

## A Conversation with William Kittredge September 30, 2006

*William Kittredge was 35 when he stopped ranching on his family's huge Eastern Oregon spread to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop, earning his MFA in 1969. In the subsequent decades he has become a distinctive voice of the Western experience. In his memoirs, essays, and fiction he has explored the legacy of the agricultural West, and the effect of ownership and dominion on the land and people of the region.*

*By 1987, Kittredge had become established nationally as a writer to watch, with a new collection of essays, *Owning It All*, following two collections of short stories, *We Are Not In This Together*, and *The Van Gogh Field*. He published a 1992 memoir about growing up on—and eventually leaving—a vast family ranch in Oregon's Warner Valley, *Hole in the Sky*. He has also written the non-fiction works *Who Owns The West?* and *The Nature of Generosity*. He and his longtime companion, Annick Smith, edited the Montana literary anthology *The Last Best Place*, and he retired from a long career as a professor at the University of Montana in 1997.*

*In fall, 2006, Kittredge's first novel, *The Willow Field*, was published by Knopf. Of that novel, author David James Duncan wrote: "William Kittredge is the bard laureate of the American West, and this novel will be bringing people joy thousands of days from today." In March, 2007, Kittredge was named the winner of the 27<sup>th</sup> annual Los Angeles Times Book Prizes' Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement.*

*Kittredge was interviewed over breakfast at *The Shack* in his longtime home of Missoula, Montana.*

STEPHEN HIRST

Your new novel, *The Willow Field*, just came out. After writing short stories, and memoir and essays for so long, what are some of the challenges you faced in the novel?

WILLIAM KITTREDGE

When I began writing—thirty-some years ago—I thought I would write novels. I imagined being one of these guys, Faulkner or Hemingway,

who would have a novel out every two or three years. Just like that, every two years I'd publish a novel. Sure. I could never figure out how to make a novel work at all. Tried it several times. A friend who looked at one of them told me, "Your agent wouldn't touch this with gloves on."

I started writing essays because I couldn't find ways to include a lot of things I wanted to deal with in short stories. Eventually, nonfiction began to wear out. I must have written every anecdote in my life at least once. I wrote that material to *death*. And when I tried to start a novel, my problem was, I was used to writing about ideas and theories. With *The Willow Field*, I had this business of driving horses to Calgary. And that was all. But, I thought, That's a good thing. It's active. Let's get these guys moving and see what they want to do. As I've told students by the thousands, if your characters have to do what you want them to do, they're just puppets, they're dead. They should get to do what they want to do. If it fucks up the story, too bad, it fucks up the story. But of course it won't really. The characters will bring it to life.

When I was beginning the novel, I didn't even know where this kid lived. I had him quit high school in Reno and get a job at a ranch near Winnemucca. Then he starts screwing the ranch manager's daughter. So the boss tells him, You're gonna marry her or I'm going to kick your ass daily here. Or you can do the smart thing and take this job driving horses to Calgary. The kid takes the job, and meets a woman in Canada. Through all this, the characters came to life in my imagination, to the point where I dreamed about them as if they were real people.

#### HIRST

When you're writing nonfiction, to what extent does fiction—or techniques usually associated with fiction—play a part in your work?

#### KITTREDGE

Fiction and nonfiction are in many ways the same creature. The kind of nonfiction I wrote—first-person memoir—really exists in your head. It's a story. Writers shouldn't invent from whole cloth in nonfiction; they shouldn't make people say things they didn't say. But to what degree is anything nonfiction? It's always my version of the story. I'm the one deciding what to emphasize and what to leave out, organizing the anecdotes. It's a construct that I make up. It's my story. Someone else may write a completely different story after witnessing the same events. There's really no such thing as nonfiction.

What got me writing essays was *Rocky Mountain Magazine*, started in Denver in 1978. The magazine represented a breakthrough for Western writers because it was slick, paid money, and looked like *Esquire* or *GQ*, but it was entirely Western. The editor, Terry McDonnell, called and told me he'd read some short stories I had written, and he wanted me to write an essay for the first issue. It paid seven hundred and fifty bucks, which in those days was huge. I was used to getting ten. I said I'd like to but I couldn't, I didn't know how. He said, "I'll tell ya," and he told me in about three minutes. It's worked ever since. It's perfectly formulaic, but a formula that works, an exact description of human decision-making, how we're continually revising ourselves, telling ourselves a story and revising that story, re-imagining it, re-seeing it.

Terry asked for some ideas, and I earnestly wrote up about three, each on a single-spaced page. And I gave him three or four titles, no ideas attached. He called back and said, "I want something called 'Redneck Secrets,' (one of the titles). I want to be able to put that on the cover." So I said, "O.K., sure, no problem." Then I hung up and I thought to myself, Fuck, what are redneck secrets?

A good editor is often able to see what you're trying to do even before you really understand, and place it in a context which clarifies it. In the revision process they can get you out of trouble, and point out things that are weak or not well-thought-out. I sent in "Redneck Secrets," the first essay I ever wrote, and Terry found some things he thought were awkward and pointed out what was spongy, the soft spots. So then I went *way* over the top re-thinking those spots and came up with the most outrageous parts in the essay. Terry called and said, "The new stuff's great! Wish the rest of the essay was up to it."

#### HIRST

What do you think are the essential characteristics of a redneck?

#### KITTREDGE

They're disenfranchised people, often in the historic West of Scotch or Irish descent. Kicked out of Scotland and Ireland, kicked out of the Carolinas, kicked out of the Ozarks, pressing on and on. They tend to be libertarian, anti-government. They're angry, perhaps justifiably, furious because of the ways they've been fucked over. If you go to breakfast out where Hugo's old bar used to be, suddenly you're not in upscale Missoula. Different kinds of people come into the restaurant, it's a different world.

It's more of a redneck place. I knew that world; I grew up in it. Our upscale world is speeding off into the future, and that world—they're not on the airship yet.

SHAWN VESTAL

You wrote about writers trying to get past the romantic “lie” of the West, trying to write about the region in a clear-eyed way. How do you write about a place without being limited as a regional writer?

KITTREDGE

It's said that if you want to have a hardback bestseller, you have to write a book that sells between Boston and Baltimore. That's where they buy hardbacks. On the other hand, writers can live anywhere. Richard Ford lived in Montana for only a few years and yet *Rock Springs* is dead on the money, one of the four or five finest recent books about the contemporary West. But Richard was lucky enough to move on before he could be labeled “regional,” which seems like another way of saying “minor.”

I didn't understand the emotional life of other places, and I'm not going to write about people I don't understand. When I began this novel, I knew I would write about the West, and probably the West that I grew up in, not the West as it is now. This novel really gets away from the “cowboy West.” In any event, that world is the only one I've ever understood well enough to write about.

The mythology of the West is artificial. Those kinds of cowboy conflicts did exist, but those silly, truth-and-righteousness stories never, ever happened—there were no Lone Rangers riding around. Years ago someone pointed out that there were more gunshot killings in a trailer village on the outskirts of Missoula in the last ten years than Dodge City had in ten years of its gun-fighting heyday.

VESTAL

You've noted that people in your hometown in Oregon consider you a traitor in some ways, because of your writing about the agricultural destruction of the area. Are you troubled by that?

KITTREDGE

I'd feel troubled if I hadn't had the guts to say it. We did a lot of damage there, in short order. We lost a foot of topsoil, the fields were

going saline, we had to fertilize in various elaborate ways. Two-thirds of the water birds are gone—there had been enormous flocks when we first got there. And it didn't have to go down the drain like that. If someone doesn't say something, it will just continue. So I don't think I'm a traitor. Some of the practices in place now have to be changed. And they will be changed.

HIRST

Native tribes factor into some of your earliest memories, as you reveal in your memoir. How did that affect your early sense of ownership or mastery of the land?

KITTREDGE

When I was a kid, there were some native people who lived half a mile from us. In *Owning it All* I write about them, about an Indian girl dying, and watching them bury her in their graveyard. But those people, I guess they were northern Shoshone, were gone by the time I was six or seven years old. Another fellow, Don Pancho, worked for my father and his wife cleaned house for my mother, and their children were our friends, three little kids that were playmates, you know. We hung out with them about every day, somehow missing the idea that they were disenfranchised compared to us. We thought we were all basically in the same boat, except my mother wasn't cleaning house for the Indian lady, whose house was actually tenting over a frame. We may have had some smidgen of an idea that some of those people were oppressed, but nobody said anything about it. We assumed that was the nature of things. That was how American kids were educated to accept inequality.

VESTAL

There's a romance about the circle of writers who were in Missoula during the 1970s and '80s—you, Richard Hugo, James Welch. What was it like to be in that vibrant community of writers?

KITTREDGE

It was like a big party. And it rolled on and on and on and on, out of control a lot of the time. There wasn't much talk of writing. Once in a while somebody would bring something up—mostly guys like myself who had the romantic notion about writing novels. "You guys get to write a novel, I wish I could write one." But it was fun. We were young,

and destroyed a lot of relationships. The university seemed to expect that sort of behavior. I used to say, “God bless Dylan Thomas; he set the standard for us all.”

Hugo came in 1964, when he was 40 years old, and replaced Leslie Fiedler. Fiedler had been in Missoula since 1946. He was a great teacher. Fiedler changed the state, in lots of ways. You go out to Sidney or Circle and you’ll find lawyers or school teachers or librarians who were students of Fiedler’s. He was radical, politically, and those people are all over out there, still espousing free speech and maximum liberty.

Hugo had never taught. He was a student of Roethke’s at the University of Washington around the same time as Jim Wright. And right off the bat, he had Jim Welch. He had Rick DeMarinis and Ed Lahey. They were the stars. But Hugo—these were his first classes. This guy didn’t know what he was doing at all. DeMarinis wrote a very funny piece about Hugo’s classes, about Hugo smoking cigarettes, lighting one off another and walking around the back of the room, staring out the window at co-eds. But Hugo knew what he knew. He was kind of the harbormaster for all those parties.

#### VESTAL

What role did drinking play in the work and lives of writers you’ve known?

#### KITTREDGE

In my own case, it was some kind of self-medication. It started on the ranch, because I wanted to be a writer and couldn’t see any way it was possible. I wanted to get out. *Silent Spring* came out and with it the feeling that, Jesus Christ, we’re ruining the world when we thought we were doing God’s work. Turned out our farming and grazing practices weren’t exactly what God had in mind.

I had an extended—I guess you’d call it an anxiety attack. The only way to kill the anxiety was to drink. I think it happens to a lot of people. Carver was that way. Hugo was that way. Hell, everybody was. Welch was.

In the Warner Valley when I was a little kid, my father had a guy who worked for him who was a stone alcoholic. He was running water on these big fields. My dad had me in the pickup when I was about six years old, and we went driving down to where there were about 200 acres flooded. Here comes this guy in his old Jeep pickup, drunk. And

he looked at my dad and said, “Well, shit, *you* get drunk sometimes.” And my Dad looks at him and said, “That’s right, and I sober up sometimes too.”

That was kind of the model for many of us around here. You’ve got to sober up. You can’t write drunk. That accounts for the fact that not much got done by some people.

Drinking brought on release. It seemed like fun. It seemed like an important part of life. Hugo sobered up and wondered what ordinarily sober people did with all their time, how they used up the days. Some people quit altogether. Others just got it under control. Others drowned.

#### VESTAL

*The Last Best Place* is an iconic Montana anthology. How did it come to be?

#### KITTREDGE

Annick and I went to the history conference in Helena, and met a bunch of people. Driving back, we got the idea it’d be fun to do an anthology. We didn’t know enough, but now we knew people who did. So we asked Jim Welch and he said he’d do it, and asked some other people and pretty soon we formed a board. We had a meeting, kind of kicked around what ought to be in there. It was pretty clear that nobody had a clear idea how to do it. We all had areas of specialty, and we split up the material. Everybody started Xeroxing pages out of things we had found, eventually 5 or 6,000 pages. We had meetings about every six months. It was a great pleasure. We became good friends. It was like a club.

The only pay we got was meetings in great places, which were underwritten by grants, places like Chico Hot Springs. Slowly we put it together. We made mistakes. There were a lot of people who should have been in there who aren’t, who just missed. Rick Bass should have been in—somehow he didn’t come on the radar at that point.

And we didn’t have a title. We were actually in a trailer house at Chico Hot Springs. We had finished the whole proceeding, and we had the book. We had a bottle of gin, and it was twilight, and we were sitting there drinking and I was smoking cigarettes and trying to think of a title. In the air there was Hugo’s *The Last Good Kiss*, and Lincoln—the United State as the last best hope of mankind. I said, “The Last Best Place” and everybody said, Okay, that’ll do.

HIRST

You wrote in the essay “Buckaroos” that people aren’t going away to seek their fortunes anymore on a grand scale—that nobody believes that the Beatles or big-time rodeo is going to save them. Do you still believe that?

KITTREDGE

No, not necessarily. The salvation of the world is those kids at the university or high school who are really trying to engage the world—see it fresh and come up with workable options and a sense of a world that’s decent and fair. At the same time, there’s a lot of anger from people who are disenfranchised and left out of the equation, and they get tired of the smart kids, of computer geeks, the enviros; they get tired of all this stuff.

We live under schizophrenic conditions. We live in a world where, if I have a house for sale and you want to buy it and I don’t try to get as much as I can for it, I’m regarded as crazy, and if you don’t try to get it as cheap as you can, you’re regarded as crazy. On the other hand, we sit around and have meaningful discussions like this, which involve nothing but our ideas and faiths and hopes, and you go home and there’s your mother and there’s your father, and there’s this whole generous, giving, thinking society. Whereas out here in the world it’s this completely other thing. The problem is coming up with a way to translate that private, generous world into the public world. It’s not a matter of economics; it’s a matter of emotional commitment.

VESTAL

You wrote in “Who Owns the West,” “It is the proper work of our national leaders to bring us to confrontation against our own coldheartedness.” What’s your assessment of where this country stands in relation to its coldheartedness?

KITTREDGE

I think our society is rapidly changing—for the better. There are polls showing that cultural creatives, the people interested in art and ideas, in 1975 numbered about 10 million in the United States. Now there are 50, 55, 60 million. It’s a huge change. If that number doubles again, the whole ballgame’s different.

So I tend to feel pretty positive, and at the same time George Bush— Did you hear Barry Lopez yesterday? He was supposed to talk about his book, and, instead, he ranted for 20 minutes about the torture bill Congress just approved. He said, “For 217 years, this would have been unthinkable in the United States. Now it’s OK. What the hell is wrong?” One of the things that’s good is people like Barry making statements like that, which they didn’t used to make.

#### HIRST

You’ve written about people taking pride in what they do. Do you feel it’s easier to take pride on a ranch or when you’re writing?

#### KITTREDGE

A lot of people ask me, “Don’t you wish you were back on the ranch right now?” Oh yeah, I’d like to live 300 miles from a bookstore. No, I don’t wish I was back on the ranch. If I did I’d probably be there.

One of the characters in this novel says, after 30 years, when you’ve gone through the same ritual 30 times, where this is June, this is July, this is August, this is September, you realize that you’re going to be going through these processes, branding and haying and so on, for the rest of your life. Some people find that enormously rewarding and some people find it enormously stifling.

I’m one of the people who moves on. No, I don’t miss it.

There’s a lot of romance connected to ranching. People forget. I remember the first thing I did when I got out of the Air Force and went back to the Warner Valley. We had to collect 6,200 mother cows for brucellosis testing. These big bang-headed mothers. And it was January. It was sleeting, the mud about five inches deep, the cow shit about three inches on top of it. After couple of weeks of that, the romance kind of goes out of it.

It just depends on your temperament and what you want. I fell in love with books—about my junior year in college—with ideas, with writing, with the idea of being a writer. Took a class from Bernard Malamud. He was teaching five classes of comp. I lived in the Phi Delt house, and we were all jocks. These guys on baseball rides, basketball rides. First-year freshmen. And they had to take Malamud’s class.

Routinely, first class, he’d say, “All right, who’s here on an athletic scholarship? You guys, next time show up in running shoes and sweats.

Would you please? I'm not going to have you in here. You're going to go out and run around the building and at the end of the quarter I'm going to give you an A. This is not a problem for me, and I hope it's not a problem for you. I will not have you in here. You cause too much trouble, you don't give a shit about this, you might as well get in shape."

And no one ever called him on it.

VESTAL

What are your thoughts as you look back on your years of teaching writing?

KITTREDGE

I used to say every bar I went into, there's an ex-student behind the bar. But it's a great pleasure. Some of them have gone on and been real good. Maybe one in a hundred. People criticize writing programs. They used to say that a third of the people who got out of Iowa were functionally illiterate, and it might be true. People say, How can you justify that? Surely being in a writing program is at least going to make people more empathetic, better read. It doesn't hurt anything. I think it's a good thing. Hugo used to say it's the only place where your life might be taken seriously

People complain about workshop stories. I never identified what a workshop story was. I know that sitting on a ranch in Eastern Oregon by yourself is a goddamned poor way to learn how to do it. You can learn it a lot faster by going to school and talking to people who know something. Things seeps in after a while, a way of thinking, which somehow works for you.