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WILLIAM KITTREDGE

by Ron McFarland



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WRITERS SERIES

No. 152



William Kittredge

By Ron McFarland
University of Idaho

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William Kittredge

William Kittredge

1. A NEW WESTERN MYTHOLOGY

Equally at home whether speaking before the Humanities Colloquium at Cedar City, Utah, the Nature Conservancy at Bend, Oregon, the Regional Newswriting Colloquium at Salt Lake City, or the Wyoming Outdoor Council at Sheridan, William (Bill) Kittredge has emerged over the past thirty years as one of the most prolific and outspoken exponents of the New West. He has edited or co-edited seven anthologies ranging in nature from *Great Action Stories* (1977) and *Stories into Film* (1979) to the monumental Montana compilation, *The Last Best Place* (1988) and *The Portable Western Reader* (1997). He is the author of two notable collections of short stories, *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories* (1978) and *We Are Not in This Together* (1984), and his dozens of presently uncollected short stories have appeared in such magazines as *Harper's* and *Paris Review*. During the mid-1980s he co-authored, with Steven M. Krauzer, a series of nine popular westerns known as the Cord novels, under the pseudonym Owen Rountree.

Kittredge will be best remembered, however, for his nonfiction, the essays collected in *Owning It All* (1987), *Who Owns the West?* (1996), *Taking Care: Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief* (1999), and the memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992). Moreover, among his published works of nonfiction are nearly a hundred items in magazines that vary from the slick, upscale *Outside* to periodicals such as *Travel and Leisure*, *Town and Country*, *X-C Skier*, and *Big Sky*

Journal. His journalistic writing is likely to show up in sources as diverse as *Rolling Stone*, *Ranching*, *Modern Maturity*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. His most recent book, *The Nature of Generosity* (2000), is a sort of *magnum opus* in which he outlines an ethical philosophy for living in the world at large, but in this volume, as in all of his writing, Kittredge begins at home, with himself and his family and friends in southeastern Oregon and western Montana.

As Scott Slovic has observed, "William Kittredge is a storyteller but not a mere entertainer" (*Taking Care* 82). In his writing Kittredge asserts and re-asserts a new "myth" intended to combat the older myths of the west that he believes have been destructive, and when he reflects on his own life and that of his family, he perceives that they have been closely, albeit often unintentionally, involved with that old, destructive myth.

Dedicated to survival, my people overgrazed the deserts, working the valley as if it were a machine and insisting that such techniques were, in fact, necessary to our survival. We hardened our hearts and earnestly believed in the practicality of selfishness. (*The Nature of Generosity* 28)

Much of the impact of Kittredge's writing has to do with its personal, even confessional nature. Caught up in an old mythology, he played a part in the destruction of the west that he loved, and in his writings, he attempts to construct a new and healthier, saner mythology.

In *Owning It All* Kittredge sets out his definition of mythology as "a story that contains a set of implicit instructions from a society to its members, telling them what is valuable and how to conduct themselves if they are to preserve the things they value" (62). "The Western has always been a desperate story," he writes in a 1999 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* about the slayings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. In both his fiction

and nonfiction Kittredge reflects on “the fear that hardens into hate and that explodes in violence” (22). In movies and television, he observes, “violence is always aimed at the logical target; in real life it tends to be horribly random.” He concludes that the young Columbine killers, like characters of old western mythology, “isolated themselves, paying too much attention to the cult of loner individuality that resonated so insistently around them” (“The Western Front” 22).

The new myth Kittredge sets forth involves not only a debunking of the old one, but also a plea that we “give some time to the arts of cherishing before much of what we adore simply vanishes” (*Taking Care* 12). In place of old-fashioned “rugged individualism,” Kittredge argues for community; in place of taming or conquering the land, he argues for a new and useful set of stories (both fiction and nonfiction) supporting “stewardship for the land” (*Who Owns the West?* 112); in place of power and control, he argues for “generosity” as “the prime moral and political virtue” (*Taking Care* 73).

2. POSSESSED BY THE WEST

In the spring of 1938, as he was about to turn six, William Kittredge was recuperating from polio, and as he puts it in his memoir, *Hole in the Sky*, he “began a curious, end-of-innocence time, trying to fathom what there was to value about life” (3). He has not departed from that quest. Born 14 August 1932 in Portland, Oregon, Kittredge spent his boyhood on the family ranch in the Warner Valley of southeastern Oregon. The Kittredges arrived in America in the 1660s, and by the 1850s they had moved to the west, where William Kittredge’s paternal grandfather, also named William, created an agribusiness empire starting in 1937 with the purchase of the MC Ranch. Playing the “game which is called accumulation” (*Owning It All* 65), the elder Kittredge, who died in 1958, eventually disinherited the writer’s father, who had

gone into business with him. The family sold off the ranch in 1967. "It was just that nobody in my family could agree on anything," Kittredge writes, "much less the right life" (*Hole in the Sky* 6). Most of his writing, fiction and nonfiction, relates in some way to the mystery of himself, which concerns the mystery of his family and of learning to live in the west.

Kittredge began school in the small town of Adel, located about fifteen miles north of the Oregon-California border and 130 miles east of Klamath Falls, where he finished elementary school while living with his mother's family, named Miessner. Probably due to stress in his parents' marriage, his mother, who had musical interests, took him to California, where he attended junior high and started high school, returning to Oregon to graduate from Klamath Falls High School. He was not a bookish boy, but at age fifteen he discovered literature when his mother handed him a copy of A.B. Guthrie Jr.'s recently published novel, *The Big Sky* (1947). Throughout his late teen years Kittredge spent his summers on his grandfather's ranch, where he rode horses, played, and performed the chores expected of a farm boy. At Oregon State University in 1949 he joined a fraternity and played freshman football, and in December of 1951, he and Janet married. Both were nineteen.

Kittredge presents himself as a reckless young man who "knew nothing of the world" (*Hole in the Sky* 109), but marriage sobered him up somewhat. After graduating from Oregon State in January of 1954 with a degree in general agriculture, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. By that time his wife was pregnant with their first child, Karen, and two years later, their son Bradley was born. Kittredge spent his last year in the service on Guam, and after his discharge, following his parents' divorce and the death of his grandfather, he returned to the ranch to take over in 1958 as farming boss. He describes this decision as "a grand turning point

in my life, and a mistake that cost me a decade" (*Hole in the Sky* 150). Kittredge reflects on those years critically and dispassionately, describing himself as an enthusiastic eradicator of coyotes who headed up the draining of fields and over-irrigation of crops to the point that the soil went saline. Worse, he reflects on his lack of compassion for animals, for the men who worked under him, for his alcoholic father, and for his wife. He was becoming deeply, and dangerously, self-absorbed.

Kittredge pinpoints the date of his "breakdown" as 11 April 1961. While what he calls his "ordinary" life appeared satisfactory, his "other, inner life was absolutely unmoored" (*Hole in the Sky* 185). Kittredge exposes some of his drinking problems and marital infidelities in his autobiography, and in 1967, with the sale of the ranch, his wife moved out. By that time he had placed his first three short stories, including "The Waterfowl Tree," in the *Northwest Review* (it was listed on the Honor Roll of *Best American Short Stories* for 1967). He married Patricia (Patty) later that year, and after a year at the University of Oregon, they left for the University of Iowa Writers Workshop where Kittredge pursued an MFA, studying under Richard Yates and Robert Coover. After completing his degree, in 1969, Kittredge began teaching creative writing at the University of Montana in Missoula, where he was to stay until his retirement some thirty years later. At Montana he became close friends with the poet Richard Hugo, and by 1971 he had placed a story, "The Underground River," in *The Atlantic Monthly* (it was listed as "Distinctive" in *Best American Short Stories* for 1972). It was also in the spring of 1971, quite by coincidence while visiting Seattle, that Kittredge met Raymond Carver, probably the most influential writer of short fiction in the United States during the latter quarter of the 20th century. They shared similar interests in everything from cigarettes and booze to writing about the lives of blue-collar people in the west, and

Carver was to help Kittredge edit his stories for his second book, *We Are Not in This Together* (1984).

In the fall of 1973, with his marriage to Patricia falling apart, Kittredge began a one-year stay at Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner Fellowship. He had written the title story of his first book, *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories* (1978), just before he left for Stanford, but in some ways an even more important experience for him was his attendance at a conference on western movies in Sun Valley, Idaho, in the summer of 1976 with Steven Krauzer and James Crumley, who were also teaching at the University of Montana. As he explains in an essay entitled "Learning to Think," Kittredge began to consider more deeply the "purposes and politics, and what it meant to be a good citizen of the American West" (*Taking Care* 32). Although he was not to forsake the short story at that point, Kittredge's serious commitment to nonfiction and his investigations into the old myths of the west stemmed from that conference.

In 1977 he met writer and film producer Annick Smith, a widow and mother of four grown men who was soon at work on the movie *Heartland* (1979). They embarked on what Kittredge has called "a lifelong romance" (*Taking Care* 34). In her memoir, *In This We Are Native* (2001), she describes Kittredge as a "Rabelaisian Wild West autodidact with a genius for language" (76). Annick Smith also provides a vivid portrait of "The Buffalo" as he was in the late 1970s: "Rough and shaggy maned, wide-bellied, with his massive head and neck thrust forward when he walked [. . .], Bill wore his ostrich-skin cowboy boots like the westerner he was—a sometimes self-destructive, ironic, dispossessed, yet generous and loving teller of stories—a fit subject for the Hank Williams heartbroke country blues songs he admired above all others" (78). Kittredge helped write the script for *Heartland* and later worked on the screenplay and production of *A River Runs Through It* (1992), the movie

based on fellow Montanan Norman Maclean's 1976 novella. The more immediate results of the Sun Valley conference were his successful teaching, with Krauzer, of a course on western movies at the University of Montana and a foray into the personal essay. With Krauzer he edited three anthologies in the late 1970s, *Great Action Stories* (1977), *The Great American Detective* (1978), and *Fiction into Film* (1979).

Kittredge's renown as a writer has soared since the publication of his first book, *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories*, which won the University of Missouri Breakthrough Fiction Contest in 1978. One reviewer praised the eight stories that comprise the book as "finely crafted narratives, in which people struggle to build lives that make sense" (Washburn 128). When Kittredge compiled the eight stories that make up his next book, *We Are Not in This Together* (1984), he included three from the previous one. *We Are Not in This Together* also featured a foreword by Raymond Carver, commending the stories as "wonderfully rendered pieces about a special and particular place in this country that has not had many writers speaking for it up to now" (vii) and concluding that the work is "singular and unforgettable" (x). Reviewers who had overlooked the first collection of stories were quick to praise these for their "spare, controlled, and accurate" style (Watson 426), qualities often associated with the prose of one of Kittredge's acknowledged models, Ernest Hemingway. Writing for the *Georgia Review*, Sterling Watson suggested that the "hard landscape may be Kittredge's most imposing character. Bitterly cold, trying, grudgingly beautiful, and monotonous as the face of a clock, it dominates" (427).

By the time his second book of short fiction was being received, Kittredge and Steven Krauzer, under the pen name of Owen Rountree, were in the midst of turning out what was to be a nine-book series of co-written westerns published in cheap paperback

by Ballantine Books. Featuring a protagonist they called "Cord," probably named after the sporty luxury automobile of the 1930s (Kittredge's father was a friend of the inventor), these popular novels constitute a foray into the very genre Kittredge was already in the process of critiquing in his nonfiction. The novels generally took only two or three weeks to write once the authors had devised a formula; nevertheless, Kittredge's momentary dabbling with genre fiction at the same time he was writing such important essays as "Owning It All" and serious, literary fiction like "Be Careful What You Want" requires some comment hereafter.

With what one reviewer described as the "illustrious and insightful collection of essays" that make up *Owning It All* (1987), Kittredge came into his own as a writer of a particular brand of nonfiction that combines regionally focused autobiography and political commentary (Review of *Owning* 71). By that time at least thirty of his essays had been published in various magazines, and most of the fourteen that make up the book, including the title piece and such essays as "Overthrust Dreams" and "Drinking and Driving," had established a growing reputation for him as a master of nonfiction. In 1988 Kittredge edited two regional anthologies, *Montana Spaces*, an attractive book of "Essays and Photographs in Celebration of Montana," and *The Last Best Place*, an anthology of Montana writing that runs nearly 1,200 pages. *Montana Spaces* features 26 black-and-white photos by John Smart and twenty essays by such writers as Thomas McGuane, David Quammen, Gretel Ehrlich, Wallace Stegner, Mary Clearman Blew, and David Long. *The Last Best Place*, which Kittredge co-edited with Annick Smith, begins with Native American stories and myths from eight tribes and ranges over eight sections, including Journals of Exploration, Writing About Butte, and Remembering Frontier Agriculture. Nearly four hundred pages are allotted to Contemporary Fiction and Contemporary Poetry.

Kittredge's stature increased further with the publication four years later of his memoir *Hole in the Sky* (1992), the title of which refers to an oval hole cut through the base of the house pole in the cedar lodges of the Tsimshian Indians of British Columbia. The hole was understood to be a sort of "doorway to heaven" (10). The book follows his life from birth till the 1970s, when he took up residence in Missoula to teach at the University of Montana. It is an often painful story of smoking, drinking, and womanizing, but Kittredge's self-abuse, and his confessed abuse of others, is overshadowed by his family's long history of environmental abuses. As one reviewer noted, "with its unwavering focus and emotional drive, this would be a difficult book to read if not for Kittredge's style, which combines precision with a grace of statement that can only be called eloquence" (Rawlins 145).

In 1996 Kittredge turned out another book of essays on what had by then become a familiar theme: *Who Owns the West?* The question is rhetorical, as everyone who lives in the west knows that in addition to the federal government, powerful commercial interests representing such extractive industries as logging and mining continue to buy up the land and that sometimes socially prominent, wealthy individuals (including movie stars) are joining in the current land rush. Kittredge, however, argues for communal ownership or, in effect, no ownership at all. As one reviewer noted, "It is not a new message, but it is spoken here with hard-earned conviction and passionate intensity" (Ott 986). If the messages of *Who Owns the West?* and of *Taking Care*, published three years later, sound familiar, it may be that they are so because William Kittredge has been urging them now in his fiction and nonfiction for more than thirty years. And those messages appear to be increasingly relevant.

Kittredge's most recent book, *The Nature of Generosity* (2000), is surely his most ambitious undertaking to date. Among other

things, the book reflects his travels over much of the world with his long-time companion, Annick Smith, and he attempts in this volume to describe an environmental or ecological and social ethic of both regional and global dimensions. As one reviewer notes, "Combining travelog, history, autobiography, and philosophy, these five long, meandering essays are at once erudite and personal" (Shires 132). Kittredge has written little fiction since the early 1990s, although he has attempted to write novels on more than one occasion. His present project (winter of 2001) is a book of non-fiction concerning what he refers to as "personal impressions" of the American southwest.

William Kittredge (his friends call him Bill) has been a public figure throughout his career. He is an outgoing, accessible, expansive man. Noting his "garrulous baritone" voice, fellow Montana writer David Long described him in a 1987 interview as "a big man [. . .] sporting a heavy, boyish face. He gives the impression of having more energy than he can use" (5). Kittredge has invested some of that energy in engagements as a reader, speaker, panelist, and writing workshop instructor that number in the hundreds. His honors include grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Montana Governor's Award for Literature (1985), two Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Awards for Excellence, several awards from PEN/NEA, and the Frankel Prize for Service to the Humanities, awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities in October 1994. To date, his stories and essays have appeared in more than sixty anthologies.

3. FICTIONS THAT SEEK TO BALANCE THE WEST

In a story entitled "Balancing Water," which appeared in the Fall 1987 issue of *Paris Review*, after the publication of his last collection of short fiction to date, William Kittredge's first-person narrator appears to speak for the writer: "I like to live at an edge of the

world where I know the stories behind the names of places, and where most of the stories are about people who lived here just before me, and haven't been dead very long" (17). Later in that story Kittredge explains the concept of balancing water, which involves even distribution of irrigation. In most of his fiction, however, the balance has not been maintained. His working-class characters struggle to survive and to make sense of the world, and as one reviewer has observed, "They tend to be like the land: scarred, enduring, silent" (Holthaus 368). Fellow Montana writer Mary Clearman Blew comments: "Kittredge manifests his respect for the work ethic and for the stoic, often lonely and inarticulate men of the West whose work, at least in the recent past, has been genuine and needful and done with pride" ("William Kittredge" 765).

Blew also reflects on the fact that "many of the stories are permeated by a violence, sparked by alcohol, frustration, or overwhelming natural forces" modulated or meliorated by "the lyricism of his style" ("William Kittredge" 765). Every story in Kittredge's first collection orbits around death. Blind and alone, old Jules Russel of "Breaker of Horses" awaits his own death while thinking of the burial of Ambrose Vega: "A man had to die on horseback and working to inspire the fear that brought men to drink as they buried" (*Van Gogh Field* 25). In "Thirty-four Seasons of Winter" Ben Alton is haunted by the death of his stepbrother "because there was nothing but hatred between them when Art was killed" (32). "The Mercy of the Elements" begins, "Standing before the window we remember Venuto, who died" (48); and "The Underground River" opens with the announcement of the death of one brother, moves to the other brother's killing of the deputy sheriff who brings the news, and closes with his own violent death. The second paragraph of "The Stone Bear," the final and most substantial story of the book, begins, "So now Grace was dead, and Danzig was dead, and they all were dead" (107). Events

are perceived first through the eyes of the mass murderer, Grace's brother Virgil Banta, but the point of view quickly shifts to the sheriff, Shirley Holland, and his wife Doris. In a showdown with the young killer at the end of the story, Holland tells him, "People like you [. . .] are always forgetting the ghosts there are in this world" (144).

The same cannot be said of other characters in *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories*. In the title story Robert Onnter stands before the self-portrait of Vincent van Gogh in the Chicago Art Institute and recalls the death of a worker, Clyman Teal, back at the ranch in Oregon. He is also haunted by the death of his younger brother eleven years earlier in an automobile wreck and by the "stasis" of the world of barley harvests, which he is trying to escape through travel. His escape attempt involves an older, married woman, who might be regarded as a mother figure; and Robert's mother, who named the field after van Gogh, also seems to haunt the story. In fact, the two characters nearly blend in the story, and it is the woman from the art museum who tells Robert of van Gogh's suicide in a wheat field. She also offers what amounts to an interpretation of both van Gogh's and Clyman Teal's deaths: "He finished doing what he loved [. . .] until the job was over" (10). The yellow of the wheat fields, she tells Robert, simply represents love. Robert's decision not to stay with the woman in Chicago presumably suggests that he will return home to, "those cold wet mornings in early spring while they planted, the motionless afternoons of boredom while the harvest circled to where the combines parked" (17).

The opening story of Kittredge's second book and another meditation on mortality, "The Waterfowl Tree" is William Kittredge at his best. A seventeen-year-old boy and his father, a widower in his late fifties, visit the "remote and misted valley" of the father's childhood (4) to meet a woman named Eva and to hunt geese with

an old friend of the father. The story is related largely through the perceptions of the boy, who begins to detect different aspects of his father's character. When they collect the dead birds, the boy's observations read like vintage Hemingway: "They were heavy and beautiful birds and the boy twisted their necks the way his father did and felt sorry that they could not have lived and yet was glad that they were dead. They were trophies of this world, soft and heavy and dead birds" (11-12). On their return from the successful shooting the father falls through the rotten ice and dies. When the boy comes to complete consciousness back at the house where they have been staying, his father's friend Eva tells him this "was the only surely happy place in his life" (12), and then she crawls into bed with him for mutual consolation. Nothing is said of the boy's mother, but implicitly Eva, who at first appears to the boy to be "nothing but a fuzzy-headed woman" (6), offers not only the gentleness his father needed, but also that which the boy himself needs. Although at the end of the story the boy curses his father for having put him through this ordeal to make him "tough," Eva explains that his father had a heart condition, and foreshadowing details on the first page suggest that his father contrived the event as a coming-of-age ritual for his son. Here and elsewhere, death recurs throughout Kittredge's fiction, but it rarely resolves anything. In an interview Kittredge reports that editors of the *Northwest Review* returned the manuscript of "The Waterfowl Tree" as many as ten times before they published it in 1966 (Morris 171).

For many readers the most memorable story in *We Are Not in This Together* will be the title piece, which concludes the book and which begins with the gruesome sentence, "This time it was a girl Halverson knew, halfway eaten and her hair chewed off" (101). In an interview Kittredge briefly relates the actual events behind the story, how a young woman who tended bar where he drank was

killed by a grizzly (Morris 181). In the story Halverson is haunted by the death of his father and by other deaths, and the victim worked in the same bar as his lover, Darby. At age forty-two (three years older than his father when he died of a heart attack), Halverson sets out for Glacier Park to even the score, to reestablish justice in the world, or, as Kittredge might say in a different context, to "balance water." A sub-plot in the story concerns Halverson's confused feelings for Darby as she ages, the implication being that he will not be able to make love to her again until he ritually disposes of the bear that threatens his capacity to make sense of his life. Significantly, it is Darby who suggests it would be too easy to shoot the grizzly straightaway, that Halverson should go after it with his knife and that she should "do the shooting" (124). In a fortunate reversal of the conclusion of Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," with which this story might profitably be compared, Darby shoots and kills the bear, after which Halverson beheads it with his skinning knife, breaking the blade in the process. As he climbs toward Darby with his trophy, he wonders "fleetingly" whether she might shoot him (127). Finally, Darby tells Halverson that an old bear the rangers killed earlier was the right one, but Halverson knows "that didn't make any difference," and the lovers are reconciled (128). The traditional western premise that a just killing will reestablish justice in the world is derided in this story.

Curiously, "Agriculture," one of Kittredge's most frequently anthologized and reprinted stories, the one for which he won a Pushcart Prize in 1985, appears in neither of his collections of short fiction. The theme of marital infidelity figures in this and several other of his stories. In "Agriculture" a farmer named Streeter hires an itinerant crop sprayer to dust his acreage. His wife Patty undertakes a brief tryst with the pilot, who leaves abruptly, driving Streeter into the bunkhouse for several days of self-pitying boozing before the couple reunites.

Of the remaining thirty-odd stories that have been published but not collected in book form, one of the most frequently mentioned is "Phantom Silver," which first appeared in the *Iowa Review* in 1977 and was issued as a single-story, limited-edition chapbook ten years later. The story was prompted by a letter from his former University of Iowa professor, Robert Coover, who was editing an issue of the *Iowa Review* on revisionist fairy tales. As Kittredge explains in an interview, it is "an attempt at reinventing the Lone Ranger, turning the Lone Ranger story back on itself" and at saying that regardless of how useful the old myth may have been "to a people who were intent on conquering a part of the world," it is not "useful anymore, it's destructive" (Morris 177). After rehearsing the familiar legend of the ambush of the Texas Rangers by Butch Cavendish's outlaw band, Kittredge creates an abrupt flashback to the fourteen-year-old boy who will become the Lone Ranger sodomizing his sixteen-year-old sister (at her prompting) while the Comanche kill and scalp their parents. The story then leaps ahead to 1912, when Tonto finds a woman and moves to Grants Pass, Oregon, and the Lone Ranger, nearing seventy, heads for San Francisco in search of his wayward sister. Near the middle of the story the disoriented Lone Ranger makes his way to the Pacific, and with a growing sense of futility, he fires a single silver bullet into the bewildering fog. Refusing to be a "common man," the Lone Ranger then pursues what he thinks to be "the worst man in San Francisco, an old Chinese gentleman" (40) and calls him out, but his moment in history is past, and his guns prove useless. Instead of gunning down the old Chinaman, he peels an orange the old man has given him, orders drinks for the house, and starts telling stories of his past exploits. The past is useful, presumably, but only as the past, as history—not as a myth to live by in the present. The Lone Ranger is unaware that the salmon are dying in turbines, and he will be "ancient" when

the atrocities of the Second World War occur. The lyrical conclusion to the story rings with irony: "And for us there is still the great white horse rearing above the rolling horizon, which is golden and simple in the sunset, those sparkling hooves striking out into the green light under dark midsummer thunderclouds. Far away there is rain, the stars growing luminous, and the white horse always running" (41).

As fascinating as "Phantom Silver" is in some ways, its fabulistic nature tends to set it apart from Kittredge's other fiction, and its overt message connects it directly with the nonfiction that has largely supplanted his focus on the short story. Although his short fiction has continued to be anthologized, his last new stories appeared in 1993.

4. THE GENERIC COWBOY RIDES AGAIN

Without a doubt the most peculiar turn in William Kittredge's career occurred in 1982 with the publication of his western pulp paperback, *Cord*, which according to the lead on the cover introduced readers to "a tough, deadly outlaw—and his freewheeling female partner." Only two of the nine *Cord* novels run over 200 pages, and most are 150 to 160 pages in length. Kittredge wrote the formula novels, usually in just two or three weeks, with his colleague, Steven Krauzer, under the pseudonym Owen Rountree. They received a flat rate of \$3,000 each for their work, and Ballantine Books issued print runs of 50,000 copies. As Kittredge has described their writing process, after discussing their plans, one of the two writers would create a first draft and hand it over to the other (they took turns generating the initial draft) (McFarland 168). In an interview Kittredge confesses that one of their plans was simply "to make a buck," but another motive was that they could not "quite swallow exploiting the mythology in so bald a fashion," so they hoped the novels would "cut subtly from

within" at the outdated myths of the popular western (Morris 178). Kittredge is quick to point out, however, that the novels were not read that "subtly," and Mary Blew observes that they do not represent a "serious foray into postmodernist subversion of the genre" ("William Kittredge" 767).

The first novel in the series, simply entitled *Cord*, introduces the readers, according to the prefatory hype, to "A great new western with a new kind of hero." Cord is "tough—an outlaw, a bank robber, fast, and deadly with guns." Set in western Montana, where he is planning a bank robbery, the novel features gunplay from the outset, as Cord dispatches two bad guys who try to bushwhack him in the opening six pages. The writers produce the predictable clichés of the genre: "Do one thing quick and you are dead without even hearing the bullet," Cord warns an adversary. "There'll be a hole in your gut the size of a washbasin. This is a Forty-five, made for stopping all sorts of craziness" (39-40). Of course there are compensatory lyrical moments as well: "The clouds had broken almost completely now, and the moon hung before him in the sky like a translucent roundness of pale green ice" (7).

Kittredge and Krauzer do not take enough risks with language, however, to warrant any boast that these will be "new" kinds of westerns. Presumably, the novelty lies in Cord's partner, the Mexican woman named Chi, short for "chiquita," perhaps, Spanish for "girl," or possibly a reference to "chi," the principle of inner vital energy in Neo-Confucian philosophy that plays an important role in acupuncture. In her first appearance she is described as having "sleek dark hair [. . .] plaited in two braids that hung down from under her flat-brimmed hat" and wearing "a wool serape and leather pants tucked into hand-tooled boots that came nearly up to her knees" (10). For the most part Cord limits his relationship with Chi to the business of outlawing, but in later novels romance blooms and he thinks of marrying her and settling down, even

though he knows that will never work out. Throughout the series, Cord's sexual liaisons involve random women who cross his path and are enamored of him immediately; predictably, he loves them and leaves them. Overall, Chi appears to rescue Cord from tough situations about as often as he rescues her, but her character is hardly sufficient to warrant the label of "feminist western" that Kittredge and Krauzer hoped for (Morris 178).

Cord's vision, such as it is, has been captured in many Hollywood westerns featuring the likes of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. With the encroachment of the homesteaders, Cord is aware that his days of freedom are numbered: "Cord had made a bargain with the West; he had understood that for a long time. This freedom for a while, and then the end, quick and violent" (88). It is a given of the genre that Cord and Chi are honorable outlaws, good people at heart, more inclined to throw their fists than to draw their guns (although fatal gunplay inevitably occurs in every novel). Generally, their victims are the *really* bad guys: money-grubbing land barons, dishonest bankers, crooked lawmen, hypocritical good-citizens. In spite of Cord's grim prediction of his violent end, the last novel in the series, *Brimstone Basin* (1986), ends with Cord and Chi riding off together, "On toward the Bitter Root Valley, and good news and greener pastures" (195).

The nature of the novels is fairly obvious from the book-jacket teasers. Despite his concern over the loss of his free way of life to homesteaders, Cord joins with Chi in *The Nevada War* (1982) in their defense: "Freewheeling outlaw Cord and his female partner Chi pull into a small Nevada town to help Cord's brother set up his ranch. But they don't expect to find themselves involved in an all-out war between ruthless ranchers, who want to keep all the profits to themselves, and struggling homesteaders looking only to survive." Needless to say, Cord and Chi are champions of the underdogs. To this second novel in the series Kittredge and Krauzer

appended the first of their historical notes, brief essays that were to appear as afterwords in the remainder of the novels. In *The Nevada War* the six-page essay reflects on the historical range wars of the 1870s through the 1890s, particularly the Montana Range War of 1884, and they provide a short bibliography of the most important historical treatments of the subject.

In *The Black Hills Duel* (1983) the “freedom-loving outlaw and his tough lady partner” are hired to protect gold shipments from “the murderous grasp of thieving road agents” in a “hardscrabble Dakotas mining town.” The ten-page afterword deals with the dime novel and the roles of Ned Buntline and Buffalo Bill Cody. In *Gunman Winter* (1983) Cord and Chi travel to Kansas to oppose an outlaw turned sheriff who has plans to rob a train. The afterword is a dozen pages on train robberies in the west between 1866 and 1937. *Hunt the Man Down* (1984) takes Cord and Chi to the Idaho Territory, where they try to settle down, but are thwarted by a corrupt governor. The afterword focuses on the Montana gold-mining town of Landusky, which became a haven for a broad spectrum of outlaws, and on other robbers’ roosts like Hole-in-the-Wall. The two teasers on the back of *Gunsmoke River* (1985) tell it all: “A man-and-woman outlaw team hold up a bank in Colorado—and the law blames Cord and Chi. To clear their names, the two hard riders hunt down their bandit look-alikes. Before the dust settles and the smoke clears, Cord and Chi will team up with their quarry and face down a notorious Pinkerton agent turned killer.” As with most of the novels in the series, this one demonstrates the premise that “In Cord’s world formal law was mostly a rumor, and disputes were settled by simple contests conducted along clear rules” (*Gunman Winter* 115). In *Gunsmoke River* as in other titles, “Owen Rountree” rarely keeps his readers waiting long before violence becomes unavoidable. The nineteen-page afterword on U.S. Marshall Joe LeFors and hired gunman Tom Horn is one of the two longest in the series.

Kittredge and Krauzer have an agenda throughout the novels implicit in the following passages from a bank robbery early in *Brimstone Basin*: “Hardiman saw the capitalist reach inside his coat and, misreading the move, snapped, ‘Bring it out slow.’ The capitalist produced a bulging pocketbook” (28). This “capitalist” (the term is used in several of the novels) turns out to be “a wealthy feed-and-grain speculator,” presumably the sort of person a younger William Kittredge would have dealt with often when he was a boss at his family’s MC Ranch. Such characters are the low-key villains of these novels. From their kind, “Owen Rountree” imagines idealistically, at least back in the 19th century, certain outright, self-confessed outlaws exacted a direct, albeit crude, sort of justice. The nineteen-page essay at the end of the novel concerns one of the most remarkable of those “capitalists” in Montana’s frontier history, Granville Stuart.

Paradise Valley (1986), which was to be the last of the Cord novels, depicts Chi and Cord experiencing a respite from the law and heading out, as the teaser on the back cover puts it, “for a life of genteel ranching on a spread Cord had always been fixing to acquire.” Of course no such peaceable conclusion can come without violent complications, this time in the person of “the notorious Eudora Craven” who is “holed up with her two mean-tempered sons against a band of hard riders hellbent on settling blood for blood.” With them is “Arrowsmith, a dying gunslinger who long ago had saved Chi’s life—and now was calling in the debt.” In a rather odd opening chapter for novels in the series, Cord is leafing through dime novels at a bookstore in Cody, Wyoming, and he informs the impatient clerk that he is thinking of writing a book himself, to “tell the true story of the real West” (3). Significantly, the clerk is unaware that the manufacturer of the Remington typewriters also makes guns. Cord recalls a violent bank robbery from his past, but the only gunplay in the opening chapter that

occurs in the present is a staged event for tourists. (The thirteen-page afterword concerns Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show.) Clearly, the changes Cord and Chi have worried about are coming to pass, and their free life on the outlaw trail is doomed. But despite the modernizing hints of chapter one, the last sentence of the novel suggests a serene ending of the best Hollywood rode-off-into-the-sunset variety: "But right now the birds were calling from the willows, and Chi was by his side, and they were off on the long road to the Bitterroot" (188).

Kittredge regards the sixth novel in the series, *King of Colorado* (1984), as their best: "it was the book where we finally figured out how to do it, and weren't yet sick of doing it" (Morris 178). The novel opens with Cord being tried in what amounts to a kangaroo court in Utah, where he has been framed by a lusty young Mormon woman. By this time Cord and Chi have been on the outlaw trail for ten years, and Chi comes to Cord's rescue, after which they join the dwarf Pell—a character introduced in the series' first novel—and proceed to the silver mines of Colorado and further, more violent adventures. (The dozen-page afterword deals with the silver mines at Leadville, Colorado, and the Comstock Lode in Nevada.) One passage in this novel establishes what Cord and Chi stand for and what many contemporary westerners, for better or worse, still believe: "Justice was fine at illuminating the delicate shadings in awkward situations, but it neither solved nor proved anything. That was why Cord had spent a lifetime trying to move by his own laws, which mostly had to do with being left alone to do as he pleased" (28). From the Claude Dallas murders of 1981, the Ruby Ridge confrontation of 1994, and the Ted Kaczynski Unabomber case of 1996 to the daily confrontations with Constitutionalists throughout the inland northwest, Cord's sense of justice has been replayed *ad nauseam*. In the novel, Kittredge and Krauzer add a single, terse sentence as an understated critique: "Maybe there was the problem."

Finally, Kittredge observes in an interview, “it became so loathsome a job to write them—the novels were as thin as gauze—that we quit” (Morris 178). It could be argued that the less said of the Cord series with respect to Kittredge’s career as a serious writer and commentator on the west, the better. But it might equally be argued that his deep involvement with the potentially harmful illusions promulgated by the western as a fictional genre have combined with his personal living out of those illusions and myths to empower his repudiation. In an essay from *Who Owns the West?* (1996), reflecting on the recent death of Louis L’Amour, Kittredge insists that the “darker problem with the Western” is that it is “a story inhabited by a mythology about power and the social utility of violence” (74). Against that kind of “western,” indeed against the very kind of western he had written with some success, Kittredge argues for an alternate story, a new mythology, in effect, a new genre of “western.” That genre has taken him away from fiction and into the realm of personal, literary, or creative nonfiction. This so-called “fourth genre” (after poetry, fiction, and drama) has become prominent in American writing, for various reasons beyond the scope of this commentary, from the closing decades of the 20th century into the 21st.

5. THE DREAM OF OWNING IT ALL

One version of The American Dream begins with “owning your own home,” and that phrase is harped on anew with nearly every presidential election. How far that dream extends (to owning your own 20,000 acres and half a dozen homes?) and whether it has already become a nightmare is the focus of William Kittredge’s first book of nonfiction, the fourteen essays that make up *Owning It All* (1987). Even as he was writing the genre westerns of the Cord series, Kittredge was turning out essays like “Overthrust Dreams,” “Natural Causes,” and “Owning It All,” which appeared in such

magazines as *Outside* and *American West*. His enthusiasm for writing nonfiction is implicit in the historical afterwords he and Krauzer appended to eight of the nine Cord novels, and his publication of essays in a variety of periodicals postdates that of his short stories by only about half a dozen years. At this writing more than a hundred of his essays have been published, about double the number of his stories. Reflecting on his interest in nonfiction in an interview, Kittredge explained, "Nonfiction right now is closer to poetry" than fiction (Ward 54), adding that "a nonfiction writer (a good one) says, 'No, you should question this all the time. I'm full of shit, watch me.' And the best poets are saying the same thing" (55). Like good poems, Kittredge insists, the best essays are "conjectural."

The anonymous reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* hailed *Owning It All* as an "illustrious and insightful collection of essays," adding that "Kittredge stands valiantly at the center of a fledgling regional literature emerging from shattered myths and discarded ideals" (Review of *Owning It* 71). As with his short fiction, Kittredge's process has been to break down the dominant mythology, or ideology, that governs the west (and perhaps the world at large) and to "make it personal" (Morris 176). In an essay entitled "Learning to Think," from *Taking Care* (1999), Kittredge describes his "education in the arts of the personal essay" (37) from *Outside* magazine editor Terry O'Donnel in the fall of 1978: "What he wanted was a series of scenes in what constituted an emotional progression, witnessed by a figure (the author) who is trying to fathom their meaning" (38). In subsequent years, teaching essay writing at the University of Montana, Kittredge focused "on work that began with experience and then attempted to transcend the personal" (38). Starting with "a voice capable of talking and speculating in candid, trustworthy ways," he then "moved to defining significant experiences, to finding patterns, and gesturing toward social implications" (39).

True to his *modus operandi*, *Owning It All* opens with an essay entitled "Home" that begins, "In the long-ago land of my childhood we clearly understood the high desert country of southeastern Oregon as the actual world" (3). In this essay he investigates the "old attitude" whereby his relatives assume they live "in a separate kingdom where they own it all, secure from the world" (4). But what the loosely organized essay is really "about" could be debated. The bottom line would appear to occur on the last page, when Kittredge writes, "Stories are valuable precisely to the degree that they are for the moment useful in our ongoing task of finding coherency in the world" (19). But while this theme or premise looks appealing, it runs somewhat counter to an earlier statement he makes about the role of stories in the same essay: "It is a skill we learn early, the art of inventing stories to explain away the fearful sacred strangeness of the world" (10). This comment on the nature of stories seems to contradict the former; it suggests that when stories discover "coherency" in the world, they destroy its magic. Moreover, Kittredge concludes his observation on page ten by saying that storytelling is "like war and agriculture," a kind of self-defense, and that "all of them are ways of enclosing otherness and claiming ownership." And "ownership" in this book, as throughout most of Kittredge's writing, is suspect at best.

Kittredge is almost certainly aware of the contradiction, or paradox, in his treatment of stories and the role of storytelling. What he explores as he moves through the essay is a variety of fictions that provide only temporary "coherency." Robert Frost, describing the role of a good poem, refers to it as "a momentary stay against confusion" ("The Figure a Poem Makes"). The coherencies the young Kittredge discovers and about which he tells brief nonfiction stories are only useful "for the moment" (19). The task of making sense of the world is not one to be resolved or somehow outgrown, but is ongoing.

Ultimately it can be argued that all literature concerns death in some way: it is either directly about death (Cain kills Abel; David slays Goliath; Jesus is crucified; Odysseus, Achilles, Aeneas, Beowulf, Roland, and The Cid put thousands to the sword), or it is intended to distract readers from dwelling on death or dreading it. Much of the “fearful sacred strangeness of the world,” after all, concerns the mysteries of death. While death is certainly not the manifest subject of the essay entitled “Home,” it does appear to be the latent theme. Like most nonfiction that aspires to the designation “literary” (as opposed, for example, to the expository prose of a textbook or a newspaper), “Home” possesses qualities known as conceptual density and resonance. Simply put, a lot goes on in it.

What might be described as a subliminally elegiac tone begins with the second section of the essay, where Kittredge recalls one of his boyhood heroes, a brawler named Jack Ray, whose behavior helped instill what Kittredge now sees as a dangerous glorification of violence. At the same time, following an optimistic quotation of Jack Ray to the effect that “she’s a new world every morning” (6), Kittredge critiques his own inclination to join in “one of our main hobbies here in the American West, as we age,” which is to look back at the past. This, he opines, does not necessarily mean we are growing up. He also critiques western culture for being so “insistently boyish” (6). Then he observes flatly, “Jack Ray has been dead a long time now.”

This sudden pivot, from Jack Ray’s optimism to the sweeping generalities about the west and then to the announcement of Jack Ray’s death, is a facet of Kittredge’s style that keeps his prose unpredictable and forces readers to stay alert. The section ends with Kittredge’s father observing that Jack Ray “was something once.” Then follows a set of three asterisks and another sweeping declaration as the next sub-section begins: “Possibility is the oldest American story” (6). Specifically, that refers to the notion of

heading west. In a very short space, then, Kittredge rapidly shifts gears between the personal and the universal three times, and he quickly shifts once again, this time reflecting on himself "in the late '50's, living with my wife and our small children in our little cattle-ranch house" (6).

The third section of "Home" moves from the personal reflection on how he would leave his home on rainy afternoons in November, to literary reflections from Melville and Twain, to historical accounts concerning mountain man John Colter in the early 19th century and to the missionaries Whitman and Spalding in 1836. When he considers the wagon trains of the later 19th century and asks what pushed them westward, he concludes they were lured by "Promises of paradise for the taking," but also that they were impelled by "fear of mortal corruption and death," specifically from cholera (8). Kittredge returns again to the personal element when he reflects on the westward migration of his paternal great-grandfather in search of gold in 1849, which ends with him dying "white-trash poor" in Oregon in 1897. The second major section of the essay (the fourth sub-section) then opens with another thematic assertion: "Childhood, it has been said, is always partly a lie of poetry" (9). After this, Kittredge promptly moves to an episode involving himself at age eight covering garden crops with burlap sacks against a freeze and then being startled by a mating sage grouse, which prompts him to comment on how stories "explain away the fearful sacred strangeness of the world" (10), as mentioned above.

The structure of this essay, as of many by Kittredge, could be called "associative"; that is, it is not linear, logical, or chronological (A does not lead predictably to B, then to C, and so on). The essay is divided into two numbered sections, but he uses asterisks to create a total of seven distinct sub-sections. But as analysis demonstrates, the individual sub-sections are not really unified in any

conventional sense. For example, on the first page of the essay the first-person narrator (Kittredge himself) is 13 years old and it is the summer of 1945; at the end of that one-page section he is 26 and it is 1958; the next section (two pages) is set mostly in the late 1930s; the next starts in the 1950s, then drops back to the 1804 voyage of Lewis and Clark and moves quickly through much of the 19th century, culminating in the death of Kittredge's paternal great-grandfather in 1897. The second section of the essay opens with Kittredge's childhood memory dating from when he was eight, or about 1940; the next two sections jump ahead to 1942, and Kittredge's memories of the war years, including the death and burial of a dog named Victory; the next section moves from the death of a Paiute girl in about 1942 to a comment on the Ghost Dance movement of 1890, then jumps ahead to the 1960s before dropping back to 1942.

Kittredge comments on his process: "Story after story. Is it possible to claim that proceeding through some incidents in this free-associative manner is in fact a technique? Probably" (16). After mentioning, apparently just in passing, the death from measles of a Paiute girl "roughly my own age" (14), Kittredge shifts abruptly to the report of an ethnologist named James Mooney and his report on the Ghost Dance religion of 1890, which culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee. Mooney cited a report from a Paiute man named Captain Dick, and that reminds Kittredge of a man named Conlan Dick who lived at his family ranch in Oregon in the 1950s and 1960s. Reflecting that "In any event, Captain Dick's magic was dead," Kittredge offers another of his sweeping statements about his kind of writing: "All these stories are part of my own story about a place called Home, and a time in which I imagined we owned it all" (16). His next statement does not concern "owning it all," however, but is unpredictably, "The girl who died was named Pearl" (16). Most readers will be startled by that

sudden revelation, which turns his essay in a wholly different and unexpected direction. That is the way Kittredge's essays usually work. The next page or so concerns his largely imaginary memory of the girl's burial, after which he concludes with his comment on how stories are "useful" in "our ongoing task of finding coherency in the world," as indicated above. The last paragraph reflects on his father's bulldozers tearing down the Indian encampment, the death of Pearl, and the burial of the dog Victory. Bringing such disparate elements together is Kittredge's way, here and elsewhere, of "finding coherency," or more accurately, of *making* the world coherent.

The title essay of the volume squarely confronts the mythology that Kittredge describes as "a pastoral story of agricultural ownership" whereby "a vast innocent continent" that is also "savage" is tamed by "good rural people" who bring civilization and law. It is at the same time, he hastens to point out, "a racist, sexist, imperialist mythology of conquest; a rationale for violence—against other people and against nature" (63). (Kittredge's language recalls Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest* [1987], published in the same year as *Owning It All*.) This essay begins with his predictable grounding in the personal, as he reflects on growing up and ranching in the Warner Valley, but Kittredge quickly moves to more sweeping and argumentative statements: "Agriculture is often envisioned as art, and it can be. [. . .] It's just that there is good art and bad art" (58). With respect to the issue of ownership, Kittredge adamantly rejects the familiar 18th-century premise of the right to "life, liberty, and property": "Our rights to property will never take precedence over the needs of society. [. . .] Ownership of property has always been a privilege granted by society, and revocable" (64).

After a short essay on his departure from ranching for a writing career, Kittredge proceeds in *Owning It All* to two potentially

controversial essays, "Redneck Secrets" and "Drinking and Driving." In the former he reflects on "good" and "bad" rednecks. Bad rednecks, Kittredge argues, "lose faith and ride away into foolishness," eventually resorting to the "spastic utility of violence" (82). He then recalls a bar scene wherein a man being pestered by a drunk says, "Son, [. . .] you better calm yourself, because if you don't, things are going to get real Western here for a minute" (82). Presumably, the drunk is the bad redneck in this scenario. Kittredge subsequently observes what he sees as "a real spiritual equivalency between Redmen and Rednecks," both being among the "downtrodden" (83). Ultimately, he argues, the "bad" redneck errs in how he displays his frustration over his powerlessness: "A Redneck pounding a hippie in a dark barroom is embarrassing because we see the cowardice. What he wants to hit is a banker in broad daylight" (83). In effect, the "good" redneck bears striking similarities to "Owen Rountree's" Cord. "Western Rednecks," Kittredge concludes, "cherish secret remnants" of the dreams of a "just and stable society" and of "wilderness individuals [. . .] who would be the natural defenders of that society" (89).

The question may arise as to whether Kittredge romanticizes the redneck, in effect encouraging sympathy where he should be promoting disapprobation. The controversy is heightened in "Drinking and Driving" where, despite his apparent disapproval of the escapism and loneliness that lead rednecks and others to the bottle, he connects drinking and driving with everything from Vivaldi and Hank Williams to poetry (particularly that of his friend and colleague Richard Hugo). Kittredge suggests that drinking and driving alone is, like country music, "a terrific sport but a real thin way of life" (95). Drinking and driving with cronies, however, to which he devotes more than half of the essay, he equates with a vague search for the "ineffable" (96), which appears to be a complex of freedom, excitement, and personal fulfillment. The "most

complex option" is "traveling with lovers" (104), and he devotes only a couple of pages to it. Significantly, Kittredge plays down the drinking-and-driving element in the latter two categories, although it is still there, and leans toward the gerund "traveling." Nevertheless, those inclined toward the ideology of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) are likely to take exception to this essay. The essay is playful, however, and is almost certainly *not* intended as a serious discourse on the value of driving while drinking (he never approves of driving while intoxicated).

The next two essays in the book, "Overthrust Dreams: 1981" and "Grizzly," are an antithetical pair. The former reflects on the oil fields of Wyoming and the problems, environmental and economic, of a boom economy in the west. It is one of Kittredge's more conventionally journalistic essays. "Grizzly" examines the still-hot issue of maintaining or enlarging the grizzly bear population in certain areas of the west, notably in such national parks as Glacier and Yellowstone. His "host" for the visit to the lookout tower on Huckleberry Ridge in Glacier National Park is Doug Peacock, the environmentalist who served as the model for George Hayduke in Ed Abbey's radical enviro-novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (127). Kittredge counters Peacock's open admiration for and deep understanding of the grizzly with accounts of fatal grizzly attacks that have occurred over the past forty or so years, including the one that served as the background for his story, "We Are Not in This Together." Kittredge speculates that "wilderness must indeed, by definition, be inhabited by some power greater than ourselves" (131), and he expresses reverence for the "great and sacred animal who can teach us, if nothing else, by his power and his dilemma, a little common humility" (136).

The essay called "Silver Bullets" reiterates Kittredge's argument that heroes, particularly the western variety, "live in a racist, sexist, imperialist framework of mythology as old as settlements and

invading armies" (156). As he has insisted elsewhere, and as he would insist thereafter, "people seeking frontiers are often people seeking escape from law, bringing terrible demons with them—lust and greed, for property and power" (157). Kittredge's nonfiction is both dogmatic and didactic: he has an agenda and he is by nature and by profession a teacher. Among his rhetorical weapons is the most basic arm in the arsenal: repetition. In support of his anti-mythic ideology, the essay focuses on movies from *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953) to *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (both 1969), culminating in *Rambo* (1985). Such movies, Kittredge observes, continue to provide escape, through comfortably distanced violence, from powerlessness and the paranoia that attaches to it (162).

Kittredge devotes the penultimate essay in the volume, "Doors to Our House," to western writers whose work he admires, starting with Richard Hugo and D'Arcy McNickle, then moving on to Thomas McGuane, Ivan Doig, and David Quammen—Montanans all. The essay is in part an argument for regional art: "What I am trying to say is that regional art is important because it is mostly the only art which is useful in our efforts to know ourselves, even if only locally. And there are times when it transcends regionality" (169). Some readers might object that if regional writing is so "important," then one ought not to feel obligated to append a corollary to the effect that it sometimes "transcends" itself. By the end of the essay Kittredge has cited artists and writers including Charles Russell and Marilynne Robinson (Idaho), Willa Cather (Nebraska), Ole Rølvaag (South Dakota), Mari Sandoz (Nebraska), H. L. Davis (Oregon), Wallace Stegner (Utah and elsewhere in the west), David Long (Montana), and even Cormac McCarthy, whose base of operations is east of the Mississippi. As often is the case in his nonfiction, Kittredge offers an aphorism that by its very pithiness is simultaneously credible and vulnerable: "the art of a region

begins to come mature when it is no longer what we think it should be" (176).

The lyrical epilogue to *Owning It All*, curiously titled "Revenge," begins with an assertion of "[w]hat we will do about the bastard fragility of things" (180). Kittredge assumes the role of a pioneer who stands at the summit and gazes "forward into our new land." The diesel fumes of the cattle truck vanish, and we find ourselves in an idyllic wilderness, moving quickly through the cycle of seasons until "a party returns from hunting with the report that they have sighted a strange horned animal" that Kittredge speculates might be "sadness" (182). The fable, or parable, concludes with a paragraph that begins simply, "It is over." "We" walk away from the idyll and return to work, punching the time clock, but Kittredge reserves the last sentence for poetry: "Far back in our eyes there will be a feathery and ironic glow of triumph" (182).

6. FALLING THROUGH LIFE

William Kittredge had established a solid reputation as a writer in the west before the publication of his memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992), but as his first book to be released by a major commercial publisher (Knopf, with paperback from Random House) it introduced him to a much broader readership from outside the region. Reviewers were both more numerous and more enthusiastic than in their response to his other titles. The anonymous reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* wrote, "Kittredge parlays vivid prose and storytelling talent to produce a powerful indictment of materialism and its capacity to undermine the spirit and dissolve human connections with the universe" (Review of *Hole* 61). This understanding of Kittredge's master theme is reminiscent of its poetic forefather of more than two hundred years ago, Oliver Goldsmith's "Deserted Village" (1770): "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates and men decay." Kittredge would be

the last person to claim his vision is original, but that does not make it any less urgent.

In *Hole in the Sky*, Kittredge pursues his life from age six (1938) through at least age forty (1973), emphasizing along the way themes familiar from his earlier writing, in a similarly free-associative style. His opening chapter, "Falling," refers to light falling on us and to us "falling for the world," the way a child awakens "to a love affair" with the world (3), but as the book develops, we recognize that the metaphor has broader implications. For example, there is a falling away, a falling from innocence, and in many respects Kittredge, at age sixty, portrays himself falling "through" the world. This opening chapter is filled with a sense of yearning for his boyhood past, and the phrase "I want to" echoes throughout. Finally, he intends to write something "useful," a book "about stories I learned to tell myself in my most grievous isolations," and above all, it is to be a book "about taking care inside whatever dream we inhabit" (11).

Although the nine chapters and two "interludes" that comprise the book are arranged chronologically, each unit, particularly through the first six chapters, could stand on its own as an individual essay. "Territory," for example, begins with a survey of Kittredge's family tree, which he traces to a Captain Lyman Kittredge, who left England for America in 1660, and includes the Harvard scholar and noted Shakespeare expert, George Lyman Kittredge. Typical of his style with the essay, however, Kittredge begins with the personal, moves away from it (in this case about ten pages on the northern Paiutes and their confrontations with settlers and the army in the 19th century), and then returns to the personal in the form of his powerful grandfather whom he "learned to despise" (15). Grandfather William Kittredge was born in 1875 near Yakima, Washington, and died in 1958 while playing pinocle. We have all but forgotten him by the time Kittredge

returns to his story ten pages later. The problem with his family, as Kittredge sees it, is that they had no tradition of "talking" (15): "Without stories, in some very real sense, we do not know who we are, or who we might become" (26). Significantly, his grandfather did not "discuss anything with anybody" (26), and the result was an efficiently run agricultural operation that included grain farming and ranching, which they worked analytically and coldheartedly. He concludes, "It was another way for the world to be dead" (27).

In the game of acquisition as played by his family in the 1930s, Kittredge describes his grandfather as "not so much cruel as indifferent to purposes other than his own" (39). The oldest child (he has two brothers and a sister), Kittredge describes himself as "a solo act" (48). In what some readers will find the most memorable of his boyhood acts, he kills a litter of newborn field mice and a tame duck with a kitchen knife, commenting, "Something was wrong with me [. . .] There was an animal inside me that didn't know what to do" (49). Kittredge does not spare himself or glamorize his childhood recollections. He reflects on the "spoiled little prick I was learning to be" when he was eight, and the essay ends with a more general condemnation: "We want to own everything, and we demand love. We are like children; we are spoiled and throw tantrums. Our wreckage is everywhere" (66). In a six-page "interlude" that follows, Kittredge laments that even the benign influence of horses failed him when it came to the lessons of "intimacy": "what I was learning, ultimately, was the art of keeping intimacy at some distance, and living with power" (69). In retrospect, Kittredge judges himself guilty of a coined word, "antidysthanasia," which he defined in an early story as "the failure to take positive efforts to preserve life" (68).

In "The Promise of Generations" Kittredge writes of his early adolescence during World War II, when he lived mostly with his

mother in California during the school year and worked at the ranch in the summers, trying to become a horseman and to prove that he could be "tough." Although his father prospered in the post-war years, he drank heavily and spent his money on race-horses and airplanes, thus running afoul of the senior William Kittredge, the patriarch of the family, and as Kittredge laments, "Soon there was no family. To his death my father spoke of his father with contempt" (92). In a scenario reminiscent of the one in which as a boy he killed the field mice, the teenaged Kittredge goes on a drunken shooting spree with his pals, killing jackrabbits with his .22 from a Jeep, and then clubbing them after running out of ammunition: "It was cheaper than shooting, and just as gratifying. Until I struck the ground and shattered the hardwood stock on the rifle. I felt like an asshole, and pitied myself" (97).

In "The Beautiful House" Kittredge revisits his college years at Oregon State in Corvallis, the early years of his first marriage, the birth of his daughter and son, and his service in the Air Force. The essay begins, "For a long time I wanted to be a football player" (105). He never saw himself as a star, but as a "blocking back," a "true-hearted journeyman" who would eventually end up coaching high school football in a small town, but playing freshman football at Oregon State, he discovered he was "slow-footed" and "never tough enough" (105). He joined a fraternity, majored in agriculture, and at age nineteen married Janet, "the first girl who was ever good to me" (106). Significantly, Kittredge is critical even of what most would consider an admirable commitment to literature: "As the books piled up around my life like barricades, I turned away from my friends and their athletics, and became the worst sort of schoolboy pedant" (109). While his wife dropped out of college to support the family, Kittredge took "time out from real life": "I had discovered a separate kingdom where nobody lived but me, a place made of ideas" (110). Before long he discovered

Hemingway's works and began to think of writing himself: "Here was a writer who moved me to want to be like him, and to say things of fundamental consequence" (112).

Kittredge took a fiction writing class taught by Bernard Malamud, who had just published *The Natural* (1952), but he confesses that he tried to resist Malamud's advice to the effect that his stories would remain mere anecdotes "until some one thing changed, until the consequences of a moral stance were played out. He told me there had to be a formal moment of recognition, in which the world was seen in a new way" (112). His dream of becoming a writer, however, would be deferred for several years. In 1954, at the age of twenty-one and with his wife pregnant, Kittredge received his degree in general agriculture and enlisted in the Air Force, "where I was unlikely ever to see combat" (115). He describes his four years in the Air Force as wasted, along with his efforts to write, mostly fiction about "men without women," a phrase he uses several times (it is the title of Hemingway's second book of short stories, published in 1927). Curiously, Kittredge censures the immature way in which he and his wife were living, but then turns on his own denunciation: "my disdain for the children we were is an act of arrogance" (135). He repudiates his own "pitying" for being "as monstrously unfair to the people we were as it is smugly complacent for me to feel now" (135). The self-reflexivity here is one of the most striking features of the autobiography; that is, Kittredge's capacity to be critical of himself for being critical of himself.

"The Beautiful House" is the longest of the essay-like chapters in the book, and its composition merits some reflection. As with most of Kittredge's essays, this one is something of a montage, and he creates typographic gaps in the texts to indicate conceptual units. The term "montage" from art pertains to the combination of pictorial elements from different sources in a single composition, and

by extension, it refers to any “combination of disparate elements that forms or is felt to form a unified whole” (*Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*). He creates twelve such units over the forty pages that make up Chapter 5, the lengthiest of them running about seven pages. As indicated above, the first unit or mini-essay begins with Kittredge’s interest in playing football—it runs only about one page. The second begins, “Girls came to me like creatures from some other continent” (106), and it is there that he writes of his marriage to Janet. The subjects of the remaining ten mini-essays range from the “stiff-lipped silences” (113) and distances between family members to Kittredge’s Air Force assignments. This is so much as to say that any given chapter of Kittredge’s memoir usually covers extensive territory, and the organization is loose and associative.

Reading such a freely associative chapter (or essay) can be confusing, or it can be exhilarating. The feeling is more like that of reading certain poems than it is like that of reading an article in a well-edited, conventional periodical. Kittredge comes very close, in his ambling way, to the root concept of the “essay,” which comes from the French for an attempt, a stab at something, a sort of shot in the dark. Freshman writing courses in college typically concern the writing of “compositions,” not “essays” (although instructors sometimes use the traditional term). The executives at Micron are not likely to welcome an “essay” when it comes to a write-up on a new computer chip or the latest software. The glue that holds this essay together—rather loosely—involves detachment, how people lose touch with each other in their supposed progress through life.

Kittredge was to use the title of the sixth chapter, “Who Owns the West?” as that of his third book of nonfiction, published in 1996. Upon his discharge from the Air Force in 1957, he returned to the ranch and embarked on an even longer span of wasted years. The chapter begins with the announcement of his parents’

impending divorce, but it moves quickly to the problems associated with Kittredge's new role as "boss of the grain camp," to which he was promoted by his brother Jack, who acquired controlling interest in the ranch after the death of their grandfather in 1958. "We were done with boyhood and its enthusiasms," Kittredge writes tersely (151). Now the childhood experiment in killing field mice, and the teenaged slaughtering of jackrabbits was to become a full-scale adult war on wildlife: "We baited the coyotes with 1080 and hunted them from airplanes; we wiped them out" (153). Kittredge describes himself at age thirty as "bursting with self-importance" (160). The problem was, Kittredge suggests, that "the ecology of the valley was complex beyond our understanding, and it began to die as we went on manipulating it in ever more frantic ways" (171). Reflecting on waterfowl as "a metaphor for abundance" in his childhood, Kittredge recalls his father shooting 123 ducks on one occasion (183), then admits "there was an obvious string of crimes" in that regard and concludes, "Maybe we should have realized the world wasn't made for our purposes" (174).

At the end of the sixth chapter Kittredge recalls dancing and drinking with a woman his family knew as "the crop duster's wife," and he interprets her comments as references to "failures of sympathy" originating in "failures of the imagination, which is a betrayal of self" (175). In the "mirror" she constitutes for him, Kittredge sees himself, and in the next chapter, "Sleeping Alone," he confronts what he calls his own "breakdown" in the spring of 1961. He sees that his "dream of marriage and fidelity" had "collapsed before my determination to cherish myself beyond all others," and he decides to "sleep alone" (181): "In the theory of life I was closing in on, selfishness was pure and necessary. It became an excuse for whatever you wanted to do" (189). One of the more painful chapters in the memoir, this one details several episodes of heavy drinking and marital infidelity, and it culminates in an

incident with a prostitute who teaches Kittredge an important lesson “we all should have learned, us boys out West”: “slow down” (199). The sexual lesson has broad implications: “She didn’t owe me anything, and if I wanted allegiance I’d better learn to slow down and attend to the rewarding of someone, as someone right then was attending to me. I was learning that this dynamic is at the heart of everything” (200).

In the summer of 1967, after his family sold the ranch, Janet took the children and left Kittredge. By that time, at age 35, as he explains in the eighth chapter, “Selling Out,” he had turned to writing as his “main chance in life” (205). In August he met Patricia (Patty), a heavy drinker and “the vivid woman who shared my second marriage” (210). After a brief stay at the University of Oregon studying creative writing, they headed for Iowa where he was to enroll in the Writers’ Workshop. Patty had delivered a still-born baby boy, and they had already decided to end the marriage by then, the summer of 1968. A very brief “interlude” (just a little more than a page) recounts a visit from his “old alcoholic bachelor” Uncle Hank at Thanksgiving (219). “The prime figure of failure” and “a cautionary figure to frighten boys when they were lazy,” Kittredge writes, “I value his indifference to the ambitions which drove my family” (220).

The last chapter of *Hole in the Sky*, “Paradise All Around,” skips over Kittredge’s stay at the University of Iowa and brings him and Patty to Missoula in the fall of 1969, where he was to start teaching at the University of Montana. He meets the poet Richard Hugo, who would become his good friend, and then Kittredge fast-forwards the story to 1973, when he left for a year at Stanford to study as a Wallace Stegner Fellow, and on to 1974 and his divorce from Patty. Much of the final essay is a lyric tribute to Missoula and Montana. He also introduces Annick Smith, “the luck of my later life” (230), and extends his account to 1979 and the marriage

of his daughter. "We must define a story which encourages us to make use of the place where we live without killing it" (234), Kittredge maintains: "I tell my own stories, and I move a little closer toward feeling at home in the incessant world" (238).

In an interview Kittredge described *Hole in the Sky* as "a story about taking care of ourselves and taking care of the world and how to conduct ourselves in what I conceive to be proper ways" (Morris 173). Some readers may argue that the book teaches such lessons only via the negative. It is a collection of warnings, an often rueful and apologetic confession, and a series of object lessons in how *not* to live. The power of the book derives largely from his refusal to yield to nostalgia or to self-excuse. "Out of the courage of his own experience," Mary Clearman Blew has observed, "Kittredge offers form and hope" (770).

7. THE WEST: LIVING IN IT AND TAKING CARE OF IT

Scott Slovic has suggested that the publication of *Who Owns the West?* in 1996 "heralded an important shift in Kittredge's extended process of owning up/ownership, moving beyond self-flagellation toward conciliation, vision, and love" ("William Kittredge" 96). Both it and *Taking Care* (1999) are books of essays drawn from those that had been published over the previous dozen years. While the table of contents of *Who Owns the West?* implies a neat structure of a prologue ("White People in Paradise"), three individual essays ("Heaven on Earth," "Lost Cowboys and Other Westerners," and "Departures"), and an epilogue ("Doing Good Work Together: The Politics of Storytelling"), quick reference to the acknowledgements page indicates that the pieces were "previously published in slightly different form" in no fewer than sixteen periodicals. *Taking Care*, subtitled "Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief," appeared in the Credo Series, edited by Scott Slovic for Milkweed Editions. About 75 pages are devoted to six of Kittredge's essays,

to which are added 16 photographs drawn from his years on the ranch in Warner Valley, an engaging 19-page "portrait" of Kittredge by Slovic, and a valuable 25-page bibliography of Kittredge's work and of interviews and critical writing about him (mostly book reviews).

In the prologue to *Who Owns the West?* Kittredge describes the loss of the supposedly "inexhaustible paradise" of the American West (4) and its resettlement "by people seeking sanctuary and opportunity" (5). To the "locals," descendants of the "original" (post-Native American) settlers these re-settlers appear to be interlopers or outright trespassers. Feeling, as Kittredge observes, "humiliated by their economic powerlessness," many of the locals "would like to close the gate, lock down the West, and call it their own forever" (5). As a preliminary answer to the question posed in the title of his book, Kittredge suggests, "All of us, of course," but he recognizes that the answer is overly simple (7).

Part One of *Who Owns the West?* is a sprawling essay in four sections entitled "Heaven on Earth." Readers familiar with *Owning It All* and *Hole in the Sky* will find themselves sensing a sort of *déjà vu* as they read this essay, and whether they find that familiarity pleasant or merely redundant will vary. After all, one might argue, the same nouns will necessarily pertain to his childhood memories: irrigation ditches, Deep Creek Canyon, old Lombardy poplars, yellow-jackets, D-7 Caterpillar tractors. Certain important characters, like Ross Dollarhide, also reappear.

How nearly Kittredge echoes himself may be illustrated by comparing two sample passages from this essay with passages from *Hole in the Sky*:

People ask me if I don't feel a great sense of loss, cut off from the valley and methods of my childhood. The answer is no. (29)

People ask me if I don't sometimes wish I was back on the ranch. The answer is no, and always will be. (*Hole in the Sky* 204)

We drilled chemical fertilizers along with our barley seed, and sprayed with 2-4-D Ethyl and Parathion (which killed even the songbirds). Where did the waterbirds go? (30)

We sprayed 2-4-D ethyl and malathion and the World War II German nerve gas called parathion (for clover mites in the barley), working to shorten our own lives. (*Hole in the Sky* 153)

The sort of ur-source for the latter passage is in the title essay of *Owning It All*: "We baited the coyotes with 1080, and rodents destroyed our alfalfa; we sprayed weeds and insects with 2-4-D Ethyl and Malathion, and Parathion for clover mites, and we shortened our own lives" (61). The passage in *Hole in the Sky* also mentions baiting coyotes and losing the alfalfa to rodents. Close analysts of literary texts might inquire whether the most recent version is an improvement over the earlier ones: better to leave the reader reflecting on dead coyotes and shortening "our own lives," or on dead songbirds and vanished waterfowl?

To say that Kittredge repeats himself is not to imply that he does so haphazardly. His iterations have, rather, the cumulative effect of intentionally employed rhetoric: they acquire incantatory power. Moreover, the context of these refrains is always somewhat different. In the third section of "Heaven on Earth" these passages lead to Kittredge's observation that around 1990 he heard the Nature Conservancy wanted to purchase part of the former family property, the MC Ranch, and he was hopeful for "an actual shot at reimagining desire" (33). Although that purchase did not happen, Kittredge notes that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and environmental groups have bought other land in the vicinity with

an eye toward the development of wildlife refuges. The "skill" he hopes westerners will learn is "how to live in paradise" (35).

The longest of the three central essays that comprise *Who Owns the West?* is "Lost Cowboys and Other Westerns," which rambles nearly sixty pages and is divided into four sections, each of which might be considered an essay in its own right or, given Kittredge's love for digressions and montage, more than that. The first section of the essay begins, predictably, with a personal reference: "As a small boy I liked to get out of the house early and catch the yellow Adel school bus [. . .]" (43). Significantly, this section is broken into a dozen discrete parts, more than half of which run just one page or less. So what is that essay, or quarter-essay, "about"? Many things is the easy answer. It begins with Kittredge's memory of a girl who rode his bus to school and whom he saw again years later, but it also includes reflections on "the lost paradise that was childhood" (45), the fact that "Our stories always slide in the direction of make-believe" (46), the notion that "we are hunted and hunters" (47), the observation that his own former "code of freedom was also a code of selfishness" (48), the nagging question as to why his family and much of his part of society cannot "learn to connect to one another" (49), a warning against the danger of "heedless dreams of conquest and revenge" (50), a sad note on a woman who found herself too old to "get herself downtown on Saturday night" (51), the gap between what we do and what we think or talk about (52), and a picturesque house near Missoula where he imagines children on a trampoline and wonders if we can "find ways to live in some approximation of home-child heaven" (52).

The second section of "Lost Cowboys and Other Westerns" focuses on writers like Hemingway and Hugo and culminates in a tribute to Raymond Carver. The third and shortest section concerns Kittredge's struggle to define his goals as a writer. The

problem as he expresses it is that all he had was “killer ambition”: “I didn’t even have a story I understood as my own” (71). What he needed, he indicates, was “politics,” but not in the conventional sense of the term. Quite simply, he defines politics as “a way of understanding why one thing is more important than another” (72). This he acquired largely from the conference on western movies at Sun Valley in the summer of 1976. He then leaps to “years later,” driving through Nevada and hearing of the death of Louis L’Amour and recognizing that L’Amour’s portrayals of the west are not dying out (73). “Another kind of story” about the west is being written, however, and the remainder of “Lost Cowboys and Other Westerns” concerns those stories in which “we can see ourselves for what we mostly are, decent people striving to form and continually reform a just society in which we can find some continuity, taking care in the midst of useful and significant lives” (76).

The twenty pages that make up the fourth section of the essay are divided into twenty distinct units, and readers will be correct, as a rule, if they expect to encounter the associative rambling of the montage when so many divisions of the text are involved. One moment Kittredge is at the Charlie Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, and the next he is recalling his father. Driving through the snow along Lost Trail Pass, he reflects on his friend, Idaho writer John Rember, and suddenly he finds himself at Sun Valley at the Western Film Conference of 1976. “Meditating” on Elvis Presley’s last days prompts Kittredge to think of Lewis and Clark and “the high hopes that surrounded our beginnings” in 1805 (88). Attempting to make some sense of the current “crisis” in the west, Kittredge speculates not only that “we see a society in the midst of reinventing itself,” but also that it is an “ironic society” that is “making itself up in a quite self-reflexive way” (98). The crisis, he argues, is one of “awareness and guilt,” and it has

“driven us to a deep sense of powerlessness,” the result of which is “anomie,” a favorite term of his which involves the absence of values and a sense of alienation (98). The question, he contends, is how to define the “new story” and how to “make it come to be” (98). The closest Kittredge comes to answering the question, in this essay, is in the small parable he offers at the end, wherein a young man returns to the abandoned home where he once lived with his family and finds a trapped bird. Although he opens a window and frees the bird, he sees there is “no cure.” The concluding sentence offers at least some hope: “Imagine a life in which the meadowlarks and magpies come down from their trees and look in our windows at night and study us in our sleep, and then fly away, thinking tomorrow we must talk and sing to them because nothing else ever helps” (100). That, presumably, is the role of the writer.

The third large essay that makes up *Who Owns the West?* is “Departures,” which focuses largely on Montana. In fact, the first two sections or sub-essays might be regarded as lyrical eulogies to the state: “In the valley below, along Post Creek, the willows are opening new leaves, and the hayfields are greening up. It can be understood as a vision of paradise” (103). But Kittredge also offers a critique as he travels his home state, which he perceives as a place settled by people, himself included, seeking escape. The small essays that comprise the third section of “Departures” cover numerous towns throughout the state, from Malta on the northern “high-line” to Miles City in the east. “The American West,” Kittredge writes in the seventh unit, “has always been a double-hearted dreamland: a home in paradise, and a wide-open situation where you could make a killing,” particularly from extractive industries like timber and mining (133). But all of that is changing, Kittredge maintains: “Tourism and the educated are in the saddle, and they are going to be,” and “Tourists come for the wilderness”

(133). This sentiment is certainly not what Montana's old-timers want to hear. The new Montanans, and perhaps most of the new westerners, care little about miners, loggers, and ranchers: "Rather, they care much more about preserving what's left of the natural world in the west, which in many cases they correctly understand is theirs, for their own sweet recreational use" (134). The fear among the locals is that "Montana is becoming an out-West theme park" (136), and their more immediate and practical concern is that land prices and property taxes are soaring.

Portions of the dozen-page epilogue, "Doing Good Work Together: The Politics of Storytelling," are threaded into an essay with a similar title in *Taking Care*, and all of it is familiar reading for those who know Kittredge's agenda. A simple list—not complete—of five items or premises of that agenda should suffice:

Useful stories [. . .] are radical in that they help us see freshly. (158)

[N]obody owns anything absolutely, except their sense of who they are. (160)

Many of us live with a sense that there is something deeply and fundamentally wrong in our society. (162)

We yearn to live in a coherent place we can name, where we can feel safe. (163)

We need stories that tell us reasons why taking care, why compassion and the humane treatment of our fellows is more important—and interesting—than feathering our own nests as we go on accumulating property and power. (167)

To say that this is William Kittredge's vision in a nutshell might be an understatement, but this list is a fair enough statement of where he's coming from and where he is trying to go.

The phrase "taking care" echoes throughout *Who Owns the West?* so it is certainly an appropriate title for the small book that

appeared three years later, *Taking Care: Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief*. The intent of the Credo Series, as explained in a prefatory note, is to offer “some of our best writers an opportunity to speak to the fluid and subtle issues of rapidly changing technology, social structure, and environmental conditions.” Readers will find relatively little new in this book, which begins with a revised version of the interlude about Uncle Hank from *Owning It All*. The half dozen short essays that follow, including “The Politics of Storytelling,” as mentioned above, start with this opening sentence from “Child in the Garden”: “My own story is the only one I’ll ever know with any emotional accuracy” (6). In effect, William Kittredge has been telling himself, or telling on himself, for the past twenty years. Reflecting on his three past books of nonfiction, he observes, “If you’ve read one or another of those books and think you’re hearing it echoed here, likely you’re right” (7). This book will appeal mostly to those who are unfamiliar with Kittredge’s other writings and who wish to acquire a quick orientation to the man and his ideas. *Taking Care* is best read as an introduction or preface to his writing. If readers enjoy this book, they will almost certainly enjoy the others; conversely, if they find the agenda or ideology of this book inimical, they will not be likely to appreciate the others.

In his list of “what I believe” in the essay “Belief,” Kittredge stresses a concept that has come to be increasingly important for him: “Generosity, I think, is the prime moral and political value” (73). His next book, *The Nature of Generosity*, published by Knopf in 2000, would take that assertion as a point of departure.

8. THE WORLD LEARNING TO BE GENEROUS

In a 1997 interview for *CutBank*, the literary magazine he helped establish at the University of Montana, William Kittredge indicated he had finished with the obsessive story he had been

telling over the years and wanted “to do something to celebrate the world” (Ward 60). Three years later he fulfilled that intention with *The Nature of Generosity*. Brad Knickerbocker, in his review for the *Christian Science Monitor*, describes the book as “a deeply personal ramble that is neither self-indulgent [n]or dull, an intellectual exercise with many poetic moments” (20). In her review for *Booklist* Donna Seaman refers to Kittredge as “a renowned philosopher of the American West” and describes the book as “provocative, imaginative, eloquent, and profoundly critical” (691). Certain familiar strains are sounded throughout the book, particularly in the introductory essay, “The Imperishable World,” which concerns such matters as his theories of storytelling, his childhood in the “luminous world” of the Warner Valley, and the destruction his family’s agricultural methods wreaked. But Kittredge discovers some new melodies. The word “security” echoes throughout the essay, and from the first pages it is evident that while his base of operations is the American west, his range is global. In fact, the very heft of this book (at 276 pages it is long by Kittredge’s standards) implies greater expanse.

Kittredge’s enemies here are bureaucracies that “deny complexity in order to control and compartmentalize response” (29). He is apprehensive about globalization and the global economic movement that embraces “fables of economic growth” promoting “the wonders of a worldwide culture that is dedicated to commodifying experiences and legitimizing greed” (30). This movement, which has recently spawned protests and riots from Seattle to Stockholm, will distance us “from the intimacies we are genetically driven to seek” (30). Kittredge’s philosophy, specifically his ethics, are openly altruistic, and he defines altruism as “the sacrifice of immediate benefit for the future good of ourselves and our kin” (32). The opposite of altruism is selfishness, which he regards as “inherent in living systems” (32). He refers to “feedback loops” that pertain

variously to either selfishness or altruism (depending upon whether people respond vindictively or generously). He advocates what he calls "extreme long-loop altruism": "generosity toward strangers and ways of life we never expect to encounter as a method of preserving both biological and cultural multiplicity and possibility" (34).

The body of the book consists of four large essays or "parts," each predictably ambling and digressive. They are both personal and universal, the thoughts of an individual in his later years, with all the accumulated quirks one might expect, pleading the cause of the communal. "The Old Animal" is part montage and part pastiche (that is, composed of borrowed materials and motifs), and it is broken into 22 units, most of which run from one to three pages and many of which could stand alone as small, gemlike essays. Kittredge begins with himself at age 65 thinking of the waterfowl that flew over the now dry basin, Long Lake, in the Warner Valley over ten thousand years ago. His destination in this essay is the caves of Lascaux in France with their famous primitive art, and his vehicles are a combination of anthropology, history, science, and literature. With similar range, the second essay, "Agriculture," begins with Kittredge's personal memory of "hoeing beets" (83) and proceeds to follow the evolution of the "arts of farming" (88) from the Nile (12,000 B.C.) through Asia and the New World.

Some readers will find the scholarship throughout the book rather daunting, even though Kittredge does not apply his sources rigorously. The array in the first essay alone is impressive. He opens with a playful and probably familiar epigraph from Mark Twain: "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to" (37). Thereafter, he casts a wide net: anthropologist Peter Farb's *Man's Rise to Civilization: The Cultural Ascent of the Indians of North America*, poet Edward Dorn's *Shoshone*, ten lines from poet Albert Goldbarth's "If," a passage from Robert Wright's *The Moral*

Animal, allusions to George Gaylord Simpson's *The Meaning of Evolution* and to Peter Westbroek's *Life as a Geological Force*, and amid these less familiar references, Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* and Gretel Ehrlich's *A Match to the Heart*. But for every reference to a familiar personage like Machiavelli or Nabokov, there are two or more to scientists and scholars like Sharman Apt Russell and Gerald Edelman. On one page alone we encounter allusions to British psychologist John Bowlby, biological texts by E. O. Wilson (*Sociobiology* 1975) and Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene* 1976), and Terry G. Jordan's *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers* (50). At this point we are not even halfway through the essay, and we have touched on subjects as varied as "the molecule called polysaccharide" (44) and the Fulani people of Lake Chad. Turning the pages we are likely to encounter comments on the nature of language, with references to linguist Noam Chomsky, or to Gore Vidal's novel, *Empire*. Here is Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*; there are lines from a poem by Sharon Olds. In many ways the impact of this book is similar to that of such Renaissance compendiums as Robert Burton's huge, sprawling, erudite, and delightful *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Like Burton, Kittredge makes a virtue of being expansive and self-indulgent, and as with Burton, there is method to his madness. Kittredge's readers are, or should be, swept along with the tide, and the brevity of the individual units that make up any given essay assures a rapid pace.

The third essay, "Commodification," is dispersed among just 10 units so that the sub-essays are generally more cohesive than elsewhere in the book. "Commodification is as old as prostitution" (146), Kittredge declares. Corporations, he maintains, "range the world like predators" (155). Predictably, he is no fan of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Units of some length are devoted to the

“creation of high-rise cities,” beginning with Manhattan (161) and to a raft trip with Annick Smith through the Grand Canyon. Most of “Commodification,” however, comes down to an attack on “institutionalized greed” (181) and Kittredge’s thesis that, “Defining ourselves in purely economic terms, we ignore the necessary role of generosity in our lives” (183).

The last and longest of the large essays in *The Nature of Generosity* is “Generosity,” which offers a wild ride of 31 units distributed over nearly eighty pages. In the broadest sense, this essay might be considered a celebration of the garden: “It’s inevitable that our planet is mostly going to be a vast garden, tended by humans” (248), but for this global garden to survive, Kittredge warns, diversity and wilderness must be sustained. The global diversity of the essay ranges from the family ranch in Oregon and the sight of a rare wolverine in Glacier Park to a history of the pastoral “paradigm” of Theocritus and Virgil, through Voltaire and Rousseau, and on to Wordsworth and John Clare (200-07). The underlying issues concern survival, what it will take to “sustain ourselves” (187) in this complex world: intimacy and, of course, the humanist ideal of generosity.

Kittredge does not come off as “radical” in his politics, despite what some might read as elements of traditional Marxist ideology in his nonfiction. Reflecting in “Generosity” on the “systems of repression” in Latin America, for example, he suggests, “the emergence of a merchant class with economic leverage will in the long run prove a good thing in the lives of the peasants” (224). He hopes for bourgeois evolution, not for anarchy or revolution. And his force here is not one of “will,” but of “hope”: “gradually, maybe generosity will accumulate and inspire political changes that will help to alleviate the misery of impoverished millions” (224). This is hardly a clarion call to the barricades. And in the next sentence, Kittredge pulls back even further, albeit regretfully: “But maybe

nothing is changing at all." After all, Kittredge writes in the opening sentence of the next (the eighteenth) unit, "Indigenous people and working classes are normally close to powerless in the game of revolution" (224). Clearly he does not wish to provoke violence. As an intellectual he sees his role as one of "helping individuals and communities to remember their experiences and to reevaluate them" (225).

The closest Kittredge comes to suggesting practical remedies occurs over the next three units or sub-essays (235-50), in which he comments on the dwindling commons. The "paradise" he claimed was the subject of this book stems from the Persian word denoting a garden, "a cultivated sanctuary": "The unruly creature we are hungers for a sanctuary" (240). Again, the motif of security intrudes. He warns himself as much as his readers that "forays into generosity can sometimes drift off into sappiness," and he admits that for him travel "runs on a desire to visit gardens" (240). Later he writes, "Maybe there should be a poetics of gardening" (and there is, ranging from Horace to Andrew Marvell and beyond): "There's obviously a relationship between gardening, managing what we have in a nurturing manner, and responsibility" (243).

For the most part *The Nature of Generosity* is a compendium of what Kittredge calls "cautionary tales" (260). The last two units of "Generosity" are one-page commentaries on a friend who owns an organic garden in Missoula and on the Russian plant geneticist Nikolai Vavilov, who promoted the preservation of food-crop seeds "to ensure genetic diversity" (262). Against the "sadness" he sees in the world brought on by "hunger, injustice, and violence" (252), he offers the following appeal, which comes down to a rhetorical question: "We yearn for kisses and miracle cures, elegant cooking, incessant blossoming, and laughter in the fields and streets. So how do we plant our garden?" (263)

In "Jitterbugging at Parties," the twelve-page epilogue, Kittredge offers a nine-item "wish list," the most significant of which might be this: "That we must resist the impulse to simplify and weed plants and creatures and people into monocultures. Complexity is what's elegant and alive" (268). On the last page Kittredge appeals for a garden that will be "plentiful and democratic" and for an agenda requiring us to "relearn the arts of generosity." He urges that we "give something back to the systems of order that have supported us: care and tenderness" (276).

9. CONCLUSION

Although William Kittredge has characterized himself more than once as a man who is "as irreligious as a stone" (*Who Owns the West?* 166), he is obviously a moralist of sorts and in many ways a deeply spiritual man. As early as 1979, in a review of Kittredge's first book, *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories*, Anthony Arthur detected "a kind of spiritual contest in a beautiful, remote, and menacing land" (256). In his response to an interviewer who asked him whether his work "has a definite moral quality to it," Kittredge responded affirmatively, but mentioned his concern that his work might become "more didactic and less convincing and less compelling" (Morris 182). To those who would object that Kittredge raises more questions than he can answer in his writing, particularly in his nonfiction, Miles Harvey's observations in a review of *Who Owns the West?* are pertinent. Harvey describes Kittredge as a "cultural go-between," negotiating the terrain between "anti-government and anti-environmentalist" proponents of the Old West and "urban émigrés" and environmentalists of the New West. He concludes: "[Kittredge] doesn't hope to provide all the answers; he does succeed marvelously in reframing the controversy's most difficult questions" (123).

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