Back and Forth with DARE

Ivan Doig

Because the pages of DARE contain numerous citations from both the novels and nonfiction works of Ivan Doig, it is a special pleasure to hear that our volumes have also been of use to him in his writing. We are happy to present an article by this acclaimed author.

Continued on page 2
I muse a bit here about DARE and me, I realize that my wordslinging contributions are just one side of the story. In my work, which now adds up to three nonfiction books and eleven novels, if I fairly often have been DARE’s confidant, the big volumes of lingua Americana have been my frequent companion. Let me count the ways.

—First and foremost, DARE many times has simply served as voice coach as I’ve warmed up for a day’s writing. Getting ready to perform the ventriloquism that animates my fictional narrators—sheep rancher Jick McCaskill in English Creek and Ride With Me, Mariah Montana and one-room-school prodigy and educator-to-be Paul Milliron in The Whistling Season, primarily—I might read ten pages at random (buggy to bull of the woods, say) just to catch the feel of how everyday lingo is made. Exaggeration, punning, humor, ethnic influence—not to mention Frederic Cassidy’s more lofty folk-speech categories of iteration, redundancy, malapropism, onomatopoeia, and so on up front in Vol. I—in the best of times sneak out from the pages to tickle my imagination. Thus, perhaps, Jick says of a herder gifted at picking grazing areas for his sheep that he’s a true grassaroo, and Paul describes the nasty mix of moistureless snow and windblown dirt that he and his brothers are trudging through to the neighboring homestead as snirt, both ultimately returning to their lingual breeding ground as DARE entries.

—The mere availability of DARE and its persevering mission to capture America’s tunes of the tongue have helped to take me back to the homeland of vocabulary: childhood and youth. I’m a descendant of the lariat proletariat; my mother and grandmother were ranch cooks and my father was a hired hand on cattle and sheep ranches both, as was I as a summer hand all through high school and college. My dad, essentially a professional foreman, was a gifted storyteller and quick with bunkhouse humor to stay on good terms with the crews he ran. Growing up at his side as he raised me himself for several years after my mother’s death when I was six, I naturally got earfuls of Montana earthiness as it was spoke. And then came the next figure who shaped my boyhood and ultimately my writing life.

“You’re not sugar nor salt nor nobody’s honey, so the rain will never hurt you,” she crooned to me to ignore our reliably aggravating high-country weather.

“That one goes around looking like she’s been yanked through a knothole backwards,” she huffed about our worst-dressed neighbor.

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illustrating what he calls “the back-and-forth linking Doig to DARE and vice versa.”

It has been said of Shakespeare that when the right word did not already exist, he made it up. As a novelist, I’m with Will, as are the countless creative spirits in Appalachian hollows and Western gulches and city canyons who have so bountifully populated the five volumes of DARE with American lingo. Our lingual distance from the Elizabethan playwright who thought up star-crossed, fancy-free, lackluster, barefaced, laughable, all-knowing, and many another neologism that is now everyday language may seem magnitudinous, but really, it is only the space of the tongue. The play’s the thing, in this case the innate human temptation to play with what we say, so that a squabble accelerating into a fistfight becomes a flibble, a sip of watered coffee extended to a child is lovingly drawn out to a sipe, and a matter that nags at you daily does so six ways from Sunday.

Each of those, not coincidentally, DARE attributes to none other than me as either progenitor or gatherer, along with sixty-four other entries in which I am cited. Holy smokies, as the character Herman the German in my novel-in-the-making which I am cited  as progenitor, the big volumes of DARE have been my frequent companion. Let me count the ways.

The article by Brian Mattmiller in the UW alumni magazine (Summer 2009), ’DARE to Be Done,’ delighted me and brought back memories of Professor Cassidy. As a student, I worked in the English office with Bea Bragstad, who was the secretary to Dr. Quintana in the 1940s. I knew Mr. Cassidy and so many of the wonderful teachers. I was from Milwaukee and Sheboygan County and used the regional ’ainso?’ (that evoked much laughter away from Wisconsin).

Working with the professors in the English Department taught me a lot. Each was brilliant in his or her own way. Although the article refers to Frederic Cassidy’s project beginning in 1965, he was interested and working on the project 20 years before.

Valerie Melius Kunz
Journalist
Riverside, Illinois
And, she confided about the couple dallying together in our wide-eyed little town, “Those two are as close as three in a bed with one kicked out.”

Into my life had come that river of proverbs, my grandmother. I was ten years of age, but a kid’s ears are as old as sin. All of a sudden I knew I was in new territory of life, something like honorary adulthood. Now, besides my Scots-burr storytelling widower father, here was my mother’s mother in this reluctant knot of bloodline they had made, to raise me. And you bet, my ears were busier than ever from then on, with the picture-play of words from this corseted, doughty woman born in 1893—whose formal education had broken off at the third grade—as when the prairie wind would swirl up her dress and she would announce, “Balloon ascension!”

So it is not happenstance that, besides what might be called a lyrical style of my own wording, starting with my first book, the National Book Award finalist This House of Sky, and similarly in my other nonfiction works, Winter Brothers and Heart Earth, and all of my soon to be dozen novels, there is also what I call a poetry of the vernacular in how my characters speak on the page. People who are poor in all else are often rich in language. Certainly that was the lesson of the memorably eloquent everydayness of that pair of imaginative tongues I grew up around. To attain a language that makes a shimmer behind the story—the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of people’s lives coming through—seems to me what Faulkner was up to, and Dickens, and surely Twain; I am glad to tag along after them with swatches of dialogue such as the herder Canada Dan’s complaint against an oblivious tourist caught in the path of a flock of sheep: “It’s getting so a man can’t even herd sheep through town without a turster in the way, ain’t it?”

—Finally, DARE settles arguments magnificently; kapow, and that’s that. A know-it-all friend (okay, he’s an English professor) was certain I misheard or mistyped in calling the drainage ditch beside the highway a barrow pit, rather than a borrow pit, as he insisted he’d heard and read it referred to. Imagine my triumph when I produced the DARE entry extensively credentialing barrow pit as the primary usage, along with the computerized map showing its occurrence dead-center in my native part of Montana.

All in all, then, DARE and I have long been traveling the same byways. Almost literally so in The Bartender’s Tale, in which an eager young oral historian named Del Robertson arrives into the story, and my northern Montana literary province called the Two Medicine country, driving an equipment-packed Gab Lab. Aha, I can hear the loyal legion of DARE fieldworkers who bravely captained camper vans in search of new frontiers of lingo, it’s the Word Wagon!

Well, ‘tis and ‘tisn’t, to try out a locution I’m not sure Shakespeare ever risked. Somewhere in the back of my mind may have been that example of rubber-tired research, but in my kind of fiction I frequently make up my own version of things that turn out to already more or less exist.

Viz., in Prairie Nocturne, the Over There Committee to memorialize the dead of World War...
I, thought up by me for plot purposes, proved to have real-life counterparts in Great Britain and Europe.

Viz., in The Whistling Season, Paul Milliron’s spooky capacity to remember all his dreams all his life, which I flat-dab made up and dubbed mnesia, turned out to be somewhat similar to an actual neurological condition of ungovernable recall.

In the case of the Gab Lab, Del Robertson’s 1960 VW camper loaded with recording gear was more closely inspired by the travel of my wife, Carol, and me in tracking down, first, the voices that knew my father and grandmother and their times, for This House of Sky. Thus it was that the African-American singer Taylor Gordon, one Montana summer day of 1968, chucked into my reel-to-reel recorder about the writer Carl Van Vechten’s habit of showing up at Harlem rent parties wearing a phantom red shirt. And in the next decade, my series of interviews, roughly “Listening to This Land” for a Seattle magazine, produced life-tales in people’s own words, such as the gent who told me of having been a guard on a Puget Sound fish trap when his relief man rowed out to him, calling as he came that someone named Lindbergh had flown an airplane across the Atlantic. Thence to the dozens and dozens of interviewees—forest rangers, Fort Peck Dam workers, people who were homestead kids and attended one-room schools, and so many others—that underlay my fictional undertakings ever since, and have yielded much of the back-and-forth linking Doig to DARE and vice versa.

Nor, I think, are DARE and I done yet in our roamings through the regions of language. For the ongoing digital edition, my candidates are at the ready: cartwheel, which is what silver dollars were called in the Montana bars and cafes my dad and I were customers of, back then; school section, the square mile of a township that produced revenue for the county schools and served as an essential lingual landmark in rural geography, as in “The cattle are in there north of the school section”; and what about swuft, which came out the end of my fingers into The Bartender’s Tale to mean swiftness, brainy, sensible, and other previously inexpressible sterling qualities? Meanwhile, on DARE’s magisterial side of the matter, a bookmark abides at page 84 of Vol. III as I contemplate which of my characters in the next novel shall have a jackknife face.

Ivan Doig’s twelfth novel, Sweet Thunder, will be published on August 20, 2013, by Riverhead Books, a division of Penguin Group USA.

DARE Weathers Financial Crisis
Joan Houston Hall
Chief Editor

After a difficult winter and spring, in which DARE’s financial situation was so uncertain that staff members were issued “at risk of layoff” notices, the project’s fortunes are looking up! As a result of the heartwarming generosity of friends and supporters, we are able to continue working with regional English from Adam’s housecat to zydeco. And by the end of this year, the digital edition of DARE will be available (watch for details in a future issue of this Newsletter)! We are grateful to many individuals and organizations, chief among them an anonymous donor, whose extraordinarily generous gift initiated a snowball effect; the UW’s College of Letters & Science, which matched the anonymous gift; the UW’s Office of the Provost, which will provide assistance for three years; the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a mainstay for DARE over several decades; the National Endowment for the Humanities, without which DARE would not exist; the American Dialect Society, DARE’s sponsor; and the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, a very important longtime supporter. With their gifts, and those from individuals mentioned below, DARE now has enough support to continue for at least another year.

Significant help came from the blogosphere as well. Sounding the alarm for DARE, bloggers Ben Zimmer (Language Log), Allan Metcalf (The Chronicle of Higher Education), and John E. McIntyre (Baltimore Sun), as well as journalists Mark Johnson (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel) and Dan Simmons (Wisconsin State Journal) let readers know that their help was urgently needed. Hundreds of word lovers from across the country and around the world responded. New contributors as well as longtime friends rallied to our aid, sending gifts ranging from a few dollars to thousands.

On campus, linguists Joe Salmons, Anja Wanner, Monica Macaulay, and Rob Howell gathered signatures from dozens of colleagues. They represented not only English, German, Scandinavian, African, and Asian languages, but fields as diverse as Landscape Architecture, Cartography, the Study of the American Constitution, and Disability Resources, among others. These colleagues testified with enthusiasm to the importance of DARE in their many lines of research.

To all of the people and organizations listed above, DARE staff members send our grateful
Meet Toni Drake

We are pleased to welcome our new Director of Development, Toni Drake, to the DARE team. In this interview, Beth Gardner poses a few questions to introduce Toni to our Newsletter readers.

Q: What brought you to the University of Wisconsin Foundation?
A: As a native Madisonian and UW grad (BSE’00, JD’07), I knew that this was the place for me as soon as I learned about the Foundation and its role as the fundraising, investment, and stewardship arm of the University.

Q: What are your primary job responsibilities at the Foundation?
A: As a Director of Development for the College of Letters & Science, I meet with alumni and supporters and work closely with the Psychology Department, the English Department, and, of course, DARE!

Q: What do you enjoy most about your work?
A: The good fortune to meet all kinds of interesting, altruistic people and help them connect with their philanthropic passions at our world-class alma mater.

Q: What is the most surprising thing you’ve discovered in working with DARE?
A: The wonderful news that, contrary to popular belief, American English is not becoming homogenized! I was also surprised that DARE wasn’t accessible online, and look forward to that happy day.

Q: As a native Wisconsinite, do you have any favorite regional expressions?
A: I say “bubbler” and “gesundheit,” of course, but also remember the TYME (Take Your Money Everywhere) machines that were the first ATMs here. I’ll never forget asking someone in New York where I could find the “time machine” and watching them back away from me slowly. . .

Q: What do you like to do in your leisure time?
A: During our short but lovely Midwestern summers, I try to get in as much biking and gardening as possible. The rest of the time is spent running after my two-year-old, a big chatterbox and future DARE reader. I recently told my husband that he’d put on her diaper cattywompus. He insisted that he’d put it on just fine, thank you, and cattywompus wasn’t a word. The first point is still up for debate, but DARE came to my rescue on the second point [DARE Ed: see catawampus adj 1].
Volume VI DARE Quiz Key
Julie Schnebly

Though the Volume VI DARE quiz in the Winter 2013 issue of our Newsletter made some of you want to flash your cookies, it was a wingding doodle of a time for others. There were fifteen people who got all the right answers—perhaps as quick as a sheep shakes his tail? We broke the tie with a drawing, and Mark Mandel was the lucky winner of a copy of Volume VI. Others achieving perfect scores were Lauren M. Blough, Laurel Brinton, Jackie Cassidy, Thomas L. and Elizabeth B. Cooksey, George Downs, Wilson F. Engel III, Connie Flint, Alan Hartley, John Ingham, Margaret Klein, William C. Moore, Betty P. Nelson, Karen Putnam, and Barbara Vass. If we didn’t mention your name, it seems that you had some trouble with coffee, out-of-the-way places, vomiting, and trusting people. Maybe you should get that checked out! In any case, we hope you had fun, and we thank everyone who participated. The answers appear below. ♦

A23 To do something at the very first try: “He got the right answer _____.”

___ First crack off the bat

U11 Got it on tick

___ Quick as a sheep shakes his tail

B25 Any joking names around here for a very heavy rain? You might say, “It’s a regular _____.”

___ Goose-drencher

H74a Scuttle of mud

___ Toad-strangler

C33 What joking names do you have for an out-of-the-way place, or a very unimportant place?

___ Squirrel Hollow

EE29 Water-buster

___ Wide place in the road

H74a Different words for coffee according to how it’s made—very strong:

B25 Belly-washer

___ Spoon stands up in it

___ Strong enough to kill a horse

U11 If you buy something but don’t pay cash for it, you might say, “I _____.”

___ Bought it on time

BB17 Feed the fish

___ Put it on the sleeve

V2b About a deceiving person, or somebody that you can’t trust, you might say: “I wouldn’t trust him _____.”

___ As far as I could throw a bull by the tail

___ Behind a broomstraw

CC9 Where it doesn’t snow

Z16 A small child who is rough, misbehaves, and doesn’t behave, you’d call him a(n) _____.

___ Ankle-biter

___ Stinker

LL6a Wee nip

BB17 Other words or expressions used around here for vomiting:

___ Flash his cookies

V2b Past the front gate

___ Upchuck

CC9 Other words or expressions for hell: “That man is headed straight for _____.”

___ Down under

___ Hades

EE29 When swimmers are diving and one comes down flat onto the water, that’s a _____.

___ Belly-buster

MM24 One good frog-leap

___ Pancake

FF17 Words meaning that people had a very good or enjoyable time: “We all had a _____ last night.”

___ Ball

___ Gas

Z16 Live wire

LL6a A small, indefinite amount—for example, of cream: “I’ll take just a _____ of cream in my coffee.”

___ Skosh

___ Smidgen

FF17 Wingding doodle

MM24 Other expressions meaning ‘a short distance’: “The river is just a _____ from the house.”

A23 Lickety-split

___ Stone’s throw

___ Whoop and a holler
DARE Wins Dartmouth Medal

The Dictionary of American Regional English was the recipient of the 2013 Dartmouth Medal for most outstanding reference work, an honor conferred by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association. Chief Editor Joan Houston Hall accepted the award on June 30 at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago.

Dave Tyckoson, Associate Dean of the Henry Madden Library at California State University, Fresno, presents the medal to Joan Hall; looking on is Mary Popp, Research and Discovery Services Librarian at Indiana University and Chair of RUSA.
DARE Newsletter

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