

## Reading Guide

The Whistling Season

by Ivan Doig

### Praise for *The Whistling Season*:

“Doig is in the best sense an old-fashioned novelist: You feel as if you’re in the hands of an absolute expert at story-making, a hard-hewn frontier version of Walter Scott or early Dickens. The landscape and characters are vivid, the prose flawless, and like the earlier masters, Doig imbues each scene and his spacious story with deep emotional understanding and a sense of possibility and personal adventure. *The Whistling Season* is a book that strives for more than beauty, which it achieves: It reaches for joy.”—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Doig has given us yet another memorable tale set in the historical West but contemporary in its themes and universal in its insights into the human heart.”—*The Seattle Times*

“Doig’s writerly ambition is less in plotting than evoking, and it is his obvious pleasure to recreate from the ground up—or the sky down—a prior world, a prior way of being. The land and its people—the family, the neighbors—are laid out before us with a fresh, natural openness. We get uncluttered space, the no-nonsense solidity of things, a close-up registering of weather and the movement of the sun . . . Earth-seeking writers like Willa Cather and Norman Maclean come to mind.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

### Introduction:

"Can't cook but doesn't bite." It was only the line atop a classified advertisement in a weekly newspaper, that of "an A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" seeking to relocate to Montana. But for young Paul Milliron, his two younger brothers, and his widower father, as well as his rambunctious fellow students in their one-room school, it spelled abracadabra.

Paul's is the voice of the book: a bit wry, contemplative, and literally bedeviled by dreams--lifelong, he has had the disturbing knack of vividly recalling the episodes of imagination that swirl in his mind at night. By 1957, Paul has risen to become the state superintendent of education, strapped for budget in what he knows is going to be a changed world of everything he has believed in "eclipsed by this Russian kettle of gadgetry orbiting overhead." In his heart he knows the powerful political pressures on him to "consolidate" the rural one-room schools will be the death-knell of those perky idiosyncratic little institutions such as the one that produced him at Marias Coulee. Before his crucial convocation of rural educators when he will give them his decisions, though, he impulsively drives out to Marias Coulee, now a scatter of mostly abandoned homesteads just beyond the northern fringe of a successful irrigation project. There the story begins, with Paul swept back in memory to 1910 when the Milliron family's hard-bargained new housekeeper, Rose Llewellynn, and her unannounced brother--two of the most original characters to grace recent fiction--stepped down from the train, "bringing several kinds of education to the waiting four of us."

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Does the life of a homesteader in 1907 Montana, as it is 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 own education or the education of children today? What are the advantages and 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 the great teachers you have had, 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 (mostly good and decent) characters believable? Compare this novel to other contemporary novels you have read recently. Are there any other contemporary writers to whom you would compare Doig?
9. Discuss the character of Brose Turley. What does he represent, and what purpose does he serve in the novel? 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?

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Discussion questions written by Ben White