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Big Fish

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••BIG FISH

WILLIAM KITTREDGE

Where to begin, if you're my age, but in memory?

When I came to UM in the fall of 1969, I found a new friend in Jon Jackson, who was editing a student literary magazine called *The Garrett*, a financially hand-to-mouth enterprise, close to folding after each issue. But occasionally brilliant, at least until Jackson left for grad school in Iowa City, where he helped edit *The Iowa Review*.

Since I was the new guy in Creative Writing, Dick Hugo gave me the task of finding secure funding for a new magazine with a new name – one that would be actually printed, not Xeroxed, and perfect-bound, with a picture on the cover.

Three things I knew. (1) Powerful people in charge of UM budgets seemed to think literary magazines were a waste of money, i.e. worthless. (2) Any registered student had more leverage with funding entities than I did. Perhaps I was simply a new assistant professor trying to accumulate points toward promotion and tenure. And (3) I was going to be down in California, on a fellowship, for the next year.

So I got some UM grad students on the job. In the spring of 1973, Gary Thompson and David Long and David's wife Susie and I got together at David and Susie's house in Missoula, where David was under the sink in the kitchen (he'd lost a plastic "scrubby" down the disposal). Good news. He was a practical, under-the-sink kind of guy. We need a strong dose of practical. We cooked up the title, *Cutbank*, and they took over efforts to hustle the funding. And, it worked. The next spring, when I came back from California, the first issue existed. I could hold it in my hand. I could

read it. I could brag about it. And I did, although I hadn't done any of the actual money hustling and soliciting and editing.

Efforts to get *Cutbank* funded for the long haul perhaps worked because of local history. Literary magazines in Missoula turn out to be a long story, beginning with *Frontier* and then *Frontier and Midland*, edited by H.G. Merriam and published out of the UM English Department in the 1920s and 1930s. Funding committees revered H. G. Merriam. Well they might have.

Wallace Stegner (*Wolf Willow*, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*), and A. B. Guthrie Jr. (*The Big Sky* and the screenplay for *Shane*), and Dorothy Johnson ("The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence"), along with others, were Merriam's close friends and cohorts and eventually came to national literary reputations. The standards espoused by Merriam bled off into traditions. What were they? Think clearly and write to some point? *Come fly with me?* I wouldn't presume to define them.

This isn't a history of literary magazines I have known. It's about the clear usefulness of such magazines, in print, online, multi-media, whatever. The times are as usual changing, and will continue to change, to evolve. Nothing will stay the same. We're lost unless we can respond coherently. And artistic thinking helps us with our responses, inciting us to see freshly and clearly – even if whatever we see isn't fresh or clear. E. M. Forster said, in the 1920s, "The medium we work in is the reader's imagination."

That's the main point I mean to make. Good art, while never able to escape the human entrapment, incites us to imagine and to re-imagine and re-locate our emotional selves in situations as they evolve. Preconceptions and our prejudices blind our eyes, and thus, our minds, and good art incites us to abandon blindness. Bad art reconfirms our belief in the *status quo*, the sad old

“everything-as-usual is good enough for me” line of crap.

Ethnic and regional and religious social and political issues presently motivate and separate us in utterly savage ways while we mainly ignore the wash of inhumanity all around us. So – therefore – some serious rethinking must obviously get large on our agendas. Every time there’s a fresh issue of *Cutbank*, I point with pride and think , “There we go, rattling cages, trying to be anyway useful.”

THE END