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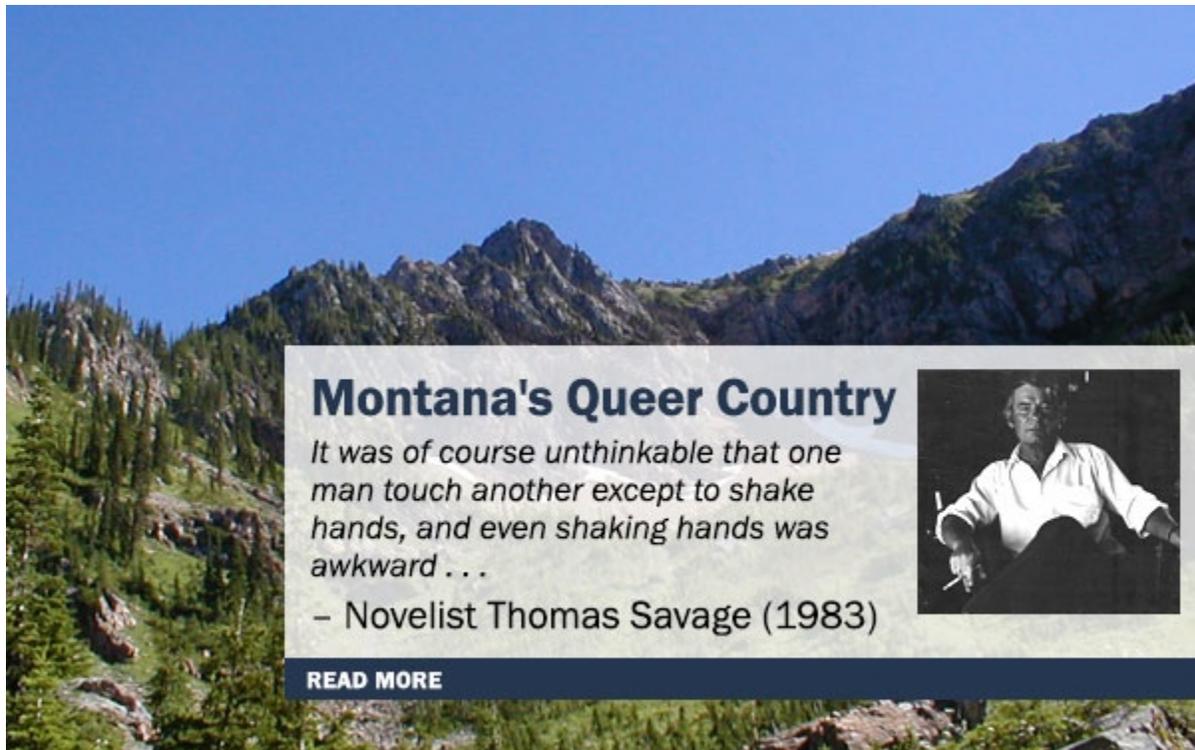
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FAMILY PHOTO OF THOMAS SAVAGE, USED BY PERMISSION OF ELIZABETH SAVAGE MAIN

Thomas Savage's Queer Country

O. Alan Weltzien, University of Montana, Western

Novelist Thomas Savage (1915–2003) grew up in the lonely world of the northern Rockies during the twentieth century's first half and in eight of his thirteen novels continually re-inhabited it as a scene of gender protest. He left Montana, his native state, at twenty-two, only periodically visiting after that and returning only once after the 1960s. His daughter said he “hated Montana” and wanted to get as physically far away from it as possible, but that’s not the whole story.¹ In those eight novels Savage critiques the limited roles available to men and women in the high landscapes between his hometown of Dillon, Montana, and Salmon, Idaho. His novels continually portray an atrophied masculinity, in which same-sex desire tends to be masked by homophobia. His strong female characters also suggest his deliberate blurring of conventional gender stereotypes. The novels set in Savage country reveal an author struggling with his own complex sexuality. This unpopulated sequence of valleys and passes, which straddles the Continental Divide, becomes his own queer country: an open space of same-sex desire muted by gender conformity. The high dry landscapes become a liminal site of potentially reconfigured identity even as that potential is denied.

Savage’s fiction has received little attention from western literary critics, and only recently has the queer sexuality of his life or work been the subject of that criticism. Among the accolades greeting Savage’s best novel, *The Power of the Dog* (1967), only one review, an

anonymous note in *Publishers Weekly*, cited its subject as “a repressed homosexual . . . plotting a homosexual involvement with the boy [Peter Gordon].”² John Scheckter’s early scholarly article, “Thomas Savage and the West: Roots of Compulsion” (1985), emphasizes middle-aged identity revision in the fiction rather than gender ambivalence.³ The Western Writers Series booklet *Thomas and Elizabeth Savage* (1995) makes virtually no mention of Savage’s complex gender life, which insistently leaks into his western-set novels.⁴ While the booklet excellently reviews the respective careers of husband and wife novelists, it ignores what I am calling Savage’s gender protest, which constitutes one of the major interests in this semi-forgotten novelist’s career. In the recent Montana critical anthology, *All Our Stories Are Here* (2009), Karl Olson and I argue separately for Savage’s significance as a western writer critical of the region’s hostility to queer identities.⁵ Four of Savage’s eight western novels are in print today, making it possible for readers to discover the queer country of a writer whose work anticipates Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain,” for instance, and deserves to be read alongside it.

Savage had a long career (1944–88), and though his novels never sold well, they received almost uniformly high praise. At Random House, where he published his fourth novel, he was called by some “the new Truman Capote.”⁶ In his *Hudson Review* notice of *Power of the Dog*, critic Roger Sale called it “the finest single book I know about the modern west.”⁷ A decade later, *The New Yorker* reviewer of *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (1977) [retitled *The Sheep Queen* in 2001] gushed, “There are few American novelists now active who have produced a more distinguished body of work.”⁸ Savage’s most recent champion is Thomas McGuane, who has stated, “In my view, Savage may be the best of all the western novelists, after Cather.”⁹

The youth who became Thomas Savage imagined himself a writer by the time he enrolled in Beaverhead County High School: active on the newspaper staff, he penned a column, “Balloni,” that foreshadows his novels’ witty social commentary and sardonic tone. Scattered copies survive in the Beaverhead County Museum. Known as Tom Brenner (his stepfather’s name), Savage spent a few semesters at the University of Montana, Missoula, where he studied writing under Brassil Fitzgerald. In letters from 1936 (in my possession), twenty-one-year-old Savage claimed he loved the family ranch and intended to stay, but in the fall of 1937 he traveled to Boston to be closer to Fitzgerald’s daughter, Elizabeth. They married in 1939 and graduated from Colby College the following year. In the next decade they started their family while Savage worked a variety of jobs (in Massachusetts, Chicago, and back on the Brenner Ranch). When he published his first novel, *The Pass* (1944), he took his birth father’s name. Savage worked for a few years at Brandeis University and taught at Vassar one year (1958–59), but otherwise he devoted himself to writing.

Although he was married with children, Savage had a conflicted sexual life. According to their daughter, when Savage proposed to Elizabeth he told her he was gay, but she thought she could “cure” him.¹⁰ In 1960 Savage met Tomie dePaola, twenty years younger and sharing a first name. They fell in love and Savage essentially left his family for approximately one year. Their daughter later called their passion a “bonfire.”¹¹ The couple even exchanged rings in the Cowley Fathers’ Chapel in Boston’s Beacon Hill.¹² By the fall of 1961, feeling deeply torn about his family, Savage ended his liaison and returned to wife, sons, and daughter. His sons never

entirely forgave him for the desertion, and his daughter called Tomie “a snake” who “destroyed my childhood.”¹³ Thereafter, dePaola, who has enjoyed a giant career as a children’s book author and illustrator, saw Savage briefly only three times. Savage began a novel based on his liaison with dePaola, but after his agent, Blanche Gregory, read it and informed him he’d never get it published, Savage threw the manuscript into the Atlantic.¹⁴ When such dead ends appear in Savage’s fiction, they signify, in part, his novels’ gender protest. Critic Karl Olson defines this protest as “homothanaticism,” “the tragic consequences of homosexual desire,” as though “homosexuality inevitably leads to disaster” (104).

At the moment of his fictive genesis, Savage created a landscape representative of his queer sexuality. In 1937 when he began work on what became his first novel, *The Pass* (1944), his story draft featured a landscape without humans.¹⁵ He queered the high country as he peopled it. On the first page of the finished novel, protagonist Jess Bentley surveys the view from the pass of the title, and “in his eyes now as he looked down on the silent expanse of the valley and across to the jagged blue peaks there was doubt. Again he heard the words of a grizzled prospector he had met on the trail. ‘Queer country. . .’ Down there was the prairie” (17). In this foundational moment in his career as a writer, Savage—a gay man happily heterosexually married—places elements of himself in this strange *tabula rasa* known as Idaho’s Lemhi River valley.¹⁶ The novelist slyly declares gay independence in a particular rural western space he has made his own.

Thomas Savage country is “queer country,” though that trait remains mostly eclipsed by prevalent social taboos; the bunkhouse, for example, becomes a site of same-sex desire and suppression. Those male characters who stretch beyond the tiny box of bunkhouse masculinity—wherein desire is muted by a species of peer pressure—are ostracized or destroyed. The bunkhouse poses as one site for the rehearsal of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as “homosexual panic,” wherein same-sex desire is muted by homophobia, which expresses a bottlenecked masculinity and the psychic opposition to that.¹⁷ Savage’s bunkhouses, like other settings within his novels, exploit that tension, the energy of that desire marked by its denial manifested through self-loathing, suppression, or death.

Throughout his western fiction, Savage insists on representing sexual energies that his characters deny or suppress. The narrator of *The Pass* attests to the artificial silencing of sex: “Now on the prairie sex was never discussed with another man, and this was strange because the prairie lived because of sex” (204). One never said “bull” or “stud,” and “childbirth and sex were not discussed because somehow it insulted your wife” (204). Queer sexual identities, in particular, populate Savage’s novels in such characters as Slim Edwards and prissy old Billy Blair in *The Pass*, and others.¹⁸ Billy Blair, for example, owns a sewing machine—granted, an inadvertent purchase—a cream separator, and two milk cows. Milking—milk production—is certainly no man’s work, and a blizzard kills him. This world, as Savage’s narrator attests, is built on taboos that often strangle identity formation because of some inarticulate, attenuated conformity. Queerness exists to be muted, stigmatized, or stamped out, though it never can entirely be. Slim is tolerated; Billy is not. Savage’s implicit protest arises more forcefully in subsequent novels.

In his second novel, *Lona Hanson* (1948), analogous to Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) in its land obsession and family destruction, the blurring of gender boundaries is more extensive and explicit. Lona, title character who embodies a profoundly uneasy gender mix, negotiates her gender identity in relation to at least three versions of masculinity embodied in male characters. Avatar of her tough-as-nails great-grandfather (ranch founder and patriarch), Lona drives herself ruthlessly, in the process pushing her feminine mother (Ruth) and husband (Clyde Barrows) away. She has married, for his family's money, effete Barrows, a wannabe novelist come west and duding—and actually working—for his health and for inspiration. The Owen Wister type borrows from Savage himself, a misfit who grew up on the Brenner Ranch and cowboied well, into his twenties, though he preferred Mozart to ranch chores.¹⁹ Always vulnerable, Lona periodically pretties herself and waits for Eddie Rohn, her first flame and natural partner who follows a rodeo career and struggles to traverse the space between bunkhouse and big house, hired hand and lover—and potential partner. She is confronted more than once by Joe Martin, a cold, calculating blackmailer who rapes Lona in a Butte hotel room and puts the screws on her through the novel's melodramatic final page. An overgrown tomboy and masculinized boss, Lona cannot integrate her identity any more than she can hold onto Eddie. She reaches her first name—Lona, alone—which she's been steadily earning through the novel. Lona wears the pants and struggles towards embracing and expressing her female sexuality, and in her world she remains a victim of her ambition to be both man and woman.

The naturalistic *Lona Hanson*, which Savage judged one of his weakest novels, serves as a rough draft to *The Power of the Dog*, published nineteen years later, after Savage ended his relationship with dePaola. Joe Martin from *Lona Hanson* represents the first version of a repressed villain character type, recurring in *The Power of the Dog* as Phil Burbank.²⁰ Savage got some inspiration for the Joe Martin/Phil Burbank character from his step-uncle, William Brenner, according to family memory one peculiar and talented bachelor but no homosexual.²¹ Savage's remarkable fictive use of Brenner, wherein he is made gay and demonized as though these are coeval, describes the psychic cost of his own displaced homosexuality. According to his daughter, when he returned to his wife and family in late 1961, he quit dePaola "cold turkey," but it wasn't that simple. After a nasty confrontation between Tomie and his older son, Brassil, Savage blamed both of them rather than himself, and in a farewell note and subsequent drunken phone call, confessed his love but declared that it "just wouldn't work."²² It is hard to estimate the cost of his decision, but out of this psychic turmoil came the major thrust of his career, including six novels in a decade, 1967-77.

Instead of writing a novel about a gay couple that wouldn't get published, Savage came home again to "queer country." *The Power of the Dog* concerns the stripping away of power from the novel's dominant character, Phil Burbank, who is gay, repressed, homophobic, and maliciously misogynist. Phil embodies the past tendency to mask gayness through overt homophobia coupled with self-loathing—a toxic mix. In her Afterword Annie Proulx calls Burbank a "vicious bitch" (287), and his general nastiness and specific cruelty to Rose Gordon, his new sister-in-law, stick with the reader. Perhaps its most important character is a minor one we never meet, Bronco Henry, whom Savage based on a Lemhi County, Idaho, horseman well-known in his day. Bronco Henry represents Phil's unavailable male lover and love. The

famous opening paragraph, the annual castration scene, announces Phil's symbolic emasculation (3). In the novel, Phil gradually veers from hating young Peter Gordon, his step-nephew—the first clearly autobiographical surrogate of Savage—to feeling deep affection for him. After all, Phil possesses the “uncanny ability to detect the secret lives of men,” which “fosters in him a measure of empathy for the nameless, ubiquitous itinerant workers kicking around the valley” (Olson 107).

Phil recognizes in Peter a kindred spirit and outsider—above all, a young man sexually attracted to other men more than women, and presented as effeminate in more than one way. Phil's vulnerability expresses the loosening of what I've called the engines of repression.²³ The final third of *Power* exposes Phil's homosexuality at the price of his life. His desire will out, and Peter plays him like a marionette:

But Phil knew, God knows he knew, what it was to be a pariah, and he had loathed the world, should it loath [sic] him first. His voice was husky, “That's damned kind of you, Pete,” and he slid his long arm about the boy's shoulders. Once before that day, he'd been tempted, and desisted, because he'd always sworn out of that old loyalty never again to make that move. (263)

In this climactic passage, homosexuality (“that old loyalty”) means ostracism and exclusion, and ultimately for Bronco Henry and Phil, death. Phil fascinates because his misogyny exposes his self-loathing, the twisted repression of homosexuality. During his final visit to Dillon, Montana, in April 1983, Savage, glossing Phil as an “evil” character, cited Dostoyevsky's definition of personal hell as a character's fatal inability to love another.²⁴ For Phil, misogyny and misanthropy stem from his own psychic opposition to homophobia—the veil he's thrown over his oldest desire.

The character type recurs in Savage's most autobiographical novel, *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (1977; reprinted as *The Sheep Queen*, 2001), wherein Ed Brewer wears the veil. As before, the veil insinuates the novel's gender constriction and protest. Like Phil, Ed possesses “secret knowledge” “that almost everyone is vulnerable . . . almost everyone can be destroyed,” and the narrator, an older version of *Power*'s Peter Gordon recalling his childhood, seeks his weak spot: “I often wished Ed dead. How I wished I had been older and ready to pit my intellect against his, to find the clue to his own weakness and destroy him” (225, 227). In repeatedly killing this character type in his novels, Savage pledges allegiance to Freud's reading of homosexuality as pathology, in the process denying that facet of himself.

Bronco Henry, Phil's idol and wannabe lover, appears as an old, aloof hand and former family man in Savage's *For Mary, With Love* (1983), Savage's twelfth novel, which reiterates elements of his gender protest. In *For Mary, With Love* the world of the bunkhouse, intimated back in *The Pass*, appears corralled, pushed by towering gender polarities. In this world of cowboy coffee, for instance, tea is unavailable to men: “Just as cats in that country were considered pets for ladies, so was the beverage tea considered a drink for ladies or ladylike men—another example of the absolute dichotomy of the sexes. It was a taboo for a man to drink tea” (124). This kind of

overt essayistic comment recurs throughout Savage's queer country. Tea is as inaccessible as wildflowers, let alone anything approaching same-sex desire: "It was *of course* unthinkable that one man touch another except to shake hands, and even shaking hands was awkward and in shaking hands their eyes seldom met" (104, emphasis added). Savage's condemnation of such repression had not changed in the four decades since he created Billy Blair and foreman Slim Edwards in *The Pass*. Men can neither bake nor use the word "beautiful." Clearly, consistently, too much has been ruled out as taboo in rural western masculinity. Savage, who knew those rules intimately, could hardly protest more plainly.

Another taboo word is "sidesaddle," and when big house tutor Mary Skoning, title character, claims she can ride like a man though she ordinarily rides sidesaddle, the men chuckle: "In the bunkhouse they whispered that a man rode sidesaddle, and everybody understood. They were awkward with the truth that in that masculine society [sic] there were among them those who lusted after the young man in the next bunk." Savage's narrator hastens to add, "Nobody out there really rode sidesaddle. Nobody had ever seen anybody ride sidesaddle except in pictures" (105). The suggestion points to the literal rather than figurative meaning, though the double entendre lingers. The comment mocks a gentrified, European style of women riding horses even as it mocks Hollywood as a source of gender stereotypes. It's "the truth" that always matters to Savage, a truth he insisted upon in his oeuvre, however dark the outcome for gender-bending characters.

A few months before *For Mary, With Love* came out, during his 1983 visit to Dillon, Montana, Savage admitted he liked to wear lavender gloves while patronizing the Andrus Hotel bar: *the* Dillon bar where one could see outside and inside with some ease.²⁵ His sartorial flaunt marked his own protest against the black-and-white, cattle-ranch, small-town world in which he grew up and from which he flew far away. His colorful scarves and cigarette holder, like his exotic cars, measured his own identity at great distance from his roots.²⁶ His gloves, like his fiction, push against received stereotypes.

In old age Savage reverted, in both lifestyle and his writing, to queer country. His close marriage and professional relationship ended with Elizabeth's death from lung cancer on 15 July 1989. In an interview that year, Savage claimed to be working on "a novel about a young man with . . . [AIDS]," but to my knowledge there is no surviving evidence of this manuscript. Thereafter, Savage moved to San Francisco and his "roommate," known to his daughter only as John, was a "rugged little runt" of a man, a "mentally challenged" former boxer in love with him.²⁷ During these years Savage worked on his final, incomplete novel, *Buddies*, a tale set around World War I that centers on same-sex desire. He could not interest a publisher. At least in his experience, same-sex love stories would not sell because the market—that acute barometer of fashions and tolerances—had not yet opened enough.

Both biography and oeuvre, then, reveal competing loyalties. In old age Savage rejected the bisexual label for himself, once telling his daughter, "There is no such thing [as bisexuality]."²⁸ This canny denial suggests a rejection of heterosexuality, yet Savage remained first and last a family man. Despite his nod to Freud's denunciation of homosexuality, his fiction intimates his

deeper adherence to Michael Warner's sharply revisionist stance: "(T)he theorization of homosexuality as narcissism is itself a form of narcissism peculiar to modern heterosexuality" (560). Somehow, the self-loathing must be transmuted to self-love in the bunkhouse and those big, lonely western spaces—queer or not—beyond them. But Savage's fiction, inclined towards "homothanaticism," only hints at such a paradigm shift. Often the queer spaces feel like no space. As Proulx's Ennis del Mar states in "Brokeback Mountain," "(I)f you can't fix it you got a stand it," since same-sex coupling "don't happen in Wyomin and if it does I don't know what they do, maybe go to Denver" (271). In the rural queer west, it's damned hard if not impossible to "stand it," and exodus to some Denver is likely unworkable. Savage couldn't make it work in 1961 New England, and he doesn't allow gay characters that space in his conflicted queer country.

The biography and western-set novels, then, at times reveal stark alternatives in gendered identity. In his 1985 article John Scheckter argues that Savage's novels since *Power of the Dog* have "concentrated upon a single situation—the discovery, in middle age, of a deep and painful need to re-examine the entire process of becoming an adult. Such concentration, perhaps obsessive, mirrors an autobiographical crisis" (36). In Savage's biography, that need developed out of his discovery, in 1969, of his older sister, a lesbian with whom he developed a close, if occasionally stormy, relationship. The later fiction's focus upon identity formation, particularly during adolescence, reflects his own homosexuality and heterosexual compromise as well as his love-hate relationship with his ranch roots. In the novels from *Power* through *For Mary, With Love* we trace, through several protagonists, a fictionalized Savage turning his back on his oldest sexual "loyalty" (*Power* 263) and becoming a happily married writer. Becoming an adult signifies, especially for the Joe Martins and Phil Burbanks, excruciating choices. The spaces between bunkhouse and big house prove as difficult to negotiate as those spaces beyond heteronormative conduct. Savage called his native west "a kind of touchstone for myself" (Audiocassettes). It served as a sharp reminder of what he hated as well as loved, and he certainly hated its gender claustrophobia and hypocrisy as he experienced it. His fiction suggests that the rural intermountain west's queer country remains elusive, a hard patch of ground in which to stick and thrive. It serves as a bracing tonic, a savage critique of loneliness derived, at its core, from its seriously skewed, compromised masculinity.

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1. Elizabeth Savage Main, Interviews, 2007-2013.
2. Annie Proulx, "Afterword," *The Power of the Dog* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2001), 278.
3. John Scheckter, "Thomas Savage and the West: Roots of Compulsion," *Western American Literature* 20 (Spring 1985): 35-49.
4. Sue Hart, *Thomas and Elizabeth Savage* (Boise: Boise State Univ. Western Writers Series, 1995).
5. Karl Olson, "West of Desire: Queer Ambivalence in Montana Literature," in *All Our Stories Are Here*, ed. Brady Harrison (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2009), 101-16; O. Alan Weltzien, "'Just Regular Guys': Homophobia, the Code of the West, and Constructions of Male Identity in Thomas Savage and Annie Proulx," *ibid.*, 117-40.
6. Tomie dePaola, Personal Communication, Jun-Aug 2012. Savage's fourth novel was *Trust in Chariots* (1961).
7. Quoted in Proulx, "Afterword."
8. Jean Ross, "Interview with Thomas Savage" 11 Jan 1989, *Contemporary Authors* 132: 365.
9. The comment appears on the back cover of the 2011 edition of Savage's second novel, *Lona Hanson*.
10. Main, Interviews.
11. Main, Interviews.
12. dePaola, Personal Communication.
13. Main, Interviews.
14. dePaola, Personal Communication.
15. To the best of my knowledge, this story draft no longer exists. Savage recounted this story when interviewed (12-14 April 1983) by John Scheckter in Dillon, Montana. Audiocassettes of this interview are in my possession.
16. Savage does not acknowledge in this novel any tribal inhabitants that ever flourished in the region. References are to the 2009 Riverbend Press reprint of *The Pass*.
17. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 18-21.
18. Karl Olson interprets the "queer heart" of old Slim, whose fastidiousness the novel mocks and whose most powerful possession is his cigar box of memories (106).
19. Ralph Nichols, Interviews, 2009.
20. Weltzien, "Introduction" to *Lona Hanson* (Helena, MT: Riverbend, 2011), xiii.
21. The character type appears again in *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (1977) as Ed Brewer.
22. dePaola, Personal Communication.
23. Weltzien, "'Just Regular Guys'" 123-25.
24. Savage and Scheckter, Audiocassettes.
25. Scheckter, Personal Communication, 2011.
26. Weltzien, "Thomas Savage, Forgotten Novelist," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 58.4 (Dec 2008), 23.
27. Main, Interviews.
28. Main, Interviews.

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O. Alan Weltzien, longtime English professor at the University of Montana Western, has authored, edited, or co-edited seven books and published dozens of articles. He has a book tentatively titled *Exceptional Mountains*, a cultural study of Pacific Northwest volcanoes, forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press in 2016. Weltzien has long stalked the trail of Montana novelist, Thomas Savage. He has published articles about Savage previously and is currently working on another. Weltzien still likes to ski in winter and scramble mountains in summer.