

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **Whistling Season**

### **By Ivan Doig**

#### **Introduction**

"Can't cook but doesn't bite." So begins the newspaper ad offering the services of an "A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" that draws the hungry attention of widower Oliver Milliron in the fall of 1909. And so begins the unforgettable season that deposits the non-cooking, non-biting, ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her font-of-knowledge brother, Morris Morgan, in Marias Coulee along with a stampede of homesteaders drawn by the promise of the Big Ditch—a gargantuan irrigation project intended to make the Montana prairie bloom. When the schoolmarm runs off with an itinerant preacher, Morris is pressed into service, setting the stage for the "several kinds of education"—none of them of the textbook variety—Morris and Rose will bring to Oliver, his three sons, and the rambunctious students in the region's one-room schoolhouse.

A paean to a vanished way of life and the eccentric individuals and idiosyncratic institutions that made it fertile, *The Whistling Season* is Ivan Doig at his evocative best.

([www.harcourtbooks.com](http://www.harcourtbooks.com))

#### **About the Author**

Years before Wallace Stegner's death in 1993, Ivan Doig was being heralded as Stegner's successor as the dean of Western American letters—high praise for the younger author. Their work provides ample grounds for such comparison. Both Stegner and Doig wrote books about figures important in the history of the West; both write as realists; and both base their fiction on careful research. Each crafts clear, polished prose, ideal for providing illustrations of excellent writing. Moreover, like most authors of the American West, Doig shares Stegner's concern for the natural environment as well as his view that Americans need wilderness.

Doig has shown distinctive artistry in writing three books of nonfiction and five of fiction. In *Earthlight, Wordfire: The Work of Ivan Doig* (1992) Elizabeth Simpson points out one of the hallmarks of his career: "All of Doig's books push the boundaries of genre, and some nearly defy classification." Most of his books focus on the working people of the West: farmers, ranchers, cowboys, cooks, shepherders, forest rangers, construction workers, and truck drivers who labor long hours at hard jobs sometimes in unpleasant, even unbearable, conditions. ([www.bookbrowse.com](http://www.bookbrowse.com))

## Reviews

"Doig blends a coming of age story and late-life reflection to luminous effect....[A]nother memorable tale set in the historical West but contemporary in its themes and universal in its insights into the human heart." — *Seattle Times*

"Ivan Doig, along with Wallace Stegner and A. B. Guthrie, may be the quintessential Western writer. In 10 books of fiction and nonfiction, he has masterfully explored human communities set against a beautiful, if harsh, Montana landscape. *The Whistling Season*, a coming-of-age story told in flashbacks, thoughtfully evokes a lost time and place. Almost all aspects of this novel impressed the critics—the colorful characters, the emotional resonance, the rich period details, the eloquent prose, and even Morris's lessons on astronomy and ancient history. Only the *Oregonian* felt this was good, not great, Doig—which still says a lot." — *Bookmarks Magazine*

## Further Reading

*C.J. Box* by Joyce Saricks

*Redemption Falls: A Novel* by Joseph O'Connor

*Telegraph Days* by Larry McMurtry

*Leaving Whiskey Bend* by Dorothy Garlock

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. Does the life of a homesteader in 1907 Montana as portrayed in the novel appeal to you? What is appealing about it? Would you trade the comforts and the disconnection of modern life for the simplicity and the hardships of these characters' lives?
2. How does Doig foreshadow and hint at the novel's plot twists? For example, when did you first realize that Rose and Morrie might not be who they claim to be? Did you have a theory about their true identities? How does this kind of foreshadowing contribute to the novel's effect on you?
3. Do Paul's dreams ring true to you? Why or why not? Does Doig do a good job of capturing the feeling and content of a vivid dream? What do Paul's dreams say about him?
4. What is the significance of the verse that Aunt Eunice quotes on page 22: "Yet, Experience spake / the old ways are best /steadfast for steadfast's sake/ passing the eons' test?" Do you think the adult Paul would agree with the gist of this verse? In trying to save the schoolhouses, is he being "steadfast for steadfast's sake?" Is this novel an argument that "the old ways are best," or is it simply an elegy to those old ways?
5. Compare the students' excitement over the arrival of Halley's Comet with the panic over Sputnik and the quality of American education that has led to the adult Paul's being ordered to close the schoolhouses. Why do you think Doig frames the novel with these two events?
6. What do you think of the education that the children of Marias Coulee receive? How does it differ from your or today's education? What are the advantages/disadvantages of today's educational system relative to that of the one-room schoolhouse?
7. Was there one teacher whose effect on you was like the effect Morrie had on Paul? What makes Morrie a good teacher? Discuss great teachers and what qualities they shared with Morrie.

8. In his review of *The Whistling Season* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Sven Birkerts wrote that Doig's writing answered the question, "Is there any way to write nowadays . . . that can escape the taint of knowingness, of wised-up cynicism?" How would you describe Doig's style of writing? Do you agree with Birkerts? Did you find the characters believable? Compare this novel to other contemporary novels. Are there any contemporary writers to whom you would compare Doig?
9. Discuss Brose Turley. What does he represent, and what purpose does he serve? Is it significant that he is the only character whom we see at a church service, in the revival meeting? What is the significance of his coming to Morrie when he is frightened by the signs of drought and the appearance of the comet?
10. On page 294, the adult Paul reflects that closing the one room schoolhouses will "slowly kill those rural neighborhoods...No schoolhouse to send their children to. No schoolhouse for a Saturday night dance. No schoolhouse for election day; for the Grange meeting; for the 4-H club; for the quilting bee; for the pinochle tournament; for the reading group; for any of the gatherings that are the bloodstream of community." Today, fifty years after the time when Paul is reflecting, do you think other gathering places have replaced the schoolhouses? What have contemporary American communities lost or gained since the days of close-knit rural neighborhoods like Marias Coulee?
11. Do you blame Morrie and Rose for keeping their identities secret from the Milliron family? Does Paul do the right thing in keeping their secret from his father? How does his decision to do so relate to the closing passage of the novel, in which the adult Paul decides to mislead the appropriations committee in an effort to save the schoolhouses?

(Harcourt Publishers)