

# IVAN DOIG

(1939–2015)



Ivan Doig was one of the most respected writers of the American West. He wrote particularly about his home state of Montana and his 16 books won him the Wallace Stegner Award (2007) and the Western Literature Association Lifetime Distinguished Achievement Award. We've read and reviewed a number of Doig's books in *TRE* including *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, *Bucking the Sun*, *Mountain Time*, and *Whistling Season*, and recommend them to you. The Montana books for which he was so well-known center on the rigors of life of country people, infused with humanity set against the grand scale of Montana.

## THE WORK SONG 9

Ivan Doig (2010, 275pp, Riverhead Books)

*The Work Song* is set in Butte, Montana in 1919. The city at that time had a population of about 100,000 (it's one-third of that today) and the landscape was dominated by Anaconda Copper Company and its copper mines. Doig brings back Morrie Morgan, a rural school teacher from *The Whistling Season* as his protagonist. Morrie arrives in Butte without a job, without possessions (his trunk has been lost) and low on funds, and settles into a boarding house run by an attractive widow, Grace Faraday, whose husband was killed in a mine fire. Morrie, on the lam from Chicago gangsters who believe they've been had after he made a big winning bet on a sports wager, gets acquainted with Grace's other boarders, Griff and Hoop, two retired miners who help him with what's going on in Butte. He quickly lands a job with a funeral home as a crier at funerals, but then finds his calling at the public library run by an eccentric, tough old rancher named Sandy Sandison, who has the job because of his coveted personal book collection. As Morrie settles in to his job and life in Butte, he is also shadowed by a couple of hired goons, worried that outsiders showing up in town may be troublesome agitators. With this mix of characters, Doig builds an entertaining story built around impending union management difficulties, including that of composing a rallying strike song (thus the title *Work Song*) to brace the workers for dealing with hard times. Doig weaves a good story, finding numerous strains to portray in Butte in 1919. The period right after World War I was a contentious time in America with labor strife, outbreaks of anarchism, and miners from all over the world in Butte for the high wages and creating their own neighborhoods—Dublin Gulch for the Irish, Meaderville for the Italians, Finnville, and so on. His story, and the characters in *Work Song* touch on all the pressure points while providing a read that features great dialogue and characterizations, and a wonderful portrayal of time and place. (SHA)