job than even exists where Doig is from.

Ultimately, these changes bring the author to Seattle, Washington rather West than East of the land of his upbringing. The end wraps around to the beginning: there are his father and his grandmother but now they are with him. He has become the one who is 'the center'. He and his wife have the wealth and power. His relatives, strangely out of place and so reminiscent of Montana's ranching lifestyle, are harboring with him. He has them in this new world with him, but they are able to be present with the benefit of his position as one of these 'educated men' of the modern age.



Characters

Ivan Doig

This is the author. He was born in the 1940s in Montana. As a young, adult man he ventured far Westward where he attended the University of Washington. One of the years he was a graduate student there, the summary writer was born in the Eastern region of the country, but also in the North. Ivan Doig has settled in the Seattle area where he continues to live. This gives readers a special something when compared to reading of works of people who have died either recently or a long time ago.

Ivan is a married fellow and mentions his wife in the acknowledgments.

The author has written and published several books. The edition used to produce this summary is not the first. It originally came out in the 1970s and was released again in the early 1990s.

In short, this is the type of educated fellow who grew up as a country fellow, where this was commonplace. While he had decided that he did not wish to be restricted to that lifestyle and thereby took himself to the university and on to more of the sedentary white-collar lifestyle he also felt strange, and realized that he liked being connected with that natural, rural way of life even whilst he enjoyed what he had become.

Ann Nelson

This is a woman with whom the author had a friendship and an incredibly important professional connection. While both were married to people other than one another, rather than even attempting any inappropriate behavior they instead found another way to help one another. Ivan had always been astounded by Ann's efficiency.

In a bold move, he one day asked her if she would become his literary agent although she had no real previous experience at this. She agreed and during the introduction the author describes it as having been thanks to her, above and beyond what it took for him to write an entire book, a publisher was found within a few months.

This was managed only after several years of friendship, between these two in addition to a tremendous amount of personal effort on Ivan's part when it came to the book itself.

Bessie Ringer

This woman is Ivan Doig's grandmother. She is his mother's mother. As such, she was the mother-in-law to Charlie Doig, but only after he had proved himself worthy of her daughter.



Bessie was a reasonably sensible, very active girl. She had grown up under a father who's main featured characteristic is that he was frightening. It was also known that he was sometimes drunk. It was also true that he was married and remained so throughout his days.

Bessie was told by her father who to marry. She took her father's advice, and lived to doubt very much that the suggestion had been an act of good judgment.

He included her a lot, and was open to her assistance which also meant that she learned a great deal.

Bessie lived with her husband until well into her middle years. After her own children had all become adults, her husband left. She is reported to have intentionally broken her own marriage and while she never divorced she also never reconciled to her spouse.

Her husband's name was Tom Ringer.

Charlie Doig

This is the author's father. He, along with a woman who lived as his wife for many decades, raised a family in Montana. Late in their lives, they turned to the younger generation for some support, and found it. However easy or difficult it may have been, this man was forced to face his own illness and weakness after decades of having been a strong, vigorous rancher out in Montana 'big sky country'.

He came down with emphysema that was so severe that he and his mother went to his son. His son lived together with his wife in Seattle, Washington. While there, this man's adult son became inspired to write an unusual real life book about his own childhood, and adult life.

This man was a great inspiration and influence on Ivan. One reason that the book was written was that at some point in his middle years, he concluded that he, and his parents were 'relics' of a bygone era. One way for him to express this was to describe much of their lives in a way that could be shared with others, by writing about it.

Carol Doig

This is the author's wife, with whom he has successfully spent decades of his life. While she does not have a front-and-center position in the early parts of the book, she was actually present in the author's life during his journey of hosting his father and grandmother, and throughout the entire process of writing the book that this summarizes.

She is to be viewed as a 'staple', meaning a fundamental essential upon which the author has relied on a daily basis for decades. She had the proper disposition to facilitate rather than to ruin either her marriage or her husband's joyful business



relationship with Ann Nelson that grew out of friendship. This is noted only because there are people who would be so jealous of such interest and affection as to have prevented him from having the best literary agent possible to suit his needs. Luckily, everyone involved was able to 'share' in the ways needed to achieve results.

It is 'assumed' that Carol took Ivan's surname, but nowadays that is not essential and may not have happened.

Mother Doig

Ivan's mother actually died early on in the boy's life. He was only 6 years old at the time. She had dark brown hair and asthma. Her parents were rather poor, but did the best they could with what they had. Her family made at least one major move in order to take her needs into account- this was their relocation to Montana.

She was an energetic girl and woman within the confines of her asthma. She was reported to have learned to do both women's work and some 'man's work'. She spent some time in overalls but felt embarrassed if outsiders caught her attired that way- not dressed to be seen, but only to work the ranch.

She was well protected by her parents, especially her mother with respect to love and romance. Her mother ensured that she stay close to the apron excepting a fully proper and well intention match came along. She accepted the one serious suitor who pursued her, but only because he dated her with very severe and appropriate restrictions for 6 years prior to being allowed to take her to himself as his wife. During these years, she finished growing up and Charlie Doig had the opportunity to cultivate a very real understanding of her, her mother and the rest of the family.

She passed away at the tender age of 31 years, after one more summer of shepherding along with her husband which she enjoyed. She was survived by her parents and a son.

Luckily, his grandmother helped his father to raise him after that.

Tom Ringer

This man was Ivan Doig's maternal grandfather. His role and reputation in the memoir are a bit peculiar. He is reported to have been considered rather a 'never-do-well' type of fellow, and perhaps a little notorious as a drinker. He was encouraged to, or allowed to marry the daughter of a man near to his own age- the daughter of one of his peers.

He did succeed in providing for her. They did have a few children together. He included her rather more so than less so. He taught her things in order to enable her to help him perform some work. At times this was quite simple, but it was either the same or closely related to what he was doing.

He did get drunk sometimes.



Now and then he would just go away for a few days at a time, and he did not always report this.

His wife was often enough not particularly happy with him. Disgruntled, surly or entirely displeased was not made clear but she broke their marriage on account of it, apparently intentionally.

He left once when the children had grown without going back. He left his wife with a home although his departure meant that she was going to have to find a way to provide for herself or else reconcile with him.

He lived out the remainder of days largely alone and a bit sad about the marriage not working out in the end. He did have some visits from his grandson Ivan Doig during Ivan's childhood.

McGrath

This man was a ranch foreman of the Camas ranch in Montana. He had many dogs, and tended to assemble and hire a rather rough and funny bunch of men. He may have hired men he felt sorry for, but that is never stated.

Two of his ranch hands were long term. They related to him very differently and were viewed as having almost nothing in common except that both continued to work with McGrath. They were Mickey-and-Rudy.

As the name indicates: McGrath was an ethnic Scotsman in the big land of the midwest.

Sheep were amongst his business, but were not the limit of it. He is present during a few chapters of the book.

Mickey

This is one of McGrath's long term ranch hands. Mickey was chronically angry with McGrath but at the same time, he never left him. He stuck with the job, did not necessarily perform impressively and refused to quit.

His boss growled at him at least once each and every week for years on end but never fired him. Quite possibly, McGrath never even tried to fire him, just cussed him out a bit.

Somehow Mickey had either the blessing or the stubborn stupidity to stick with McGrath and so it went on. Why change jobs when this is what it's like?

His longevity of service caused his name to be connected to that of another man who was very little like him, called Rudy.

Rudy

This was one of McGrath's longest term ranch hands. He related to his boss in a discernible manner. He just told the man 'yes, you're right' regardless. In spite of his indiscriminate use of the term 'Yes' to McGrath's face it was a well known fact that the moment he was off he would do whatever chore seemed most pertinent to his repertoire of skills. He may well have taken into account what McGrath told him but the feeling that he left others with, according to the author, is that just because he told his boss 'yes' didn't necessarily mean that's what he would do.

Due to his persistence in the same position, Rudy ended up as part of the conjunction: Mickey-and-Rudy.

In this regard the two were rather like two horses hitched to the same team.

There were other ranch hands, their boss was accepting of foreign employees as most of the work did not require speech, but Mickey-and-Rudy were the ones with seniority.



Objects/Places

Montana

In this case, the entire massive place is meant, all of a piece. This vast terrain has some variation, but is predominately grasslands. This land was claimed by the white man, and by the American government in the 1800s. There were concerted efforts to have it settled: homesteads were offered.

Homesteaders entered the region in the 1870s. The going was quite tough, actually. Within 50 years the conclusion was made that it was usable as ranch land, but not everyone could manage that.

By the midst of the twentieth century, there was a relatively small number of ranchers, and those who worked the ranches. While a sore disappointment for many homesteaders- because it left them landless rather than landed, it has been the only way so far found to work in that region.

There is a large proportion of ethnic Scottish people there, amongst the immigrants.

The main native tribe of the same terrain are the Blackfeet.

Seattle, Washington

This is the most nationally and internationally famed urban centers of the American Westernmost Continental North. In this sense by 'Continental' is meant 'the lower 48 states'. The city has grown steadily during the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

It is found at the beginning and end of the memoir as it is where the author lived when he wrote the book.

White Sulphur Springs

This was the name of a major area within the state of Montana where the author's father and grandmother spent a great deal of time working. It is in Montana and is named in an incredibly straightforward manner.

There are white sulphur springs in the area which serve to give it a definitive quality to people who travel through or live in the region. This sets it apart from other areas within Montana which have been given other names to prevent confusion.

This is also the name of a town, named directly after the aforementioned white sulphur springs.



Fence

Fences are used to create boundaries- they are territorial markers. They appear now and then in the memoir within the context of ranch related work. They are a source of work for ranch hands. They are important within the world of ranchers in a particular way.

There are at least two references to them: one in which there is fast money to be made by the Doigs setting in fence, and one winter Bessie Ringer helps her husband earn a living by creating fence posts for use in ranch fencing.

Grill

This is a restaurant that Charlie Doig and Ruth run together for a year or two during their rather brief marriage of three years. The money comes in mainly thanks to drunken late night customers.

Smith River Valley

This is the area of Montana that Charlie Doig comes from. This is and was ranching country. The land was still 'hard going' and sparsely populated well into the twentieth century. Some it is fine for supporting sheep and cattle, as they are grazers who like to move. It starts in the first third or so of the book, when life is revolving around Charlie Doig as the handsome father and main financial provider.

Big Belts, Montana

This isn't a town but is a particularly hilly/mountainous part of the state of Montana. Homesteaders and shepherds found that flocks could be moved through here wonderfully in the warm season but often the winters took out more than whatever had been gained in the warmer weather.

As a consequence, the Big Belts maintain a reputation of being particularly rough country.

Ranch Crew

This is not an object in the usual sense. This is a group of ranch hands who, together, need to attend to a set of major needs of any given ranch.

The author explains that handling them so as to make them effective without a lot of trouble was an important skill that his father had to a great enough degree to be well respected by his son.



McGrath, with Mickey-and-Rudy appear later in the book as another example of the ranch crew foreman and his men.

This is a form of leadership which focuses on small groups of men, although it could include women, that is essential in ranching.

Bell

In this case, this refers only to the bell worn by the front sheep of a flock. It is mentioned during the book as part of a sheep drive. It shows the impatience of held knowledge because the author reports that his father was irritated by anyone driving a car who annoyed him by asking questions such as, 'why does the first sheep wear a bell?'

Saddle

This is a largely leather device that is used to make it possible to or more comfortable to ride on a horse's back even for long periods of time. There is more than one kind of these. Different riders find that one type may suit him or her better than the others.

Ringling

This is an important location in the book. Charlie Doig and Grandma Bessie Ringer spend a good deal of time there. They can often find work there, he as a ranch worker and she as a cook.

Chicago

This is a giant city in the state of Illinois. It has a port on a great lake. It also hosts a number of universities, including Northwestern where the author attended university.

Missoula

This was one of the universities that the author considered attending. He was offered a scholarship to go there but passed it up in order to go to Northwestern.

Themes

Ranching

Ranching is one of the main themes of this book. This had its root in the original homesteading plans set out by the American government in an effort to take over the region from the natives. Encouraging settlement and figuring out what would make it profitable for people to live there was a necessity.

Much of the immigration came from Scotland. They were mainly lowland Scotts; they were already accustomed to working sheep but needed to figure out how to work the new terrain. During the fifty years from the 1860s to 1910 immigrants tried this. As it turned out, it was tough going. The idea that there would be a large number of land owners running relatively small farms did not work. The majority of the land wound up being owned by a rather small number of people.

This situation forced the bulk of the people living in the region to work assisting those who had managed to hold onto their land. The generation of Charlie Doig, Ivan's father, consisted mainly of people who had grown up working ranch farms. Most of them did this as part of a family. Charlie exemplified this: he had learned the ropes of how to ranch by working along with his brothers and his father. They took the hard lesson that amongst them, they could not perform all of the work well enough to keep a financially healthy, functional ranch. At the same time, despite this serious shortcoming, they had cultivated a variety of skills that were absolutely necessary to the success of such places. This being the case, their lot in life was to become ranch hands, and to help make someone else's ranch work.

Charlie's adult life was that of a ranch hand. In the longer run, he was able to master most of the skills needed and therefore worked as a sharecropper, which is a ranch manager who makes his money as a portion of the profits the ranch makes in a given year.

While there are cattle in this book, the main animal is the sheep. The reality of the sheep gives some inkling into why there is that ancient Grecian story about 'the Golden Fleece'. There is big money in sheep for those who know what they are doing, and have the equipment, space and dedication to manage them.

Family Life

The book begins with the author, his wife and young living in Seattle. He has made the decision to host and to harbor both his father and his grandmother. There is a familial crisis in that his father is ill. This type of thing comes up in many families, where there comes a time during which the roles change over: those who protected and raised a generation become dependent upon their own offspring who have since matured and come into 'their own'. There is no getting around the truth that having the type of family



in which members get along well, resolve differences, harbor a great deal of love along with a strong sense of duty makes this kind of thing go better. Of course it also goes better when there is plenty of money.

The author begins to explain things by using memory to take readers along with him, back in time. He then shows how his own dependency upon these two older people who are in his Seattle home developed. His father and he were closest with his mother, who was his father's wife. At this time, although Ivan may have met his grandmother, her role in his life was rather in the background than the foreground.

Of course, for Charlie, the situation was a bit different. While he was much closer with his wife before and during his son's early years, unlike the author, Charlie had many years of history with Grandma Bessie. The reason for this was that she was a legitimately protective mother and Charlie Doig had initiated a courtship when he was 'the older man' and the woman who became his wife was only an adolescent, all of 15 years old. Bessie had been married off to a much older man at age 18 and took a strong interest in finding out who this fellow was and whether or not it would be okay for him to be her daughter's husband. This meant that Charlie had 6 years of experience with her during the courtship of her daughter. Then she faded into the background.

When Ivan's mother dies, he is only a 6 year old boy. He and his father are both bereft. He never writes about what it was like for his grandmother to lose her daughter long before she ever passed away.

Charlie tries remarrying, when he a woman he hires to be the family's cook becomes same-bed close with him. During this time, his in-laws, or former in-laws are more distant from he and Ivan. At the same time, the author explains that he and his father were so sad for the first couple of years after her death that had to be, and luckily were, carefully taken in and protected during their fragile period by friends of the families who cared enough to take them in, make sure they had work and to prevent isolation during their grieving process.

Later, grandmother comes in closer to the family. This becomes more drastic after she breaks her marriage, once the rest of her children have grown several years after the death of one of her eldest daughters. She has changed to a lifestyle where she needs to work to earn a living and has been released from staying close to her husband and her children. More and more, she becomes an integral part of Charlie and his son Ivan's lives.

By the end, the same woman is now a fixture who is facing the potential loss of her son-in-law and is staying with her grandson. Together the three of them had made it through the death of her daughter and then had had many adventures together later in life. Once Ivan, the author had grown and left them for higher education and a career, along with a marriage of his own, Grandma Bessie and Charlie Doig had continued to live and work as a family unit for years. In the end, there they are together, protecting and loving one another as people hope and do, or wish were possible. This shows how true it is that even when a family system is a bit unconventional it can still work.



American Aspirations

The author is also writing about the hopes of a family and how they might come to pass. The first ambitions were chased when the ancestors emigrated to a new country, and courageously tried homesteading. They were seeking superior opportunities to what they felt they might be able to achieve back in their native lands.

For Ivan's ancestors, the truth was that this did not go all that well. While conditions could have worsened, the hard fact was that they were not very successful at homesteading but had managed to become settlers. This was why they were found living as ranch hands and cooks.

The roles of women and men were mainly divided, but in actual practice, there was some changing around and overlapping of duties. This was especially the case under conditions when one or the other gender was away from the other for a while. Of course men cook when there aren't women with them to do it. Of course women tend the fields and the farm when the men are away herding livestock. One way or another, life revolves around getting the needed work done more than it does around 'roles'.

The author grew up in a time when there was public education. This effected what his father could do as he had to keep near enough to schools and to one location to create stability for the boy, Ivan. As life progressed it became obvious that not only was Ivan clever, but he was good at 'playing along' and following orders. He was an excellent student and as a result his father and his grandmother and his school teachers began to consider something. They began to entertain the idea of his going to college or university and on perhaps, to a very different sort of life from that of his ancestors.

Ivan Doig was rather lucky in that his father and grandmother and many of his teachers and the American culture in general supported the decision for him to pursue new opportunities beyond ranching in Montana. Funding was a major limitation, but the family decided to go for it and Ivan's father Charlie assured him that as far as they were able, Ivan had their full support.

Ivan went to Northwestern far to the East of his upbringing, in Chicago, Illinois. The training and opportunities that he received by doing so had a rapid impact on his life. At first, it restricted him to occasional visits home to Montana and then, by the time he graduated the truth was clear. The way had cleared into a new future for him, but in his case it meant that there was no going back. Montana was no longer the 'right place' for Ivan Doig.

The author had increasing success with journalism, and then as a freelance writer. Since then, he has developed into a professional author. This book is one of several that have been published.

Style

Perspective

The author's perspective is intentionally subjective. The work is a memoir and as such depends upon a sense of personal biases as an essential aspect of the entire text. This is nearly the opposite of those books written with as objective a perspective as possible. What is included in this book as harboring the greatest meaning is often enough that which must be removed in order to obtain an objective viewpoint.

There is some creative latitude in this regard. The majority of the book stars the author's father and grandmother, and since it does he has created a version of the past that is based upon that blend of fact and fiction which is the natural result of his own memories and the limited sense of the situation.

Ivan Doig provides a narrative voice to a great deal of the book. How he does so is intriguing because he writes from the reality of being well into his own middle age but includes a reconstructed third person viewpoint. He includes memories of his own perception as a child when he does this. While in regular practice this is 'no big deal' Ivan has really done impressive writing when he transmits this in the written form.

The author is not removed from the truth. The perspective is that of one lengthy 'flashback'. In reality, this represents beyond question some of the mental activity that people use in the normal process of 'preserving' the story of their own life, their own memories and identities.

Tone

The tone of the work is quietly uplifting. The author takes real life and crafts it through the art of writing into a cohesive whole that is then shared with others. Much of this is delivered to convey what would otherwise be Ivan's part in a conversation. He is educating the readers, but not in the manner of a university textbook nor a lecture. The book could be used as part of a 20th century American history course, or for a literature class but the tone does not vaguely resemble a university textbook in the more scientific fields at all.

There is a sense in which the author has written this work in order to preserve something that has ceased to exist. The entire lifestyle that he was born into has passed away. This is what set him to thinking that he wanted to take some kind of action that might be helpful. This being the case there is a certain nostalgia involved along with a poignancy regarding loss.

At the same time, the author has approached this project from a crossroads in his own life. The sad news is that his father is dying. This strong, handsome man hasn't ever seemed to be the type to do something offensive such as, well, die. Early in the book,



the author shares how deeply effected both he and his father were by the loss of his mother. This causes another 'echo' and perhaps an especial delicacy that had not existed before.

His grandmother is somehow, like himself, in the position of being going to outlive the other. For his own self, this is normal, in that he is the son.

For his gran, however, the matter is different. She to survived the death of Ivan's mother, who was Charlie's wife. This has made her a survivor. Now, she is being set up to go through another loss, and again, strangely to outlive members of the younger generation.

There is due to this, perhaps a special importance placed upon the fact that Ivan's grandmother is safely with he and his wife in Seattle. Here, he can protect her and they can be together to. Doubtless his father knows this.

Structure

This book has an unusual structure. In many ways it is quite normal. There is an introduction and then there are some quite straightforward chapters. Each of these is neatly set out. This being noted, the author has done something a little unusual.

Ivan Doig has added little inserts between the chapters. They run a page or two and nary more. They offer another take on what is being presented as if there has been a newspaper article about it, or something of this sort.

There is more that the author does to make this work exceptional. He creates a special use for including the memories of comments made by other people. He presents these with an italic font. These are interspersed throughout the work just as naturally as they would come up in conversation. He shows readers explicitly how these kinds of thoughts are woven into his mind in such a way that they work as facts, as tidbits of information. That might be exact quotes, but they might be paraphrasings. They were said not written; he does not present them as quotations in the usual sense.

All in all, Ivan Doig has made a lovely memoir. This style of writing differs from the autobiography in its heavy use of subjectivity. While too much inaccuracy would make it a fictional memoir rather than a work of nonfiction, there is more leeway than one finds in the traditional autobiography format.



Quotes

"Yet of my mother's death, whatever I try, just a single flicker, dim and hurtful, ever is called back," (p.9)

"The very floor of the Smith River Valley rests one full mile above sea level," (p. 22)

"Two deep Caledonian notions seem to have pulled them so far into the hills: to raise sheep, and to graze them on mountain grass which cost nothing," (p.23).

"In White Sulphur Springs there was steady thirsty commerce no matter how the bartender behaved," (p. 58).

"Sheep being sheep, not all ewes had the idea that they were supposed to be ready to mother their lambs," (p.162)

"She would sniff the baby imposter endlessly, distrustful but pulled by the blood-scent of her own," (p. 163).

"Then ewe and lamb were each stamped, in blotty digits about 5 inches high, with a number that showed they belonged to each other," (p. 162).

"She was silent then a long while- but a thinking silence, not a perturbed one," (p. 174)

"As the Irish fellow says, this place must be the back of the neck of the world," (p. 177).

"Dupuyer, unlike Ringling or White Sulphur Springs, seemed never to have had the least hesitation about its livelihood since the first wagon master wearily overnighted on the site sometime in the 1870s," (p. 186)

"One store, three gas stations, three saloons, the cafe, some few hundred feet of sidewalk, a few dozen houses, a couple of barns, several overtopping groves of cottonwoods, long winters, pushing winds, a hundred people, and a highway trenching it into halves," (p. 187)

"Then the contradiction that answered my wondering what it might be like to live among the Blackfeet," (p. 205).

"Then with the first of spring, a letter from Northwestern saying that I had been granted a four-year scholarship for full tuition," (p. 233)



Topics for Discussion

Do you think that Ivan and his father Charlie suffered from clinical depression after the death of Ivan's mother? Show how their grief was or was not depression.

What is your favorite part of Montana, based purely on the descriptions provided in the book.

How many sheep are there in 'two bands'?

Are ewes automatically good mothers?

Do you think that Bessie and Tom Ringer should have stayed together as well as married?

Do you think Tom Ringer was a good husband or not or mixed? Explain your answer.

Agree or disagree with the author that he is a relic; defend your answer.