

DARE *Newsletter*

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Photo credit: Ivan Doig

Ivan Doig

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

Also in This Issue:

<i>DARE</i> Weathers Financial Crisis.4
Meet Toni Drake.5
Volume VI <i>DARE</i> Quiz Key6
<i>DARE</i> Wins Dartmouth Medal7

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 *flabble*, 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 of the moment would exclaim. Quite a list, from *dab* to *Yankee rain*, but when I get past the surprise and pleasure of that page-and-a-half printout Joan Houston Hall provided along with her request that

“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

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 by 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.

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 in my latest novel, *The Bartender’s Tale*, 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,

“What a joy it is to know that a lexicographical project of this kind has, so far, braved all of the obstacles to its successful completion. . . . I am a lexicographer myself, working in the Russian field. Having had a Scottish mother and a Liverpoolian father, I have been an admirer and amateur student of non-standard varieties of English since my childhood half a century or so ago. . . . James Murray, Joseph Wright and other epoch-making lexicographers would, I know, have admired as much as I do your team’s efforts in the cause of scholarship and humanity, especially as, like them (and, less publicly, myself), you have had to grapple with a huge and complex task while oppressed by the morale-sapping handicap of uncertain funding.”

Colin Howlett
Lexicographer and translator
England

“How do you pronounce the stuff you pour on top of pancakes? Surp? Syr-up? Serep? The answer tells a lot about you. What do you call the thing in which you carry groceries? Bag? Sack? Poke? Again, the answer tells much about you, and your regional heritage. Cassidy and Hall have spent many years interviewing hundreds of people from all parts of the United States and literally ‘mapping’ their speech patterns. This book series will be on the desk of every serious linguist in the nation. BUT—it’s surprisingly interesting reading. Want to know the origin of ‘the last rose of summer’? Interested in what ‘love bite’ means? These and thousands of other interesting American words and phrases are found here. This is a word lover’s Disney World.”

David E. Carter
CEO, BrightBooks.com
Sanibel, Florida

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 ‘tisin’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, chuckled 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 *swift*, which came out the end of my fingers into *The Bartender's Tale* to mean swift-minded, 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 *jack-knife 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 Kriebel 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

thanks. Your belief in the value of our work has allowed us to continue. ♦

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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 **catawompus** adj 1]. ♦



Photo credit: UW Foundation

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 _____."*

- C33** Back side of nowhere
- ___ 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



Photo credit: George E. Hall

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. ♦



Photo credit: George E. Hall

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.



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