



## The Whistling Season

*Ivan Doig*

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## **The Whistling Season** Ivan Doig

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 noncooking, nonbiting, 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.

## **The Whistling Season Details**

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Author : Ivan Doig

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## From Reader Review The Whistling Season for online ebook

### Amy says

Why have I never heard of this author? He is an amazing writer! (I liken him to Wallace Stegner, Leif Enger, Marilynne Robinson.) I thoroughly enjoyed reading this quiet, humorous, intelligent book about homesteaders in Montana in 1910. I love the narrator (a 13-year-old boy-genius). I love the story. I love, love, love the language. I'm going to read Ivan Doig again as soon as possible.

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### William says

Sometimes you just want a story of simplicity. You want to go to a place that reminds you of things about how you grew up and who you grew up among. You want a more recognizable time, even if the recognition is emotional rather than experiential. Maybe you just want a story that is a little less alienating than the one you find yourself in.

The Whistling Season is a lovely book of this kind of unapologetic simplicity: the issues are of character and growth, the characters are quirky and complex, and, like Case Histories's Olivia Land there is a portrait of affectionate, innocent childhood in sweet Toby Milliron.

This book about the one room schoolhouse is so much more.

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### Liz says

I'm always a little sad to turn the final page of a truly enchanting book such as *The Whistling Season*. Ivan Doig's charming brand of storytelling is welcoming and unhurried, perfectly timed to capture moments of poignancy and hilarity. Any author that can make me laugh out loud while I'm reading scores pretty darn high on my scale!

This story chronicles a period in our narrator's life, super-smart twelve year old Paul Milliron, during which he's forced to grow up a little faster than he would have liked. The story of Paul, his father, brothers, Rose, and Morrie will be with me for a while. Doig has a wonderful talent for revealing the human compassion inside each of his characters. It's particularly evident in the way they come through for and look after one another, no questions asked. Without a doubt, the Milliron family bond is the heart and soul of this book.

One constant in Paul and his brothers' lives is the one room schoolhouse where they are educated and in which a large portion of the story takes place. I've never given much thought to what it would be like to go to a school like that but this book really planted me there, with grades one through eight being taught in one room by one teacher.

***“Forever and a day could go by, and that feeling will never leave me. Of knowing, in that instant, the central power of that country school in all our lives.”***

Paul's experiences in the schoolhouse will indeed color his entire life and in later years he'll be in a position to fight to maintain that way of life in the rural parts of the state. It's the kind of job for an intelligent man

with a good heart. That, as you will see if you read this book, is Paul to a tee.

If you enjoy reading stories about genuinely good people and solid relationships, I strongly encourage you to try Ivan Doig. Besides this book, I also recommend *Last Bus to Wisdom* which, in hindsight, is really a five star book instead of the four I gave it at the time (review here).

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## Elena says

3,5-4\*

En esta entrañable historia, Paul nos cuenta su infancia junto a sus hermanos viviendo en las solitarias y áridas tierras del Lejano Oeste (concretamente Montana) de principios del siglo XX.

Aunque el desenlace me ha parecido un pelín forzado y con algunos detalles que no creo que fueran necesarios y otros un poco desaprovechados, la historia y sus personajes me han gustado mucho, así como la acérrima defensa que hace de las escuelas de zonas rurales.

Una historia entrañable, tierna y divertida.

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## Clif Hostetler says

This book is one of my all time favorites. It is "poetry of the vernacular". If this story doesn't capture your heart you must be a snobbish city dweller who has no appreciation of America's rural past. The setting is rural Montana in 1909, a one-room grade school, and a family of three young boys and their father still mourning the death of their mother (and wife) the previous year. It takes a skilled writer to turn such a plain setting into one of the most enjoyable, interesting and humorous books I've ever read.

The story is told as memories of a 1950s era state school superintendent who is recalling his own experiences attending a rural Montana school 40 years earlier. Poignancy is added to the story by it being in the voice of a person who is part of the bureaucracy that is in the process of closing all one-room grade schools in the state. One reason this story resonates with me is that I attended the same one-room rural grade school that my father had attended, and it was the school where my mother had been the teacher for seven years before she was married. With this background I feel I was witness to the end of the era celebrated by this book because all rural school districts were consolidated into larger districts soon after I graduated. The book idealizes the one-room school by having probably the world's best teacher and some very intelligent students in attendance. My own experience attending a one-room school wasn't nearly so interesting or exciting. Nevertheless, I look back on my grade school years with great fondness and in a manner similar to the narrator of this book.

"Childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul," is a quote from this book with which I agree. The book's narrative begins, "When I visit the back corners of my life again after so long a time littlest things jump out first." Indeed, this story is mostly a collection of "littlest things," but all of them jump under the animating influence of Doig's vision.

This author deserves to be more widely known. Where has he been all these years? A long interview with the author is at the following web address:

<http://www.harcourtbooks.com/Whistlin...>

I was shocked to learn that the author had not attended a one-room grade school himself. Well, after all it is a

novel, not a biography, so I'll let that pass.

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### **Will Byrnes says**

This is my first venture into Doig's fiction. He is known as the definitive novelist of Montana, in the same way that Pat Conroy is the writer most associated with South Carolina. In anticipation of visiting Montana later this year (2010), it seemed appropriate to see what Doig had to say about the place. Of course, it might have required a bit of a time machine to step into the world depicted here. Maybe like reading *Mary Poppins* to get a sense of London.

Brothers Paul, Damon and Toby Milliron live with their father, Oliver, on a homestead in Marias Coulee, Montana. Mom had succumbed to a burst appendix, and the house was in dire need of an organizing force. Enter Rose Llewellyn and her brother Morris Morgan, late of Minneapolis. Rose, recently widowed and eager for a new start in a new place, comes to Montana to work as a housekeeper to the Milliron family. The foppish, ultra-urban Morgan tags along. East (of a sort) meets West. Urban meets rural. Intellectual meets physical.

I was reminded of *Little House* and of a very 1950s/1960s family entertainment sensibility. I was half expecting Rose to descend on an umbrella. And the house-maintenance-challenged Oliver would have fit quite nicely into say, *Bonanza*, or the Donna Reed show.

But the core here is the coming of age of Paul, 13 when we first meet him. He faces some of the usual challenges of young men, a bully in particular. But Rose and Morris light him up like a lantern and he glows like a light in the dark. Morris has a world of knowledge to go along with his impressive moustache. Rose, whose habit of whistling while she works informs the book's title, has a warmth that emanates as she cleans more than dust from the Milliron home. But there is a secret to Rose and Morris, a bit of shadow on their lightly-explained past.

The story is joyful and warm without becoming too icky-sweet. Doig focuses very much on language, with Paul and Morris as his lenses, and tells a bit about the life of a working farmer in a dry land. Destiny resides as a theme as well, but lightly. Paul is very well drawn, although I would have liked seeing him grappling with the perils of the opposite sex a lot more. I quite enjoyed the book and will dig through the piles of books in our vast stores for more works by Doig.

April 9, 2015 - Ivan Doig passed away. Here is a piece on him from the NY Times

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### **Renata says**

Reading this story made me wonder again what are the stories we want to tell about our country's history and the people who settled the west? Doig reminds us that many of the homesteaders were intelligent, inquisitive and adventurous, all willing to work harder than most of us can imagine to live a full life and what we came to call the American dream - to claim land of their own. This novel reminds me of Wallace Stegner in the

way the author richly describes the life of the mind of the characters. It reminds me Heartland by Haruf - although there is no central tragedy to pull the characters' lives together. There is a rich and quiet humor but I feel he has simplified the story greatly - it is also much like the stories of Fred Chappell (southern) *I Am One of You Forever*, or *Farewell, I'm bound to Leave You* - strong stories of place. I need to think on this one some more.

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### **Magrat Ajostiernos says**

3,5/5

Aunque me decepcionó el final, la mayor parte del libro lo disfruté un montón. Es una historia sencilla y tranquila sobre un viudo con 3 hijos a principios del siglo XX en Montana, el mundo de la escuela rural es el epicentro de la historia y ese punto nostálgico me conquistó.

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### **Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says**

This was my first Ivan Doig, and it was an unexpected delight. Doig's deliciously droll delivery and richly drawn characters make him the kind of storyteller we all wish for and rarely find. There's something so comforting and lyrical about the subtle repetition of themes and that perfect narrative voice---what Ivan Doig himself calls "the poetry of the vernacular."

The characters in *The Whistling Season* just pop right off the page. I miss them already. I loved Toby, with his sweet innocence and optimism; mischievous and resourceful Damon; scholarly Paul and his obsession with Latin; and the industrious, kindhearted Rose. My favorite character may just be Rose's brother Morris. At first he comes across as a bit of a dandy and a bumbler, but turns out to be a formidable teacher who can rise to any challenge. His scholarly manner of speaking just tickled me no end. And then of course, there's the father Oliver. He's the one solid, stable figure in the story, keeping it together for his three motherless boys.

*The Whistling Season* is a love story in every way. It's about love of family, love of learning, love of nature and the changing seasons, and especially, love of good old-fashioned humor.

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### **Margitte says**

Right out-of-the-gate: this novel had my toes curling, my smile circling itself right around my head, my hands itching to start writing my thoughts down. My word, dear author, how you got me back into a wholesome zone with your wordsmithery.

Paul Milliron. 1952. There was a fire in the sky. It was the year of the Soviet Union and the Sputnik. *The Russians in their kettle of gadgetry has sped past the USA into space. Science will be king, elected by panic.*

It was also the year that he as Superintendent of Public Instructions had to make an earth-shattering decision about rural one-room schoolhouses. He remembered 1910 when Halley's comet came to visit as another kind of fire in the sky. The year Mark Twain passed away. He was a thirteen year old school boy at the time in Marias Cooley, Montana. It was the year of Morrie in his life.

1909-1910. Yes, a tinch of good ole' homestead wholesomeness covered the farmlands of the dryland prairie farms below the Montana skies. There was a little bit of a twitch: Morrie Morgan was there - the University of Chicago schollar-cum-chicken house cleaner, melodiously articulating his cultured words. The Thucididian orator who pleaded Paul's case against Father's sense of honor, and he did this with the lilt he tend to give to his most soaring notions.

To Paul, it was like hearing their father meet up with himself. Morrie *was lightly built, and an extraordinary amount of him was mustache. It was one of those maximum ones such as I had seen in pictures of Rudyard Kipling, a soup-strainer and a lady-tickler and a fashion show, all in one.*

There was father's laugh. Anything funny had to prove it to his nose first. A willing, but dubious cook. Mealtimes were a kind of tribal low point for the Milliron-tribe where this widower and his three sons Paul, Damon, and Toby *had to contemplate whatever Father had managed to fight onto the table this time.* As part of the tribe there was Houdini the dog, *barking so loud he staggered around in circles* when he got excited. Their only salvation was aunt Eunice's cooking each Sunday, where chicken drumsticks, the Missouri T-bones, had a place of honor on their plates and palate.

From Manitowoc, Wisconsin, to Marias Coulee in Montana. New territory, new future in farming. But then Mother passed away, leaving Olivier Milliron and his three young boys to fend for themselves. Eventually Father got the idea of a housekeeper when he noticed a want-ad in the *Westwater Gazette*. The ad claimed:

*Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite*

Father said: "Paul, get out your pen. We have to draft a surrender."

*"By circumlocution," Father said, which I (Paul the narrator) resolved to look up. "I want you boys, "he tapped Damon with the comb, "to tend to your manners over there. It's good practice for when our general domestication happens."*

Well, manners was a different ball game at school, where the three Millirons constantly had to endure the teasing about the nonbiting housekeeper. ("Does she come with a muzzle?" "Is she so old she's a gummer?") Paul's only fellow seventh grader, Carnelia Craig, was front in line. She was unfairly deposited among unruly peasants such as the Marias Coulee one-room schoolhouse attendants instead of putting her in charge of Russia. *Paul comprehended more of Carnelia's lofty approach to life, jaded as it was, than Paul did of his father's latest castles in the air.*

And that is how Rose Llewellyn and Morrie Morgan , a brother and sister team, entered the dialogue. It was the first sign of a new destiny.

In between the human interactions, the pathetic fallacies in nature would from time to time intervene: the wind would practice for winter in October; sometimes the sky would be guiltlessly empty. Even the wind would have nothing to say, for once then. The clouds became moody. The weather would throw a fit.

Nobody saw it coming. The teacher ran off with that preacher, hopped on the train with that sky pilot. Baggy Miss Adelaide Trent have become Sister Jubal.

"Destiny strikes again," Oiver said wearily.

*"GOOD MORNING, YOUNG SCHOLARS,"* the new teacher said. *Three dozen of schoolchild ears took a considerable moment to adjust to that form of address, to that new source of articulation at the front of the class...*

Somewhere along the way, Chaucer, that book-laden pilgrim to Canterbury sneaked in. *Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach*, to which Oliver Milliron --post haste to reason and a granary of knowledge... or post partum to hope... or post mortem to the good intentions-- replied *But all be that he was a philosopher/Yet had he but gold in coffer.*"

It was the year when promises were made up down and sideways. A year of new beginnings with words, oh the words, right when the heavens were going to speak in a tongue of fire.

It became a bittersweet satorial journey of a widowed father and his three sons and what happened to make them the men they would become.

I don't want to say much more about the plot. I just want to add that it was one of the most atmospheric, gripping tales I have ever read. What started off as an innocent memory...

That's all I'm giving away.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. This novel was the perfect choice to start my reading year with. I simply fell in love with words. Again. Mix a little bit of Kent Haruf, and a little bit of Willa Cather, a splash of Richard Russo with a barrel full of Ivan Doig, and you're set for inexplicable excellence.

Happy New Year to everyone!

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## **Barbara says**

This is a beautiful book. Doig's use of language is thoughtful and clever. Sly, quiet jokes are tucked into the text here and there and if you read too fast, you might read right past a good laugh. The story is composed of a perfect blend of both the joy and trouble that make up life and work out to be joy overall ("I laughed, I cried," as they say, but it's true here!). Doig evokes, as always, what it meant in times past to be part of a community. But this time, he gives hope to all of us rootless wanderers disconnected from family that we, too, can become a valued part of a community. Halley's comet serves as a symbol of illumination passing beautifully through lives and moving on, both in Mark Twain's 75 years on earth and in the itinerant teacher's one school year in Marias Coulee, Montana. Alternatively, it's a symbol of the persistence of all good things in the universe, because it inexorably returns every 75 years. Sputnik serves as symbol of technology separating communities and the drive to consolidate all the matters of daily life in order to be effective and cheap--as seen here in all of us sharing our delight with reading disembodied over the internet! But, "the universe desires light," and the book's ending holds out hope that the force-of-nature comet will return to triumph over the artificial satellite. And, if you're on this site, you're probably one of those lovers of language who will recognize your feelings about learning language as a child in Paul's delight in the study of Latin and its connections to English.

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## **megan says**

The oldest of three brothers growing up in Montana during the early 1900s narrates this wonderful and joyful story. Paul Milliron's widower father sends for a housekeeper in Minnesota after reading an add that says "Can't Cook; Doesn't Bite" in their local newspaper. The housekeeper, Rose, moves to Montana with her brother Morty and the book really takes off from there. I started reading this book thinking that the tone would be a lot darker but it was actually a really uplifting book--I especially loved the way Ivan Doig

captured all the relationships in the book--between the sons and their father, between the boys as brothers and especially between the boys and Rose & Morty. I can't recommend this book enough.

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## **Betsy Robinson says**

After you reach an age where you have enough history to look back on as an elder to your young self, there is a tendency to do so—seeing things from a perspective you could not have known and aware of your limitations at the time. Sometimes my experience doing this is so vivid that I wonder if, in the truth of nonlinear time that physicists posit is real, young me is sensing old me and if this was the whispers I remember hearing as a kid—what I secretly called "my old woman in the sky." Maybe I was really here now talking to me then.

Well, Ivan Doig has written a book that contains both voices—a man in 1957 looking back at his one-room schoolhouse days in Marias Coulee, Montana, 1909 to 1910—and it is absolutely charming, captivating, and seductively warm. In short, I *loved* it!

First-person storyteller Paul Milliron, in 1957, a school administrator, looks back on his childhood with his widowed father, two younger brothers, and the amazing housekeeper/teacher Rose Llewellyn /Morrie Morgan duo who positively sparkle with iconoclastic character. Paul is a prodigy who loves Latin, remembers all of his dreams, and has "blindsight"—which, even if Doig didn't intend it, allows me my theory about hearing a whispering older version of himself.

Technically the transitions from 1957 to a vivid and present childhood are impeccable. This book is a perfect mix of good storytelling (with a wonderfully unexpected plot twist at the eleventh hour), sweet nostalgia, and intellectual edge. Ah, a full meal!

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## **Donna says**

I was charmed by this book when I first started reading it. Something about the story and the nostalgic narrative reminded me a little of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But unlike that classic, this book didn't have the depth or a focal point such as the racial inequality in a Southern town and the resulting injustices. Instead, this book had a middle-aged narrator looking back to his childhood in Montana during 1909, in a warm-hearted story about a widowed father and his three sons doing their best to carry on after losing the mother a year earlier. The emphasis was on their family and the trials and tribulations of growing up in that place during that time when dry farming and a one room schoolhouse were challenging enough without missing a beloved wife and mother.

The family had just reached a delicate balance in their lives when something happened that changed everything. The father, Oliver, saw an ad for a housekeeper who claimed she didn't cook, but wouldn't bite. Intrigued and needing help, Oliver answered the ad, and next thing he knew, the new housekeeper, Rose, had arrived from across the country, unexpectedly bringing along her brother, Morrie, a highly educated man, curiously content to do manual labor. As hoped, Rose whipped the neglected house into order, a regular dust buster if not a cook, much to Oliver's delight, but dismay where his stomach was concerned. And much to the sons' dismay, gossip and teasing became rampant in the schoolhouse, concerning the housekeeper, a widow, spending so much time in their widowed father's home. Then everyone had bigger things to gossip about when the teacher ran off with the traveling preacher and a replacement needed to be found before the school was forced to close. Rose's brother, Morrie, was thrust into the position to either sink or swim.

Nobody could have predicted all that would happen next in that one room schoolhouse which held the hopes of the next generation in grades one through eight.

Maybe this was all very exciting for Oliver and his thirteen year old son Paul, the book's narrator, as well as for Paul's younger brothers, Damon and Toby. But for this reader, while I was charmed by all the characters and was rooting for them, and while I enjoyed the closeness of their family which I envied, I was also a little impatient with this even keeled story. It wasn't until the very end that anything out of the ordinary happened. Which isn't to say I didn't enjoy reading about this family. But I needed something more dramatic or climactic to happen along the way than this running account of those months during their life. And except for an aunt and a bully with an even bigger bully for a father, everyone was so darn nice, if flawed. I hate to complain about this since I'm always complaining about books with unlikable main characters, but I guess I prefer something between the two extremes, especially in the absence of dramatic turns in the story.

Still, this book kept me interested enough throughout and, despite my complaints about it, I looked forward to picking it up to find out what would happen next. And while this was a family drama with plenty of humor, at its core, it was a love letter to one room schoolhouses and a plea against their impending extinction, making it something worth thinking about. It's the first book in a trilogy which surprisingly veers off to focus on Morrie in the next two books, not Paul as he grew up, as I supposed it would.

Recommended for readers who enjoy comfortable family dramas laced with humor and nostalgia, and those looking for a respite from nasty characters you wouldn't want to meet in real life.

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### **Kiwi Begs2Differ \ says**

Why didn't I come across Ivan Doig before? This novel is absolutely beautiful, great writing, full of humor and unforgettable characters, this book is going straight to my favorites shelf.

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