

## IN MONTANA, THERE'S NOTHING BETWEEN ME AND WHERE I WANT TO GO.

by Mark Costler

"In Montana," says novelist, essayist and critic Walter Kirn, who wrote the novel-turned-film *Up in the Air*, "there's nothing between me and where I want to go. It's not just the big horizons, it's that there's nothing blocking you from reaching those horizons."

Kirn, who has lived in Montana for 20 years, wrote *Up in the Air* in a cabin tucked against the Crazy Mountains. "Montana," he says, is "big outside and it makes you feel big inside. I can see farther and I can imagine further. Montana is one of the last best places to actually feel your own imagination working without the intrusions of a million others."

"I work with words and words are easily crowded out in the hurly-burly of modern American life, but they still mean something here—whether it's somebody promising to do something or just street corner conversations. Those conversations sound a bit more vibrant and distinct somehow."

Kirn is tapping into the organic connection between Montana's vast, sweeping landscape and a clarity of interior spaces that has attracted and anchored a parade of writers—Richard Ford, Richard Hugo, Annick Smith, Thomas McGuane, William Stafford, Judy Blunt, Bill Kittredge, Maile Meloy, Jim Harrison, Debra Magpie Earling, Ivan Doig, Jim Welch, Norman Maclean. They came—or stayed—to feel the grandeur of open space. They found the sense of wonder that can only exist in a land so close to its untamed past.

That's the thing about Montana—you come up over a ridge or drive downhill into a cluster of warm lights, and there it is: nothing you've ever seen before. Maybe it's a herd of bison grazing beside a steaming fumarole in America's oldest national park, or a wolf trotting along a sinuous thread of blue stream. Maybe it's a buffalo jump, where pre-contact Native Americans made possible an entire way of life. Maybe you crest a rise and suddenly see five different mountain ranges, blue and unknowable, marching toward different wild horizons. Maybe the rodeo's in town.

In Montana, the sweep and scope of the landscape, the abundance of wildlife and the tactile nearness of history don't just feed your mind with new images, they provoke new ways of imagining. These are moments that begin to change the way you see the world. You can't schedule them, but Montana allows them to happen.

Alex Smith will be trying to capture just those moments this summer when he co-directs, with his brother Andrew, the film version of *Winter in the Blood*, Jim Welch's wrenching and redemptive novel about life on one of Montana's seven Indian reservations.

"We're going to have a separate camera to capture the magic of the moment," Smith says. "I want to get more of the impressionistic quality of any given day in Montana."

Having grown up in the state, Smith understands intuitively that sense of expectancy. "People here are game. They're up for an adventure, because that is by definition what's going to happen if you head out the door. That's why we're determined to shoot the movie in Montana, because of that expectancy of adventure that's everywhere. I think there's real value in knowing that if I go on a little stroll it's guaranteed to have surprises."

It's this interaction with the land, Smith says, that allows Montanans to soar over barriers that, in our busy lives, separate inner and outer spaces.

"You're dwarfed by the landscape so you can actually become part of it easier. It's not all about humanity; there aren't humans everywhere you look. It's not about ideas, or interactions or body language or negotiations. It's quieter. You don't have to shout to be heard. You can hear the day."

Judy Blunt, whose prize-winning memoir *Breaking Clean* is a hymn to her painful separation from the enormous landscape of her youth in Eastern Montana—where the stars come down to all the horizons—says that learning to hear quietness is the true gift of the land.

"Some people are looking for a place to be quiet. Montana is where that possibility is absolutely alive, the same as it was for the first homesteaders. We haven't commodified it. For people who are willing to set aside common pleasures—things like margaritas on the beach—and find something that is at heart an American experience—a Native American experience, an early American experience—it's certainly more essentially American than they're going to find anywhere else," says Blunt.

"There's something about those open spaces that allows for an expansion of the soul. People who live here look out at the land and see something that's full and ripe. If you are willing to see beyond what you are trained to see, coming here can be a life-changing experience."

Montana's vast landscapes are full of small places that hold a piece of someone's heart. Mountain lakes with cool, reflective surfaces. Glacier-fed streams laced with cutthroat trout, pouring from hanging valleys that feel like a secret every time you find one. A restaurant in the deep blue glow of the

highway lights, where warm huckleberry pie starts to melt the homemade ice cream on the plate beside it. Coming into a place like this, you can't imagine what will reveal itself to you. You won't know until you're in the middle of it.

Debra Magpie Earling, who wrote the acclaimed novel *Perma Red*, found one such place after hearing about it from friends. "I didn't know there were petroglyphs that could only be seen from Flathead Lake, but I heard about them," Earling says. "So we got on a pontoon boat and headed across the lake toward the area where we heard the petroglyphs were. Rising above us were red cliffs and you could see these old stories on the wall. They were so beautiful that I jumped in and swam to them. For me that's Montana, those pictographs and petroglyphs. People who have been here for centuries marked the land with stories. It's beyond magic. It's mysterious and wondrous. It's the stuff of legends."

Earling finds those moments of sudden awareness not only on the land, but also in its people. "One of the most interesting

*From downtown Livingston, Paradise Valley leads on to Yellowstone National Park.*



things about Montana are the pockets of intellectual communities throughout the state. You have people who are real maritime sailors in Polson on Flathead Lake. You have the cowboy intellectuals who are old-time historians. There are the elders who tell the old stories, and people on the reservations who preserve the languages of a different time."

The mistake would be to assume Montana is all rough-and-tumble, that revelations only appear on a hike to some distant horizon. For a land that moves to rhythms as ancient as hoofbeats and the howls of wolves, "Montana has become a pretty sophisticated place," Kirn says. "When you want a little urban fix, when you want that which can only be had in a sophisticated setting, you're never that far from it. But you're



Sunset in Glacier National Park

never so close to it that it's reaching out to claim you when you don't want it to."

The state's remarkable human element, a mosaic of micro-cultures—Native American tribes; the Irish, Italian and Finnish mining conclaves of Butte; Hutterite farm colonies; the true open range cattle culture of Miles City; western Montana's woodsmen and -women—has, through a shared sense of struggle against often fiercely indifferent weather and terrain, managed to remain at the same time both individualistic *and* cooperative.

"I can pull in to any tavern or gas station anywhere in Montana and, with a basic code of politeness and fundamental human etiquette, make friends, find out what's going on, hear stories," Kirn says. "That's to me the paradox of Montana. It's a vast state that allows you to have life-sized experiences, one-on-one conversations, intimate encounters with your fellow passenger in the car as you drive to Glacier Park, walks down Main Street in which you can feel the whole history of a town."

Montana captivates the imagination of remarkably imaginative people—writers, yes, but actors, directors, musicians, painters, sculptors—not because of what's so obviously here or not here. Rather, creative people keep finding themselves amid unplanned moments of clarity that resound through their lives.

Hear it in William Stafford's poem "Once in the 40's"—hear the pure longing he feels for one of those moments, many years before, when he understood something about himself, in Montana:

We were alone one night on a long road in Montana. This was in winter, a big night, far to the stars. We had hitched, my wife and I, and left our ride at a crossing to go on. Tired and cold—but brave—we trudged along. This, we said, was our life, watched over, allowed to go where we wanted. We said we'd come back some time when we got rich. We'd leave the others and find a night like this, whatever we had to give, and no matter how far, to be so happy again.

It's one thing to read other people sharing these moments, but to truly understand them, you have to put yourself in someplace like Glacier Country and see what happens.

In Glacier Country—the swath of Montana lying west of the continental divide, from the Canadian border in the north to the Bitterroot Valley in the south—rivers are born of towering peaks raking snow from the sky and powered by steep ravines tilting into broad valleys. The Blackfeet call the mountains of the Continental Divide in and around Glacier National Park "the backbone of the world." The road that delivers you to its summit is called Going-to-the-Sun, because it does. When you walk beneath razor ridges to a lake blued by glacial melt, past mountain goats or bighorn sheep grazing



Blackfeet tepees at Saint Mary Lake, Glacier National Park

casually in a meadow of shooting stars and glacier lilies, the timeless state of grace you see all around you is exactly what fueled the Blackfeet's vision.

If Glacier's landscape is sudden and powerful, the clear lapping waters of Flathead Lake, only a few miles away, tell more subtle stories of light and space with their calming waltz. These old tales underlie all the new ones—the arc of a well-struck golf ball against a backdrop of Swan mountain peaks, the zing of a fishing reel announcing a connection to a living, livid creature on the other end of the line.

In Whitefish, a ski town and summer playground just a short drive from Glacier, people are more likely to ask you what you've seen than where you're from. Off-the-boat quality sushi can serve as a prelude to flights of fine wine, topped off by an evening of acoustic finger-picking under the stars. In gourmet coffee shops you mingle with local shop owners, park rangers and river guides jump-starting their days; if you prefer ranch-style flapjacks and bacon and eggs, you'll be sitting with a convivial clutch of locals for that, too.

Broadway talent in one of the northern Rockies' most beautiful theaters, fine art shops next to the hardware store—downtown

Whitefish looks like it feels, as if the town stepped directly from the early 20th century complete with a skate park, trail systems, wi-fi, an aquatic center and every other early 21st-century convenience. Fifty area hotels meet lodging preferences from posh to quaint. An historic train depot welcomes daily Amtrak service from both coasts and everywhere in between.

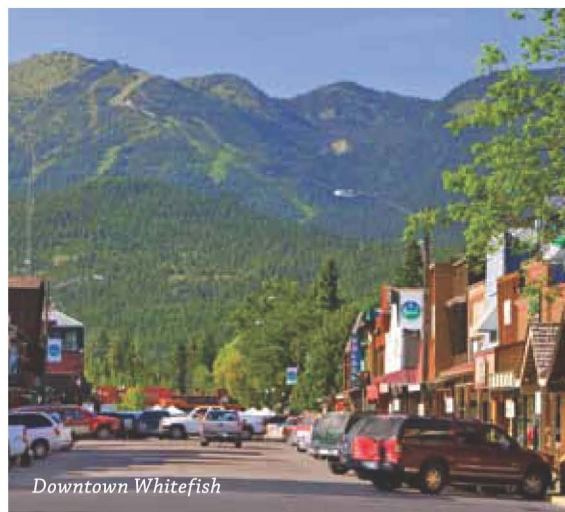
Farther south, bison graze ridges, still coexisting with the Salish and Kootenai tribes. In Missoula, the person next to you at the tavern may be a nationally recognized wildfire expert, a poet or a cutting-edge outdoor athlete. The Bitterroot mountains form a colonnade of blue peaks marching to the south. Deep woods, open valleys and cold streams all lie within minutes of a string of B&Bs, lodges, inns and hotels.

When you visit Whitefish, or anywhere in Glacier Country, stand at the outskirts of town and look around. You'll begin to see what Walter Kirn means—there really is nothing between you and where you want to go. And you can begin to understand why this much nothing is really something.

WHITEFISH: [ExploreWhitefish.com](http://ExploreWhitefish.com), 877.862.3548

GLACIER COUNTRY: [GlacierMT.com](http://GlacierMT.com), 800.338.5072

THE STATE OF MONTANA: [VISITMT.com](http://VISITMT.com), 800.847.4868



*Few states have their own literature; Montana's runs broad and deep, reaching far beyond familiar titles like The Big Sky, The Horse Whisperer and A River Runs Through It and into the lives of its people. Take Glacier Country, for instance, a section of the state that includes the Blackfoot and Bitterroot Rivers, five ski resorts, the Flathead and Blackfeet Indian Reservations, the Seeley-Swan Valley's chain of lakes, and the Crown of the Continent, Glacier National Park. The selected readings that follow are a mere sampling of stories that allow you to anticipate the richness of experiences waiting in Montana:*

### NONFICTION

*Indian Creek Chronicles* – Pete Fromm  
*Tough Trip Through Paradise* – Andrew Garcia  
*One Good Horse* – Tom Groneberg

### HISTORY

*Blackfeet Lodge Tales* – George Bird Grinnell  
*Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*  
– Joseph Kinsey Howard  
*Montana, An Uncommon Land* – K. Ross Toole

### FICTION

*Bitterroot* – James Lee Burke  
*Perma Red* – Debra Magpie Earling  
*Pale Morning Done* – Jeff Hull

### POETRY

*Good Enough* – Victor Charlo  
*The Lady In Kicking Horse Reservoir*  
– Richard Hugo  
*Suddenly, Out of a Long Sleep* – Lowell Jaeger

