Hard work and tough dreaming; a biography of A. B. Guthrie Jr.

Charles Eugene Hood

The University of Montana

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UMI
HARD WORK AND TOUGH DREAMING
A BIOGRAPHY OF A. B. GUTHRIE JR.

by

Charles E. Hood Jr.

B. A., University of Montana, 1961

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1969

Approved by:

[Signatures]

[Signatures]

May 22, 1969
Date
"Here is a man, nominally a hairy-eared newspaper scribbler, who evolved by hard work and tough dreaming into a Pulitzer Prize novelist. . . ."–Robert L. Perkin.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Warren J. Brier, my adviser, for his hours of assistance, his helpful advice, and good-humored encouragement. I am also indebted to Professor Robert C. McGiffert and Professor John E. Moore, the members of my thesis committee, for their time and suggestions. I am particularly grateful to my wife, Julie, for her patient understanding and encouragement. Special thanks go to A. B. Guthrie, Jr., who generously gave of his time to submit to my lengthy interviews.
This biography of A. B. Guthrie Jr. focuses on his writing. Emphasis has been given to information relevant to his perspective as a writer and to his career as a novelist. The motivations and mechanics involved in the production of his books have been stressed, as well as the reactions of critics to his work. Guthrie's own thoughts about writing have been included. Some of the chapters are devoted almost exclusively to examining certain values and perspectives evident in Guthrie's writing. At first glance, such an examination may appear to be of questionable value to a biography. Yet, Guthrie's books are Guthrie. "No one writes anything without revealing himself," he has said. It was with that observation in mind that chapters entitled Anti-fundamentalism, Indians, Violence, Humor, Western Perspectives and Uncertainty were included.
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CHAPTER I

When A. B. Guthrie, Jr. wrote a highly complimentary review of Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* for *The Reporter*, he selected one paragraph from the book as his favorite and most memorable:

I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people I respond to, the prejudices I wear like dishonorable scars, the affectations that sometimes waken me from middle-aged sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and the heroes I follow, the colors and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb-village and the lovely, lonely exposed prairie of the homestead.¹

For Stegner, that "womb-village" was a town in Saskatchewan; for Guthrie, it was Choteau, a small prairie community at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in north central Montana.

The mountains and prairie around Choteau were Guthrie's playground as a boy. He could not have grown up in a spot more richly endowed with history of the

West. A few miles down the highway from the Guthrie home on the outskirts of Choteau, a historical marker says:

In the days of the fur traders and trappers immediately following the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806) all of this country bordering the Rocky Mountains from here north into Canada and south to the three forks of the Missouri and to the Yellowstone River was buffalo range and the hunting grounds of the Blackfeet Nation.

These Indians were fierce and willing fighters, who jealously guarded their territory from invasion. Like all the plains Indians, they were dependent upon the buffalo for their existence. The herds meant meat, moccasins, robes, leggings and teepees. Board and room on the hoof. Some Indian legend says that the first buffalo came out of a hole in the ground. When the seemingly impossible happened and the buffalo were wiped out there were Indians who claimed the whites found the spot, hazed the herds back into it and plugged the hole.

If there had been such a hole in the Choteau area, Guthrie and his friend, George Jackson, would have found it. They hunted the hunting grounds of the Blackfeet and fished the beaver streams of the mountain men. Guthrie developed a historical interest that prompted searches for Indian relics and visits to buffalo jumps. Almost before he was in long pants, he was rubbing elbows with ghosts of men he later would bring to life through his books. He would come to know the land along the

2 Historical marker, Montana Highway Commission, U. S. 89, 3 miles north of Choteau.
Teton River as only a boy can know it:

It was all good, all grand. A boy could look twenty miles to the west, to the blue or snow-mantled wall of the Rockies, and find assurance there. Or he could look east to where the benchland rose, or south or north and feel at home in distances beyond reach of the mind. He was a natural part of this world, friend and killer of animals; eater of wild flesh and wild fruits; dipper in the waters; braver of the blizzards; finder of the first Johnny-jump-up and the woodsly Indian moccasin; hound-smeller of the season, of the growth he trod unseeing upon, his nose undulled by age and nicotine.3

If much of Guthrie's learning about the west can be attributed to this atmospheric osmosis, the force that made this learning meaningful was his father. Guthrie's brother, Charles M. (Chick) Guthrie, recalls:

Bud always was a great reader, with great ability to concentrate. Noise never seemed to distract him. His father must be given a great deal of credit for rousing Bud's interest in the West and its history. He had quite a library of western Americana and Bud took full advantage of it. The Lewis and Clark Journals, Chittenden's History of the American Fur Trade, Francis Parkman's Oregon Trail were grist for his mill. Also the old Youth's Companion and the American Boy, magazines which ran stories by James Willard Schultz, who was married to a Blackfeet squaw and who lived with or near the Blackfeet for many years.

Dad and Bud did considerable hunting and fishing together, they took walks through the fields, studied birds and plants. The whole family enjoyed camping in the mountains and dad would spin yarns at the campfire, some real and many apocryphal.4

3Guthrie, "Town to Be a Boy In," Venture, 1, October, 1954, p. 12.

Guthrie's father was the first principal of Teton County Free High School, and his credentials as a scholar are legendary. Mrs. Carl B. Field recalls that the elder Guthrie read a dictionary while presiding over a study hall period.\(^5\) He was an "immensely respected" man in Choteau, George Jackson said. Years after his death his memory is revered.

Complimenting his high level of education—he was a graduate of the University of Indiana—was an equally well-remembered skill as a teacher. "He was a very fine instructor," recalled George Coffey, a member of the 1905 graduating class, the second to graduate under Guthrie's father. "More than one student has come home to say Mr. Guthrie was a better instructor than he ever got in college."\(^6\)

Guthrie himself remembers well his father's abilities as a teacher:

Latin, English, mathematics, history, the science of that time—he could teach them all and teach them well. Subjects came to life under his tutelage. Interests broadened. His advice gave depth and directions to more lives than I can say.\(^7\)

\(^{5}\)Mrs. Carl Field interview, Choteau, Nov. 2, 1968.

\(^{6}\)George Coffey interview, Choteau, Nov. 2, 1968.

Both Guthrie and his friend, George Jackson, recall that the elder Guthrie could be as spellbinding out of the classroom as in it. When he told children's stories such as "Brer Rabbit," he would play the part of each character.  

A stern disciplinarian, he ran the high school with a firm hand. Despite his bookish interests, he could be a very tough man, and few students stepped out of line. When he first arrived in Choteau, cowboys took him for a sissy, Coffey recalls, but that image was dispelled when the senior Guthrie pulled a man named McDermott off his horse. McDermott was invited to have it out, but the invitation, says Coffey, was not accepted. Guthrie patterned a short story, "First Principal," after the incident. He recalls that McDermott had a colorful nickname arising out of the man's penchant for using tallow to treat his saddle leather. The tallow from the saddle came off on his pants, Guthrie says, prompting the nickname, "Taller-ass."  

Guthrie also mentions his father's toughness in The Blue Hen's Chick:

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9Coffey interview.

10Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
Teaching was a sissy occupation, or so some thought when he arrived in town. He wrenched a quirt from one of them, after a slash across the face, and put the run on him. He once walked into the eye of a revolver, first pointed at a friend of his, and won possession of it. No big-boy rowdies in his school intimidated him. Be it said for them, they came to like him as a consequence. In later years more than one has thanked me for his discipline and wished he were on hand to thank. It seems strange in these days that parents didn't protest. I can't recall that any ever did.11

Guthrie never had the benefit of being in one of his father's classes, but he profited enormously from simply being his son:

The stimulus and guidance that I got from him I got at home. I'm grateful for it. But for his interest in literature, but for his profound attachment to nature and the West, which took me into books and carried me afield to buffalo wallows, bird's nest, landmarks and sites of old excitement and made his loves my own, I doubt I would be writing now. Count under unearned blessings the blessing of having had parents both educated and aware.12

Of his father's library and their occasional "field trips," Guthrie remembers:

He had a few western books. Very few original sources. But he was immensely interested in the West. He had talked to enough old timers to have his appetite whetted. We used to go to buffalo jumps. Once we went to the scene of the Baker Massacre on the Marias--it's covered by water now. Later we were to traverse a good part of the Oregon Trail. He knew Francis Parkman /author of The Oregon Trail/.13

11The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 34-35.
12Ibid., p. 35.
Guthrie learned from his father about notable mountain men such as Jedediah Smith, Tom Fitzpatrick and Liver Eating Johnson.  

His father also helped to arouse Guthrie's interest in botany. "My dad wasn't a botanist--I'm not either--but I did learn some of the more common plants from him," Guthrie says. "Now I have quite a little library on plants and grasses."  

Like his father, he always has been interested in animals. The elder Guthrie's special knowledge of birds seems to be his most special gift to his son:  

My father was a great student of birds. There, he was an immense help. If he spotted some kind of bird he didn't recognize, he was apt to shoot it; not for sport, but for identification.  

In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie recalls the bird-watching he did with his father:  

Through my father's old field glasses he and I identified, with help from books, birds in our region rarely seen and more rarely recognized. We counted the Savannah sparrow, the olive-backed thrush, a brown thrasher that forsook ancestral acres in favor of the West and staked a homestead in a bullberry bush. We rejoiced at seeing these and others, at knowing more about the world around us.  

14 Ibid.  
15 Ibid.  
16 Ibid.  
17 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 14-15.
Coffey remembers shooting a bird he could not recognize and bringing it to the Guthrie home for identification. "Bud's father identified it for me—it was a mud hen. He knew the proper name for it,"

Guthrie's father made at least one mistake about birds. Coffey recalls hunting with him west of Choteau, where they spotted some "white birds" at some distance. They shot several before realizing the birds were swans, illegal game. "Bud's dad told Bud and Chick to get rid of them, so the two boys took them and buried them somewhere," Guthrie recalls the incident with amusement, but corrects Coffey's story by noting that it was George Jackson and himself who disposed of the swans.

Although Guthrie benefited enormously from the knowledge and abilities of his father, he also was marked by a negative influence. His father's Victorianism and puritanism were made dangerous by a temper quick as a lash, even, as George Jackson adds, if it also were "quick to mend."

"He was a different kind of a man from normal,"

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18 Coffey interview.
19 Ibid.
21 Jackson interview.
Coffey recalls. "He was Victorian, with a good sense of humor; but when he wasn't joking he was a very stern man."\(^2\)

Guthrie lived in the shadow of his father's occasional outbursts, which sometimes were triggered by a righteous Methodist fundamentalism. The scars left by his fundamentalist upbringing, and by the father whose temper gave meaning to the frightful image of a vengeful God, still mark Guthrie, and are noticeable in his writing.

Despite his father's lip service to fundamentalism, he was a liberal. His affinity for liberal thinkers seems to contradict his strong Methodist puritanism. "I was reading Thoreau and John Burroughs during college, partly because my father liked them," Guthrie remembers. This conflict has never been resolved in Guthrie's mind. "My father had the habits of a fundamentalist, the observation of Sunday and all that. He was a liberal in philosophy and an absolutist in behavior."\(^3\) By the time Guthrie was in college, his father was reading, and apparently appreciating, Darwin's theory.\(^4\)

\(^2\) Coffey interview.

\(^3\) Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 31, 1968.

\(^4\) Ibid.
Whatever the flaws of Guthrie's father, it is difficult to argue with Coffey when he concludes that "his father's influence is responsible for Bud's ability as a writer."25 As Guthrie's close friend, Randall Swanberg, remarks, "Literary people just don't come from non-literary families."26

Guthrie's brother, Chick, sums it up like this:

Bud is as smart as they come, is dedicated to principle, and determined. Otherwise he wouldn't have made it. And don't forget his father. The two often were at sword's points, but dad probably was the biggest influence in his life and career.27

Guthrie himself would be the last to deny the gift of his father, although it took the animosity some time to wear off. In his autobiography, he remarks:

Whatever hate I had for him I loved is gone. I feel sorry; and when I cast back to him without casting farther, I see his smile and feel his hand kind on my shoulder and hear his cheerful voice; and we have a chaw of licorice and catch a trout or find an arrowhead and speculate about the men who lived before us.28

He had that image of his father in mind when he dedicated The Big Sky "To My Father."29

25 Coffey interview.

26 Randall Swanberg interview, Great Falls, Nov. 3, 1968.


28 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 38-39.

Guthrie did well in school, and during his high school years worked as a printer's devil and sometime reporter for the *The Acantha*, the newspaper his father owned for a time.

Choteau, then, was many things to Guthrie. It was growing up in a back yard rich with history and big as a boy's imagination; it was hunting and fishing with George Jackson; it was a fundamentalist upbringing in a puritanical church; and it was a father who gave him his abiding interest in the West and scarred him with his temper. Guthrie later would pay tribute to his home in *The Blue Hen's Chick*:

> Some men escape and some renounce their origins. I didn't want to. Most of me was what I had been; most of what I had been I would always be, son of a scholar, boy explorer of field and stream, part book man, part aborigine, and the core of me Choteau, Montana.  

Years later, when the success of *The Big Sky* made it financially possible to do so, he would return to Teton County and buy a cabin at Twin Lakes, in the midst of the country he had written so much about.

A small town boy in the big city, Guthrie had an unhappy first year of college at the University of Washington at Seattle. The following year, he transferred

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30Guthrie, "Town to Be a Boy In," p. 15.
to the University of Montana, where he majored in journalism. His choice of that field was not surprising:

   Journalism, we agreed, seemed a likely choice for one who wanted to write. Perhaps Father's experience as a country editor was a factor. It must have been: my brother and sister majored in the same field later on.

   As of that time, the selection was a happy one. Arthur L. Stone, the dean of the school, was an experienced newspaperman, to be sure, but he was first of all a kindly philosopher. There were few 'must' courses in the theory and practice of newspapermaking. He wanted us to have the backgrounds of English, history, ethics, political science.  

   He was a good student. His brother recalls that "Bud always wanted to excel, to be the top student in his class, to make the best speech. He had small patience with mediocrity and, in his younger days . . . had a biting sarcasm."  

   The years in college were to change Guthrie:

   I had been a believer and, through unexamined family background, a conservative, and I emerged from college an agnostic and a liberal. I suppose reading was the first cause, though my reading was spotty, partly because of lack of continuity in English courses, partly because I had no program of my own and chose books hit or miss. Main Street, just out, unsettled yet delighted me, and I thought Sinclair Lewis great. Henry Mencken gave me exultant pause, though at first I sided with his adversary, Stuart Pratt Sherman. Hardy awakened me to universal tragedy, and for years I walked in his dark shadow and to some extent still do. The naturalist John Burroughs, in prose an echo of

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31The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 49.

Walt Whitman, was a comfort. I had to be told by a professor that one reason for my liking him was that his language was so spare; but I liked nature, too, and, forsaking Methodism, half-embraced a pantheistic faith and found defense against despair in declarations like "The longer I live the more my mind dwells on the beauty and wonder of the world." Thackeray, Voltaire, Anatole France, H. G. Wells, Theodore Dreiser--these and others played some part in my shaping. From Swinburne and his now-seen as too-facile lines, I got a pleasant melancholy and couldn't comprehend then what Father found in Frost.33

Guthrie, when he mentioned the professor who told him why he liked John Burroughs, was referring to his English teacher, H. G. Merriam, now professor emeritus at the University of Montana. Merriam recalls the incident well:

I had asked members of my creative writing class to bring in a short piece they thought was particularly good. Bud came in with a writing by Burroughs. I asked him to count the number of adjectives and adverbs in it, and he couldn't find many. That struck him with quite an impact. Years later at a writing conference he said he had always remembered and appreciated that advice.34

Guthrie remembers that the writing he chose to read for Merriam's class was the preface of Summit of the Years by Burroughs. A sample paragraph:

There is no other joy in life like mental and bodily activity, like keeping up a live interest in the world of thought and things. Old age is

33 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 52-53.
practically held at bay so long as one can keep the currents of his life moving. The vital currents, like mountain streams, tend to rejuvenate themselves as they flow.\footnote{John Burroughs, The Summit of The Years (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), p. v.}

Even today, Guthrie remembers the lesson he learned the day he read those words:

Merriam thought it was a good selection, and he asked me, "Do you know what makes this so good?" I didn't know what the hell it was! He had to tell me it was because there were very few modifiers in it. What a help that was! Just a comment like that!\footnote{Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 31, 1968.}

Merriam recalls having had Guthrie as a student for three quarters of creative writing during his senior year. During that time, he published two poems and two short stories in the English department's literary magazine, The Frontier. For a time he was one of the editors of the publication.

Merriam's remembrance of Guthrie is one of an interesting and likable young man. "In class," Merriam recalls, "he was writing mostly verse. He wrote his prose in journalism and his verse in the English department."\footnote{Merriam interview.}
manner. "Poetry writing is very, very good for prose," explains Merriam. "You can't say what you like in a sonnet, for example, with the first words you write down." 38

Merriam never regarded Guthrie as a particularly outstanding student. "I never thought that Bud would develop the way he did," he said. Yet, he remembers one quality that set Guthrie apart from the crowd: He would not accept criticism unless he thought it valid.

Guthrie never would have accepted the criticism given another student by Robert Penn Warren when Warren was a visiting lecturer at the University of Montana, Merriam said. Warren rewrote the last line of a student's poem. When the student showed the poem to Merriam, Merriam asked, "What does the last line mean? I don't understand it."

Replied the student: "I don't either, but that's what Mr. Warren told me the last line should say." 39

Merriam says:

Bud was the sort of person who did not accept criticism until he himself understood the criticism and could see how his writing would improve if he followed it. He would rebel against your criticism

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
until he understood it completely, then he would work out his problems until he got it right.40

Although most of his work in creative writing was in verse, he did publish two autobiographical stories in The Frontier. In "Glen Does Some Thinking," Guthrie tells of a student who wants to express himself to a student gathering, but is ridiculed by his audience because of his inability to speak in public. He relates the agony of his character, who is up before that audience and trying to say his piece:

"The amendment can do nothing but harm," he said. He started to go on, gulped twice, and finally got under way. He showed the first disadvantage of the measure. The students didn't grasp it, perhaps from disinclination, perhaps from inability. Their faces were immobile. He tried to continue. His next argument was his best and would surely convince them. His breath fairly whistled. He cleared his throat and stuttered a little. His voice didn't sound natural. It was high and strange. He choked and gasped for breath. His right leg began trembling so violently that his heel beat a steady rat-a-tat-tat on the floor. His brain whirled. The silence became unbearable.

A girl next to him snickered. Snickering spread like contagion. The whole crowd was laughing. Glen glanced frantically about him. Then he fell limply in his seat.41

The article, published during Guthrie's senior year, likely was drawn from his own experience. In

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40Ibid.

In my senior year a not-so-happy thing occurred. I fell victim to a neurosis, one that still haunts me, though not so much these days, one that must have been seeded in my system years before. Called on to read or speak before a crowd or class or a company of even three or four, I got terrified, became hysterical. My face worked and my knees shook. My voice trembled and gave out. I could not understand why. Later I read all the Freud and Jung I could find, seeking knowledge of myself, and wound up at a point at which I disliked to enter a store to buy a pair of socks unless I knew the clerk well. Complete self-effacement, that was for me. So much had I acquired from fundamentalist Christianity. So much for having been a good boy whose thoughts and dreams and nightmare vice proved I was unlike the righteous lot, a sinner born in sin. I had rejected primitivism long since, but its gifts stayed on.

The chairman of the Rhodes Scholarship Committee for our district, unaware of my infirmity, suggested pointedly that I apply. I didn't.42

Merriam recalls a certain "hesitancy" in Guthrie's speaking in class. "It wasn't a stuttering, exactly. I don't know what the block was, if it was emotional or physical. But he was not a fluent speaker."43

The sarcasm alluded to by his brother shows up in the second story Guthrie published in Frontier. In "The Infallibility of the Infallible," he wrote:

I lift my hat to the college man. I marvel at his ability. I wonder at the powers which have

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42 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 54-55.

43 Merriam interview.
made him what he is. His versatility in judgement is sufficient to fill me with awe. Four hundred topics may come up during the course of one day and on every one the college man will have a decided opinion, or, if he hasn't he can and will formulate one in a minute--two at the outside. No public opinion, no question of ethics or of sound sense is too much for him. He sails gladly and promptly into all disputes and as gladly and pompously out of them again, secure in the conviction of his infallibility.\[^{44}\]

Perhaps in another attempt at "self-effacement," Guthrie concludes, "I ought to know. You see, I'm a college man."

During his college years, Guthrie did little reading--or writing--about the West, although he did write a poem entitled "The Trailrider." "I was pre-occupied by the idea of man in sequestration," he says in explanation. It was a preoccupation which later would be expressed in Boone Caudill in *The Big Sky*.

America was heading for depression when Guthrie was graduated from college. He was a ranch hand in Montana and Mexico, a laborer and grocery clerk in California, a Forest Service employe in Montana and a salesman and part-time office manager of a feed company owned by relatives in New York. Finally, he got a job with the *Lexington (Ky.)* Leader, as a cub reporter. He would remain with that paper for 21 years and would become executive editor. It was


his distinguished work as a reporter and editor that qualified him to win a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in 1944 for a year of study that was to be a turning point in his writing career.

During those years at Lexington, Guthrie rekindled the old interest in the West and began seriously to consider writing a book. The historical significance of Kentucky to the exploration of the West may have spurred his interest. Kentucky, he remembers, was "a stage in the great American journey, east to west, where Dan'l Boone and George Rogers Clark and frontiersmen and soldiers and seekers tramped history on the land." 46

In Thomas D. Clark, who later became the chairman of the history department at the University of Kentucky, Guthrie found a friend whose interest in the West matched his own. With Clark, Guthrie remembers spending "rich evenings, talking of old times and new books, exchanging confessions of ambitions, for both of us are young and untried." 47

Clark remembers those days in detail:

I lived a neighbor to Bud Guthrie for many years, and I suppose I never held another man in such high affection. Our families were intimate friends, and we shared our woes and our joys. Bud was a more successful newspaper man than I was a

46The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 75.
47Ibid., p. 76.
fledgling instructor in the Department of History at the University of Kentucky. Aside from our common struggle to survive in the depression years and a family friendship we shared a common interest in the history of the West. He was an avid student of the West, and had been so since the day his family moved to Montana from Bedford, Indiana. We both expected to write books and to satisfy our yearning for finding answers to the exciting moments of westward expansion in the nineteenth century.

Once we talked of taking a slow walking journey over parts of the Oregon Trail. This never happened and I deeply regretted this fact. This past summer I drove over much of the trail and tried to imagine the experience that we might have had on such an adventure. We did, however, resort to the second best avenue, that of reading. Both of us gathered books on the West, and we had many conversations on the subject. When Bud began to approach the matter of writing he engaged in long periods of reading. I used to leave my office at the University just after Bud left his office at the Lexington Leader downtown and I would see him bumping along on an old flatwheel street car reading books on the West. 48

Guthrie remembers those educational street car rides. As a reviewer of books for The Leader, he found the rides gave him time to become engrossed in a western book while enroute to or from his office. "It was a 25-minute ride each way," he recalls. 49

Although Guthrie lived far from Choteau, his boyhood home, it continued to play a special role in his development as an author. With his wife and family, he returned to Choteau nearly every summer to visit relatives


49 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
and renew his friendship with the West. When he wrote his first book, the story was set in Moon Dance, a western town that Choteau residents immediately recognized as their home.
CHAPTER II

In 1936, when he had gone to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester with his mother while she was being treated for cancer, Guthrie decided to write his first book:

In that time of waiting, day and night, I tried to drug myself with gun-and-gallop and who-dunit books. I could write, I told myself finally, as well as these writers; and there must be money, which I needed, in such stuff. What about a mystery and cow-country myth in combination? So far as I could recall, the two had never been blended. All right. I'd blend them. I promised to, thinking somehow that a published book, by mere publication, would constitute a last tribute to Mother and maybe boost my bank balance besides.¹

After the treatments were completed, Guthrie returned to Lexington to begin writing. His initial efforts were not satisfying:

Within a month I was bored with what I'd set down and bored more by the whole prospect—the contrived and implausible plot, the knights and knaves, and love too pure for motor impulses to pants and panties. Final tribute to Mother, this cheap lie about life? She might shy at outspoken expression, but she knew shallows from deeps. Publication? Money? Hah!²

Guthrie's mother died while he was writing the book. When he returned to Lexington after the funeral, he forced himself to complete the manuscript. "It knocked

¹The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 130.
²Ibid., p. 131.
around a long time, going from publisher to publisher," Guthrie said. "Then E. P. Dutton and Company took it. The book came out in 1943."³ Tom Clark recalls:

I can remember when he finally got together the manuscript for Murders at Moon Dance. He tried to write in the vein of a western, and in the style of all those books he read. Though this book brought him a real joy at the time of publication, I am sure that he came to look on it only as a beginning.⁴

Later, Guthrie preferred not to look at the book:

My first book— that virginal try at free-lance professionalism— was as unfulfilling as are most virginal breakthroughs in whatever pursuit. In the absence of entire evidence I can't say it is the worst book ever written, but I've long considered it a contender. Hard-cover publishers put it out under the title, Murders at Moon Dance. A soft-cover house renamed it Trouble at Moon Dance. Under any name, the thought of this trash troubles me. When I see it displayed on paperback racks, where it somehow survives, I turn away.⁵

When asked about the book in an interview, Guthrie responded, "Oh Jeez, let's leave that one alone."

Still, there was satisfaction in the book's publication. "I won't deny a certain pride in seeing it in print. It was pride, though, mixed with unease. Out of final shame I bought up the last hard-cover copies to be had in Lexington."⁶ Guthrie also notes:

³Ibid., p. 133.
⁴Clark interview.
⁵The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 128.
⁶Ibid., p. 133.
Two or three inadequate things can be said about if not for it. I needed the $400 that was paid to me outright in lieu of all earnings except a half share in subsidiary-sale money, if any. Second, a writer must write a first book; he can't begin later on. Finally, I like to think the example may encourage young writers to push on despite their first efforts.

The New York Times review was not enthusiastic. In a column entitled "Crime Corner," Isaac Anderson presented this abbreviated sketch:

MURDERS AT MOON DANCE
New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., $2
Setting: The cow country of the Far West, where men wear guns.
Characters: Ranchers, cowhands, cattle rustlers, halfbreeds, a mad sheepherder, a restaurant keeper and his pretty daughter.
Sleuth: West Cawinne, a man of few words, quick on the draw and unafraid.
Finding: A combination western yarn and detective story and not an outstanding example of either.

A common pulp western, Murders at Moon Dance bears study only in tracing the remarkable development of Guthrie from pulp writer to novelist.

The book is set in the western community of Moon Dance. West Cawinne, the hero, solves the mystery surrounding a series of murders and wins the pretty girl. Guthrie's characters are given such improbable names as

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7 Ibid., pp. 128-129.
Seldom Wright, Bally Buck and Tandy Deck. His technique is an unhappy combination of journalesque and pulp fiction.

His language is pretentious:

"Goodbye, Mommie," he said, and held out for her kiss a cheek hispid as a cactus.  

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Here McLean pulled his horse to the side of the road, letting it set its own pace in the viscous sod.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

"I warned you," he trailed off then, helpless before this unpretentious resolution.  

His writing often is trite or overloaded with modifiers, in the tradition of the Tom Swift books:

"I don't see why you want to pack that gun anymore," she disgressed.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

"Hal and tarnation!" ejaculated Svenson.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

"Me for one, anyhow right now," McLean volunteered.

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10 Ibid., p. 10
12 Ibid., p. 8.
13 Ibid., p. 15.
14 Ibid., p. 18.
"Sure you need more, Marty?" he replied with friendly hesitancy.  

"Ah, no. Nothing to amount to anything," Cawinne replied guardedly.

"Thanks," answered Cawinne negatively.

"I don't set up to be no gunman, Larion," he said, facing the other unyieldingly.

"What will you have?" she asked abstractly.

"It's good for you, the heat," he said indifferently.

The book is overstocked with stock phrases. Guthrie refers to "a great bank of slate-gray clouds," and one of his characters "scanned the bleak sky." Other examples:

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 48.
17 Ibid., p. 49.
18 Ibid., p. 50.
19 Ibid., p. 51.
20 Ibid., p. 79.
21 Ibid., p. 81.
"In his hands, the lethal piece of blue steel seemed to come to life."22

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

. 23. her complexion seemed delicate as tinted china.

Even the classic cowboy cliche is used. When the bad guy lies dying on the floor, he tells Cawinne:

"Just when everything--was right," he whispered. "McLean's place--mine. But I didn't--didn't--"
Whatever it was that Seldom Wright meant to say went unsaid.24

Vestiges of journalism style appear in his writing. He describes Goldie Lampkins as "the angular and buck-toothed waitress." When three customers arrive, she goes to "wait on the trio."25

Although his brutal realism in later books helped to discredit the western myth, Guthrie's first book propounded that myth, which embraces the popular good guy-bad guy "shoot 'em up" image. In Murders at Moon Dance, he likens the skill of a gunfighter to that of other "precision" crafts:

"Uh," answered Robideau, and rolled another cigarette, one-handed, with the manual dexterity characteristic of jewelers, dressmakers and

22 Ibid., p. 101.
23 Ibid., p. 94.
24 Ibid., p. 221.
25 Ibid., p. 127.
Judge LaFrance's lecture to Tana Deck on the virtues of the western man is another example:

"What did the western man do? Do? Why, he fought them Indians, and he chased the outlaws out of the country or buried 'em in Boot Hill. He saw a job had to be done, and he done it. Direct action, that's what he was, and no waiting around for some bolder, stronger, saltier man to come along and tend to his knittin' for him. He was the man, that genuine western man, who made things safe for women and children. Yes, and for weaklin's too. He was the man that settled the country."

The old voice paused, panting a little with its vehemence. When it went on, it was gentle with significance: "Tana, there's a heap of the old west in West Cawinne."

Cawinne even solves murders with the help of the Myth. Explaining how he discovered that the murderer was not a "western man," Cawinne says:

"McLean was shot from behind. That made it look like it might be the work of an outsider. Usually, western men give a man a chance."

In the true western tradition, Guthrie fashions a predictable "riding-off-into-the-sunset" conclusion, with the hero promising the heroine he'll hang up his shooting irons:

His breath drew in sharply. He reined his horse closer to hers and gently, wonderingly, put his hand

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26 Ibid., p. 78.
27 Ibid., pp. 235-236.
28 Ibid., p. 263.
on her shoulder.
"You might kiss me," she whispered, and raised her tender mouth to his.
Afterward they rode on, hand in hand.
"We will have the best place," he exulted, "and all the past will be past, and all the things you hate. The guns go on the shelf for good."
She looked at him with shining eyes, and there came into her gaze fear and courage and regret and understanding and a great pride.
"Until the case calls for a man," she said.
(The End) 29

In later books, Guthrie would develop an ability for writing internal monologue, inconspicuously working descriptive information into the thoughts, words or actions of his characters. In Murders at Moon Dance, however, his descriptions stand apart from his characters, as if they are being provided by some invisible on-the-scene reporter:

He trembled violently, like one in a fantastic exaggeration of a chill. 30

Only on a few occasions does Guthrie demonstrate his potential as a fiction writer. His portrayal of Tandy Deck is over-written and too neat to be believable, but it has rhythm and style:

Tandy Deck's whole life was a record of polished ineffectuality, of graceful mistake, of beautiful incompetence. Whether in physical activity or social intercourse or business procedure, his manner was so finished, his utterance so suave, his

29 Ibid., p. 284.
30 Ibid., p. 85.
appearance so handsome, that the unfailing presence of error seemed the result of some fantastic confusion in the assembly of his being. In boyhood he had loved sports and had erred with such grace on diamond and court that the village prophets of Iowa had nodded in sage assurance of his success. As a student he was obedient, eager, ingratiating, and wrong. He tried bookkeeping in his early manhood but sought other fields after his employer found that the neatness of his figures was equaled only by the number of their discrepancies. The ambition to be a rancher, a flashing cowman with Angora chaps and a square of silk around his neck, drew him west, where he contributed to the lore of the range by demonstrating with what finesse a man could leave a horse unintentionally. By turns grocer, hotel clerk, salesman, make-shift teacher and small-time promoter, he had wandered from locality to locality, everywhere elegantly incapable, in all pursuits exquisitely inept.  

Although he calls the town Moon Dance, Guthrie obviously was writing about Choteau. Breedtown, the community burned by vengeful inhabitants of Moon Dance, actually was situated on the south fork of the Teton River in the Choteau area, Coffee recalls. He said the settlement comprised about 50 cabins housing Indians and half-breeds, who made their living by bringing firewood into Choteau from the mountains. The small community died out many years ago. The Freezout Lake to which Guthrie refers is situated just south of Choteau.

31 Ibid., p. 32.
32 Coffee interview.
33 Jackson interview.
Guthrie's childhood friend, George Jackson, recognized many locations described by Guthrie, and spotted occasions when Guthrie had made changes, such as moving a large house—Indian Pete's Palace—from one part of the county to another. Jackson said: "There is such a house. But Bud has moved it out to his Twin Lakes cabin. I've never talked to him about this—I just know that's what he did."\(^{34}\)

Jackson even recognized viewpoints as having been drawn from their days as children. The two friends would "hash things over" hunting, fishing or trapping trips. Sometimes when Guthrie presents a certain viewpoint in the book, Jackson remembers the specific outdoor discussion in which the opinion was formed.\(^ {35}\)

At least one of his characters was patterned after an actual Choteau resident. Judge LaFrance, a harness-maker and justice of the peace in Moon Dance, was fashioned after Judge DeHaas, who was a harnessmaker and justice of the peace in Choteau.\(^ {36}\)

Before E. P. Dutton and Co. agreed to publish the book, Guthrie took the first few chapters to a Bobbs-Merrill

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\(^{34}\)Ibid.

\(^{35}\)Ibid.

\(^{36}\)Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
Company representative visiting Thomas Clark, his neighbor in Lexington. She turned down the manuscript. The rejection, Guthrie recalls 25 years later, was justified.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
CHAPTER III

Guthrie was looking for a publisher for Murders at Moon Dance when he began to think about a second, more serious book:

The idea occurred to me early in 1940. It occurred to me because, so far as I knew, no honest story about the fur trade had been written, and—
you say I am a romanticist—well, read the earlier stories about the fur trade if you want to run into some romanticists. They really idealized, heroized everything and everybody.

Although the research and writing would have to be done at night when he came home from his desk job at the Leader, the prospect of such a challenge excited him:

I would write a second novel, this one about the mountain man in the period from, say, about 1830 through the high years of his rule to about 1843, to the time of his self-wrought ruin. I would tell of the fur-hunters who followed hard on the heels of Lewis and Clark, of men in the molds of Bill Williams, Hugh Glass, Joe Meek, John Colter, Kit Carson, Provot and the Sublettes. By boat and by horse and by foot we'd penetrate, my men and I, the surprised wilderness. We'd trap the clucking, beavered streams and bed down in the wondering parks of the almost-untouched young West; and we'd love squaws and fight Indians and spree big at rendezvous and, broke and sober and satisfied, signal goodbye and ride on to untried, rich rivers, counting good beyond telling this life that our blind lives would extinguish.

With the exception of a couple of antique and

artless attempts only one novel was tied to the fur trade insofar as I knew. That was one in a series whose protagonist was Stewart Edward White's Andy Burnett. I had followed Andy's adventures with pleasure and inactive consideration. White told a good and clean and therefore short-of-truth story. Not for me a Sunday-school representation of men mostly amoral, I thought with growing conviction. No bowdlerizing of documented behavior. No heroes, or villains for that matter, who never unbuttoned whether to make water or squaws. Be wholly honest! Get to the whole truth! Live and make live again that unfettered life! Don't heroize, keeping in mind that all heroes are errant and that the mountains counted cowardice the first sin and seldom listed a second!

In size and intent the undertaking seemed wildly ambitious, preposterous in relation to the sum of my credentials. I had written a book, if that counted. I knew a good deal about the physical West and, through unorganized reading of records, something about vanished times there. Through the years I'd assembled a small but select early-Western library, a start for organized research. My interest was real and almost nostalgic. I had spent years in Kentucky and encountered that dark strain so often found in the hill folk who could claim more than one mountain man and now would provide my protagonist. A typewriter sat at home, ignored and sullen. Scant and weak for the venture, there was my muster.2

Guthrie also discussed his motivations for writing the book in the Autumn, 1954 Montana Magazine of History:

I don't know when I began feeling that justice hadn't been done to the fur hunter of the 1820's and the 1830's, justice not in the sense of idolatry but of truth, of proportion. We have enough creators of idols, who make one admirable quality the sum of the man; not enough honest appraisers who recognize that a part of all heroes is the clay common to all of us. The great men of our folklore are made to appear almost spotless, I don't believe in them. I don't even like them very well. Perfection is

2The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 148-149.
something we strive for, but that no one ever attains, thank heavens! What we need to remember, in the reconstruction of heroes, is just that no one ever was perfect. I wanted to show the mountain man—in this first book of mine—for what he was, or what he seemed honestly to me to have been—not the romantic character, the virtuous if unlettered Leatherstocking, but the engaging, uncouth, admirable, odious, thoughtless, resourceful, loyal, sinful, smart, stupid, courageous character that he was and had to be.

It occurred to me, as I worked at the idea, that another universal entered here, the universal of Oscar Wilde and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." Each man kills the thing he loves. No men ever did it more thoroughly or in a shorter time than the fur hunters of General Ashley and Jed Smith and Jim Bridger. For a short thirty years they knew their paradise—freedom, excitement, adventure, solitude, the cozy satisfaction of planting feet where white feet had not trod before. And then it was all over—beaver trapped out, Indians tamed, buffalo on the wane, lonely trails peopled by home-seekers, the rule of free action supplanted by statutes filed in courthouses. Nothing was left.

All of us, it seems to me, do the same thing, if not so spectacularly or completely, through some evil accident of existence. Not that we are unconscious or wanton. We kill the thing we love because we don't have clean choices and, lacking them, destroy our loves by a sort of attrition until at last, numbed and sullied by necessity, we may wonder what it was we ever loved, or how it was that once we loved it. That is one of the tragedies of the lives we have to lead. We never have the clean choices that our youth and innocence have led us to expect; and not having them, weaken or lose our attachments in the compromises we can't avoid.

Well, in any case, there was a theme here that attracted me. I would write the story of the mountain man.3

Thomas Clark remembers Guthrie's initial efforts:

When Bud finally found the direction in which

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he intended to go he began gathering materials for The Big Sky. He did his research as carefully as a historian, and perhaps even more so. He sensed in his new project its importance in opening the advance into the Far West. Again he gathered books, maps, and information wherever he could find it. I was impressed with the care with which he checked his materials on a series of maps which he kept. I am reasonably sure that he was the first man to locate precisely all of the rendezvous sites of the mountain men. 4

Guthrie selected the name "Boone Caudill" for his mountain man. "Caudill is an old Kentucky name," explains Guthrie, "and since Boone came along not so long after Daniel Boone, I just put the two together." 5

Clark recalls that Guthrie "came to think like the mountain men, and at times I thought he felt that he was, in a way, vicariously at least, a reincarnation of Boone Caudill." 6

Guthrie even attempted to recreate the vernacular used by the mountain men. This "mountain man talk" was well authenticated. A man would refer to himself as "this child, this coon or this nigger," Guthrie said. "... they didn't use the first person singular. I don't know why." 7

After writing the first few chapters, Guthrie's

4 Clark letter.
5 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
6 Clark letter.
7 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes, Aug. 4, 1968.
enthusiasm turned to depression. His writing was poor.

He realized he needed help:

It is difficult for any writer, amateur or professional, to assay the ore he mines. What appears to be gold may be dross. The rich vein may be base. Conceit may have salted his diggings. He works in a lonely and uneasy knowledge that determinations wait on outside assayers.

Or sometimes, especially if he's unseasoned, he may reject valuations that jar his ego. He knows nuggets and veins when he sees them. He can tell precious from base. And the words that he's written, by God, are golden! It is best to leave this prospector alone in the desert with his faithful jackass.

Hard as it is for a writer to judge whether his words are working, it is harder yet for him to perceive why they're not. He's too close to them for examination and verdict, too sorely kin to all to pass sentence on any. Each pristine expression, every original effort to shape and relate the larger components of story asserts a relative's claim and fights upstart interventions by bastards. Yet somehow he knows that his lines don't do to the reader what he wishes them to. They don't--and they must above all--carry him through a course of experience.

At this point it is time and past time to seek help, to find and impose on that rare and knowledgeable someone who can excite his awareness and focus his confused eye on effect. Apply the seat of your pants to the seat of your desk chair, a sage advised writers, and something will come out. Uh-huh. But what? Prayerful perseverence alone is all too likely to confirm the anchorite in evil practice.

I had no enlightener and small perseverance--two negatives that left me at virtual zero. After writing three chapters I suspected my imagined reader had quit me. I couldn't blame him. My copy stank.

That much was apparent. The reasons weren't. Not even one reason was. Not overwriting, for one. Or journalese. Or the precious insertion of personal wisdom that stood in the way of the story. Or long-loved long words. Or declaration instead of evidential suggestion. Or the confinement, not the release, of imagination brought about by adverbs and adjectives. Or lack of imagery. Or wandering
viewpoint, if any. To most of these considerations I'd never given thought. Whatever thought I had given to the few was no aid to detection of guilt. Case filed away as unsolved.8

In 1944, Guthrie was accepted as a Nieman Fellow for a year's study at Harvard. "It was the big break," he recalls.9 Clark says:

I remember so well the afternoon when I came home from work and the great mother's helper, Guthrie, came out on the stoop just off of his kitchen and yelled over that he had been given a Nieman Fellowship and was going to Harvard. This was a major landmark in his life. There he came into contact with several people who either impressed him or gave him real assistance. Among those were Frederick Merk, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., and Ted Morrison. Too, he met and formed a fast friendship with Bernard DeVoto. These new friends and the environment surrounding the Nieman fellows had a marked influence on Bud.10

Louis M. Lyons, curator of the Nieman Foundation at that time, recalls that Guthrie asked, and was granted, permission to work on his novel in addition to his other work:

Then 43, he Guthrie had done some fiction "pulps," he said. In applying for the fellowship, besides indicating the studies he wanted as background for his newspaper work—which is the purpose of the fellowships—he proposed a major piece of writing. This was accepted. To his studies in international affairs, he added Frederick Merk's American history course—The Western Movement—then the broadest sweep of American history at

8 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 149-150.
9 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
10 Clark interview.
Harvard—and a writing course with Theodore Morrison. Merk's course gave him background, in addition to his own Montana youth and Kentucky milieu.

When Merk retired in 1957, editorial writers cited his influence on Guthrie as being one of the high points of his teaching career. The May 5, 1957 Oregon Journal said:

He has written comparatively little, his influence being that chiefly of a teacher. One well-known direct result of his inspiration is A. B. Guthrie's grand trilogy of novels on the West. . . .

Robert R. Brunn, assistant American news editor of the Christian Science Monitor, noted that Merk introduced Guthrie "to the raw material from which he wrote two among the first accurate novels of the frontier, The Big Sky and The Way West."\(^{13}\)

Morrison, whom Lyons describes as "a very effective critic and coach,"\(^{14}\) was to become the "enlightener" Guthrie needed. Guthrie recalls Morrison's comments on the first few badly written chapters:


\(^{14}\)Lyons letter.
The best parts, he said when I saw him later, were the bits of internal monologue, the passages in which I held closest to my protagonist. "Internal monologue" was a phrase new to me. As he went on, I recognized that "best" was a relative term. Best of a bad lot. My distance from my character necessarily would vary, he said, but did I want to divorce him completely, as in my descriptions? Would an unlettered country boy have thought of "cirrus" clouds and "sluggard" suns? (God Almighty)

I had written of the boy, "He was hungry." Well, maybe all right, Morrison said. Sometimes the quickest and flattest way of expression justified itself in the context, though it had no appeal to the senses and smacked of authorial intrusion besides. But what if I substituted for that dead declaration of hunger: "He thought of the corn dodger and spring greens Ma might be fixing."

I make Ted sound blunter and more positive than he was, and I have shown only a few, ready grains of his seeding. He was always considerate, kindly and tentative in his words of disturbance and never authoritative, being the first to admit and announce that if a thing worked, then it worked, and that was all there was to it.

Lesson One, I thought as I came away from that first meeting with him. Food for thought. I had a time digesting it.15

"It took me about six weeks to begin to comprehend what he Morrison was talking about," Guthrie says.16 He recalls:

All those first weeks with Ted as my tutor were hard. I would go home after a session and torture my brain. What was it he meant? What really was wrong, what really had he suggested? Like other beginners I was impatient with inexactitude in a critic and dejected by it. The course should be easy to chart. A guide shouldn't lose a man in a thicket. I didn't know then, though I surely

15 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 169-170.
learned later, that a teacher can only suggest, can at best reveal some of the tricks by which illusion is wrought. The rest is up to the student, to what there is in him, to his guts and his heart and his head, all working from the meager base camp that the teacher has managed to pitch.17

It took a bad movie to bring Morrison's criticism into focus:

When I was most confused and sorest beset, my wife and I went to a movie. Make it two movies. Boston was blighted, like towns everywhere, by the double feature. The second feature, so-called, was bad beyond any imaginable efforts to worsen it, but we saw it through, munching popcorn with no injury to illusion. While the plot unfolded to no one's astonishment and the dreary dialogue sounded and actors acted as if their emotions could be communicated only through seizures, a curtain lifted for me. I had been hamming. Plain, by-God hamming. That was part of what Ted had been trying to tell me.

A bridge crossed, though not the last one by far. I needed to understand and to apply other suggestions, advanced with a moderation that only dented my ignorance. I had to show and not tell, a difficult achievement in any case and more difficult in the case of a newspaperman who had spent his life telling. In my characters I had to forget myself. They were my creatures to be sure, but they had to have a vitality of their own, an independence of me except that, as the invisible manager, I kept their waywardness in check. Even that management was demanding, for characters, once conceived, have a willful habit of jumping the reservation and must be herded back into the boundaries of story.18

Finally I managed to achieve identity with my characters—which meant that I lost my own for the time. I was at Harvard but wasn't. I was in the young mountains trapping prime beaver. I was frolicking at rendezvous on the Green. I was

17 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 170.
18 Ibid., pp. 170-171.
peering at distance, watching the dust that might mean buffalo and might mean Indians. I sat on the ground, for who wanted a chair? I lived on straight meat, for who hankered for the fixin's of Eastern tables? I was alive in unpeopled space and at home with it, counting buttes and streams and mountain peaks as friends. I wasn't Bud Guthrie. (The nickname came from my sister, Nina Bess, who as a toddler couldn't pronounce Bertram.) I was one of my characters and I was all of them. After I had finished my manuscript my wife said, "You've come out of the last century, thank God."

Once I had seen that movie in Boston, the hardest days were passed, not the hard days of hard work, not the hard days of more learning, but of the confused days of the dark, of blind isolation in ignorance. I had established a beachhead, small as it was and might ever be, on the great island of fiction.

And now things were different with Ted. Reading my copy, he laughed at passages I had worked to make funny and held tight or nodded where I wanted him to. A light would come to his eyes, and there was help in his heart, mine to draw on, and he would say, "Good, Bud, good!" And his words were benediction and benzedrine.\(^{19}\)

Morrison, who minimizes his role in Guthrie's development as a writer, recalls that his pupil faced "one serious obstacle" when he began writing *The Big Sky*:

As has happened before and since, his very success and distinctiveness as a journalist did not stand him in good stead when he turned to historical fiction. He had to learn, or revive his knowledge of, the crucial differences between these two forms. But he had *The Big Sky* in him, and after a time it began to write itself naturally. My recollection is that the essential change occurred with the appearance of Jim Deakins in Chapter III. If I did anything, it was to point out that Jim had a rightness and a

\(^{19}\)Ibid., pp. 172-173.
naturalness that hadn't before shown itself in the book. Guthrie was able to go back, rewrite the preceding chapters, bring them into harmony with the method and tone of Chapter III; from then on, with only one brief snarl, the book flowed as easily as good water from an untroubled spring.20

In response to those words, Guthrie said of Morrison:

He doesn't give himself enough credit. He commented on every chapter after I got back to Lexington. After a while, we got to understand each other so well he could just start to say something and I'd say: "Hell, why didn't I see that before."21

Morrison's recollection that the entrance of Jim Deakins in Chapter III marked the turning point in The Big Sky was mildly disputed by Guthrie. "Perhaps it was a little before that when Ted told me, 'Your problem is when you go outside your internal monologue,'" Guthrie said. "I had to learn not to look at my characters like a bug under a microscope."22

Once Guthrie had learned this, the story and characters began to develop in an uncontrived way. He used no outline:

Characters made themselves what they were. That may, and I underscore may, be the mark of all fiction worth reading. I doubt that anyone starts out by saying, "This is what my character will be like."23

My characters assume a kind of vitality and life of

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
their own and the characters make themselves after they begin to assert themselves.24

... In my first chapter of The Big Sky, I hadn't even thought about Jim Deakins. Or Teal Eye. Don't call this inspiration; rather it is an inner organization of the subconscious reserved for writers.25

... I never make an outline. I always feel I'd be imprisoned in one. If I'd have made an outline of The Big Sky, I'd never have had Dick Summers. He just strolled onto the page.26

... When I re-wrote the first chapters of The Big Sky, I don't think I used a word of the same prose, although some situations were the same. When I finally was satisfied with the first chapter, it had been rewritten 12 times.27

Guthrie believes he was wise to find one good critic. "Too many critics are like too many cooks. Everyone will take your writing apart for different reasons. Pick one critic and stay with him."28

After Guthrie had rewritten those first chapters, Morrison says his role as an adviser was minor:

I can only remember one other chapter that gave more than incidental and very minor trouble, and that for the best of reasons. It was the chapter in which Boone kills Jim Deakins, and I think it was unsatisfactory at first because the author emotionally resisted this inevitable and climactic act of violence to a friend, the crowning irony of the whole structure.

24Ibid.
25Ibid.
28Ibid.
On second try, the chapter came right and took its place in the book. Fundamentally, Guthrie had the intelligence to conceive of the book and the talent to write it. He had to rid himself of some incrustations of journalistic habit at the start. After that, nothing could have prevented the book from reaching its goal. My part became very simple: it was to cheer from the sidelines as the chapters went past.29

Morrison was "psychoing it" when he said Guthrie was reluctant to face Deakins' death, Guthrie said. "But he was right; it [the chapter] didn't work right at first."30

As to Morrison's reference to the "incrustations of journalistic habit," Guthrie agrees and regards his tutor's advice as crucial in helping him to overcome this problem:

My eyes were opened, really, to the difference between journalese and the language of fiction. Quite different. So many people assume that because you can move earth you can build a foundation. These don't necessarily go together.31

Without Morrison's help, and the year's fellowship at Harvard, Guthrie's book likely would have been of low quality if completed at all. "I might have written it," he says, "but it wouldn't be the book it is."32

29Morrison letter.
32Ibid.
was not surprising that Guthrie dedicated a later book, *These Thousand Hills*, to Morrison.

At first, Guthrie would write nothing without obtaining documentation through research. As he gained confidence, however, he began writing beyond his research:

I was taking educated guesses—surmises—and then my research backed me up. Remember, though, my surmises were made on the basis of a lot of reading. But I never found specific references until later.\(^{33}\)

Guthrie's writing progressed so well that he was granted an extension at Harvard and received a fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in August of 1945. Lyons remembers:

He completed 60,000 words of the novel during the Nieman year, and all the research. He then got us to extend his fellowship three months (to a full 12 months) and went to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, run by Morrison. \(\ldots\)\(^{34}\)

The extension (Guthrie says it was only two months) allowed Guthrie to remain at Harvard during the summer to continue his writing. He recalls:

The two months I spent there were lonely. Family gone, Nieman friends gone, classrooms, professors, seminars gone. There remained, not for me to impose on overmuch, Ted Morrison, Louis Lyons, Benny DeVoto, Charlie Morton of the *Atlantic Monthly* and the few non-academic friends we had made. There remained the Widener Library and the typewriter with its demands on me.

\(^{33}\)Ibid.
\(^{34}\)Lyons letter.
In unproductive fits I read or reread The Great Gatsby, The Charterhouse of Parma, Dracula and other books that excused me from working on my own. I even had a go at The Golden Bough but could find no excuse there and said the hell with it. Reading, I wondered why so many people considered Tender Is the Night to be Fitzgerald’s best work. I wondered about Charlie Morton’s great liking for Stendhal.

But word by word and line by line my manuscript proceeded. Not in bursts, though. For me, writing is a slow and painful business. It demands concentration and search and presents the obstacles of dissatisfaction with what could be said better. And there’s no immediate reward in putting words on paper. The reward, great but fugitive, is in having written, in having found the word, the line, the paragraph, the chapter that is as good as ever you can make it. I spent a full day on one line of dialogue and knocked off satisfied.

Lonely, I found company in my characters, who grew as I came to understand them. They assumed their own qualities independent of me and hence became more demanding. And names. They took or had taken their own with scarcely a thought on my part. Their independence, along with their development, made me almost superstitious. Writing ahead of my research, I kept finding my guesses jibed with the facts. A final experience came close to closing the case. One of my characters called himself Deakins, a name unheard of. A couple of years after I had completed my manuscript, I wandered along the crest of Independence Rock in eastern Wyoming. There, on what was called the great register of the desert, fur-hunters and others who followed the sun had painted or chiseled their names. One leaped to my incredulous eye. DEAKINS. Standing there, staring at a name inscribed long ago, gazing at distances too far for the mind to reach, I thought: I have been here before.

My manuscript was two-fifths finished when I set out for Bread Loaf. Looking back at my loneliness, renewing in recollection my almost physical hunger for the West, some times I think that whatever The Big Sky is, it owes much to nostalgia.35

35The Blue Hen’s Chick, pp. 185-186.
Guthrie was no more than an acquaintance of Bernard DeVoto before he went to Bread Loaf and he admits having been awed initially by the famous historian at the writer's conference:

Except for a couple of casual encounters I hardly knew him at that time. A difficult man, a curmudgeon, given to extremes and tantrums, he made me uneasy, and uneasier still because he was an authority on the early West, a student with knowledge undoubtedly far beyond mine even in application to the limited years I'd researched. Fortunately, I didn't know that in a sense I had stolen his subject, and was writing the kind of novel he had long wanted to write and perhaps would have written already but for a growing shakiness of faith in himself as a writer of fiction.

Another man might have resented my usurpation of his western preserve, might have cried down through vexation the kind of a novel he'd had in mind before me. Not DeVoto. He read The Big Sky in manuscript and promptly beat all drums to promote it.36

Lyons recalls that the acquaintanceship of Guthrie and DeVoto "proved to be a fruitful association, doubtless influential on Guthrie's style and in intensifying his western studies."37

Among the persons who read and appreciated Guthrie's manuscript at the writers' conference was publisher William Sloane. Guthrie recalls being summoned before Sloane one afternoon:

37Lyons letter.
Bill had my manuscript before him. He filled his pipe. That took some time. Once he had lighted his fire, he raised his hazel-nut, hypnotic eyes. He asked, "How near are you through?"
I said, "Two-fifths, maybe."
And how long would it take me to finish?
I said that depended. I had to go back to my job.
He puffed on his pipe and shook his head in what seemed like negation. "This is great stuff," he told me, "simply great."
I panted my thanks.
Would I consider, he asked, a five-thousand-dollar advance?"
It was hard to consider. I had never seen that much money all in one pile.
The trees weren't there, or cottages, or friends, as I raced to Bread Loaf's single phone. From it I wired Harriet: "Swinging on a star. Five thousand in advance."
I think I knew then that I was done, or close to done, with newspapermaking.38

Guthrie returned to Lexington after the writers' conference and resumed work with the Leader as executive editor. He was allowed to spend only as much time as necessary to give the newsroom needed direction so that he could devote most of his time to The Big Sky. Clark recalls:

When he came home The Big Sky to all intents and purposes had been finished. He had signed a contract with Henry Holt, but in the interval Henry Holt was sold to the Texas millionaires, and Bill Sloane, now editor of the Rutgers Press, and a group had withdrawn to form their own company. One of the books they took with them was The Big Sky. In many ways this no doubt was a fortunate thing. The new publishers pushed their best book, and with good results. I should add that the last four chapters were

38 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 194.
added after the manuscript was finished, and—I am not at all certain that Bud would agree—perhaps injured rather than helped his wonderful manuscript.39

As Clark suspected, Guthrie would not agree. He felt the additional chapters necessary. Without them, The Big Sky would have ended with Boone Caudill returning home after ruining his idyllic mountain existence. The realization that Caudill did not belong in civilized society either would have been lost.

Determining an appropriate ending for the novel prompted considerable deliberation, however. What was to become of Boone Caudill, the mountain man who had wrecked his own paradise? Guthrie recalls:

My first impulse was to have him become a buffalo hunter, a trade he would have scorned. But I decided to leave his outcome up to the imagination of the readers. . . . I think that was a wise decision. Hundreds of people have asked me what happened to Boone. . . . So don't wrap up your book in a neat package. Leave something for the reader to imagine.40

Many years later, Guthrie retains this philosophy, as evidenced by his answer to a question:

Q. Boone Caudill. Is he hero or villain or both?
A. Or neither? I don't know. You make up your mind on that.41

39Clark letter.
41Ibid., Twin Lakes.
In 1946 The Big Sky got itself completed, or it got me to complete it. Hours and weeks and months of slave labor went into it. Working, I could look back on what I had done with some satisfaction, but what remained to be done appalled me. . . . I had a theme, not original, that each man kills the thing he loves. If it had any originality at all, it was only that a band of men, the fur-hunters, killed the life they loved and killed it with a thoughtless prodigality perhaps unmatched. Yet in the absence of an outline the typewriter was errant or balky. It produced pages of junk or no pages at all. I cursed it day after day.

But the end came. Clutching the manuscript, knowing only that I couldn't do better, I set out for New York, so exhausted as to be numb to all consequences. Even the welcome it and I got left me indifferent if not unappreciative. A thing done was done, and already my mind had fixed itself on the Oregon Trail and a new book, The Way West.\(^4^2\)

Although the title The Big Sky was gleaned from his writing, Guthrie does not take credit for it:

None of us--Ted, my wife or I--had thought of a title for the manuscript, were it to be published. That could wait. It waited a long time. Even after the manuscript was ready for the presses we were racking our brains for one. Finally Bill Sloane said to forget it. Send him some autobiographical notes instead. In the notes I mentioned my father's first day in Montana, when he had stood under the big sky and exclaimed, "By George, I'm free." Sloane wired me congratulations on my title, The Big Sky--but it was he who found it.\(^4^3\)

Mrs. Jane Haugen, Guthrie's sister, remembers being excited and elated when she read the galley proofs

\(^{4^2}\)The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 199-200.
\(^{4^3}\)Ibid., p. 172.
of The Big Sky that her brother sent in large rolls to her home in Missoula. She said:

I was in the hospital having a baby when The Big Sky was about to be published. Dad who was visiting from Choteau brought some of the proofs with him to the hospital, and I remember he went, "tsk, tsk," at some of the risque parts because he didn't think that anyone in my condition should be reading them. But he was very proud.44

44Mrs. Jane Haugen interview, Missoula, March 1, 1969.
CHAPTER IV

The Big Sky was an immediate success:

I wasn’t prepared for the praise the published book got. Me, an important new author? Me, a fresh voice out of the West? Me? I read the reviews and looked at the pictures and, though pleased, felt somehow diminished while my family rejoiced. Though my being had gone into it, the book wasn’t mine now, and what comments were made about it were like voices heard in the distance. Here I was, apart from it, and tomorrow I would fall on my face.1

Clark recalls:

We were so proud and thrilled at Bud’s success. He made the rest of us piddlers seem like country boys with ink on our fingers. The book had a wonderful sale, and the movie contract lifted the Guthries well out of the doldrums of the depression. Nevertheless, Bud’s good Indiana Methodist conscience bothered him a bit in staid old Blue Grass Lexington where so many damned fools, ignorant of the realities of the opening of the West, tittered behind the stairway like a bunch of snaggle-toothed boys about to turn a back house over on Halloween. Bud’s test came on a much bigger scope in the national praise of the book.

Since that day I have not taught a course in the westward movement that I have not referred my students to The Big Sky as a book which presents the salty essence of the opening of the West in a highly dependable form. This is more than a novel; it is really an epic in history and fiction.2

Many major book reviewers commented on the newly

1Ibid., p. 200.

2Clark letter.

Until—and unless—a better one comes along, The Big Sky is the outstanding novel about the time and country with which it deals.3

In the Herald Tribune, Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote:

A monument of a book! One of those monuments made out of rough boulders, native to the spot, rolled together to serve as a pedestal for a towering bronze figure of epic size . . . a monument to the "mountain man." . . . We have rarely had in an American book a full-length portrait-statue of any man, so sound, so convincing, so rounded, as this portrayal of Boone Caudill, the Kentucky mountain man.4

The review in The Atlantic said, in part:

Reading The Big Sky is like coming from a sleet-swept New York Street into the limitless, sun-baked expanses of Carl Akeley's African Hall. In this novel, which may surely be termed superb, the Far West of a century and more ago is spread out from the wild Missouri to the towering bastions of the Rockies. . . . There are passages of sheer poetry that suggest Carl Sandburg while remaining entirely Guthrie; passages that one is tempted to quote at length for the sheer joy of transcribing them.5


The Atlantic noted that "save by casual mention, no historical figures appear in this story. . . ." Guthrie commented on his decision to use neither actual incidents nor people:

Neither in The Big Sky or The Way West did I take an actual incident. I made up my own crew and my own incidents, relying for background on my general knowledge—or even my specific knowledge—of the settlers. I don't like to put words in the mouths of real people. They may have said this but the chances are they didn't. I don't know, this seems to be a little like the disfigurement of a headstone to say they said "so and so." No one can prove they didn't but neither can you prove they did. I don't like that.\(^6\)

In a Yale Review article, Orville Prescott commented:

It gets under way slowly and unimpressively, and only as it progresses does it become apparent that this is no ordinary combination of research and adventure but a major work with good claims to be considered an epic of our vanished past. . . .\(^7\)

Charles A. Wagner, in Commonweal, expressed similar feelings:

There has not been a sustained piece of historical fiction dealing with the mountain men of a century ago to equal this, in dialogic purity, in historical accuracy, and in unfettered treatment.\(^8\)

\(^6\)Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.


U. S. Quarterly Booklist and Time praised the novel for what they termed its skillful combination of romanticism and realism. Said the U. S. Quarterly Booklist: "Neither an historical romance nor an altogether regional novel, this book achieves a skillful balance between sentiment and realism." 9

Time wrote:

Author Guthrie's mountain men—buffalo hunters, trappers and guides—are seen, smelt, and heard with a consistency and solidity of understanding that makes most other writing about them seem perfunctory or fake. All the romantic qualities that a boy could find in these figures—their lonely hardihood, keenness and courage—are combined with a realist's grasp of them as rough and wayward fugitives of society. The idiom of their thought and speech has never been so richly used in fiction. 10

The magazine applauded Guthrie's portrait of "... sardonic Dick Summers, a man swift and animal sensitive, who ranks as the most vivid scout in literature since Natty Bumppo in James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales. 11

Guthrie was on the cover of the Saturday Review of Literature edition that contained The Big Sky review. Describing the book as "skillfully planned and beautifully


11 Ibid.
finished," the magazine said:

We shall never know exactly how the mountain men talked; they had no literal reporters. We shall never know as much as we would like about their psychology; they told little of themselves and wrote almost nothing. We do not even know as much as we should about just how they dressed, fed, planted their traps, sold their plews, picked up willing Indian girls, endured their starving times, cut each other's throats, and gambled with their own lives. All this has to be patiently reconstructed with historical research, first-hand knowledge of the western scene and above all imagination and study to do an impressive job of reconstruction.\(^\text{12}\)

Bernard DeVoto's review probably pleased Guthrie most:

This book is so extraordinary that I find it hard to express the full measure of my admiration without being extravagant. It is an exceedingly distinguished book, an unusually original novel, and one of the most thoroughly wrought acts of the imagination I have ever read.\(^\text{13}\)

A few reviewers expressed reservations about some of Guthrie's descriptive passages because of their frankness. Said Booklist:

The descriptive passages are excellent, but it is a lusty, brutal story of frontiersmen who could not live except in wild free places untouched by civilization. Read before purchase.\(^\text{14}\)


\(^{13}\)Bernard DeVoto, from jacket flyer of The Big Sky, original source unavailable.

Library Journal’s review said:

Fine character studies of trappers and Indians. A story rough as the men it characterizes, with frontier frankness and language and situation which may offend. Men will enjoy it.\(^\text{15}\)

Margaret Marshall, in The Nation, had a more serious criticism:

The characterization of the three mountain men is carried out by contemporary and realistic means, including the stream-of-consciousness technique of revealing their thoughts and feelings. Bernard DeVoto assures us that Mr. Guthrie’s delineation is accurate, that this is actually “how they were, how they lived, most of all how they felt.” The trouble is that, however well Mr. Guthrie understands them, his rendering of their thoughts and feelings is not very convincing. I doubt whether any contemporary rendering would be. It would be almost impossible not to ascribe to them, as Mr. Guthrie often seems to do, the thoughts and feelings about the early West of a present day American. The fact that the two sets of thoughts and feelings may be similar only complicates the problem. As for his handling of the romance of Caudill and Teal Eye, it is, to say the least, anachronistic.

As I have indicated, the landscape is the object and motivation of the emotional drive out of which Mr. Guthrie writes. At times, notably in the account of men marooned in a mountain pass in winter, he succeeds in communicating its reality. And the reality turns out to be a fabulous realm of snow and peak and sky of which the most fabulous element of all is a rock goat, alive and real, yet also an emanation of the ghostly landscape. . . . This is the best passage of the book and I think it is no accident that it takes on a legendary quality.

Throughout the book it is the characters who are allowed to remain figures in the landscape who seem most real. The Indians, whose stream of

\(^{15}\)“The Big Sky,” Library Journal, 72, April 15, 1947, p. 638.
consciousness Mr. Guthrie does not attempt to plumb—excluding Teal Eye, except when she is drawn too far into the orbit of her white man's consciousness—are more convincing than the three mountain men on whom he spends so much effort and space.

I can't help feeling that Mr. Guthrie has applied the realistic technique to material of which the reality cannot be captured by the documentary method. This method serves him well in one respect. The brutality and the plain squalor of life in the early West came through. On the other hand, one suspects that its rather solemn and pedestrian compulsions inhibit him in another respect. Though a few tall tales are spun around campfires, he makes very little use of the humorous myth making which was and still is a constant and deeply indigenous American way of coping with the overwhelming presence.

The realistic appearance, the technique of dogged documentation, has a prestige akin to that of virtue in this country. Yet the American fiction which has survived and will survive is the fiction which may and usually does start off on the ground, along "a bright trail of fact," as if in propitiation, but ends in the fabulous. Melville and Mark Twain were realists in that they dealt with contemporary reality. But Moby Dick and Huckleberry Finn and The Great Gatsby, to take a more recent example, are fables, not documentaries. Aspiring writers should learn this, and let themselves go.

Mr. Guthrie's mountain men would be more believable if they were more legendary—by which I do not mean romantic. As it is they are not only unconvincing; they impose upon the wilderness, and they narrow the dimensions and wonder of The Big Sky. Mr. Guthrie is a competent and sensitive and conscientious writer. But the spirit of the West, whatever it was, has escaped him—partly I think because he used a realistic trap. 16

J. M. Lalley, in *The New Yorker*, found technical faults that qualified his praise of the novel:

If it were possible to have a novel that was the result of a collaboration by Ned Buntline, James T. Farrell, and Donn Byrne, it would, I suspect, be rather like "The Big Sky," by A. B. Guthrie, Jr. . . . To say this is not necessarily a disparagement, for each member of the disparate triad I have just mentioned is, in his own metier, an excellent story-teller. So, for that matter, is Mr. Guthrie. Yet despite this great and nowadays unusual merit, the book has certain artistic disharmonies that make it seem to me not quite the masterpiece its publishers think it is.

This is a historical novel, and its milieu is one much favored by the contributors to Beadle's Dime Library; that is, the Wild West before there were any gold-rushers, cowboys, cavalry, professional bad men, or breech-loading rifles. That was the day when the country beyond the Missouri still belonged largely to the Indians, who had to share their vast domain only with the factors of the great fur companies and a few handfuls of tough, intrepid and not especially amiable white trappers. Mr. Guthrie, though, differs from the old dime novelists, on the one side, and the new, interpretive historians like Turner and Parrington, on the other, because of his naturalistic approach to the epoch. His purpose is to portray these trappers, or mountain men (the Indians called them Long Knives), as they really were, which requires as much attention to their barbaric vices as to their romantic resourcefulness and fortitude. But Mr. Guthrie comes very close to defeating this purpose by employing in his descriptive passages a prose that is startlingly like the costumes of his characters—a sort of sturdy buck-skin dialect lavishly embellished with poetical foferaw.

Lalley relates Guthrie's story of Boone Caudill traveling up the Missouri, surviving an Indian ambush and fighting and frolicking as a mountain man, then comments:
Through all this hardy and heroic business runs a curious love theme—the passion of Caudill for a Blackfoot girl called Teal Eye, who is scarcely more than an infant when he first sees her. Driven by a dream or a longing that all Mr. Guthrie's rhetoric does not make plausible, he finally seeks her out across God knows how much mountain wilderness and marries her according to the tribal rite. Because of his free, savage existence, Caudill, like most of the other Long Knives, has himself become in spirit an Indian, and he lives happily for a time with Teal Eye in a Blackfoot village, but even the loose tribal authority and discipline are more than his haughty spirit will endure. It is apparently for no better reason than to show his contempt of the Blackfeet that he forsakes his wife and allows Jim Deakins to persuade him to guide a Yankee promoter of colonization to a secret pass through the Teton mountains into Oregon—an act that invites the vengeance of the Blackfeet. It is in the same capricious spirit that he presently murders Deakins, because of a sudden jealous suspicion. The story ends rather inconclusively as Caudill, who has gone back home to Kentucky and found that he does not like it there, again faces West. He is, we are told, a haunted man, an energumen, and we are encouraged to infer that, for all his craft and knowledge of the country, he is not one of the mountain men who will soon be called upon to take up the new and even more glamorous career as the famous Army Scouts.

I have said that the book has disharmonies and that one of them is the incongruity of Mr. Guthrie's rhetorical touches and his naturalistic method. Here is a characteristic example, from his account of a fight between two drunken trappers: "As he twisted away the knife came down and cut through his shirt, and the bite of it along his arm was like the bite of fire... He jerked the hand around under his chest and saw it weakening, one finger and another letting up like something dying... The knife slipped out and fell on the grass. Boone snatched it up, holding to Streak with his other hand. A word stuttered on the man's lips, and the campfire showed a sudden look of fear in his face, a look of such fear that a man felt dirtied seeing it." Old Buntline himself, I daresay, would have given a great deal to be able to produce a passage like
that, but the effect of it in this case is to
distract attention from the story to the virtuosity
of the author. There is a further weakness, it seems
to me, in Mr. Guthrie's abrupt transitions from
objective to subjective narration and in the
frequent portages from one stream of consciousness
to another, for one is never sure whether a thought
belongs to a character or to the author. For instance,
when, on the expedition into the pass, Deakins, weak
from wounds and hunger, has the half-delirious notion
of urging his starving partner to kill and eat him,
one can't help feeling that this is Mr. Guthrie's way
of working in the trapper's adage that "meat's meat"
and of telling us in a pinch cannibalism was a possi­
bility among the Long Knives.

Yet when all the discounts are made, what remains
is an extraordinarily interesting first novel. Its
technical faults and the cloudiness of its characteriza­
tions are to a large extent compensated for by the
author's understanding of the mountain country and
its moods and by his imaginative treatment of histor­
ical detail, which is vividly attested to by such
episodes as the almost instantaneous extermination of
an Indian tribe by Smallpox. And if Boone Caudill
is not the Aeschylean tragic hero Mr. Guthrie seems
to believe, he is nevertheless a recognizable, and
even familiar, type. Perhaps in fact, the whole
point of the tale is really this: The frontier has
long since vanished, but the frontiersman, with his
anarchic temper, his reckless courage, and his
prodigious improvidence, is still among us. 17

Years after The Big Sky was published, competent
author-critics still give the book "rave" reviews. Montana
author Dan Cushman called the book "a big, sprawling won­
terful success." Guthrie's creative writing teacher,
H. G. Merriam, regards it as definitive:

It will be hard for anyone to write a better
novel about the mountain man than The Big Sky. It

17 J. M. Lalley, "Young Man of the Mountains,"
is the definitive book. Do you know what I mean by that? I mean that nobody's going to write a better one. . . . There's love in The Big Sky. I got the feeling that Guthrie was having a grand time when he wrote that book. . . . My only criticism of The Big Sky was in his description of crew pulling the keelboat up the river. He carried it on too long. I got the idea he was trying to get across long before he was ready to give it up.18

After Guthrie published his second major book, The Way West, Dayton Kohler discussed the contribution of his books to literature. Noting that Guthrie's literary reputation "so far outweighs the body of his work that his case seems worth examining in greater detail than the average book review allows,"19 Kohler wrote:

Within limitations of substance and technique . . . Guthrie's area of achievement is clearly defined. He has brought to his re-creation of the western experience a new perspective and a different set of values.

On one level The Big Sky is entertaining melodrama, the Old West of hunting and trapping, Indian fighting, violence and sudden death. On another it is a novel of atmosphere, its pages lovely and luminous with the sense of great spaces and empty skies conveyed in the images of sunset-flushed peaks, stormy winter nights, green river valleys, autumn moons; a land where "one day and another it was pretty much the same, and it was all good." But the true meaning of Guthrie's novel comes through, not in action or landscape painting, but in an unexposed pattern of ideas and images bringing the whole into proper focus.

We can make no greater demand upon the art of the

18 Merriam interview.

novelist than this. Granted the imaginative reality of his story, he must convey upon the level of significant meaning some truth about human conduct and its consequences. Because Guthrie tries to answer this demand, his novel has moral value beyond mere entertainment. His sense of form allows no surprises of technique, and his style is at times uncertain, but no one could doubt the seriousness of his purpose. He writes about the frontier, a subject and an experience which concerns us all, though we may be separated from it by generations.

What was missing from the noble view of the pioneer was the sense of human values, the appalling waste of human spirit and effort, and the emotional erosion which frontier life imposed. The realistic writer must always restore the cost of hardship and the casual cruelty of things to the story of the frontier.  

Kohler probably would disagree with Marshall's contention that Guthrie did not make his characters legendary enough. Says Kohler:

Guthrie has been fortunate in that the stories he has to tell lend themselves to the use of historical images, the kind of symbolic figure for which other writers capable of more subtle and aesthetic effects often search in vain. In The Big Sky his image is the mountain man, solitary, morose, fiercely independent, given to wild humors and murderous rages. All the lesser symbols of the novel—the frontier court which aroused Boone Caudill's resentment of law and order, the beaver which looked at him with quick, frightened eyes in the moment of dying, Boone's quest for Teal Eye, the blind child, the spoiled paradise—tend toward a fuller understanding of the trapper's place in the landscape and history of the West.  

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20 Ibid., pp. 68-69.

21 Ibid., p. 69.
Asked if he intended Boone Caudill to be a symbol of all mountain men, Guthrie said no and added:

People have talked about symbolism in my works, but I'm hardly ever aware of any symbols. And I doubt that any real--and not that I include myself in such--any real good writer is. Faulkner had something to say about that, you know. He compared a writer to a carpenter. If he saw a place that needed a nail, he drove it in.22

Kohler saw one main weakness in Guthrie's writing:

At the present time his chief weakness is in the drawing of character. His people, in spite of their tremendous energies, seldom gives the impression of depth. Like a scene viewed in flat light, his background figures are often more shadowy than real. Some of them we know by readily identifiable tags--Teal Eye, solemn, bird-like; Jim Deakins, amiable, redheaded with joking ways to set off Boone's moroseness... Dick Summers, slow-spoken, wise, retrospective. The flat character has great literary value--some writers, like Dickens, have created no other kind--but chiefly for eccentricity or humor.... In The Big Sky, they do convey the violence and squalor of the time.23

Allan Nevin, in his review of The Big Sky in The Saturday Review of Literature, also noted that secondary characters were "rather shadowy."24

Guthrie has responded:

If I had gone into them in greater depth some other person would say I gave too much attention to secondary characters. You can always do this

22Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
23Kohler, p. 71.
24Nevins, p. 9.
nitpicking. I used to review books, I know how easy it is. Sometimes it's an effort of the reviewer just to show just how damn smart he is, too.25

Like Marshall, Kohler felt Guthrie could have utilized the tall story to better advantage:

It is unfortunate that he Guthrie has not made greater use of the tall story, the frontiersman's way of coping with bewildering or overwhelming circumstance, for the few yarns told by Dick Summers have the ring and authenticity of the early West.26

Guthrie did make more use of tall stories in his later books.

Wallace Stegner, in a foreword for a later edition of The Big Sky, notes how closely the novel is tied to Guthrie's childhood:

Bigness, distance, wildness, freedom, are the dream that pulls Boone Caudill westward into the mountains, and the dream has an incandescence in the novel because it is also that dream that Bud Guthrie grew up on.

The country he takes us through with Caudill, Jim Deakins, and Dick Summers is his native landscape, known since childhood. It is a sign of commitment, and evidence of love, that when he gives wildness its fleeting consumation by settling Boone Caudill in a Blackfoot lodge with the girl Teal Eye, he locates that idyllic camp on the river called variously the Tansy, Breast, Teton or Titty—essentially the valley around Choteau, Montana, where Guthrie lived as a boy and has settled as a man. It is country of a kind I know well—at the edge of the mountains but not in them: high plains

25 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

26 Kohler, p. 71.
country, chinook country, its air like a blade or a blowtorch, its sky fitting down close and tight to the horizons and the great bell of heaven alive with light, clouds, heat, stars, winds, incomparable weathers. But even if I had never been within a thousand miles of Montana I could not miss Guthrie's love and knowledge of the land he writes about, and I could not avoid knowing something of what that unmarked wilderness would have meant to Boone Caudill. The big plains and the surging ranges and the hidden valleys are a fit setting for his story of intractable liberty and violence; and in the end they turn out to be not only a setting and a theme, but also like Caudill himself, victim. The West of The Big Sky is innocence, anti-civilization, savage and beautiful and doomed, a dream that most Americans, however briefly or vainly, have dreamed, and that some have briefly captured.

And when Lat Evans stakes out his own ranch after a career of wolfing and bronc busting, he stakes it out on that same Tansy, Breast, Teton, or Titty River where Boone Caudill had lived his idyll with Teal Eye and the Piegan of Heavy Runners band—and where twenty years later a boy named Bud Guthrie, son of the editor of the Choteau Acantha, would be hanging out his ears listening to cowpunchers, sheepherders, drifters, politicians, and wandering journalists talking of a past that no one yet had begun to write down.

The Big Sky is the first, and for me the best, of the three novels that eventually came of that listening. What makes it special is not merely its narrative and scenic vividness, but the ways in which Boone Caudill exemplifies and modifies that enduring American type.  

Guthrie demonstrates his descriptive powers—and reveals his love for his childhood home—when he views through Caudill's eyes the country around Choteau:

The water ran easy at his feet, talking to itself as it went. It was as clear as the evening sky over

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the mountains, with a brown clearness in it that came from fall and leaves the trees had dropped. Up to his right, where the Teton had cut into a bank and made a hole, a lazy trout lipped at the surface, sending out little spreading circles. A chokecherry bush hung over the hole, its green gone but with some berries hanging black and wrinkled on it. The mountains lifted blue in the west, cutting sharp into the quiet sky. High and far in them lay patches of snow. He could see the mountain like an ear and the notch by its side that the Teton ran out of, and southward he could see the canyon of the Medicine with a high reef of rock on one side and a saw-toothed mountain on the other. Between the two rivers were smaller canyons made by streams that maybe the white man hadn't put a name to yet. None of them could be as pretty as the Teton winding, busy but not hurried, with a mind and time to have a look at things as it went along. Clumps of cottonwood grew on its banks, and chokecherry and serviceberry bushes and wild rose and red willow that the Indians mixed with tobacco. No place could be prettier than this valley, with the two buttes rising to the south and the tan hills ridged wide on the sides, and cottonwood and black birch and sagebrush growing, and elk and deer about and buffalo coming down from the benches to drink. It was a place a man could spend his whole life in and never wish for better.28

As Morrison first pointed out, Guthrie's internal monologue is the strength of his writing. A sample early in The Big Sky:

Boone lagged to the trail and stopped and looked back. Home seemed a far piece now, beyond the knobs, beyond the great river, through the hills. His ma would be wondering about him, he reckoned. Maybe she grieved, hearing from Pap that the river must have got him. Maybe she said, "Boone! Boone!" to herself while her wet eyes leaked over. Of a sudden, weakness came on him again, taking the strength out of him and the grit. It wasn't any use trying to

28 Ibid., p. 253.
run away. Everywhere people picked on a boy, chasing after him like they'd chase a wild brute, or playing friendly and stealing from him. Better to go back to Ma and let Pap beat on him. Better to have something to eat and a home to lie in. Only, the law was after him now, and maybe home would be the jailhouse, and Pap would want to kill him, or come nigh to it. He straightened. Anyhow, he'd even things with Bedwell. He aimed to get Old Sure Shot back one way or another. He turned around and started west again, his head pounding to his step, his eyes following the horse tracks on the trail. 29

The melodramatic death scenes of Murders at Moon Dance make a startling contrast with this graphically described death in The Big Sky:

The eyes flicked wide, flicked and fluttered and came wide again and closed slow as Boone wrenched the knife free and drove it in again. 30

In The Big Sky Guthrie develops an ability to draw word pictures—an ability he did not have when he wrote Murders at Moon Dance. After Boone and Deakins have an argument, Guthrie needs only to describe Boone's posture to tell the readers that he still is angry:

He rode straight and stiff, feeling Jim's eyes on him, and answering goddamnit with the set of his back. 31

Guthrie's research was meticulous. He describes in detail the procedures mountain men used to set beaver

29 Ibid., p. 31.
30 Ibid., p. 209.
31 Ibid., p. 239.
traps:

He stopped and put the cocked trap in the water, so that the surface came a hand above the trigger, and led the chain out into deeper water until he came to the end of it. Then he slipped the stick through the ring in the chain and pushed the stick in the mud, putting all his weight to it. He tapped it next with his ax to make sure it was secure enough. Back at the bank he cut a willow twig and peeled it, and from his belt took the point of antelope horn he kept his medicine in. The medicine came to his nose, strong and gamy, as he took the stopper out. He dipped the twig in the medicine, restoppered his bottle and put it back, and stopped again and thrust the dry end of the twig into the mud four inches above the surface of the water. It wouldn't be long, he reckoned, until a beaver came to medicine.32

However, he did commit an insignificant historical error that taught him a lesson he would remember several years later:

Once when I was working long hours to meet a deadline, I was led to use a name that I found in recent but not old literature. The name was Nyack, and the thing named was the small creek in Montana, a tributary of the Flathead. The chances seemed at least a thousand to one that the present name was old. The fur hunters didn't give titles to mountain ranges, peaks, plateaus or stretches of plains, not often at any rate. But they did name the rivers because the rivers were the scenes of their operations. The consequence is that nearly all western-stream names are more than a hundred years old. I took the one chance in a thousand, telling myself, moreover, that the stream was unimportant, except of course to my story, and that such a little matter didn't justify a further search. Maybe it didn't, but the book hadn't been long in print before I received a letter. The writer said it was his impression that Nyack Creek was named at the time the Great Northern railroad was named.

32 Ibid., p. 181.
building its line through Montana, a half century after the time of my story. He was right, too. I've always wondered, since he caught me in one mistake, how much confidence he put in the rest of my history.\textsuperscript{33}

Some of his critics were in error themselves. Guthrie says:

A midwest book reviewer said "The Big Sky" would have been better if I hadn't employed such modern gangsterism as the phrase "rubbed out." Now "rubbed out," meaning killed, meaning done away with, is old. I do know that it was drawn, probably in the first years of the 19th century, if not earlier, from the Indian sign language. When an Indian wanted to impart the information that a man had been killed, he rubbed the fingers of one hand against the palm of the other. Hence, "rubbed out." So the fact is that today's gangsters aren't modern at all in this case. They borrowed an idiom a hundred and fifty years old. The reviewer, had he wanted to, could have found a more recent but still dusty example. Custer's soldiers, singing "Garry Owen" as they marched to their last rendezvous, boasted that they would rub out the Sioux.\textsuperscript{34}

Perhaps the major importance of Guthrie's first serious book lies in his characterization of Caudill. For the first time in American fiction, a three-dimensional mountain man appears on a printed page. Guthrie shatters the myth of the Noble Savage by developing that third, vital dimension to the stereotype mountain man. Stegner writes:

Caudill is an avatar of the oldest of all the American myths--the civilized man re-created in

\textsuperscript{33}Guthrie, "The Historical Novel," p. 2.
\textsuperscript{34}Ibid.
savagery, re-baptized into innocence on a wilderness continent. His fabulous ancestors are Daniel Boone, who gives him his name, and Cooper's Leatherstocking; and up and down the range of American fiction he has ten thousand recognizable siblings. But Caudill has his own distinction, for he is neither intellectualized nor sentimentalized. He may be White Indian, but he is no Noble Savage—for the latter role he is not noble enough, and far too savage. Though he retains many mythic qualities—the preternatural strength and cunning, the need for wild freedom, the larger-than-life combination of Indian skills and white mind—he has no trace of Leatherstocking's deist piety. His virtues are stringently limited to the qualities of self-reliance, courage, and ruthlessness that will help him to survive a life in which few died old. Guthrie clearly admires him, but with reservations enforced by the hindsights of history. Boone Caudill's savagery, admirable and even enviable though it is, can lead nowhere. The moral of his lapse from civilization is that such an absolute lapse is doomed and sterile, and in the end the savagery which has been his strength is revealed as his fatal weakness.

For Boone's course leaves him nowhere to go. By mid-novel, having fled the settlements and the settlement's law and the authority of a harsh father, he has cut himself off so utterly that he can hardly stand the civilization of so remote an outpost as Fort Union, on the Yellowstone... He symbolically marries the wilderness when he brings Teal Eye into his tepee on the Teton. But that too, the only thing he wants, the only thing he is fit for, will be his only a little while. He is a killing machine, as dangerous to what he loves as to what he hates, and what the logic of his ferocious adaptation demands, the novel's action fulfills. In the same moment when he shoots Jim Deakins, the one friend who has bound him to the past and to civilization, he breaks his bond with Teal Eye and the Blackfeet and the son who might have represented continuity and a compromise between the two ways of life has been—how properly for both historical rightness and the fictional inevitability of his theme!—born blind.

No compromise is possible for one who, like Boone Caudill, has given himself all the way to savagery. He cannot go to farming as Dick Summers does, and he would be too intractable ever to lead
out a wagontrain to Oregon. As Fenimore Cooper realized as early as The Pioneers, in 1823, the true White Indian, whether woodsman or plainsman or mountain man, is doomed. Caudill is as incapable as Leatherstocking of becoming a venerable relic in a tamed community, but neither does Guthrie apotheosize him as a mythic Untamable facing into a western sunset and uttering a firm "Here!" in response to the ultimate voice. Boone's end is less literary. Gloomy and guilt-ridden, possessing neither the security of the settlements nor the animal contentment of the wild, he simply fades out, disappears. It is not he, but the gentler Dick Summers, the white man who has adopted Indian ways without ceasing to be white man, who serves as the link between the world of beaver and the world of the western wagons.

This is to say that while Boone reveals all the large outlines of the myth, he retains a degree of realism, a marked quality of harshness and violence. In his temperament—which is what Guthrie had added to the myth to create him—he is less like the standard frontier leading man than like the degenerated border type that in reality created and populated the frontier, the men whom Hector St. John Crevecoeur describes as early as 1782; men "no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank . . . . dependent on their native tempers, and . . . remote from the power of example, and check of shame." "Once hunters," cried Crevecoeur in a tone between philosophical disapproval and personal disgust, "farewell to the plough. The chase renders them ferocious, gloomy and unsociable. . . . Eating of wild meat, whatever you may think, tends to alter their temper."

Ferocious, gloomy and unsociable, de-civilized by the eating of wild meat. Boone Caudill might almost be a gloss on Crevecoeur's observation. But it is his special excellence that he is something more—he is both mountain man and myth, both individual and archetype, which means that the record of his violent life is both credible and exhilarating. And he has one tender and attractive thing about him; an inarticulate but powerful love for the sweep of plain and peak and sky, the intimacy of cutbank and wildrose island, the free distance shaped by butte and hogback and aspen-blotched mountainside. It is the thing he most clearly shares with his creator, the thing that can make a taciturn, bloodthirsty, unwashed, gut-eating white savage a character whom we follow with excitement and often with acute sympathy. For this
part of him we share, too, and we grant, if we are honest, that the dream of primitive innocence is likewise, and simultaneously, a dream of violence and unrestraint. However inappropriate to the civilization with which we have infected Boone Caudill's mountains, it is a dream that dies hard.35

So impressed was novelist Robert Ruark with The Big Sky, that he mentioned it in his autobiographical novel, The Honey Badger:

Alec felt marvelously self-sufficient, exuberant even, although the exaltation could possibly be credited to the three stiff drinks he had taken. He got that special thing from Africa, that exaltation, and he could understand how the old American mountain men had felt about space and an absence of people. Guthrie had written it so very well in his The Big Sky. A man must be happy forever with a monument like Big Sky to his name. He wondered where Guthrie got the feel. Guthrie was a modern, and of course there was a ton of research available, but feel was something you had to find for yourself, and it wasn't in books.36

Predictably, such compliments are warmly received by Guthrie. However, he regards an off-hand remark of a passing acquaintance as "the best compliment I ever had" on The Big Sky or any of his books. Congratulating Guthrie in Lexington on publication of the book, the acquaintance remarked: "You know, to look at you, a man wouldn't think you could do it."37

37Guthrie interview, Nov. 15.
CHAPTER V

The historical novelist must know his history—which means that in the actual preparation of a book he must spend at least as much time in research as in writing. He must read the prime sources, take adequate notes, arrange the notes so that he can put his hands on them when he wants them. (Sometimes a man gets the feeling that he ought to take notes on his notes.) More than that, his very choice of a subject is usually the result of a long and interested, if unmethodical, reading about the time and place and people with which he expects to deal.

Guthrie, who made those remarks in a speech at an historical conference in Helena in 1954, unconsciously was preparing himself for writing a book about the Oregon Trail when he was still a child. He read voraciously from his father's small library of western Americana, including Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*, a chronicle of the author's trek west in 1846. The book stimulated an interest about the westward movement, and it still was strong in Guthrie when he decided to write *The Way West* many years later. Parkman's recollections provided valuable detail about life on the trail. An example:

Sometimes we passed the grave of one who had sickened and died on the way. The earth was usually torn up, and covered thickly with wolf-tracks. Some had escaped this violation. One morning, a piece

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of planks, standing upright on the summit of a
grassy hill, attracted our notice, and riding up
to it, we found the following words very roughly
traced upon it, apparently with a red-hot piece
of iron:—

MARY ELLIS
Died May 7th, 1845
Aged two Months.

Such tokens were of common occurrence.
We were late in breaking up our camp on the
following morning, and scarcely had we ridden a
mile when we saw far in advance of us, drawn against
the horizon, a line of objects stretching at regular
intervals along the level edge of the prairie. An
intervening swell soon hid them from sight, until,
ascending it a quarter of an hour after, we saw
close before us the emigrant caravan, with its heavy
white wagons creeping on in slow procession, and a
large drove of cattle following behind. Half a
dozen yellow-visaged Missourians mounted on horse-
back, were cursing and shouting among them, their
lank angular proportions enveloped in brown homespun,
evidently cut and adjusted by the hands of a domestic
female tailor. As we approached, they called out
to us: "How are ye, boys? Are ye for Oregon or
California?"

As we pushed rapidly by the wagons, children's
faces were thrust out from the white coverings to
look at us; while the care-worn, thin-featured matron,
or the buxom girl, seated in front, suspended the
knitting on which most of them were engaged to stare
at us with wondering curiosity. By the side of each
wagon stalked the proprietor, urging on his patient
oxen, who shouldered heavily along, inch by inch,
on their interminable journey. It was easy to see
that fear and dissension prevailed among them; some
of the men—but these, with one exception, were
bachelors--looked wistfully upon us as we rode
lightly and swiftly by, and then impatiently at
their own lumbering wagons and heavy-gaited oxen.
Others were unwilling to advance at all, until the
party they had left behind should have rejoined them.
Many were murmuring against the leader they had chosen,
and wished to depose him; and this discontent was
fomented by some ambitious spirits, who had hopes
of succeeding in his place. The women were divided
between regrets for the homes they had left and fear of the deserts and savages before them.²

Parkman also provided a detailed description of a wagon train guide:

Foremost rode Henry Chatillon, our guide and hunter, a fine athletic figure, mounted on a hardy gray Wyandot pony. He wore a white blanket-coat, a broad hat of felt, moccasins, and trousers of deer-skin, ornamented along the seams with rows of long fringes. His knife was stuck in his belt; his bullet-pouch and powder-horn hung at his side, and his rifle lay before him, resting against the high pommel of his saddle, which like all his equipments, had seen hard service, and was much the worse for wear.³

When Guthrie wrote The Way West, he would include the tragedy of a child's death on the trail. Dissension would exist in his company as to who should lead it and the train's rate of progress also would be a point of controversy. Guthrie's guide, Dick Summers, would be similar in appearance to Henry Chatillon.

Although Guthrie already was contemplating writing a novel about the Oregon Trail when he completed The Big Sky,⁴ he could not bring himself to begin the task immediately. The Saturday Review of Literature reported:

Struggling to bring forth "The Big Sky" he found so enervating he hadn't the courage left for anything

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³Ibid., pp. 10-11.
⁴The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 200.
but shorts. He concluded that "writing differs from most occupations in that the reward lies, not in doing, but in having done." But now, his labor pains grown dim, he admits that "Sky" was merely the first of a four-novel series, and is again in the throes of the creative process.\(^5\)

Financial problems of his publishers played a role in getting him to start and complete the new book:

While I prospered, my publishers were going broke, not because they weren't good publishers, but because they had begun business just prior to a slump and had no backlist--like, say, a cookbook--to sustain them.

Under their pressure, in six months of such effort as I'll never be able to muster again, I wrote The Way West.\(^6\)

The narrative was to tell about a company of settlers on a wagon train journey from Missouri to Oregon in 1845. This would be no sentimental saga of the noble pioneer who spent most of his time lying under covered wagons shooting at onrushing Indians, but a well-documented, honestly told story of life on the trail. Guthrie found he would have to write from the viewpoints of a wide variety of characters:

I wanted to write a novel about the Oregon Trail. I wanted to show what kind of people went, in what circumstances, with what purposes, with what emotions. I wanted simple men to go along, and grasping men, and wise and foolish men, and mean and noble men, and simple heroic women and tired wives and pregnant


\(^6\)The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 201.
women and a seduced girl. And I wanted a preacher, a Methodist, I decided, maybe partly because I was reared in that faith.

Now I knew, or thought I knew, that I'd have to be in a lot of minds before I got my company from Independence, Missouri, to Fort Vancouver. So big a canvas doesn't permit of too few viewpoints.

This is going to sound funny. But, from one change of viewpoint to the next, I was the hero and the villain, the wise and foolish men, the tired wife, the pregnant woman, and the seduced and pregnant girl. I was her seducer, too, and suffered the assaults of a Methodist conscience.

And, maybe strangest of all, since I am not a Methodist any more, nor a subscriber to any organized faith, I was the preacher.\(^7\)

Guthrie had an awesome task of historical research ahead of him before he could start to write.

Years later, he would discuss the nature of the information the historical novelist needs:

... he must know not only the broad outlines, the social conflicts, the political, military and economic concerns and consequences of his setting; he must know how men talked, what they wore, with what techniques they fashioned their lives, how they regarded and how they met the questions that still may bother us today. It isn't enough, as one writer has said it is, to describe a carriage as a "handsome" carriage. The conscientious novelist wants, and needs, a more specific and less editorial description. "Handsome" in relation to a carriage could fit many places and almost any time--which is to say that it says nothing.

Even an acquaintance with the sticks and stones of history isn't enough. The fictionist in history must be able to read between the lines of his sources, which, in American literature at least, tend to be restrained, staid, proper, in accordance with an old

conviction that a lot of what went to make life wasn’t fit for print. He must fill in, synthesize, guess intelligently, for what he’s trying to tell about is life as it was lived, not alone as it was reported.\(^8\)

Guthrie’s insistence on realism in *The Way West* is illustrated in a profile of the author by John K. Hutchens in the *New York Herald Tribune*:

. . . he is so immersed in it [The West—it in, particularly, the nineteenth-century Far West—that he eschews latterday maps, for fear he will use place names that didn’t exist then, while modern literature, for him, is the journals of men and women who crossed the plains. The dialogue—how those men and women actually spoke—is a problem, he admits. A good deal of it he recalls from listening to old-timers in his Choteau boyhood, and even now he refreshes his memory by going up into the eastern Kentucky hills and eavesdropping on the old folks.\(^9\)

Harvey Breit of the *New York Times* reported the type of research Guthrie had done:

"There were some swell journals around that time," Mr. Guthrie said. "Joel Palmer had kept some. I drew on that—-he was a good reporter—and a good many other sources. The day-by-day journals are prime sources and better by far than the journals written out of memory. The professional writer I borrowed from in degree was Francis Parkman."

What about historical novels? They were read, certainly, but they were also in literary disrepute.\(^10\)

Guthrie recalls, "I had read about the Oregon

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\(^8\)Guthrie, "The Historical Novel," pp. 4-5.


Trail but organized research I hadn't done. It doesn't take you long to get to prime sources, however. Many of those sources were diaries which yielded valuable detail:

Overland diaries, those that were written, record little things: Rained today. Made twelve miles. . . . Oxen sore-footed. . . . Mosquitoes bad. . . . Thought about my sister, Susan, since it was her birthday, and wished much to see her. . . . Water warm and foul to taste. Some of company suffering from the flux. . . . Wood so scarce we are having to use the dried dung of buffalo and, with custom, have come to think nothing of it. . . . Today the Sabbath, but we nevertheless, halting in time for a brief service, led by Brother Clark. . . .

"The source I found most useful, I guess, was Joel Palmer, who went across the plains in '45," Guthrie said. "And I deliberately made it that year because I didn't want to get involved in the Mexican War."

A few excerpts from Palmer's diary show the attention to detail that made his journal so valuable to Guthrie:

May 12--We traveled about four miles to Caw or Kansas River. . . . It was decided when at Independence that there should be a thorough and complete organization. . . . The most important officers to be elected were the pilot and captain

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11 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.


13 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
of the company. There were two candidates for the office of pilot,—one a Mr. Adams, from Independence,—the other a Mr. Meek, from the same place. Mr. Adams had once been as far west as Fort Laramie, had in his possession Gilpin's notes, had engaged a Spaniard, who had traveled over the whole route, to accompany him, and moreover had been conspicuously instrumental in providing the "Oregon Fever." In case the company would elect him pilot, and pay him five hundred dollars, in advance, he would bind himself to pilot them to Fort Vancouver.

Mr. Meek, an old mountaineer, had spent several years as a trader and trapper among the mountains, and had once been through to Fort Vancouver; he proposed to pilot us through for two hundred and fifty dollars, thirty of which were to be paid in advance, and the balance when we arrived at Fort Vancouver. A motion was then made to postpone the election until the next day. While we were considering the motion, Meek came running into the camp, and informed us that the Indians were driving away our cattle. This intelligence caused the utmost confusion: motions and propositions, candidates and their special friends, were alike disregarded; rifles were grasped, and horses were hastily mounted, and away we all galloped in pursuit. Our two hundred head of cattle were now scattered over the prairie, at a distance of four or five miles from camp.14

July 12—This day we arrived at Independence Rock. This is a solitary pile of gray granite, standing in an open plain. It is about one-eighth of a mile long and some six or eight rods wide, and is elevated about sixty or seventy feet above the plain. On the north-eastern side the slope is sufficiently gradual to be easily ascended. Portions of it are covered with inscriptions of the names of travelers, with the dates of their arrival—some carved, some in black paint, and others in red.... We encamped two miles above the rock, having traveled about thirteen miles.15

14Joel Palmer, Journals of Travels over the Rocky Mountains, To the Mouth of the Columbia River, Made During the Years 1845 and 1846 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1906), pp. 38-40.

15Ibid., p. 67.
Guthrie's minister was patterned after a real preacher:

Years before, in lean days, I had paid ten cents for a pamphlet that a Hoosier minister had written about his experiences on the Oregon Trail in 1841-42. A poor thing of forty-odd pages, cheaply bound, devoted to righteous fulminations, the pamphlet gathered dust for two or three years. Joseph Williams' one admirable trait was his courage. Penniless, at the age of sixty-four he had traveled a course that few men but rough trappers and traders had traversed before him. He never complained unless there be classified as complaint his fierce grief about sinning companions, on whom he called down heaven's mercy and wrath. He was never in fear. God was with him.16

Guthrie was able to draw on Williams' narrative for detail about the preacher as well as about life on the trail. Here is one of Williams' diary entries as the train journeyed along the Platte River:

Thursday, we traveled up the north side of the south fork. Here we saw thousands of buffalo, all along the plains. Our hunters shot down one bull; they thought it unnecessary to kill any more. Here we saw packs of wolves, which followed them. This morning there was a great alarm given that the Indians had driven off some of the oxen, and our men went in pursuit of them, and brought them back. One man said he saw an Indian, and shot at him; but some did not believe him. All this time, I had to stand guard every fourth night. The Indians still come to trade with us. Here we have nothing to make our fires but buffalo manure. This morning a large buffalo bull came near us, when we were marching along, and seemed regardless of the bullets; but after about fifteen or twenty were shot into him, he fell. We started across to the north fork, about two miles to the northwest, and then traveled about twenty miles up the river; staid there on Saturday.

night. Here an awful circumstance took place: A young man by the name of Shotwell, shot himself accidentally, and died in about two hours afterwards. I was called upon, by his comrades, to preach his funeral, which I did.17

As in the diaries of Palmer and Williams, The Way West would include an incident of Indians driving off stock. Guthrie's pioneers would use cow chips for cooking, and his preacher would preside over funerals of men who died along the trail.

Williams, in his journal, periodically laments the sinning ways of his fellow frontiersmen:

There were some as wicked people among them as I ever saw in all my life. . . . That night, dreadful oaths were heard all over the camp ground. O the wickedness of the wicked.18

Guthrie's Brother Weatherby also would be discouraged by un-Christian conduct. Watching Indians dance at a camp celebration in The Way West, Weatherby reflects Williams' pious indignation:

Now, while the young warriors pranced and bel­lowed, doubt entered his mind. Grown men imitating beasts! Others chanting to the devilish tap of the drum! And all encouraged by the white people standing around! Behind him someone said, "Them Injuns are pretty goddam good at it."

"A miserable business he thought, while discouragement washed over him. With the glories of


18 Ibid., p. 221.
God all around, with the wonder of the night firmament coming into sight overhead, with death and judgement waiting, the Indians could find nothing better to do than to ape brutes, and the whites nothing better than to watch and enjoy. He had heard that the American Fur Company now frowned on the use of spirits in trade, but he smelled the ugly smell of whiskey. 19

The journals provided Guthrie with every-day information to add authenticity to his story, such as the amount of flour and other provisions needed to take a family from Independence to Fort Vancouver. Even the flora and fauna were documented, through a combination of journal research and first-hand knowledge. Guthrie said:

Before I ever wrote The Way West, I went over the Oregon Trail as nearly as I could follow it, whether by car or by foot. I would call this psychological preparation. I thought I needed to do that before I undertook the book. I took notes.

Guthrie's friend Randall Swanberg of Great Falls accompanied him. As they followed the trail, Guthrie took notes on the physical terrain, often checking what "a person could see from a certain point," Swanberg said. 21 Swanberg assisted Guthrie by taking notes on the plants and bird life. He was much better

20 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
21 Randall Swanberg, interview at Great Falls, Nov. 3, 1968.
at botany and zoology than I was," Guthrie said.\textsuperscript{22}

Guthrie, Swanberg says, was "meticulously accurate" in his use of the information gathered on the trail:

Let me give you an example. If Bud writes about a man in a rifle pit, with a gumwood flower by his shoulder, that gumwood flower will be in season.\textsuperscript{23}

On one occasion, Swanberg recalls that he thought Guthrie had erred in his description of a portion of the trail:

On the main trail out of Kansas—the Ash Hollow route—Courthouse Rock and Chimney Rock will be on the left. But Bud had a character look back over his right shoulder and look at Chimney Rock. I had to look back about 20 pages to find that the train had used the Pumpkin Seed entry, which would have put the rock over the right shoulder.\textsuperscript{24}

Guthrie's penchant for accurate detail is suggested by the nature of his note-taking:

It is in my notes where I, a Montanan, saw the first insect I'd call a horsefly: Kearney, Nebraska. Where I saw the first magpie: Roubidou Pass, a few miles from Scott's Bluff. Where I first noticed sagebrush: Bridgeport, Nebraska. Cactus was blowing pink and yellow west of Casper, Wyoming, which should be spelled Caspar after Caspar Collins, who lost his life fighting Indians not far from the town that, honoring him, misspelled his name.\textsuperscript{25}

Guthrie and Swanberg had more difficulty finding the route than did the pioneers:

\textsuperscript{22}Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
\textsuperscript{23}Swanberg interview.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25}Guthrie, "Adventure with History," p. 59.
With use the train \[(In the mid 1800's)\] became so marked that a blind man might almost have followed it by steering clear of vegetation. Old Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, retracing it in 1851, called it a "noble highway." He said it was worn "smooth as a barn floor, and not a blade of grass can shoot up on it on account of the continual passing." The first sight of it dumfounded the Indians, who called it "the Great Medicine Road of the Whites."

All that was a long time ago. You can lose the way today; Swanberg and I did.\[26\]

On one occasion, the pair became lost in Wyoming while looking for the South Pass. With their car almost out of gas, they followed wagon tracks on an empty prairie, and came upon a farm where a Basque sheepherder and his small daughter greeted them. Guthrie recalls their conversation:

His wife, he told us simply and without enlargement, had died in a fire in some nearby town whose name I have forgotten, Riverton or Lander, maybe. There were just himself and the baby here, and, of course, the sheep. We were on the wrong road, he told us while his hand pushed back the child's hair. This was the Antelope Hills. He suggested we ride back to the Sweetwater and try the north bank. That way he was sure we could get to the pass.

We ate boiled potatoes and salt meat and bread and canned fruit and drank two or three cups of coffee. Afterward he siphoned more than enough gasoline from the tractor tank, refusing with a sort of courteous outrage our offers to pay him. We poured the gas into the car and said good-by. From the top of a hill that would shut off the view, we looked back. He stood beside his little house, watching us while he held his daughter's hand. The child waved, and we waved back, and he waved, and we waved to him and went on, in our minds, a wifeless man and motherless baby there in the middle of nowhere.

\[26\]Ibid., p. 62.
Many an Oregon Trailer must have felt supported and made real in lost universes like this only by the wrenching certainty of love in the family. It alone stood solid against space.27

By the time Guthrie had completed his research and his tour of the trail with Swanberg, he knew the route well. A few samples of his list of "things to see" along the trail demonstrate his knowledge:

... From Grand Island, Nebraska, you'll roll along the Platte, that sand-freighted, quicksandy, mile-wide-and-inch-deep, thousand-mile-long wash of sluiced and island-spotted water, as the old travelers described it. Some river, they said. No good for navigation. (It wasn't.) Too thick to drink. So sandy it must flow bottom-side-up. Washington Irving called it "the most worthless of rivers." Worthless? A river that had worked a roadway from the mountains to the Missouri? Whose tributary, the Sweetwater, led to South Pass?

... The lower and upper forks of the South Platte were near Brule, Nebraska, and Julesburg, Colorado, respectively. You may want to see what the travelers had to contend with, though in these days of irrigation and lowered water table you may be misled. Ash Hollow and Windlass Hill are just across the North Platte from Lewellen. Physical evidences of the migration are abundant here. Outside Bridgeport are two musts: Courthouse Rock and Chimney Rock. As landmarks they were as famous as any on the trail.28

For the first time, Guthrie would write from the viewpoints of women:

When I was experimenting with a story about the Oregon Trail, I began to wonder about the women,

27Ibid., pp. 62, 86.
28Ibid., p. 90.
the largely unsung heroes of the great movement to
the West. I wondered how they felt, what they
felt, how they acted. Here was two thousand miles
of journey ahead of them, to a land almost unknown,
a land of loneliness, of savages, of guessed-at-hard­ships and terrors. A land without doctors or even
midwives. I wonder how many men would have gone had
they been women. A prairie schooner, jolting remorse­lessly over plain and mountain, wasn't the ideal spot
for nausea, nor a tent nor a sequestered cabin, if
they were lucky enough to be in one, the ideal spot
for childbirth.

It is in directions like these, I believe; it
is in the direction of rounding out life, of seeing
it in the whole, that the historical novelist may
give real service to history.29

He was apprehensive, at first, about his ability
to write about females:

... I had to get into the minds of women.
I shrank. How understand women when they didn't
seem to understand themselves? I found though, I
hope, that the buds of the opposite sex that abide
in us all can be awakened, can be brought at least
to some bloom if imagination works hard enough.30

From one standpoint, The Way West was easier to
write than was The Big Sky, because of the ready-made
framework of a wagon train trip. Guthrie recalls that
the day-to-day progression of the trip, as well as the
pre-determined time span, were factors in the book's
quick completion.31

Robert Clark, Guthrie's neighbor in Lexington, said:

29Guthrie, "The Historical Novel," Montana Magazine
of History, 4, Autumn 1954, p. 5.


We watched Bud dig and sweat through *The Way West*. He had resigned his regular routine job at the newspaper and now gave full time to writing. I am fairly certain that in dealing with the experiences of emigrants on the Oregon Trail he wished to some way relate himself and his family. His family had gone West at a later date, but in many ways to no less harshness of nature and social conditions. Bud grew up against the background of an emerging West around him, and with so many of the old landmarks so readily in sight.

His research in this case was just as careful as in the first book. *The Big Sky* The spirit is gentler. Of course the Oregon Trail involved women and children, and the spirit of puritanism ran strong on the surface, if not always behind the wagon sheets.32

Elrick B. Davis, in a review of the book, outlines Guthrie's cast of characters:

They were a fair cross-section of the manner of folk who pioneer a new country. Ambition for leadership, a driving sense of orderliness and personal strength, caused the train's organizer, Tadlock, to sell a good business in Peoria to go where a new territory, than a new state, would offer a man a chance to become Governor, Senator. Deep psychological unease had sent prosperous Curtis Mack and his young wife west from Buffalo. An old Methodist preacher had heard, while he rode his Indiana circuit, a fresh call from the Lord. Shiftless Hank McBee was carrying his family from their Ohio debts. Some unmarried men had simply "hired on" for the trip. The hopefully inept Byrds sought vague opportunity. The Fairmans had sold their Kentucky plantation to take their small son to a healthier place; Irish Catholic Daugherty had left his hill farm as his grandfather had left his in the Virginia mountains, in search for better land. Most of the emigrants had a like reason—rich farms for the taking and building drew them West.

Lije Evans and his sturdy wife were immune to the ordinary emigrant's Western fever. They had a satisfactory farm; they had made it themselves, at Independence. They had a satisfactory son to inherit

32Clark letter.
the farm; he reached manhood on the trail. They had no romantic notions about pioneering; they were born in pioneer families and were themselves already pioneers. What moved them was patriotism. Was Oregon to be British or part of the United States? They joined the train to help make Oregon ours.

Their immediate neighbor was Dick Summers, not yet fifty but an old mountain man, who had tutored in wilderness ways the two young heroes of "The Big Sky." He had seen the mountain man's day wane, and had come east to Independence to marry and farm. Now after a dozen years his wife was dead and the high country called. . . . He guided the overland company to the Oregon Dalles.

His guidance was wise not only because he knew the country and its denizen's whims. He was wise with the lore of much dangerous living and solitary thought. Above all he was wise in what happens to people when they live in closeness which the insularity of the wilderness begets. With Dick at his side, Lije's stalwart qualities ripened into the true traits of democratic leadership.33

While struggling with the book, Guthrie also was struggling to find a name for it. Robert Clark, his neighbor, recalls:

I remember that John Farrar of the old publishing house of Farrar and Rinehart was at my house for dinner and he and Bud discussed a title. I am not certain how the title The Way West finally was selected, but I do know that Bud had one reservation. He was afraid everybody would call it the Mae West. He was lying flat on his back on my living room floor one evening worrying about this and the children overheard his comment about Mae West, and they gave him a little bit of a ride afterwards.34

The first good news about the new book came before


34Clark letter.
it was in print. Guthrie wrote:

Some weeks after the manuscript had been completed, we set out again for Montana and the university's short course in writing at Missoula, where I was to teach. We made the trip with no decline of old elation and at Missoula fell in with established friends, among whom was Joe Howard, the director. Came a lull in the conference, and Joe and I went downtown. A telegram awaited me at the hotel. I opened and read it and, unbelieving, passed it slowly to Joe. It said I had made the Book-of-the-Month Club. Joe let out a whoop. He couldn't wait to get back to the campus and announce the glad news. You would have thought my good fortune was his. He was that way.35

Like The Big Sky, The Way West was received warmly by several major reviewers. The New York Times Book Review and the New York Herald Tribune Book Review were highly complimentary. Said the Times:

Even more successfully than its predecessor, "The Big Sky," Mr. Guthrie's second novel repossesses the past and gives a sense, not of fiction, but of the Western experience itself as it was totally known a hundred years ago by the men who underwent it, who chose it, and who were re-created by it as Western Americans. Mr. Guthrie writes with modest but sure art, especially in his feeling for the idiom of Western talk and for the narrative style proper to it.

In so far as we are conscious of the author at all, it is not of a romancer making the most of color and drama of the early narratives, but of a man who loves the Western mountain country. One who feels in that love a deep imaginative need to know exactly and completely how it was for the first trappers and for the first settlers who followed them, to know exactly how a war party of Sioux behaved when they came upon a white man alone, to know how thirst-crazed oxen could be handled when they caught the smell of fresh water.

35The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 203-204.
With the same imaginative conviction as "The Big Sky" in practical knowledge of everyday life—cooking over buffalo chips, for instance, or fording the violent Snake River--"The Way West" is a better novel as a novel, a humanly richer and wiser book.

Boone Caudill of "The Big Sky" was right psychologically for one kind of mountain man. But it was not clear what kind of identification the reader could make with him, or how far he represented what is bad rather than good in the developing American character. Moreover, there was something a little romantic, a little suggestive of Chateubriand, in Boone and something more than a little fictional and factitious in the incidents which brought that relationship to a tragic end.

This novel is almost entirely free of contrivance. It is the story of a society rather than of individuals, of a wagon train company with all kinds of people in it, male and female, wherein human relationships, sexual relationships, develop with a slow rightness, though often sadly or cruelly. 36

The Herald Tribune described the book as "A Fresh View of the Old Trail":

This is the story of the early emigrant trek to Oregon, told nobly and without melodrama. In a way it is a sequel to Mr. Guthrie's remarkable first novel, "The Big Sky," his tale of the mountain men. One of the chief characters of that is a hero of this. The two have also in continuum Mr. Guthrie's extraordinary realization of the Northwestern country, the Plains and the northern Rockies and their rivers and weathers and indigenous life; and of history as an organic process molding men's characters, one way or another. But "The Way West" is complete enough in itself, with a beginning at Independence, Mo., the spring of 1846, 37 and an end on the Columbia River that autumn; and if it is not as big a book as "The Big Sky" it is a better novel. The pattern of


37 Guthrie's Wagon train left Independence in the spring of 1845, not 1846.
Mr. Guthrie's development of the creation of a Kentucky boy into a mountain man, and this book's plot is neater. In fact, if Mr. Guthrie's abilities did not transcend mere plot, the story pattern of "The Way West" would be too neat. Because it is inevitable. Recollection falters at the attempt to number the troops of fictional tales spawned of Parkman's "Oregon Trail" and the library of overland emigrants' journals. Just as Emerson Hough's "Covered Wagon" was the best of the lot when it appeared, now "The Way West" tops them all; indeed it is another kind of book. They were adventure stories. This is a novel. It is not an action story for action's tumultuous sake, but a story of people.

Not once does Mr. Guthrie's emigrant train have to race its wagons into a stockade circle to beat off marauding Pawnees or Sioux. No thief or murderer or man with an unfair price falsely put on his head has found his way into this company. No old grudges smoulder between ancient enemies accidentally met. . . . Supplies run scant before they can be replenished, but no one starves. Not once does faulty leadership take the train astray. The On-to-Oregon company was thoughtfully assembled on the Missouri's banks to reach the Columbia safely, and it did so with no eye cast at a distantly future Hollywood.38

Time also noted the absence of the usual Hollywood trappings:

In all the body-torturing, spirit-testing haul from Independence to Williamette, there is not one Indian attack, not a single war whoop or flaming arrow, not one hot-blooded, devil-may-care hero to turn in an impossible rescue, not even a big-breasted heartbreaker in low-cut linen myself to take strong nation-makers from their plain wives and set them at each other's throats.39

38 Davis, "Off to Oregon Again in a Fine New Novel," p. 3.

The magazine said Summers was "the most credible scout in U. S. fiction," but it criticized Guthrie's skill in other areas:

He is still not the master of the novel and his characters have a four-square, surface rightness rather than depth. He can also use some unashamed, sugary, overripe prose: "And it came on toward night, and the sun came down and the fire of its setting dead, and the coyotes were beginning to yip on the hills and the stars to light up, and there was the smell of aspen smoke in his nose."\(^{40}\)

Newsweek praised the book for being as realistic as The Big Sky:

Now, in his second novel, "The Way West," one moves a few years ahead to 1845, when restless men and uncomplaining women sought to fill up the British-held Oregon territory. And once again the reader has the same feeling of a historically and psychologically honed repossession of the past.

There are moments of terrible excitement and magnificent calm, and people are real all the way.\(^{41}\)

The Saturday Review of Literature published a glowing review by Walter Van Tilburg Clark. Noting that The Way West was a kind of sequel to The Big Sky, Clark remarked:

Such close relationship is treat enough alone to the vitality of an imagination, but Mr. Guthrie has ventured against another as great, for while "The Big Sky" afforded him an almost virgin territory, the Oregon Trail has been worn pretty deep by earlier

\(^{40}\)Ibid.

travelers from Parkman on. In short, Mr. Guthrie could hardly have set a stiffer test for his all-important imagination.

The big thing is said, then, for both his present achievement and the durability of his powers, when we say not only that "The Way West" is no jaded follow-up, but that it is even, in both conception and manner, a better book than "The Big Sky," and at the same time as different from "The Big Sky" as if it had arisen from quite other sources or after a much longer interval.

In "The Big Sky," Mr. Guthrie gave shape to a tale heavy with important but little-related incident, by sticking so closely to Boone Caudill as to secure nearly the selective continuity of the first-person view. In "The Way West," his structural problem is just the contrary one of maintaining life in a narrative line which is necessarily narrow and dangerously protracted, and it must be solved by the reverse and much more difficult means of the multiple viewpoint. Mr. Guthrie succeeds in this complicated task with an apparent simplicity of separation inherent in the multiple approach, by gradually focusing the viewpoint, even as the wagon train itself is gradually, by experience along the 2,000-mile route, drawn together from its beginnings as a loose collection of heterogeneous and sometimes even hostile units, the solvent and the penniless, farmers and merchants, Southerners and New Englanders, politicians and loners, loudmouths and close-mouths, Catholics, Protestants, free-thinkers, into a single, efficient and purposeful entity, pioneers only, and able tools of the leader's will.

This superior achievement in structure is complemented, to my mind, by an equal improvement in the writing. In "The Big Sky," Mr. Guthrie sometimes came near, in his major scenes, to degenerating into free verse, and then, in order to maintain his tone, was forced to hurry and inflate transitional passages until the reader was pushed past understanding, and even, as times, to the point where the language parted with the realities behind it. In "The Way West," on the contrary, he has made use of an even, well-placed prose, perfectly suited to the movement of the train, and never once, that I can remember, detached from the experience it presents. Some readers will miss the magnificent but often nearly isolated canvasses of "The Big Sky,"
both scenic and dramatic, but I promise that if they will bear with the first difference, they will find the slow, bit-by-bit accumulation of "The Way West" even more effective before they are done with it, and more memorable afterwards. It is a medium in keeping with the structure, and both are admirably suited to the patient, increasingly stirring ascent toward the Divide of the miniature America that is Mr. Guthrie's wagon train on what has now become Mr. Guthrie's Oregon Trail.42

Edward Weeks of The Atlantic wrote:

The second novel is always more of a test than the first, and this is a better book--broader in scope, deeper and more versatile in its characterization, and with more power and beauty in its feel for the country. . . . More than anyone else, it is Lije Evans on whom we focus our sympathy and admiration. He emerges as the leader of the group--a man heroic beyond his own realization, as when he walked into the stampeding buffaloes, firing his gun and expecting to be trampled. It is he who assumes the hardest responsibility, who passes up the fun of the trip--the hunting, the trout, the square dances at the campfire--to make sure that the train is ready for the hardest travel. In the final test, Lije even out-tops Dick Summers. I find this a big and moving story alive with that pioneer spirit which we all respond to; here is human nature under the hardest exposure; here is the poetic evocation of the prairie, the wild rivers, and the heights. Here is history written on the land by the turn of wagon wheels.43

Library Journal and Booklist each recommended the book. Said the Journal:

Author of The Big Sky illustrates again his ability to depict the people and life of the early


West, in a manner which has the ring of authenticity and first-hand experience. . . . It is fundamentally a simple story, told with an attention to homely detail and an understanding of human nature which gives it a warmth and vitality often lacking in more pretentious works. 44

Wrote Booklist:

Although historical novels of the westward trek to Oregon are numerous, this is a worthwhile addition to the list, for it is without sensationalism, and the human drama evolves naturally from the situation. 45

In the Yale Review, Guthrie was praised for giving "the reader a feeling that he is taking part in the high adventure going forward," but the book was rated second best in a comparison with Anne Goodwin Winslow's It Was Like This:

Though her book is less aggressive and will receive less attention than Mr. Guthrie's, it is a good deal better, in my opinion. His occasionally pseudo-poetic prose, conventional characterization, and lack of narrative compulsion make the book little more than just another story of western migration. Mrs. Winslow's book has distinction. 46

Some reviewers disagreed that the book was written "with no eye cast at a distantly future Hollywood," as Davis said. Catholic World wrote:

If there had never been a westward emigration in this country, it would have been necessary for


the novels, radio, comic books and Hollywood to invent one. Incidentally, a lot of popular westania does use stock characters and situations. In his novel of the "On-to-Oregon" wagon train, Guthrie adheres to the pattern . . . the cast includes (a) a wouldbe dictator, (b) a lean, intense preacher, (c) a shiftless no-gooder, (d) a raw, untried youth, (e) an old scout who shoots straight and (f) a noble, natural-born leader of men named Lije Evans which is just the part for Joel McCrea . . . only let's hope McCrea takes some of the stuffiness out of it.

One of the women is a compassionate, broad bosomed earth-mother type, beloved of sculptors who do monuments of westward migration. Another is a sickly, gently reared easterner. Too, there is a pretty young creature who inevitably marries the youth. Guthrie brings in a 1949 best-seller note by having the girl lose her virginity before marriage. Otherwise the hazards of the journey are just what you'd expect, told pompously and long-windedly. The gusty paens of praise of Oregon should make the novel popular with the state chamber of commerce. A non-Oregonian would be apt to prefer a rousing John Ford western movie.

Commonweal observed:

There are, as in every western movie, "good guys" and "bad guys." Lije Evans and Dick Summers and Charles Fairman are definitely on the side of righteousness; Tadlock and McBee and Mack have a heap of badness in them.

All the elements usually required of a film epic are here. Death on the trail, adultery, close call with Indians, use of buffalo dip for fuel, dangerous fording of rivers, but especially, a struggle between "good guy," Lije Evans, and "bad guy," Tadlock, for the captaincy.

Mr. Guthrie's previous book, the successful (The) Big Sky, led Mr. [Bernard] DeVoto to say that "an imagination finer, more subtle, and more powerful than had even before worked in fiction of the early west came mature. . . ." Although the jacket claims that (The) Big Sky differs from this new book as

The Iliad from The Odyssey, Clifton Fadiman is willing to call it "the finest novel on the subject in existence."48

The New Yorker, the most cynical of all, bypassed Joel McRae and selected another actor for Evans' movie role:

"The Way West" ... is a prime specimen of the western novel, in which human relations play second fiddle to floods, copperheads, lame bosses, Injuns, and other pesky varmint. Guthrie, who wrote "The Big Sky," and is an author of the most creditable seriousness of purpose, here recounts the adventures of a wagon train heading West from Independence, Mo., in the year 1845, destination Oregon. The leading figure, Lije Evans, has it generously in mind to help open up the West for Uncle Sam. Lije is Henry Fonda to the life, and "The Way West" also provides roles as juicy as Brown's Mule plug for Walter Brennan, John Wayne and Ward Bond. (The women folk can go hang.)

What befalls these Independence pioneers could be guessed with the book lying unopened on one's lap: camp fever, dissension over the best route to follow, the death of a child from the bite of a rattlesnake, a buffalo stampede, and enough Pawnees, Crows, Snakes and Blackfeet to keep a man sleepless for days. In the end—But the end speaks for itself, which is more than Lije ever feels comfortable trying to do: "A tide rose in him, so fierce, so bursting in the breast, so close to women's tears, that he feared to meet the others' eyes. Yonder it was, yonder was home, yonder the rich soil waiting for the plow, waiting for the work of hands for the happy cries of children. /This is ol' Lije, a-thinkin'/. They'd made it. They had rolled the miles. And back of them came others. Crossers of the plains. Grinders through the dust. Climbers of mountains. Forders of rivers. Meeters of dangers. Sailors at the last of the big waters. Nation makers. Builders of the country. . . ."

Hollywood canner of celluloid, meet Bud Guthrie, hewer of rhetoric!  

Recalling the foregoing review, Guthrie said, The New Yorker was always snotty, but you expect that. Strangely enough, except for The Blue Hen's Chick, The New Yorker always dismissed me as of no consequence."  

When The Way West finally was made into a movie which was released in 1967, neither Joel McCrae or Henry Fonda got the part of Lije Evans. Richard Widmark played the role, although the movie character scarcely resembled Guthrie's. The movie drew unfavorable reviews from several magazines, including Newsweek, which headlined its story, "Lolita Goes West," and the Saturday Review, which called the picture "about as flabby a western adventure as has come along in a field already studded with costly failures."  

Guthrie claims no credit for the movie. "I haven't seen The Way West, and I don't propose to. I read enough about what they did to the story to know


50Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.


that it's not my story any more. And I refused credit."53

Sam Reynolds, editorial writer for the Missoula (Mont.) Missoulian, had this to say about the movie:

A new movie, "The Way West," based on a novel of the same title by Missoula's Bud Guthrie, has been panned in the three reviews of it we've seen. Bosley Crowther, critic for the New York Times, wrote that, "It is hard to believe that anybody could have made such a hackneyed hash of that fine novel. ..."

Plainly Crowther liked the book. Chalk one up for Guthrie.
Plainly Crowther disliked the movie. Chalk another one up for Hollywood.
We like consistency. Guthrie is consistently good. Hollywood is consistently bad.54

Despite the few caustic reviews, The Way West earned Guthrie more recognition as a writer than did his first successful novel, The Big Sky. In December of 1949, The Way West was named the best fictional book of the year by Saturday Review of Literature. Guthrie appeared on the magazine's cover with Eleanor Roosevelt, the winner of the non-fiction award. Said Saturday Review writer Karl Schriftgiesser:

One of the delights of reading during 1949 was to discover that Mr. Guthrie was most definitely not a one-book man. "The Way West" was in many respects a more mature novel both in its conception and execution than the remarkable "The Big Sky."55

53Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
The book's greatest accolade came the following year. Guthrie recalls:

Months more or less idle passed after our return to Kentucky. I was lazy or exhausted, one or both; and it began to seem foolish, once I'd been introduced to the ways of tax-gatherers, to make any more immediate money. However, I did take an assignment from Holiday. Working on it, I found I needed some data that my old friends in the newsroom could look up.

I called. One of the friends said, "Congratulations, Bud."

I asked for what.

"You've won the Pulitzer Prize. Just came in on the wire."

Forty-five minutes later, I found I had won it. A telegram to that effect came from Dwight D. Eisenhower, then president of Columbia University.56

Clark remembers:

I remember how elated we were when he won the Pulitzer Prize. This seemed to me to be a wonderful realization of those dreams we had in our earlier years, and we vicariously shared the joy of the prize.57

Guthrie was honored further in a Saturday Review of Literature article which said he was the only one of the four Pulitzer Prize winners— in the area of history, fiction, poetry and biography—who also made the Saturday Review's Pulitzer Prize Poll. The magazine called The Way West "realistic yet poetic."58

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56 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 204.
57 Clark letter.
A few years later, Dayton Kohler reviewed *The Way West*, and noted that it contained an element that previous accounts of the western expansion lacked:

What was missing from the noble view of the pioneer was the sense of human values, the appalling waste of the human spirit and effort, and the emotional erosion which frontier life imposed. The realistic writer must always restore the cost of hardship and the casual cruelty of things to the story of the frontier.59

Guthrie was talking about this human element when he responded to a question about his portrayal of a boy dying from rattlesnake bite during the journey:

You can't use the story of the Oregon Trail without including the tragedy that occurred along the way. It's just a matter of honesty to events. Not that I have ever read about any such event, but I know very well that many tragedies happened on the trail.60

Kohler compared *The Way West* to its predecessor:

In *The Big Sky*, Guthrie's fable is one of man outside society, but in *The Way West* his subject is society itself. True, it is a very special society, a drift of population across a continent, and his image is the slow wagon train carrying his people westward. *The Way West* presents another aspect of the pioneer experience, so different that at first reading Guthrie's two novels hardly seem to spring from the same source. In some ways his second book is less compelling than *The Big Sky*, but its subject is of greater significance, and it is by every standard a better novel. Here his characters are more varied, his insights

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60 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
deeper. His style, too, is more restrained, less likely to flower in passages of poetry and rhetoric. Undoubtedly, The Way West is our best novel of the Oregon Trail and one of our most informing works on the subject outside the field of scholarly history.61

Kohler suggests that Guthrie's characters could be developed more completely:

... the picture of a social group, such as Guthrie draws in The Way West, needs greater depth and more than a four-square surface if we are to think of his people as more than types. Since he can make his characters vivid enough within the circumstantial life of his novels, it is possible that he will eventually create men and women who have existence beyond the demands of his plot. Several of the characters in The Way West certainly mark a technical advance over those in The Big Sky.62

Kohler concludes:

The region Guthrie writes about is not the West of popular appeal, but it is no less alive and real. His two books show him as a first-rate historical novelist. If he has not yet assimilated the whole of the western experience, clarified it, and given it final, possessable form, he has at least reclaimed a significant part of it as a province for realistic interpretation.63

Guthrie has compared The Big Sky and The Way West.

Breit writes:

"The Big Sky" has been so acclaimed that one wondered how Mr. Guthrie thought about "The Way West" alongside of it. "The two novels," he said, "are quite different in tone. 'The Big Sky' was largely negative. They were a people who destroyed and only that had meaning and zest for them. 'The

61 Kohler, p. 70.
62 Ibid., p. 71.
63 Ibid., p. 72.
Way West' is affirmative; they were the people who were going to make homes. It is a kind of affirmation.\textsuperscript{64}

Despite its merits, The Way West has a weak beginning. Dialogue on page one seems trivial and contrived. An example:

"Likely I'll go to town, Rebecca," he said, closing the door.
"To talk about Oregon," she said, not quite as if she blamed him.
"It'll blow over. You wait and see." She got the broom out of the corner. "I declare, that dog does track things up." Evans looked down at Rock, who had let himself fall in the middle of the floor after leaving the marks of his big pads on the worn wood. "Rock's a good dog."\textsuperscript{65}

Fortunately, it does not take Guthrie long to apply the powerful formula of The Big Sky. He makes maximum use of internal monologue. Thinks Liye:

It was a time to think of moving, a time when the fields and trees, for all their raw and naked look, showed they knew spring was coming. The blood flowed quick in the body, and ideas came to a man. Once when his pa's house burned, catching fire in the stick-and-mud chimney, he had felt a little the same way, as if all the things he had been doing as a boy didn't need to be done any more, and he could strike out fresh and build his life as he wanted it.\textsuperscript{66}

Guthrie developed that internal monologue to a level never achieved in The Big Sky. With lyrical

\textsuperscript{64}Breit, "Talk with A. B. Guthrie, Jr.," p. 39.
\textsuperscript{65}The Way West, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., p. 4.
beauty, he reveals the mind of young Mercy McBee as she participates in a square dance:

She thought she never had been so happy as now. The music had wings to it, and the night was wishful, and the big stars watched overhead, looked down smiling and promising, just on Mercy McBee, so that, for this minute, she knew Pa was right. In Oregon everything would be different. Do-se-do. And how are you, Mr. Mack, with your white shirt and sleeves held up with their holders and the look of trouble gone from your forehead? And did you know how often I thought of you along the dusty line of travel: Did you bump a-purpose, sir, doing do-se-do?

Music outside her. Music inside, singing talk she was too shy to say, singing talk outlandish that forever was her secret. The soft night around, lightened by the big fire that made little fires in the eyes of the Indians ringed about. Music's got a time to it, Brownie Evans. 'Bout time you learned it's got a time. Let music move your feet.

Swing, Mercy. Step out and swing, arm bent to arm. Saw, Hig, saw your fiddle, you and the dark part-Indian sawing with you. Saw in the night. Saw to the stars. Saw for little Mercy McBee who's joined the grownups now and's scared to speak a word.

Watch eyes. Watch, stars. Watch, wishful night. Mercy's got a dress with a flouncy collar and her feet are in shoes, and who's to know that once they fit old Mrs. Brewer who needed help with her chirren? Mercy can dance. Mercy's good-tempered. I declare, I never saw the beat of her!  

Guthrie's descriptions of characters can be memorable. Consider the reader's introduction to Hig, whom Guthrie initially describes as "a long splinter of a man in a hickory shirt and high-hung homespun
breeches and an old piece of felt hat." He continues:

The lady had been right when she said his face was pinched up. He wasn't old but had lost his teeth, so that the mouth turned in and the small jaw sat snug under a thin nose. The eyes seemed crowded, too, under the close line of brow, but the forehead, Fairman noted, was good, as if nature had tried to make up for the stinginess below.68

Despite his initial apprehensions, Guthrie was able to put himself in the mind of a woman. Rebecca Evans says:

It was like men, she thought, to be excited and not to feel with their excitement such a sadness as a woman did at saying goodbye to home. To a woman a house long-lived-in remembered the touch of hands and the tread of feet and the sounds of voices speaking low at night. It remembered deaths and bornings and the young, gay talk of people newly married.69

On one occasion at least, Guthrie places himself in the physical—as well as mental—place of a woman. Of Rebecca, he says wryly:

She folded her arms across her chest and brought them up snug, making a rest. A woman with breasts like hers had no business jouncing over the Oregon Road.70

The recommendations of a committee report illustrate Guthrie's use of trailside diaries:

68 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
69 Ibid., pp. 36-37.
70 Ibid., p. 80.
Evans, listening with just half his mind, heard it in snatches. Recommend the train be called the On-to-Oregon outfit. Recommend a governing council of six be elected. Recommend tax to pay expenses, including two hundred dollars for the pilot. Recommend no ardent spirits be taken, except for medical purposes. Require wagons be capable of carrying a quarter more than their load, teams of drawing a quarter more. Death for murder. Thirty-nine lashes for three days for rape. Thirty-nine lashes on the bare back for adultery and fornication.

When Guthrie devotes an entire chapter to discussion among the company about the morality of using buffalo chips for firewood, he again bases the incident on fact. He recalls:

A historian from Seattle, whose name I can't recall, asked me, after I'd made a speech in Helena to the Northwest Historical Association, where I got the deal in The Way West about the debate as to the propriety of the women cooking over cow chips. I had the reference, and I could tell him—it's in the Journal of John Hancock, which he hadn't read. He said I'm sure you knew what you were talking about, but I had never come across it.

Guthrie's own amusement over that debate is reflected in Summers' comment: "Heap of doin's over a cow dab." Later in the book, the boy Brownie Evans is awakened from a dream of fighting Indians and killing "buffler" to gather buffalo chips.

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71 Ibid., p. 46.
72 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
73 The Way West, p. 93.
74 Ibid., p. 103.
Guthrie does not mince words when portraying the tragedies that occasionally occurred on the trail. The death of little Todd Fairman after being bitten by a rattlesnake is realistic. A sample:

Evans stared at his hands, and then Judith Todd's mother cried out, cried the breaking cry that he has been wishing for and couldn't stand now, and he saw the thick and sickly matter bleeding from the boy's closed lids and knew that he was dying.  

Although Lije Evans is the main character, Dick Summers clearly is closer to Guthrie's own viewpoint. "I like him," Guthrie admits. "He was my alter ego. He was my favorite." When Summers, the mountain man whose day is nearly gone, leaves the train in Oregon to return to the mountains, Guthrie clearly is sympathetic. Consider Summers' last conversation with Lije Evans:

He waited until Dick got up, then trailed off after him. "Dick!"
"What's up, hoss?"
"Nice night, ain't it?"
"If you like sea country."
"What's wrong with the sea?"
"Nothin'. I just like my country high."
"You'll git used to it here. You'll come to like it."
"Not me."
"You'll give it a try, though, Dick?"
"I reckon not."
"What you aim to do?"
"Hit back."

Ibid., p. 181.

Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
"To Independence?"
"Not that, Lije."
"When?"
"Tomorrow's as good a time as any."
"How you goin' to hit back with no horse or anything?"
"I got my rifle and flint and steel. I'll pick up a horse somewhere's."
"Damn it, Dick, I wish you wasn't that way! A man can't traipse on forever."
Dick took a minute answering, and when the words came they seemed to Evans not an answer but a fling at some thought Dick held in a far corner of his mind. "After a while he meets the ocean, Lije."
"Why don't you come with us, sure enough?"
"It ain't a thing for me, Lije."
"There's free land for you like everybody else."
Evans waited, and then added what he knew. "You could be an important man in Oregon." In the half-darkness he thought he saw a little smile twist Summers' mouth.
"It ain't importance that I'm after."
"What is it?"
"Again Dick took time to answer, and again the answer troubled Evans. "I'm bound to chase my tail, I reckon, like a pup."77

By professional writing standards, The Way West surpasses The Big Sky. The writing is more polished, the structure is improved. However, The Big Sky has a more compelling subject, and it can be argued that the less-disciplined writing style actually enhanced the themes of wildness, freedom and uncontrolled grandeur. Dan Cushman writes, The Big Sky was properly wrong. It was a big, sprawling, wonderful success. It doesn't have the progressive art form that The Way West has got."78

77Ibid., p. 337.
78Cushman interview.
If the question of which book is better is debateable, one point is certain—with the writing of *The Way West*, Guthrie had become the master of his craft.
CHAPTER VI

After Guthrie had completed _The Way West_, Harvey Breit of _The New York Times_ asked him what he planned to do next. Breit reported:

Mr. Guthrie has a design—-and it must be said at the outset that Mr. Guthrie is not an ambitious man. "I want to write," he said, "a series of at least four panels on the Western movement. In them I want to try to interpret American life to the American people. It disturbs me to see people highballing over the trails without any idea of what they're doing. You know about my first two books. The third will be the story of the cow camp and/or gold camp days. Maybe both. I'm not sure. The fourth book will be the interior Northwest from the turn of the century to the present."¹

Guthrie had begun writing _These Thousand Hills_, the story of the development of Montana as cattle country, when he and his family decided to leave Lexington. Clark recalls:

Bud lived next to us only a part of the time he was engaged in writing the third novel. I remember I read only the first chapter or two in manuscript. The call of the West and Montana was strong and he and his family moved to Great Falls. For me this was a sad parting. Our families were so close.²

Guthrie remembers the homecoming:


²Clark letter.
On the wall it was written that Montana was home. In 1953, when Helen [his daughter] was ready for high school, we moved there... Some years before, we had bought as a vacation spot a section of rock-and-jackpine land near the mountains west of Choteau. On it were two cabins, some rickety outbuildings and a couple of ponds that ranked as lakes in that semi-arid country. Now we bought a house in Great Falls and settled down, we thought, for good.

So I came home again, as nearly as a man can. It is always with a sense of loss that one returns to old and dear places. My vacations in Montana hardly had prepared me for the sum of change. In Choteau faces had vanished, names I knew best were forgotten, strangers had invaded the place. Even the geography—the mountains, fields, streams and woods where I had found adventure as a boy—seemed deprived and diminished. They were still there, but I, the boy, wasn't.

Guthrie found a stimulating atmosphere for a writer. Three widely-known Montana authors—Norman Fox, Joseph Kinsey Howard and Dan Cushman—lived in Great Falls, giving him a sounding board for his ideas and friends with whom he could talk shop.

In researching for *These Thousand Hills*, he relied on recollections of old cowpunchers as well as the chronicles of old-time cattlemen:

No man of our day can write about the West of the 1880's without reading about it. If he is very lucky, as I have been, he may remember vestiges of that vanished period and he may have friends among a few aged old-timers who will help fill him in.

For me there was Teddy Blue Abbott, whose life story as taken down by Helen Huntington Smith is one of the very best of the cowpuncher chronicles;

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3 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 223-224.
there was Con Price, who wrote two wonderfully humorous and right stories about Montana; there was Charlie Russell, the artist, sculptor and storyteller, and there was also James Willard Schultz, the white Indian of still older experience. There were these and other old-timers, living and dead, published and unpublished, from whom I have borrowed again and again. I am immensely indebted to them, as I am to the Montana State Historical Society, whose staff members have been ever helpful.⁴

Teddy Blue Abbott, the cowpuncher who kept a diary, provided Guthrie with important insights into the character of the Montana cowboy as well as significant detail about life on the trail and in cowtowns. Here is a sample of his recollections:

In the eighties, conditions on the trail were a whole lot better than they were in the seventies. Someone had invented mess boxes to set up in the hind end of the wagon; they had four horse teams to pull it, lots of grub and from six to eight horses for each man to ride; and the saddles had improved. When I was on the trail in '83 we didn't have hardly a sore-backed horse all the way up to Montana, and the trail bosses had got the handling of a herd down to a science. After some experience in the business, they found that about 2000 head on an average was the best number in a herd. After you crossed Red River and got out on the open plains it was sure a pretty sight to see them strung out for almost a mile, the sun flashing on their horns. At noon you would see the men throw them off the trail, and half the crew would go to dinner while the other half would graze them onto water. No orders were given; every man knew his place and what to do. The left point, right swing, left flank and right drag would go

⁴Guthrie, foreward, These Thousand Hills (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), un-numbered.
in to dinner together. The first men off would eat in a hurry, catch up fresh horses and go out on a lope to the herd. It sure looks good, when you are on herd and hungry, to see the relief come out on a lope.

Eleven men made the average crew with a trail herd. The two men in the lead were called the point men, and then as the herd strung out there would be two men behind them on the swing, two on the flank, and the two drag drivers in the rear. With the cook and horse wrangler and boss, that made eleven. The poorest men always worked with the drags, because a good hand wouldn't stand for it. I have seen them come off herd with the dust half an inch deep on their hats and thick as fur in their eyebrows and mustaches, and if they shook their head or you tapped their cheek it would fall off them in showers. That dust was the reason a good man wouldn't work back there, and if they hired out to a trail outfit and were put with the drags they would go to the boss and ask for their time. But the rest of them were pretty nearly as bad off when they were on the side away from the wind. They would go to the water barrel at the end of the day and rinse their mouths and cough and spit and bring up that black stuff out of their throats. But you couldn't get it up out of your lungs.5

When Guthrie wrote about a cattle drive from Oregon to Montana in These Thousand Hills, he would take particular note of the dust:

From a rise a mile or so ahead of the herd, the point was all that Butler could make out, the lead cows and the riders at the sides and behind them nothing but a long, thick, creeping worm of lava dust. Here, looking back, a man could almost believe the leaders pulled the worm, as if hitched to it and bound forever to have it on their heels.

It was hell for men behind, hell for swing and flank and double hell for drag, and the riders would be riding masked by their bandannas but still with dust in mouths and noses, dust in ears and hair, on cheeks and lashes, dust powdered, layered, streaked by tears and slaver, dust in the deep-split lower lips that were better left unlicked.

Of Miles City, Abbott recalls:

A cowpuncher would never hang around town after he run out of money. He would get on his horse and drift back out to the ranch. Oh, there was exceptions once in a great while, when a fellow got a mash on a girl. I know of one case where a cowpuncher went in town and gave his sweetheart a hundred dollars, which was all he had in the world, and she kept him all winter. She lived in a little crib behind a saloon, a log shack with just a bedroom and kitchen. He moved in there, and when she had company he slept in the kitchen or in the saloon. But I guess that is what you would call an old story.

Guthrie used a variation of that "old story" in These Thousand Hills when he had Lat Evans move in with Callie Kash, a prostitute in Fort Benton.

The stories of Charles M. Russell were helpful to Guthrie in documenting the dialect of the Montana cowpuncher, as well as his sense of fun.

Guthrie was referring to Memories of Old Montana.

Ibid., p. 120.

Frank Bird Linderman recalls a typical Russell story worth telling in its entirety, not only because it demonstrates the cowboy dialect and humor, but because its informal, first-person narrative style would be used effectively by Guthrie in short stories. See Appendix.
and Trails I Rode when he wrote of Con Price's "two wonderfully humorous and right stories about Montana."

Price was a bronc buster as well as a cowpuncher:

"... before we got ready to gather those colts, somebody brought a horse to the ranch that the outfit had sold to a livery stable in Big Sandy for a buggy horse. I found out afteraards that the reason was nobody could ride him. He had a wide reputation and was known as S. Y. (from his brand) all over the country. The weather being bad when they sold him on trial to the livery stable they didn't hitch him up for about a month and had fed him grain all that time. So when they did try him out he kicked the buggy all to pieces and ran away. So they sent him home, as they didn't want him. He was a beautiful horse, weighed about 1150 and built like a greyhound, and I was itching to tie into S. Y., as I knew my standing was bad, and I asked the boss to let me try him out. He told me it would be useless, as one of the best riders in the state had given that horse up as a bad job. Then I kidded him and told him I didn't think the horse could buck at all, was just a plow horse. Anyway I rode S. Y. and as I knew I had to make good, I scratched him everywhere I could reach him and, of course, I was made from then on. I never rode him again and I know I was lucky that day, as that horse had threwed better riders than I ever was."

In These Thousand Hills, young Lat Evans also "sticks a hoss" that nobody else could ride.

Price also recalls:

It was amusing how some ... fellows got christened by the cowboys, and the name would stick with them all their lives. I knew one oldtime cowboy for about ten years, and the only name I ever knew he had was Whey Belly. He was a short fellow and his belly always hung over the

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Guthrie would name one of the characters in These Thousand Hills "Whey Belly Hector."

The books of James Willard Schultz—especially My Life as an Indian—provided valuable information about Indians, who figure prominently in an early portion of These Thousand Hills, and about frontier Montana in general. Here is Schultz' description of old Fort Benton:

Its massive adobe walls were overlooked by two bastions of two stories, each bastion having two cannon. The great gate was as strong as the walls, and within this gate was another, a small one, through which, in times of suspected trouble, a few Indians at a time were admitted to trade, and then only on the condition that they leave their weapons at home.

Guthrie also studied the hymns that his characters might be singing in a frontier church in the 1870's. Swanberg recalls:

For sixty days he studied old Methodist hymns. He could sit and sing those hymns—thirty or forty of them. Bud has a tin ear—can't sing worth a damn—but he knew them.

Near the end of his manuscript, Guthrie wrote the


\[\text{Swanberg interview.}\]
words that later would be used in the title:

Below him lay the lovely land and the birds of the field and the beasts of the forests that were His, and the earth and the fullness thereof and the cattle on a thousand hills.13

The passage is Biblical in origin. Verse 10, Book of Psalms, American Standard Version of The Bible, says, "For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills." Norman Fox suggested the title of "A Thousand Hills." Guthrie changed "A" to "These."14

Guthrie had barely completed the manuscript when he got an offer from a movie studio. He wrote:

... George Jackson and I were again at the cabin when the telephone rang. Ben Benjamin on the other end. Twentieth Century-Fox had made a firm offer of seventy-five thousand for movie rights. Would I accept?"

"Seventy-five thousand," I said. "I don't know, Ben. The book isn't even out yet. If it succeeds, it might sell for more."

Ben sounded discouraged.

While he was talking, I looked at George, who had a far-away light in his eyes, as if he were dividing seventy-five thousand by haircuts at one-fifty each.

"Tell you what," I told Ben. "Make it a hundred thousand flat, and I'll settle."

Ben's tone suggested I had asked the impossible, but he said he would call back next day.

George began smoking cigarettes, one after another. His eyes and face, indeed his whole manner, said I was a fool. Once he sighed, "Goodbye to a fortune, Buddy."

13 These Thousand Hills, p.

There was work to do that next day. Winter was almost at hand, and Twin Lakes had to be buttoned up—canoe put away, lawn furniture stored, headgate shut off, wood stacked in the woodbox, poison replenished for mice, beds to be unmade and blankets hung up on lines, outbuildings to be examined and locked. George wouldn't help me. No, sir, he would stay near the phone.

The call was late. George sat tense as I listened. The studio had agreed to my figure.

George clapped his hands as I replaced the receiver. "Goddam it," he shouted. "I knew you'd make it. I just knew you would."

He overcelebrated that night.15

Guthrie's plot was conventional. Fred T. Marsh, who reviewed the book for the New York Herald Tribune, outlines the story:

Young Lat Evans (scion of his grandfather of "The Big Sky" and his father of "The Way West"), a serious ambitious young man but a young male, too, is restive under his father's yoke, bound, as it is, to old-fashioned ways. Grandpa has lost his memory. Times have changed since the Evanses hit the Oregon Trail. In the rich Oregon country living has become poor during a transition period and Pa Evans, out of his woe, has reverted to the strict Biblical pattern of his non-conformist Puritan ancestors. Lat rebels and after hard words, but eventually with his father's and mother's benediction—and a pain in his heart which is never healed—strikes out on his own for the new cattle country of Montana to make his way. He is naturally good with horses and, although the youngster of his outfit, becomes a top wrangler. His first big strike comes when he rides and breaks a horse deliberately conditioned to meanness. It is a gambling stunt; but the boys egg the kid on to take the gamble and stake their accumulated pay from the round-up and the long

15The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 48-49.

16Young Evans had no grandfather in The Big Sky.
wearing trail on the outcome. He wins a horse and a minor reputation from this incident—an exciting bit of horse-play in all its ins and outs.

From the beginning, Lat is on the up and up, no question about that; the other boys and boys-grown-older who are his companions are mostly drifters, more or less homeless, living by a code which offers no future. Lat remains a sort of outsider, holding to the standards of his God-fearing parents. He makes his way in the working cowboy's world and on into the respectability of a new country. But he has sowed a few wild oats on the way up and also, out of the past, a family skeleton in the closet shows up, and in the present there arises a situation where conscience is no guide. Lat discovers for himself that to decide between right and wrong is easy. What's hard is to decide between two rights where you've got to do wrong to somebody no matter what you do. The crisis comes as he and his gently bred wife with their babies have got somewhere in the territory, with Lat a candidate for the senate of the newly admitted state of Montana. Lat makes the decision he had to make.17

When it was published in November of 1956, These Thousand Hills got enthusiastic reviews from several major critics. Among them was Carl Carmer, who reviewed the book for Saturday Review, which displayed Guthrie on its cover. Wrote Carmer:

The author of "The Big Sky" and "The Way West" assumed much greater difficulties than either of those admirable books presented to him when he chose to write "These Thousand Hills." With the earlier works, A. B. Guthrie Jr. had the advantage of a detailed knowledge of materials not generally known and could depend on the curiosity of his readers to enhance his narratives.

But in "Hills," Mr. Guthrie faced the challenge of writing a "Western," the basic materials of which are known to almost every American over the age of five.

That he has produced a highly readable novel under these circumstances is further proof of the fact demonstrated by his earlier books—that he is a novelist of stature. It would almost seem that he has welcomed the familiar scenes of a nationally accepted formula for the purpose of demonstrating what a gifted artist can do with them.

Mr. Guthrie has chosen to pepper this narrative with customary ingredients of the Western.

... Captured by Indians, Lat wins release by saving the chief's son from death by blood-poisoning. Attacked by a big powerful villain, Whey Belly Hector, he defeats him in violent physical combat. A member of a posse, he witnesses the hanging of two cattle rustlers, but saves the life of his old friend, Tom Ping, who was one of the gang.

Unattended by Guthrie's skills this plot structure seems as worn and conventional as most of those adopted by lesser writers. But picturesque and flavorful dialogue, crisply outlined characterizations, unusual understanding of human motives, amazingly comprehensive knowledge of the folk and their ways, ever-weighing suspense, constant humor, and the poetic use of natural backgrounds, renders this Western so compelling that it is hard indeed to set aside until it has been devoured.

Needless to say, it will make an extraordinary motion picture if surrendered into the hands of one of the more able and imaginative of Hollywood directors.18

Marsh, in the New York Herald Tribune, also praised Guthrie's ability to make gold from dross:

One of the wonderful things about A. B. Guthrie's novels—"The Big Sky," "The Way West," and now, "These Thousand Hills"—is that they grow out of a great popular tradition—the "Western." Especially in this

third novel which hits all the high spots of the eighties—the time of the last open ranges, of cowboy and horse, booming wide-open towns, rustlers and renegades, gamblers, shrewd bankers, vigilantes, ladies of convenience in a man's world and their refined sisters from the East—especially in this third novel do we see how a sort of folk literature, become sterile and puerile to the point of absurdity, can be lifted up. And I think its roots have everything to do with its artistry. There's only a slight difference between it and the better tales in the conventional manner. But that slight difference takes this novel out of the rut to a point where it can take its place beside other superior novels growing out of other traditions the world over. It will hold its own.

Along the way are all the color and incident any reader could ask of a dramatic tale of the old Wild West. Economy in description and elimination of all unnecessary exposition is the second wonderful thing about the Guthrie novels. Ram Butler, Carmichael, Tom Ping, the old Chief and his son of a remarkable Indian episode early in the novel; Madam Fran and her respectable whore-household which includes her niece, Callie, who becomes Lat's girl in the way of an old-time wide-open town, who remains his friend and whose image he is never able to shake off his heart and many others out of stock—seem here to come to life, as cut down and then built up to human proportions.

"These Thousand Hills" is dealing with a simple society, remote from the great capitals of the world of its time and from the complications of our time. Gold is where you find it.19

Edward Weeks of The Atlantic wrote:

Mr. Guthrie tells it with rawhide and romance. There is plenty of punishing masculine detail here, as in the hot dusty struggle with the cattle; plenty of raw, numbing cold, as when Lat is trapping and skinning wolves; plenty of fear and suffering, as when he and Tom are captured by the band of Indians and held in captivity until Lat's desperate operation

19 Marsh, p. 3.
on Hole-in-the-Leg. The romance begins with Callie, Lat's girl in the fancy house in Fort Benton. Lat's ingrained morality keeps telling him that he should never be there, but her curiously virginal girlishness appeals to him; she makes him welcome in tender ways, she gives him her savings when he needs money most, and she comes closer to him than he will ever admit. This is the conflict in the book, the conflict which brings out that same streak of hardness in Lat which so repelled him in his father. I find Callie more believable than Lucy, Lat's wife, but neither of them as lifelike as the men. What I like best are the scenes Charles Russell might have painted: Butler riding at the head of the cattle; Lat breaking in Sugar; the race against the Piegan; the range after a blizzard; the campfire at night with Carmichael talking.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark's review in The New York Times Book Review examined Guthrie's latest effort in the context of Guthrie's work as a whole. In the cover story of the Nov. 18, 1956 Times Book Review, he wrote:

In "These Thousand Hills," his third novel, Pulitzer Prize winner A. B. Guthrie Jr. tells the story of the backwash from the finished westering—a flood that reversed its course to fill the inland empire already traversed by the pioneers. The story is told by way of Lat Evans, Montana rancher; its end-product is the slow, contentious thickening toward civilization in that territory that put an end to the predatory interlude of buffalo skinners, Indian fighters and open-range cattlemen. Like Mr. Guthrie's two previous volumes, "The Big Sky," a magnificently

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20 Lat's wife is named Joyce, not Lucy.

pictorial account of the mountain-man era, and the steadily moving "The Way West," which told of the Oregon Trail, "These Thousand Hills" is spaciously conceived and closely thought out. With it, Mr. Guthrie puts beyond question what many of his readers had already guessed, that he is working deliberately and with foresight within the larger intention of depicting the opening and development of the American Northwest.

If this were the only certainty concerning Mr. Guthrie's work as a whole to emerge from "These Thousand Hills," it might give rise to as much uneasiness as hope about what is yet to come in the chronicle. There are ways in which this work is not so strong a book as either of its predecessors, and only too often the task of sustaining a long, planned series, especially within the arbitrary frames of history, can weary on author into dead writing and formula plotting. But, if there are signs of less successful work in "These Thousand Hills," it is also, in itself and in what it makes clearer about "The Big Sky" and "The Way West," the sufficient proof that they have not resulted from any cheapening of intention or weakening of will.

On the contrary, as a longer glance back now shows us, Mr. Guthrie has worked out a method admirably suited to keeping each book complete and alive in itself, and making it serve its purpose in the whole at the same time. And this method, once seen provides us with the much more important certainty that the author is sustained not only by a historical concern which well might wane but also by a fictional aim of a higher and more durable sort. And that both the method and the intention are still at work in "These Thousand Hills."

"The Big Sky" tells the story of the mountain men. True, but more to the point, it does so by means of a profound re-creation of the life, internal and external, from its rebellious beginnings to its shadowy passing, of one highly credible, complete mountain man, Boone Caudill. And this concern for the individual, even though he may be at the same time a representative of his kind, creates a strong, unbroken narrative movement, though it presents an aimless, wandering, almost unconscious life, for which the simple fact
of being is almost enough. And, of equal importance, presents it as dominated by that splendid, vast and impersonal wilderness which creates it and which makes simple being enough.

"The Way West" tells the story of the Oregon Trail, that almost compulsive migration of farmers which led to the first consequential settlement of the Northwest. This was a collective movement. No one man, until he emerged from it in trial, could embody it. But Mr. Guthrie gave it the fictional power of the particular by telling it in terms of the journey of one wagon train, and then, increasingly, by way of the life of one family within that train, the Evans family, from which, finally, the proven figure emerges. And here the same wilderness that was splendid panorama in "The Big Sky" becomes mostly a narrow, fearful vision to the right and the left, and a series of heartbreaking obstacles ahead. The same world is not the same world to a solitary, free-moving hunter and to a family-burdened farmer.

Moreover, the two novels are linked (though with a wise looseness) by the presence in both of one character, Dick Summers, that incomplete, part-farmer mountain man who was Boone Caudill's mentor. In "The Way West" he becomes the remote and faintly contemptuous guide of the wagon-train, and the equally useful guide to the reader, inducing the retrospective glance, and mediating in the comparison of mountain man and emigrant.

Now, in "These Thousand Hills" Lat Evans, conceived and born out of wedlock in that wagon-train, and divided between the frustrated westering impulse of his grandfather and the stern, guilty, God-fearing fixity of his father, turns with the backwash into Montana and performs, fictionally, both a bridging service comparable to Summers' and the major duty of embodying his time. For the time also is divided, is the time of a similar conflict between the dying old West and the growing new West of towns, fenced ranches, businesses, railroads, banks, churches and schools. So Lat moves, an inturned man in a back-turning world, slowly and in torment through the end of one

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22 Not true. His parents did conceive a child out of wedlock, but it was not Lat.
age: a long range drive, a season of last-grasp buffalo\textsuperscript{23} skinning, imprisonment by uneasy Indians off the reservation, a horse race with betting with other Indians, and a love affair, of the border kind, with Callie, a prostitute in Miss Fran's parlor "house."

Next come the beginnings of another age: a bank loan to start Lat's ranching, his marriage to a religious-minded school teacher, Joyce Sheridan, his survival (because he had cut and stacked hay) in the terrible winter of 1886-87 when the last open-range-minded men were finished, a reluctant part in a vigilante action against horse thieves. There was trouble with Callie, and trouble with Joyce because of Callie (one has to choose between two rights, he said, and that was a word for his life), and trouble with Tom Ping, the incurably open-range Texan who had been his partner on the trail and in the buffalo camp but became his enemy when the sides were chosen. None of this is easy for Lat. In finally turning away from Tom Ping, refusing his challenge to a gun fight, and in returning, half devoted, to a Joyce who cannot understand, he makes not his peace but his compromise with the new age.

It would appear, then, that Mr. Guthrie has sought to embody the spirit of each era of his series in the kind of man created by that era and most important to it. It would also appear that he has sought to give the very form of each book a reinforcing likeness to that spirit—for "The Big Sky," a world vast, loose and scenic; for "The Way West," a world narrow and moving, and for "These Thousand Hills" a world tight, various, uncertain and contentious. And if "These Thousand Hills" does not move with quite the certainty and power of its predecessors, it seems likely that the difference results, not from any faltering on Mr. Guthrie's part, but from the nature of his materials. It may be that it is not possible to render the complexities of an era of increasing density, involvement and moral debate with the same unity or within the same scope that will serve the wonderings of a lone or the progress of a single, obsessive

\textsuperscript{23}Guthrie describes wolf skinning, not buffalo skinning.
passion, and that Mr. Guthrie will be forced, as his chronicle continues, to move a little more slowly, to deal book by book with phases, not epochs, with men representative of phases not of an age entire.

It is to be hoped that the chronicle will continue. What emerges above all from a consideration of "These Thousand Hills" and a glance back at "The Big Sky" and "The Way West," is the fact that Mr. Guthrie is moved by a fictional purpose as high and valid as his historical purpose is big, and that the two are soundly related, that he is writing, out of the real events of a real world, something like a spiritual epic of the Northwest.24

The New Yorker, in a section entitled "Books, Briefly Noted," described the book as "a quiet but vivid account of the young manhood of Lat Evans..."25

As usual, a few reviewers were unenthusiastic.

Library Journal said:

The ready-made audience for Guthrie novels built up by his justly famed "The Way West" and "The Big Sky" will be disappointed with this excursion into banal melodrama. Oregonian Lat Evans, cowboy and wolf-hunter, comes to Fort Benton, Montana, in 1880, there meeting Callie Kash, a Noble Prostitute, "nice of mouth and nostril, with yellow hair like good fall range." After a series of improbable incidents, including kidnapping by Indians, vigilante vengeance on rustlers, appointment to the growing town's school board and marriage to the school ma'am, and involvement in a murder case, Lat settles down to respectable ranching. Book contains some fine


passages of descriptive writing, but is generally far below author's usual high standard. Recommended for large public libraries—with reservations.26

Guthrie himself was not entirely satisfied with the book. In The Blue Hen's Chick, he remarks:

In almost ten years I haven't done much. A stint or two in Hollywood. In a series of novels one book, These Thousand Hills—which was my most difficult and least successful because it dealt with the cowpuncher and had to avoid, if it could, the stylized Western myth.27

Asked if his lack of success in this area could be attributed to a romantic viewpoint, Guthrie responded:

No, I don't think so. If I do have a romantic view, it doesn't embrace the myth. The truth I like. The myth is invulnerable—imperishable. It exists. In These Thousand Hills, I opposed it by trying to show, actually, what the day of the cattleman was like. The book wasn't very successful. The gun and gallop jobs still sell, to publishers and to TV audiences, and studios and all that. It's indestructable.28

Referring to the vigilante lynching in his book, Guthrie noted:

Nobody chooses to dislike the vigilantes today, but my account was far more likely to have happened then the romanticized version.29

Concerning his unique treatment of a conventional

26"These Thousand Hills," review Library Journal, 81, Nov. 15, 1956, p. 82.

27The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 251.

28Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

plot, Guthrie said:

It isn't the subject that counts so much as the treatment of the subject. The myth embraces—you know—the man with the white hat and the man with the black hat, and the fair little dame whose feelings never go below her waist. This is all part of the myth. This I don't buy, and so my thought, in that degree, is different.\(^{30}\)

H. G. Merriam, Guthrie's college English professor, considers These Thousand Hills the weakest of his three major books:

These Thousand Hills tried to make one man typify too many things. This just wasn't human... Lat Evans was a mixture of everything... Bud also accepted too many of the usual things, like the cowboy marrying the school teacher.\(^{31}\)

Guthrie agrees there may be some validity to Merriam's criticism but contends the book's failure to avoid the myth completely was its main weakness.

To Dan Cushman, who watched Guthrie struggle to produce These Thousand Hills, a penchant for perfection was Guthrie's main enemy. "He is cursed by integrity," says Cushman, who remembers the numerous pages that Guthrie threw away as "not good enough." "God knows how much good fiction went into the waste basket. He worked it [the manuscript] to

\(^{30}\) _Ibid._, Twin Lakes.

\(^{31}\) Merriam interview.
By the time it was rewritten, it was pallid—like a piece of meat after a raccoon gets through washing it in the creek... Bud must have thrown away about 200,000 words—gutsy stuff. I'd like to have what Bud threw away from that book.\textsuperscript{33}

Guthrie recalls numerous "starts and stops" while writing These Thousand Hills as well as his other books. However, he emphasizes that he threw away pages of manuscript only because "I didn't think they were good enough to keep."\textsuperscript{34}

Swanberg, Guthrie's friend, does not view the book as a failure, although he realizes Guthrie was not satisfied:

Bud's style grows. In These Thousand Hills, I think the writing is best. The scene of the buffalo dying alone on the prairie is sheer poetry. Bud had a feeling of failure about These Thousand Hills, but it was a lighter, smaller book than the others. He wanted to demonstrate the importance of a whorehouse in early western history. When you've said it, you've said it.\textsuperscript{35}

Guthrie "drew heavily on his acquaintances" for characters in These Thousand Hills, says Swanberg, who

\textsuperscript{32}Cushman interview.
\textsuperscript{33}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34}Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
\textsuperscript{35}Swanberg interview.
glimpses himself in Guthrie's characterization of a lawyer. Swanberg said he recognizes phrases of Dan Bomar, Guthrie's friend in Lexington. Guthrie later remarked that he had not patterned the lawyer in These Thousand Hills after Swanberg—at least not consciously.

Whatever the criticisms of the reviewers, there was no doubt that Guthrie's ability as a writer had improved dramatically since he wrote Murders at Moon Dance. A comparison of These Thousand Hills with that first pulp novel demonstrates Guthrie's development:

Consider first his flat description of West Cawinne busting a bronc in Murders:

> For a paralyzed moment, the broncho stood humped, his eyes gleaming white at the corners, and then with a squeal he dropped his head and the whole of him seemed to explode. His first jump was a preparatory up-and-down pitch, ending in a stiff-legged, jolting return to earth, but he was in the air again almost as he landed . . . he rose high on the oblique and landed and came up the other way. . . .

Contrast that passage with the powerful descriptive scene when Lat rides Sugar in These Thousand Hills:

> The horse bounced and fought the reins and tore them through the hold and bogged his head, and the earth sprang away and slammed back and sprang again. Like many a horse. Like horses

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36 Ibid.
37 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
38 Murders at Moon Dance, pp. 26-27.
ridden. Pile-driver. Rough as rock. Not rough enough. Sit soft to jolt! Watch out, that jump!
Two pitches. Four. Five or six. Bets in the bag. This bronc to boot.


The ground appeared to level and begin streaking underneath. It seemed the horse was running. It seemed he answered to the spurs with speed instead of pitches. Earth and sky broke off and took their proper places.39

Guthrie does an admirable job of catching the dialect of Texas trail chief Ram Butler. For example:

Ram let him get almost to the door. Before he spook, he flicked another glance at Lat. "We got a little ol' boy can sometimes stick a hoss,"40

Guthrie's taste for the bizarre appears infrequently but always memorably and believably. Here is an account of a skinned wolf coming to life:

It stood white in the night. It had eyes, it had teeth, and both grinned. It shuddered. It moved, stick of a body, fingerbone tail, trembling on peeled stalks of legs. Its tongue licked its teeth. A whining cry came out of it. "Shoot!"

A gun roared behind him. His own was in his hand. The flare of it flashed in the grinning eyes. The sick-white form jerked and went down, and the eyes faded out while the teeth kept on grinning.

39 These Thousand Hills, p. 61.
40 Ibid., p. 51.
"You ain't goin' to get him any deader." It was Godwin, speaking from behind. "Poison just stunned that feller, and the undressin' brung him to life."41

The reference to Whitey, the blacksmith, keeping a dead baby in a jar is based on fact. A blacksmith in Choteau once kept such a bizarre conversation piece.42 Occasionally, the dialogue itself comes straight from an old-timer's mouth. In an article about Idaho written for Holiday in 1954, Guthrie mentioned speaking to an old man who used to take horses from Idaho over the mountains to Montana—apparently illegally.43 In These Thousand Hills, the old man's words are spoken by Whitey, who winks mischievously as he assures Lat that the horses were "all branded stock, o' course. All legal."44

One of the most memorable passages is Guthrie's description of an old buffalo that Lat finds alone on the prairie:

He had come out of nowhere, this ancient buffalo bull, out of hidden hills or lost plains or the great hole in the ground that the Indians invented to account for the disappearance of the herds they once knew. A lone bull, the last bull, hooking at the places the wolves had just

41 Ibid., p. 103.
42 Guthrie interview, Nov. 15, 1968, Missoula.
43 Guthrie, "Idaho," Holiday, 15, June, 1954, p. 34.
44 These Thousand Hills, p. 160.
At Lat's shout the wolves raised their heads. They loped off as he came on. At a little distance they slowed and faced around and rumped down. They knew when a man wasn't armed. They grinned at him, their teeth showing white against the dark of their muzzles.

The bull didn't move except to front the new danger. Starved to bones, rimed with frost, he stood with his head down, daring anyone to come on, daring the world and everything in it. Above his stubborn eyes his forelock dangled, still fuzzed with last season's burrs, still sandy from remembered wallows, from watering places he wouldn't see any more. The blizzard had driven him, the wind and the cutting snow, out of some echoing solitude down here to ranges made strange since he grazed as a calf.

If he could be driven on toward the cabin, to safety and hay?

Lat pulled off a mitten and untied his rope, feeling the quick bite of the cold. He maneuvered closer and flicked the bull on the side and got a sweep of the horns in return. He tried again, and again, too close for comfort.

The three wolves were still laughing. Before help could arrive, they'd have the bull down and the soft parts, the guts and the bag, eaten out.

There was nothing to do but ride on.⁴⁵

Internal monologue, which Guthrie had not learned to use in Murders at Moon Dance, was used liberally in These Thousand Hills to develop characters. Callie Kash, in a cynical moment, comments on her job:

Company, girls! How-do-do. Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am. Yep, a drink, but saloons they sell them. Get your thumb out, Happy. Yes, ma'am, let's go. That's what I come for.⁴⁶ Un-hh, Baby! Here you are, and see you again.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 207.
⁴⁶Ibid., p. 169.
Guthrie wrote the screen play for the motion picture version of the book. It was an undertaking he regrets:

Friends ask me why the writers of novels don't re-write them as screenplays. It's silly for studios to engage somebody else. I tended to think so myself. I learned better when I came to California to make a screenplay of my book, These Thousand Hills.

I was too close to my novel, too committed to words and pages and characters and the turns of the story to use a knife, to divide and discard and reassemble and reduce to the size of a short story a full-length book, as movie-makers must do. A book may require a day, even more, to read through. Who will spend that much time in a theater? People compare books and films, usually to the discredit of the latter, without understanding necessities. The necessity was too much for me when I tried to shrink my book to the dimensions of a play. Though, after it had been doctored by a studio writer under long-term contract, the film version lost the values I had struggled for in my novel, I'm still firm in the belief that a novelist ought to leave his novel alone. Other writers without blood ties to it can do better.47

He remembers when the studio called in the "collaborator" to help him improve the screenplay:

... we didn't collaborate. He took the screenplay. Well, what he made of it offended me. Granted my script needed help, but what he did to it it didn't need! So I refused any credit. That's the second time I've turned down credit, which is, you know, heresy in Hollywood. But I don't want my name on something that I can't be reasonably satisfied with.48

47The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 219-220.

48Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
Guthrie was not the only one who wasn't satisfied with the screen version of his novel. The Saturday Review wrote:

The message, or basic theme, of "These Thousand Hills" is a good deal harder to discover. The screenplay was adapted by Alfred Hayes from and A. B. Guthrie novel, and it seems to wander between an attempt, on one hand, to say something about the character-building opportunities of the old West, and on the other to keep to the traditional form of the Western. Sure enough, things get going with a ballad called "These Thousand Hills" sung by Randy Sparks (whoever he is) and then along come those men on horses loping over some empty spaces. The men dismount; there's some talk; and it seems the fellow who needs a horse can have a horse if he'll just do a little breaking in. Breaking in a horse is always good for five minutes (William Wyler used up fifteen in "The Big Country"), and then after a while the boys get to town, where there's that girl, and there's where the story begins.

The wonder is that 20th Century-Fox needed to buy a property like the Guthrie novel to put this kind of thing on the screen. Richard Fleischer, the director, without either bite or notable insight, proceeds to develop a story about a man who gets ahead in Oregon. Our man is loved by two women—one respectable, one a tart—and he finally risks his career on behalf of the bad girl, demonstrating, I suppose, that he's a true-blue American. Then back to Randy Sparks and the theme song. Don Murray, Stuart Whitman, Lee Remick, and Richard Egan struggle through the picture, mostly looking worried. One can visualize them all getting together at the end of the picture and asking: "Say, what were we supposed to be doing?" Making a candidate for the top ten tunes, perhaps.49

In The New Republic, Stanley Kauffmann commented:

These Thousand Hills tells of a young ambitious cowhand (Don Murray) who learns that success isn’t everything. Murray is acceptable but the rest of the cast, except Stuart Whitman, are abominable. And, of course, Guthrie’s little homespun cautionary tale has been wrenched to provide a final banister-breaking brawl.50

If Guthrie had failed to write an acceptable screenplay, his writing in the novel itself reached a new level of professionalism. To use the terminology of the trade, These Thousand Hills is "slicker" than any of Guthrie’s preceding books. It is highly polished and easy to read. The critical reader will not find, as Walter Van Tilburg Clark did in The Big Sky, that Guthrie degenerated to free verse or that he has written "inflated transitional passages." However, the book has less substance than its two predecessors, The Big Sky and The Way West. As Cushman asserts, Guthrie’s growing insistence on perfection in his writing caused him to sacrifice portions of the novel that his readers would have welcomed. Cushman did not miss the irony of the situation. "Bud is afflicted by his own success. . . . perfection is his albatross."51

51Cushman interview.
Perhaps *These Thousand Hills* would have been better if Guthrie were less like Moliere, of whom Boileau wrote in the second act of *Satires*, "He pleases every one but can not please himself."
When Guthrie achieved national prominence as a fiction writer in 1946, the once-lucrative market for magazine short stories was disappearing. During the next 14 years some of his best short stories were rejected repeatedly before they finally attracted buyers in the magazine market. A few were not published.

After years of collecting rejection slips, Guthrie decided to try a new outlet. Thirteen of his stories—two of which had not been published—were published in 1960 by Houghton Mifflin Company as *The Big It and Other Stories*. Guthrie later commented on the poor reception given the stories when submitted individually to magazine editors:

It's true that many of the stories in *The Big It* never found a market in magazines. Granted the possibility that they just weren't good enough, it still remains that the sun of the article stands at high noon. Write a how-to or a how-come piece, an article on "I Made Love to a Gorilla" or "The Lesson of a Drippy Nose" and you've got the editor's attention. This trail, blazed by the Reader's Digest, is thick with followers. The result: scant space for fiction.

In following the course of these stories from one magazine to another some revealing editorial comments came my way. A "quality" magazine rejected "Ebbie," saying that the magazine's formula would not provide space both for it and the two happy stories essential to a balanced mood. Another editor wrote
that the hero of "Bargain" could not be a poisoner, no matter what the provocation. Presumably a six-shooter would have met the moral standard. One story, which had been banging around for eight or nine years, found a taker only after I had sent in the collection for publication as a book. The story was the same but I had changed the title from "Prize Fight" to "Independence Day." The new title seemed to me to illuminate the text more fully. The editors, who had seen the piece before, obviously agreed.

Are editors just guessing, or don't people read short stories? Have we lost, as readers, the imagination that fiction calls upon us to exercise? One group thinks we haven't, thinks editors are wrong. They plan to re-establish the old Story magazine. The outcome will be interesting and may well ring a change.¹

Story never was revived, and the paucity of fiction in American periodicals remains. "Some magazines, like Playboy and Esquire, still have good fiction, and Harpers and The Atlantic use one fiction article per issue, but that's about all," Guthrie said.²

In the foreword to his collection of short stories, Guthrie wrote:

Each of the stories herein, however, heightened, has some basis in fact. One of them, indeed, though shaped to the demands of fiction, hews so close to accounts of the actuality that some readers accused me of plagiarism when it first appeared—and one editor was foolish enough to entertain their outrage. So, lest others indict me, I declare that "Mountain Medicine" is the story, with variations on history, of the best-known adventure of John Colter, one of the notables of the Lewis and Clark


²Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
expedition. John Bradbury recorded it first, early in the nineteenth century. Washington Irving picked it up. They simply reported what were reported as facts. I made fiction of Bradbury's account, staying as close to the record as the short-story form seemed to permit. If any accuse me now, I won't answer. History is there for the writer of fiction, else we have to burn a lot of books.

Other stories were suggested by remembered fragments of my boyhood by bits of conversation with old-timers and by their reminiscences over a glass or two or three, or half a dozen, and by things read and believed because they were so close to what I'd known and heard.

I had a tall time writing the tall stories. I enjoyed writing the slick ones. I suffered over some of the others and found small, if any, market for them. But if literature is to have dignity, it must enlighten life, and not be sun alone. I am getting around here to thanking whatever publishers there were for permission to reprint.

And, though it is too late now, I want to thank my old, old friend, my father-in-law, from whose wit and western lore I have drawn so often. So I dedicate this collection of tales to the memory of Tom Larson.

Larson, a Choteau rancher and long-time state legislator, had died two years before The Big It was published. Guthrie obviously had great affection and admiration for this generous, free-wheeling, free-drinking man:

In his spur-of-the-moment facility for saying the unexpected, for putting wit and essential sense into a capsule, he belonged in the company of Will Rogers, Charlie Russell and other gifted old-timers now mostly dead. . . . We had a custom, he and I, of going out on the town one night during each of my summer vacations. Once, at about midnight, we decided we'd had enough and were about to take

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leave when a party of friends sailed in and hove to. So general is the practice of treating in small Montana saloons that drinks were ranged around us almost before we said no. "Pretty rugged," I said to Tom the next day. He nodded and asked, "How many did we have after we quit?"^4

Larson is included in the autobiographical short story entitled "The Fourth at Getup," one of the two stories that had not found a publisher before they appeared in The Big It. The story tells what happens when a group of dignified southern ladies, reared in Kentucky's mint julep society, visit the ditchwater whiskey world of a Montana cowtown. In the story, Tom tells the ladies they have nothing to fear from Montana whiskey:

"Whiskey don't hurt you here," he told them. "Country's so high and dry you burn it up quick. You breathe it right out. Not like in them southern states where I shipped a carload of broncs once. You take three or four drinks in that climate, and they pile up on you, and the first thing you know you're loco."^5

In a humorous story called "The Therefore Hog," Guthrie relates the bizarre scheme of a cowpoke to get sole possession of a bed that Slaughter, his drunken companion, is occupying. An ice-cold pistol barrel applied repeatedly in the darkness to the bottom of

^4The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 237.

Slaughter's bare feet causes him to flee the bed to "get shed of . . . them fire snails."^6

"The Big It," the title story, had appeared in slightly different form as a tall story in These Thousand Hills. It relates the hilarious consequences when the townspeople of Fort Benton attempt to fire a small cannon from the back of a cantankerous mule.

Reprinted from the April 28, 1951, edition of Colliers was "The Moon Dance Skunk,"^7 another light-hearted story about a sheepherder named Shorty who uses his pet skunk to clear a saloon of some wise-cracking cattlemen. Also set in Moon Dance is "The Keeper of the Key," a humorous story of what happens when a justice of the peace leaves a seldom-sober ne'er-do-well in charge of his court.

"Mountain Medicine" and "Last Snake" are stories about mountain men. The first, based on the famous ordeal of John Colter, has the captured mountain man trying to awe the Indians by "making medicine." Hardly aiming his rifle, Clell downs a high flying eagle to the amazement of his captors, who do not

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^6"The Therefore Hog," The Big It, p. 8.

^7It appeared in Colliers as "The Fraudulent Skunk."
know about the virtues of buckshot. Clell, like Colter, is stripped and told to run for his life. Colter finally escaped by submerging himself in a river and breathing through a reed, but Guthrie's character makes his get-away by locating the underwater opening of a beaver lodge and swimming inside. The story, originally published in the Aug. 16, 1947, *Saturday Evening Post*, has a proper slick magazine ending. His friends would never understand, Clell thinks, "why he never would hunt beaver again."^9

The transition of a boy named Ross into a man is the subject of "Last Snake." Ross, crew member of a Missouri River keelboat, grows increasingly frightened as the boat moves deeper into hostile Indian territory. He deserts the craft, but finds his courage at a critical moment. Although the story is not autobiographical, one glimpse of Guthrie is visible in Ross, saddened by the thought of his once-dominating father weakening with age and illness and becoming dependent on the son he disciplined so strongly. In *The Blue Hen's Chick*, Guthrie makes the same observation about his father:

^8In *The Way West*, pp. 199-200, Dick Summers uses the same trick to help convince a Sioux war party that he and Brownie Evans should be allowed to keep their scalps.

^9"Mountain Medicine," *The Big It*, p. 150.
In my late teens I defied Father absolutely and won my independence of his tantrums, and, as the years went on, he came to lean on me. For all his sins, I found that reversal sad and somewhat frightening, as any young man does when old supports give way, and standing alone and unsupported, he becomes supporter.10

"Bargain" is the story of a mild-mannered store proprietor who substitutes wood alcohol for the whiskey that a bully has been stealing and drinking. In "Old Mother Hubbard," a new ranch foreman must win the respect of cowboys disgruntled over the dismissal of their boss.

"The First Principal" is based on an actual fist fight between Guthrie's father and a Choteau cowhand who considered school teaching a women's job. Guthrie tells the story from the viewpoint of Lonnie Ellenwood, the principal's son. Also based on fact is "Independence Day," the story of 17-year-old Charlie Bostwick who makes some unpleasant discoveries about human nature on July 4, 1920. He is sickened by the blood-lust of a crowd as it cheers the beating of a local boxer who had boasted repeatedly that he was unbeatable. When he visits the defeated boxer to console him in his humiliation, Charlie finds with dismay that he is the same insufferable braggart he had been before the fight. Guthrie based his story on his childhood recollections of a boxer who

10 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 37-38.
fought in the Choteau area.

The most frankly autobiographical, and perhaps the best short story in the collection is "Ebbie," Guthrie's fictionalized account of the tragic childhood incident in which his father clubs the family dog in a fit of temper and blinds her. With great sensitivity, Guthrie relates the agony of the remorseful father who must destroy the dog, the grief of a son who doesn't understand, and the touching loyalty of the dog who loves her master even after he has blinded her.

In "The Wreck," the other previously unpublished story, Guthrie demonstrates how the best intentions sometimes can produce tragic results. An intoxicated passerby, in an attempt to help, pours whiskey on the lips of an auto accident victim who is lying unconscious in the road. Branded by society as the drunken driver responsible for the accident, the innocent victim becomes an alcoholic.

The Big It found a receptive audience. "One of the finest collections of short stories in recent years," said William Eastlake in Saturday Review. He continued:

This excellent book is not an assortment of "Western" stories, as the publishers have implied, for Guthrie is no more a "Western" writer than Melville was an Eastern writer or Hemingway a Spanish writer. True, the West provides the locale, but what a difference between these tales and those
Guthrie's stories illustrate that good writing is universal, transcending the limitations of a particular place.

The stories can be divided into two groups: those of courage, physical and moral, and those of fierce humor. "Old Mother Hubbard," "First Principal," "Bargain," "Mountain Medicine," and "Last Snake" all display aspects of human courage. In them Guthrie presents the sensitive man, kind, understanding, tolerant, confronted by the raw shock of brutality. But Guthrie's men are not made of straw; he makes his brutality convincing; his people are familiar, men we have known, those who love war and the spurt of blood. Maniacs? Guthrie doesn't think so. They are our neighbors, peppered all over the earth.

But Guthrie's gentle characters are closer to us. Innocent, almost naive, yet they are allowed by the author to cope, to survive, even to triumph. It takes an artist like Guthrie to depict them realistically. Very few writers will consider naked good and evil; they prefer to explore the shadings and shadows because they have been taken in by the cliché that good and evil do not exist in stark form. But Guthrie sees in black and white clarity. In his stories he tells where and how good and evil are to be found.

Many men of good will in this world come to the point where they are faced with evil in human form, when they cannot hide behind their stacks of books, their do-good philosophy, or their religion. They are out on a limb, all alone with nothing except courage, moral courage most times—and this is the highest form. Yet, in these stories when the situation calls for physical courage, the last resort of the desperate man, Guthrie artfully depicts characters equal to the occasion.

In contrast, we have the wild humor of Guthrie's other stories: "The Keeper of the Key," "The Moon Dance Skunk," "The Therefore Hog," and "The Big It." The first tale is the author at his best: here he depicts the destruction of life's rigid pattern. The basis of his humor is the triumph of the irrational, the illogical, the whimsical, whether the protagonist is a man, as in "The Keeper of the Key," or an animal, as in "The Big It." Guthrie uses a scalpel but the emotional impact he achieves is that of a sledge hammer, yet his humor is akin to Mark
Twain's.
It is a sad commentary on our time that some of the finest stories in this book were rejected by our magazines. One of them, "Ebbie," was relegated to Southwestern Review, an excellent publication of limited circulation. To quote Guthrie: "I suffered over some of these and found small, if any, market for them." 11

Oliver La Farge found humor, tragedy and a sense of the true character of the old West in Guthrie's stories. In the New York Times, La Farge wrote:

The stories vary in character. Some, like "The Therefore Hog" and "The Fourth at Getup," are funny enough to make you laugh out loud. From reading his novels, this reviewer had not suspected Mr. Guthrie of humor, but he has it. It is humor in the authentic Western frontier style, the humor of the baby-swapping episode in "The Virginian," rough, not always easy for the victim to take. This humor is disappearing now as the new, soft-handed, standardized writers take over.

One or two stories are tragic, others deadly serious. The most moving of the lot is "Ebbie," a tale of real quality. In this story a boy watches the killing of the family's dog. "Father went over to her and stooped and put his hand out and rested it on her side. He didn't speak, not for a long time, but just stooped and let his hand lie soft and kind on her side. ... It seemed to the boy he had never seen the face before, never seen the sadness there and the kindness, too, and the marks of wild, dark angers that he couldn't help." The neatest story, a tragedy, is "The Wreck." Some are no more than rather long sketches.

Reference was made above to "The Virginian." It is inevitable to compare these stories with Owen Wister's work, for they deal with the same basic subject—the true character of the old West—and possess the same quality of relish. Guthrie does not editorialize or ramble as Wister did. Wister saw

the old West, the unfenced, wild country and the people, at their full glory; Guthrie lives in a region where some of the old qualities still linger, and he has studied his subject profoundly. Like Wister, he conveys the feeling that he is telling of the real thing, and his reproduction of the Western manner of speech is unusually fine. None of these stories approaches Wister's best, none shows quite that master hand—and, for that matter, none is as bad as Wister's worst.

This is one of those books of which it can be said that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. . . . The northern section of the Great Plains, the Dakotas and eastern Montana (the latter Guthrie's chosen locale) are little known to the inhabitants of the metropolitan parts of the United States, who usually hear of them only when one of their wind-tunnel, deep-freeze winters causes unusual havoc. The white men of that region sprung of many origins, are a distinctive breed, although their rough, cutting edges nowadays are beginning to be smoothed by the great American conformity. There are, thank Heaven, still many such as are described in "The Fourth at Getup." Taken all together, these stories go a long way toward telling what those people are like and how they got that way.

That is no mean achievement. Compared to the stylized claptrap of Westerns of book, screen and TV, by which the very memory of the old West is rapidly being destroyed, "The Big It" is like a frontier-model Colt's .45 set alongside a collection of children's cap pistols and "rickoshay."12


Recommending the book be "an automatic purchase" by libraries with fiction collections, Library Journal said:

Adventure, humor, and a touch of poignancy are the main ingredients of this collection of short
stories, most of which (including all the really fine ones) have the early Western background of the author's novels. Men and boys, as well as women who have had it as far as the New Yorker-type stories go, will enjoy Guthrie's first, but certainly not last, collection of short stories. Booklist recommended the stories for a "general short-story audience as well as one interested in the West," and Kirkus reported that the stories were "told with the perceptiveness, the understanding, the vigor that characterizes Guthrie's novels."

In the San Francisco Chronicle, W. H. Hutchinson wrote:

It is to the publishers' everlasting credit that they were willing to put these vagrant, off-trail sketches between boards for the joy and edification of the bookish public. Robert G. Athearn of The Montana Magazine of History called the book a "top shelf item":

Guthrie has a particularly keen understanding of people and an uncanny ability to put the reader "on the same wave length" with the characters he portrays. He concentrates, as the Christian Science Monitor once explained it, on how they think and

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16 Ibid., reprinted from San Francisco Chronicle,
Henry Nash Smith of the New York Herald Tribune criticized Guthrie's stories set in contemporary times:

Several of the stories in this collection, like Mr. Guthrie's widely read novels, are renderings of incidents in Western history. "Mountain Medicine" and "Last Snake" recall "The Big Sky" in their skillful depiction of the fur trade of the northern Rockies. Other stories deal with the later period of the cattle range, especially with an imaginary Montana trading center called Moon Dance. As the author turns to this more recent subject matter he seems to feel an obligation to go beyond the imaginative re-creation of the past and searches rather too hard for plot gimmicks. In "Bargain," for example, a merchant takes his revenge on an illiterate bully by tricking him into drinking poisonous wood alcohol.

We are not asked to indorse the merchant's morality, but Mr. Guthrie is capable of simplifying issues to the point of melodrama. "First Principal" opposes a local tough to a new school teacher who arrives in Moon Dance with his family. This story is apparently meant to be more than merely slick: the teacher's small son watching his father being beaten with a quirt thinks of "Stephen stoned and Christ dying on the cross--of all the pale, good thoughtful men foredoomed before the hearty." But television clichés soon take over: "He saw his father's fist begin to work and heard the flat smacks of bone against flesh and saw the man try to shield himself and go down and get up and go down again."

"The Wreck," vaguely contemporary in setting, concerns a man who is held responsible for an automobile accident because, as he lay unconscious by the road, a passer-by washed the wounds on his face with whisky. Here Mr. Guthrie becomes involved in an indirect narrative method which he can not control; the ironic twist of causing the central character to become an alcoholic because of the injustice upon him seems markedly contrived.

Two stories in the book suggest that Mr. Guthrie's

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impressive talent might have undergone a different and perhaps more interesting development if he could have ignored the demands of the slick magazines. In one, "Independence Day," a small boy in Moon Dance is saddened and disturbed in a fashion he cannot define when a young German whom everyone dislikes is beaten in a prize fight. The best piece in the collection, "Ebbie," originally published in the "Southwest Review," concerns the same boy. His father, in a fit of anger, beats the family's dog until it is blinded and has to be shot, and the boy encounters suffering which involves both love and guilt. "He didn't know for whom he cried, for Eb (the dog) or Father or Mother or himself."

The fact that the best things in this collection are neither historical nor particularly Western, however, does not mean we would regret Mr. Guthrie's having decided to go in for fiction about the Old West. He is simply not at his best in short pieces. His strength lies in the leisurely recapture of a vanished past.18

Guthrie's most recently published short story, "Loco," appeared in the November, 1967, *Esquire*. To destroy stock-killing wolves and coyotes in the area, a cowtown dentist secretly infects the predators with rabies. The well-intentioned plan backfires and the disease spreads to other wild animals, to livestock and to the dentist's fiancee, who is bitten by a rabid skunk. She dies, although it is rumored she was pregnant by the dentist and had aborted herself with a hatpin. The dentist, realizing that he had killed the woman, kills himself by injecting himself with rabies.

As asked if the story was true, Guthrie responded:

"It had the germ of truth in it. I made simultaneous two events that occurred at different times. There was a dentist in Choteau—in my boyhood—who did trap coyotes and wolves alive and infect them, thinking he was doing the town a great service. Why the town wasn't smarter than that, I don't know. It seems incredible. But I'd seen those animals as a little boy. And that's what he was doing with them. And as far as I know, every one was applauding him. Later a school teacher did die, many years later, by trying to abort herself with a hatpin, but I just put those two things together."

It is no accident that the two short stories that most successfully avoid the slick format requirements of the magazine industry—"Ebbie" and "Independence Day"—also are the most autobiographical. The closer Guthrie's stories come to reality, the less they lend themselves to the slick formula. His best stories contain no final answers, no clear solutions, no easy choices. In "Ebbie," young Charlie Bostwick finds that his father is not all villain, but that he is capable of kindness. "Independence Day" concludes with an older Charlie failing to resolve the conflict within him.

In contrast, "Mountain Medicine" and "Last Snake" provide solutions for obvious problems. Clell escapes, vowing never to harm a beaver again. Ross finds his

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19Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
courage and presumably will live happily ever after. Such stories demonstrate Guthrie's skill as a raconteur, but they do not achieve the literary merit of "Ebbie" and "Independence Day."
CHAPTER VIII

Publication of his light-hearted autobiography, The Blue Hen's Chick, interrupted Guthrie's projected series of books about the development of the West. The fourth and final book, "the confrontation of Victorianism with the West" from 1900 to World War I, will include a character patterned after Guthrie's Victorian father. Before he could write such a book, Guthrie felt a need to review closely his own childhood and his relationship with his father. "I wrote The Blue Hen's Chick because I thought I couldn't write the book I am writing now if I didn't," Guthrie said. "I wanted to get things in order."  

Guthrie is close-lipped about the two years he spent writing The Blue Hen's Chick, partly because they were unhappy years immediately following his divorce in 1962. He spent a full year revising the original manuscript. Most of the writing, he recalls, was done in California and Kentucky, where he had lived for short

1Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
2Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
periods.  

When the book was published in 1965, it was a typical Guthrie triumph. In Saturday Review, Robert L. Perkin captures the essence of what Guthrie described as his "scattered autobiography":

"And here you are," the autobiographer sums up, "the product of what has gone before; yet not all of it can account for the you that you've become." Still and all, the blue hen's chick—the one on whom fortune and the big sky have smiled.

A. B. Guthrie's account of his life thus far, though he calls it an exercise in exhibitionism at one remove, is unpretentious and candid. The Blue Hen's Chick is no graceful memoir of a life well or ill spent such as might come from a proper English man of letters looking back, at the age of sixty-four, on a series of well-ordered, formative conflicts as they merged into a canon of comfortable verities. Guthrie's verities are modestly tentative.

The function of autobiography, I judge, is the understanding of a man on his own terms. We wind up knowing him better, or knowing what he is willing to have known, or, in the end, sensing what he thinks he has discovered among the mysteries of self. The admixture is here, and in its essence lies a ready explanation of why Guthrie is called "Bud" even by chance acquaintances. You just don't call friends by their full-dress handles. Square names are for strangers, preachers, and bank presidents. (The nickname originated, Guthrie tells us, because a baby sister couldn't say "Bertram," but this is only supplementary information for the record).

Here is a man, nominally a hairy-eared newspaper scribbler, who evolved by hard work and tough dreaming into a Pulitzer Prize novelist and, moreover, evolved unscathed by fame, financial success, or Hollywood. Not unchanged, of course, but undiminished. The rough portrait which emerges is that

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of a man, in Frank Dobie's phrase, with the bark
on-tough-minded and perceptive, durable and pliant,
not merely living but involved with life. Guthrie's
scope includes sentiment in its place, a robust
four-letter word when called for, bird-watching,
the skills of English style (I commend to every
aspirant author his chapter of maxims on usage),
and a decent respect for a hooker of old bourbon.

The method is loosely chronological, the mood
one of gentle philosophy tempered by virile pre­
judices, and the manner is broad brush. Guthrie
sketches his life not as a narrative but as a
series of vignettes, many in continuity but some,
one suspects, slabb'd in just because the flavor
is right. And although much of the book deals with
other climes--his twenty-one years as a Kentucky
newspaperman, a year at Harvard on a Nieman fellow­
ship, craft-sharpening sojourns at Bread Loaf and
in Hollywood--the wide sky of Montana, its sun
and its cold, burns every page.4

In the New York Times, Thomas C. Wheeler reviewed
the book with unreserved admiration:

To review an autobiography by A. B. Guthrie Jr.
is first to confront a literary legend, then to see
it unfold into an important account that illuminates
important times in casual places. Guthrie's journey
from a boyhood in a small Montana town to two fic­
tional conquests of the westward movement, "The Big
Sky" (1947) and "The Way West" (1949), is the stuff
from which an American literary dream is launched.

This moving personal look at his past and
experience, which Guthrie calls, modestly, a
scattered approach to the people I've known," sug­
gests that he tapped the depths of nationalistic
hope in American fiction in those who helped make
the miracle come true. . . .

His evocation here of growing up in Choteau,
Mont., the son of a scholarly schoolmaster unafraid
of either learning or discipline, in a place that
transposed a Yankee-Puritan experience into the
early 20th century, is a tour de force of period

4Robert L. Perkin, "The Big Sky Smiled," Saturday
revival.

The father, an ardent Methodist who was contemptuous of "humbug" in preachers or anyone else, not only introduced him to the world of literature and nature but also to the terrors of the human mind. "Always it seems in memory," he now writes, "we walked on tiptoe, even Mother, fearful that some trifle would eclipse the sun that he could be."

Guthrie, blending the sensations of mind and eye with the specifics of fact and allusion, leaving the emotions pure and bold, is superb. He is a stylist within the framework of the American idiom.

Today, observing the cycles of nature (the nesting of birds, the neurosis of the compulsively gnawing beaver) from his mountain cabin outside Choteau, where, a Thoreau in the West, he now spends much of his time, Guthrie is a mica light in an old wilderness.

Harper's was equally complimentary:

The author of The Big Sky and The Way West writes delightful stories of his life—boyhood in Montana, job-hunting in the depression, adventures of a newspaperman in Kentucky, a session at Bread Loaf, and, of special interest to veteran readers of Harper's, the story of his trip with Bernard DeVoto, covering the route of covered wagons by airplane and later going by boat down the Missouri River. Wonderful personal yarns by one of the really great story tellers.

Even the New Yorker, whose reviewers had been critical of Guthrie's previous books, carried a favorable review:

A blue hen's chick is a fair-haired boy, a favorite of fortune. Mr. Guthrie, whose autobiography this is, considers himself to be such a

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chick, with sufficient reason. His early years, in a Montana hamlet, were poor and hard, but he made it to the University of Montana and thence to a job at the Lexington (Kentucky) Leader where he rose from cub reporter to executive editor. Then he won a Nieman Fellowship in journalism at Harvard and a literary fellowship at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and his novel, "The Big Sky," was a best seller, a big movie and the winner of a Pulitzer Prize. Then The Way West, not The Big Sky, won the Pulitzer Prize. And so it has gone ever since. Mr. Guthrie recalls these wholly unexpected events without complacence and without false modesty, and he enlivens his account of them with an abundance of anecdotes, all of them good and some (such as the one about the matron of a home for unwed mothers who told an interviewer, "I'm so encouraged. Every year, it seems to me, our girls are of a higher and higher class.") extremely funny."

Donovan Richardson of the Christian Science Monitor confessed to being "baffled" by the book:

"Much of it is good. Very good. The writing skills and the feeling for the West's eye-stretching distances and dry-cleaned air which won Mr. Guthrie the Pulitzer Prize for "The Big Sky" still reappear here repeatedly. There is candor--more than in many autobiographies. There is humor and a zest for life. There is perception of character and the words to bring it into focus. There is wisdom and beauty. But somehow at the end one feels that the kernel of this man has eluded his grasp."

In Book Week, David Lavender wrote a critical review that upset Guthrie:

7His early years neither were poor nor particularly hard.


The subtitle of this autobiography is "A Life in Context," a phrase derived from a remark made by a friend of Guthrie when the two of them were philosophizing one night under the big Montana sky. Dwellers in that still raw and uncongested state, the friend suggested, lived lives without context. To Alfred Bertram Guthrie Jr., the term suggested a lack of firm attachment to the traditions and the hopes for the future that give meaning to the long march of human adventure.

No attachments? Guthrie had grown up in the high plains town of Choteau, Montana, where the Rockies form a fine blue backdrop on the western horizon. After a homesick, rain-grayed freshman year at the University of Washington, he returned to the University of Montana and was graduated there. In time he married a Montana girl. For twenty-one years, however, he worked and lived in Lexington, Kentucky. He came to love the South, he says. Yet when he began to write, the West insisted on being his subject, first in a trashy shoot-'em-up novel and then in the sounder books that brought him reputation and enough financial independence to live where he chose. Montana was the place.

Why? What contexts? In this book, Guthrie sets out to learn. No flat answer emerges. The author would rather the reader use his own imagination on the materials provided. These he serves up with humor and zest, spiced by sharply observed details of the outdoors and by a warmth of spirit that precludes condescension toward anyone or anything.

Many of the tales are scatalogical. The West is that way, shying with strange prudery from sexual jokes yet guffawing about bodily functions. Some of Guthrie's yarns are funny. Others, removed from their own contexts of corral fence and news gathering, loom outsized in print's strutting new "freedoms," bringing to my mind memories of a starchy old headmaster and classicist who disdained such intrusions not as obscene or unattractive or immoral, but simply as unnecessary.

This is not a reflective book. Here and there Guthrie fires away, rather unconventionally, at the fundamentalistic religious tenets that scarred him as a youth, at militarism, racism, at big dam building by the Bureau of Reclamation, at the compromises which capitalism imposes on journalism.
There is a chapter on style, rather elementary but one that tyros and many old pros should read. As a whole, however, the book is not likely to disturb anyone. Probably Guthrie did not mean that it should. Rather, it is a light-hearted account by a man who bears the world no grudges, and yet who still has not quite found the pattern he was seeking when he began this excursion.  

Lavender's review—particularly his remarks about the use of the "corral fence" and "newsgathering" yarns—irritated Guthrie, who said:

I guess he [Lavender] must be kind of a puritan. . . . He must have been prejudiced against the book because of some of the language I used. And God knows, by today's standards, it's pretty tame. I remember being disappointed by that review. I always have liked Lavender's books, and have written some favorable reviews about them.

10 David Lavender, "Good Luck is a Thing with Feathers," Book Week, May 16, 1965, p. 4.

11 Guthrie telephone interview, Missoula, Feb. 26, 1969. Although his remarks generally are complimentary, Guthrie's review in 1958 of Lavender's Land of Giants: The Drive to the Pacific Northwest, 1750-1950, contains a critical paragraph:

It is possible, here and there, to quarrel with Lavender. One may say, out of prejudice perhaps, that too little is made of the Lewis and Clark expedition, a conclusion that the scanty bibliography on the subject enforces. One may wonder if more space should not have been given to the fur brigades and the discovery and use of South Pass. One may argue that the final section of the book—a section devoted to the Northwest's experience in conservation but limited to trees, fish and water—is more an addendum than a proper part of his subject. One may feel annoyance at mannerisms in style.

One of the tales that Lavender probably considered "unnecessary" concerns a false legal record, which Guthrie said "amused men of robust humor in Lexington."

The text said that one William Yates betook himself to a church house and, in the presence of worshipers, while a minister of the gospel was holding forth, did there and then "unlawfully, willfully and maliciously extract, draw out of and pull from his trousers, breeches or pantaloons..."

Guess what? The grand jury, deaf to the delicacy I exercise here, identified it by a goodly number of names, correct and indecorous, presumably to preclude any thought that he might have extracted anything else. With wavings and shakings, gesticulations and "divers sundry flirtations," the charge said, he let go "in vast quantities of a quart, pint or other measure, upon a red-hot stove, then and there standing, causing the same to fume, fizzle and give forth various, sundry and divers noxious odors, much to the disgust of the good people then and there assembled," and, what's more, he did "say, utter and speak from his lips the following, indecent, scurrilous language: 'By God, all who cannot swim will now mount the high bench, for the Great He Elephant is about to make water."

Next case.

Although Lavender contends that The Blue Hen's Chick is "not a reflective book," Guthrie's last chapter is written in a reflective mood as he sits by a window at his Twin Lakes cabin. Enjoying his loneliness, he leisurely describes the birds and small animals in his yard, and reflects on himself and his values. His concluding paragraphs are worthy of Wheeler's description of him as "a Thoreau in the West":

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12 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 109.
Suddenly the yard is bare, abandoned by the birds, left vacant at the last by the chipmunk after he had flirted goodnight from the woodpile; and I feel deserted and thrown in on myself, as if I were the last of life.

Westward, astride the backbone of the Rockies, the sun sets through the mist. Time to have a drink. To have two, maybe. Almost time, as old-time camp cooks used to say, to burn a mulligan.

End of an April day.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 261. Although this portion of his book was first published as an article entitled "An April in Montana" in the March, 1965, Holiday, Guthrie wrote it with the intention of using it as an epilogue for his autobiography. He said:

"It was good and handy then. It started out to be part of the book in the sense that I never submitted it for publication as an article until after the book had been submitted for publication. Then Holiday picked it up. . . ." Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
CHAPTER IX

A man may repudiate his past, but he cannot forget it. On Guthrie, the fire and brimstone of a fundamentalist Methodist upbringing left an indelible imprint.

In The Blue Hen's Chick, an autobiography, Guthrie describes his childhood God:

I never quite could picture God, but He was always close about, a brooding Being who wept over His creations and loosed His awful wrath because His name was Love. Not for some years could I hazard the heresy that man, if he'd failed, was his Manufacturer's failure. It was then I commenced to think better of man.¹

Weekly lessons at Sunday school and the influence of parents with a "starchy" code of conduct helped make young Guthrie an unquestioning believer. "The suds of gospel truth," he recalls," . . . brainwashed the soulful subject clean of all but God and guilt." When, as a young man, he rejected the religious training of his childhood, he was left with a bitter heritage of guilt which he later would call "scar tissue of a primitive persuasion."²

Ignorance and fear about the "here and hereafter"

¹The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 10.
governed his sexual education:

Through euphemisms we learned as youngsters that ruin lay in our pants. Destruction awaited Onan, whose name and shame I stumbled on later. To the hospital, asylum and grave went the men known to visit Eva Fox and her miserable girls who lived down the creek in what gentility could not say was a whorehouse. And the hazard and dishonor of the taker of hymen. Living proof was apparent, in accordance with the offense, in epileptic seizures, balding heads, crippled joints and girls disgraced.2

He would be crippled by the precepts of moral conduct he obeyed too well:

The stern injunctions, the arguments by analogy, the proofs through infirm parallel, the glad despairing, martial messages of hymns, and the worn truth that God lived and all was well and vengeance was His—all these I accepted and was laid low. There was home, too, with a code that gave enforcement to a creed my parents had unspoken doubts about. I used to pray and pray again, to no apparent avail. There were other youngsters, I am sure, who were made of tougher stuff, but there were and are certainly others like me—the impressionable ones—who were and are being crippled and scarified by parents and preachers and priests who proclaim a personal God and through fear try to discipline sex. That suits fundamentalist churches just fine, I suppose. It fills the pews and puts support in personnel of the asylums and to psychiatric workers. If I had my way, I'd be tempted, though tempted only, to rip out of the Bible all pronouncements like these: "Be ye therefore perfect" and—I conform here to the inevitable paraphrase of the primitive pulpit—"As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Taken lightly, as I'd have them taken if taken at all, perhaps they are innocuous. Taken seriously, they raise the devil—and rebellion, if it comes, often carries too far.3

2Ibid., p. 12.
Perhaps Guthrie, like those youngsters made of "tougher stuff," might have emerged from childhood unseared by the fires of fundamentalism if not for a God-fearing, Victorian father with a temper like a whip:

He loved us, this I know, but devils dwelt in him, inexplicable and uncontainable. He was a man of vast impatience, of dark and instant angers. Stupidity, the unforeseen, chance variations and interruptions of plans and routines, God knows what--these fired his blood. Chick Guthrie's brother said later that, aroused, he had all the good will of a rattlesnake.

Guthrie never would forget the horrifying spectre of his father, enraged by "sex on the doorstep," clubbing the family dog, Jimps, with a baseball bat because, in heat, she had escaped from the house to join the male dogs who waited in the yard. The blow burst Jimps' only seeing eye--her other eye had been put out earlier by Guthrie's father with a spray of disciplinary buckshot--and the dog had to be killed.

"Buddy was quite a while getting over that," said George Jackson, who remembers the incident. "Yep," he repeated, as if for emphasis, "he was quite a while getting over that."
To young Guthrie, such cruelty in the name of righteousness seemed to identify his father with the vengeful God of the fundamentalists:

To the boyhood me, it was Father, in himself, who gave meaning to the word "God-fearing," for he was God, whom no one understood and everyone, in recognition of his own ignorance, forgave. I catch his image across the years. I see a strong and handsome face and see myself trotting from the house to meet him when school is out, and I stand hesitant on the board walk, straining to determine whether his expression is benign or malignant; and as a man I know I own something of him and am not always proud of it.6

In his late teens, Guthrie defied his father and "won my independence of his tantrums." His mother was less defiant, however, and Guthrie would marvel at her understanding nature. She endured the unpredictable outbursts with patient fortitude over the years, explaining to Guthrie that his father never failed to apologize for his "fractiousness" before going to sleep at night.7

George Jackson recalls colorful examples of how the Victorian codes of Guthrie's parents influenced their son's behavior as a child:

The two of us were in back of a bar, picking up beer bottles to sell for pennies. Buddy put his bottles under his sweater. I didn't give a damn, I just held mine. When we got out in front of the store, a bulldog pup began nipping at Buddy. He

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6Ibid., p. 38.
7Ibid.
wouldn't quit, and when Buddy tried to kick at it, the bottles fell out from under his sweater and onto the sidewalk in front of everybody. Bing, bing, bing! That really embarrassed him.8

Guthrie does not recall the bottle-dropping incident, but he admits that "it would have embarrassed me. My parents were prohibitionist."9

George Coffey, a close friend of Guthrie's father, said the elder Guthrie never smoked and very seldom took a drink. Would his father have condoned Guthrie's visiting bars? "He wouldn't have stood for it," Coffey said.10

At one time in their childhood, Jackson recalls that Guthrie suggested they stop swearing:

We got to swearin' pretty bad one time. So one day we were both sitting in this old outside biffy, and Buddy says to me: "George, let's quit swearin'". I said, "Ok," and to this day we haven't swore, except for a "damn" or a "hell" now and then.

Remembering that incident with amusement, Guthrie explained: "I was taught that swearing was wicked."12

Both young boys, as curious visitors, had been inside the town brothel. "I didn't care who saw me in

8 Jackson interview.
9 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
10 George Coffey interview, Choteau, Nov. 2, 1968.
11 Jackson interview.
12 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
there," Jackson recalls. "But Buddy didn't want to be seen in a whorehouse. He was A. B. Guthrie's son."  

When the pair was old enough to become interested in girls, Guthrie's Victorian heritage was still with him. Jackson recalls:

Some things Bud couldn't do. I remember he kinda liked a little girl whose stepfather ran a saloon. But nothing came of it cause he knew there was too big a difference in their two families. That kind of hurt him, I think.  

It was not until he had left Choteau and was a student at the University of Washington, and later the University of Montana, that Guthrie began to question the unquestionable, to doubt the undoubtable tenets of fundamentalist doctrine. He read and appreciated Henry L. Mencken, the man who a few years later would use his cynical brilliance to poke fun at fundamentalism during the Scopes Trial in Tennessee. Young Guthrie thought Sinclair Lewis' Main Street was "great," and he was "awakened" to universal tragedy by Hardy.

He found meaning in the writings of naturalist John Burroughs and "forsaking Methodism, half-embraced a pantheistic faith and found defense against despair in declarations like 'The longer I live the more my mind

13 Jackson interview.  
14 Ibid.
dwells on the beauty and wonder of the world."

Other writers were influential:

Thackeray, Voltaire, Anatole France, H. G. Wells, Theodore Dreiser—these and others played some part in my shaping. From Swinburne and his now-seen as too-facile lines, I got a pleasant melancholy and couldn't comprehend what Father found in Frost.

Ironically, the writings that would help Guthrie break the grip of his fundamentalist past were brought to his attention by his father. To this day, Guthrie has not resolved this irony. "My father," he explains, "was a liberal in philosophy but an absolutist in behavior."

When Guthrie was graduated with a bachelor's degree in journalism, he had changed from a conservative to a liberal and from a believer to an agnostic. "Gone by the time I graduated was the last shred of belief in supernatural religion," he recalls. "In its place was a vehement rejection that, if less vocal now, yields not an inch to argument."

The years have not changed his mind. "If I have any religion," he said, "I think it is compassion, which is not supernatural at all."

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15 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 52-53.
16 Ibid.
18 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 51-52.
19 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
Marguerite Hanusa, a long-time friend of Guthrie, contends that Guthrie "professes to be an atheist, but isn't one. He's a very Christian-thinking man."\(^{20}\)

Responded Guthrie:

There's a confusion between what is Christianity and what is ethics. You do not have to be Christian to be ethical. It's a natural confusion. I don't believe in the fables about Jesus being the Son of God. I'm not Christian in that sense.\(^{21}\)

That his fiction reflects his rebellion against puritanism hardly is surprising. Guthrie himself concedes the principle involved:

No one writes anything without revealing himself. Now this isn't out there on the page. I mean that by reading the author—whether he's writing humor, satire or fiction—you get to know him pretty well. Because, even though he [the author] isn't on the page, you'll detect his rapport with a character or his understanding yet dislike of another.\(^{22}\)

The reader of Guthrie's works gets to know him well indeed. His novels, especially, are sprinkled generously with characters who reflect his rejection of fundamentalism. Some merely share his views; others are either the knowing or unknowing victims of a puritanical upbringing.

Guthrie drew liberally from the righteous piety

\(^{20}\)Marguerite Hanusa telephone interview, Nov. 4, 1968.

\(^{21}\)Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.

\(^{22}\)Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
of his own father to develop several of his fictional fathers. The most obvious example is a short story based on his father's clubbing of the family dog. This painfully wrought story, entitled "Ebbie," so vividly portrays the cruelty of the act that even the editors of sophisticated magazines were frightened into rejecting it on grounds it might offend weak-stomached readers.\textsuperscript{23}

In \textit{The Big Sky}, the qualities of the author's father can be seen in Jim Deakins' description of his father. Deakins, in a dialogue with Boone Caudill, says:

"I was sayin' about my old man. When God got to him he was mean to live with."
"Sure enough?"
"Oh, he'd git over it, until they was another meeting. But while God had him, He had him good. I was thinking, them days, that God rode a cloud and had lightning in both hands to throw at people just for being theirself." Jim paused and went on, "Sometimes I do yet."

... My old man, now, I reckon he thought some mighty low thoughts to git tied up with God that way, every so often, and worryin' about hell and hereafter. We had to pray and read the Bible and repent the livin' day and some of the night, too, unless you could go to sleep and forgit God was watchin' you. I didn't know what repent was, but I done it. Yes, sir. I done my share of repentin'. Mostly, now, I just figger what the hell, and let 'er rip. So far ain't no lightnin' struck." Jim looked at the sky. "You can't tell, though."\textsuperscript{24}

Even Boone Caudill, who seldom thinks of the hereafter, makes about his father a remark that may reflect

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{The Blue Hen's Chick}, p. 36.

a little of Guthrie. "I reckon my pap was too mean even for God," he tells Deakins.25

In *These Thousand Hills* the resemblance of Lat Evans' father, Brownie, to Guthrie's father is striking. Some passages from this novel seem almost interchangeable with Guthrie's later autobiographical descriptions of his own father. For example, here are Lat's thoughts as he leaves home:

> Here under the burden of leave-taking, Pa was all concern and sadness and unsaid love, and it was these that counted, not the fits of sternness, not the hard and sudden angers that no one could explain and no one aged twenty could keep on living with.

> You couldn't figure Pa. You couldn't know what made him stormy one time and peaceable the next. You couldn't tell ahead what little things might set him off. Ma said he was always sorry afterwards, that never a night did he go to sleep without apologizing if he had been unreasonable. So you loved him and you kind of hated him, and you had to get away.26

Young Lat Evans did leave his home in Oregon to make a name for himself as a Montana cowboy. But one fact becomes evident—that he would never be able to leave the legacy of guilt his father had helped to create.

The puritan method of disciplining sex through

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25Ibid., p. 98.

fear bears bitter fruit early in the book. Fresh from a Montana cattle drive and anxious to act the part of a sure-enough cowboy, Lat visits a Fort Benton brothel and finds himself impotent with a girl he finds attractive. Even when a satisfactory sexual relationship is established later between Lat and the girl, Callie, the guilt of what his father would consider illicit sex haunts him. While he is about to make love to Callie, he is distracted by the memory of an innocent act in a hay barn, and the wrath it provoked. He recalls:

"... the hay shed in Oregon and the small neighbor girl and the unbuttoned trousers and the raised yellow dress and the young curiosity. They were only looking. They knew nothing but that. But there stood Pa in the door of the shed, his eyes squinting and hardening, his face like the tool of God's, his face God's itself. The girl cried out faintly and dodged around and ran off, and the will of the Lord came on.

Callie's voice breathed in his ear, "Tell me what's in your head, Lat," and he whispered, "Nothing, much," and was silent, for the whip was whistling justice, was visiting the divine wrath on the trespasser. There were the sing and the hard cut of it and the blow of Pa's breath and Pa stood, breathing deep, and slowly his face changed, from the set of wrath to the twist of torment. From what was left of the wrath his mouth got out, "Now take care! Pretty soon you'll be old enough to ruin a girl. I'd rather see you dead!"

Pa looked up then, as if to find word he'd done right, and afterwards down at the ground... At last he said, "I'm sorry, son... ."

Some of Lat's friends cannot understand his..."
reluctance to be seen in public with a pretty girl, even if she was a prostitute. "I'd be proud to show that Callie around," remarks Whitey.

The answer to that remark, provided by a perceptive cowboy named Carmichael, pinpoints Lat's problem. "Not," said Carmichael, "if Lat's pa had broke you to harness." 28

But the anti-fundamentalism reflected in Guthrie's books is much broader in scope than that expressed through his father-son relationships. In The Big Sky, Jim Deakins often philosophizes about the nature of the fundamentalist God and his inability to comprehend Him. A few selected passages tell almost as much about Guthrie as they do about Jim Deakins:

You can't beat God for bein' picky. No, sir. If he catches you playin' cards or sayin' one swear word, or with your hand on a woman, even a nigger, it's to hell with you forever and ever, amen. Even thinkin' is mighty dangerous. As a man thinketh, that's how he is, and to hell with him ag'in. Why you reckon He gave us a thinker, then? It's a sight better to be a dumb critter and enjoy yourself, not thinkin', than to think and burn for it.

God is some busybody. You'd think He had enough to do, just mindin' the world and the stars and such and keepin' an eye on the devil, so's not to be tricked. But no. He pokes his nose into every piddlin' thing. Even go to the backhouse, there's God, lookin' spang through the roof or peekin' through the moonhole, bein' almighty

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28 Ibid., p. 215.
curious about what you're doin'.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

God was mighty mean in some ways, letting a body get on to the point where he always hungered to turn back, making him know he wasn't the man he had been, making his bed cold but keeping in his mind the time when it wasn't. It was like a man was pushed backwards down hill, seeing the top getting farther from him every day, but always seeing it, always wishing he could go back. Sometimes God seemed pretty small.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Most folks made God out to be a mean somebody, putting notions in people's heads and sending them to hell if they acted accordingly. God must have aimed for a man to enjoy himself, so He gave a hankering for women and put women around him, and when a man pleased himself, he was doing what God expected all along. Where was the sense of it otherwise? Why were squaws so many and so easy, if not for a purpose?

You couldn't tell, though, the different ideas there were. Maybe the folks were right who thought God just tempted men to be sinful, meaning to roast them forever and ever for doing what He had given them a weakness for. Maybe He aimed to trip them up. Or maybe it was the devil kept a man sinning. You couldn't tell where one left off and the other took up. Do what God gave you a taste for and the devil got you; don't do it and God took you to heaven. It all sounded against nature, but men believed it and a man couldn't tell.

Jourdonnais, the French keel boat pilot, also revealed a bit of Guthrie perspective in a passage from The Big Sky:

It was the little things that made one at home in the world, that made him happy and forgetful; neighbors to hail and supper on a table and a good

\[29\] The Big Sky, p. 98.
\[30\] Ibid., p. 186.
\[31\] Ibid., p. 219.
woman to love, and the tavern and fire and small talk, and walls and roofs to shut out the terrors of God, except for glimpses enough to keep the sinner Christian.\(^2\)

While Guthrie's assault on fundamentalism is limited mainly to the mind of Jim Deakins in *The Big Sky*, the harmful effects of a puritan upbringing are evident in the physical behavior of characters in *The Way West*. "The spirit of puritanism ran strong on the surface" of this book, said Thomas D. Clark.\(^3\)

Curtis Mack, a member of the Oregon-bound wagon train, recalls with bitterness the church back home "that had left its scars on him."\(^4\) When he later hears the remonstrances of the preacher, Brother Weatherby, about the unChristianlike conduct of members of the train, Mack snorts, "Everything bad is our fault; everything good we owe to God."\(^5\)

But Mack is victimized by his wife's puritanical upbringing as well as his own. Amanda Mack's scars are deeper than her husband's, and the lingering sexual guilt makes her frigid. Mack seeks relief from his sexual frustration by wantonly killing an Indian on the

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 219.
\(^{33}\) Clark letter.
\(^{34}\) The Way West, p. 72.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 150.
trail, and by seducing a young woman, Mercy McBee. She becomes pregnant, thus continuing the unfortunate chain of events.

When young Brownie Evans marries Mercy, knowing that she is pregnant by another man, he does so with misgivings and a sense of guilt that matches that of his new wife. That guilt would bother him and Mercy for the rest of their lives and would be transferred to their son, Lat Evans, whose story begins in the sequel of The Way West, These Thousand Hills.

Brother Weatherby, the preacher who accompanies the wagon train, would seem to be the ideal target for Guthrie's probing pen. Patterned after the Hoosier minister, Joseph Williams, who wrote a journal about his trip over the Oregon Trail, Weatherby is a fire and brimstone preacher of the fundamentalist tradition. Dick Summers, Guthrie's favorite character, sees Weatherby as "A preacher who thought God was an old man with whiskers and rode the closest cloud, a thunderbolt in one and a sugar tit in the other."\(^{36}\)

It had occurred to me originally that I'd have a lot of fun if I took old Brother Weatherby (or Williams) along. The opportunities for humor seemed immense. I could show how simply foolish, how out of line with fact, how ridiculous was his faith. When the going got too serious, I'd lead

\(^{36}\)Ibid., p. 60.
him out, trapped with all his little moralities. Swearing embarrassed him before God, who rode the nearest cloud, and outraged him before man. Card playing was evil. And the breaking of the Sabbath! Not for life or limb was that crime to be excused. Oh, what a time I'd have with this pious and small-minded preacher!

I didn't, though. I couldn't. The man came to life on me. He had feelings, convictions, courage, above all, sincerity. In a reluctant way I came to admire him as I came to understand him. I saw that he was a human being, no stranger to me than I would be to him. Frightened by a storm at night, he remembered God and placed himself in His hands and fell peacefully to sleep. Foolish! In a way, to me, yes. In a way no. In any event the act wasn't funny. It seemed to me, however unlikely I would be to do the same thing, to deserve respect.

I think I've got a better novel because this old preacher came to life. I'm grateful to him, even though in the life-size, three-dimensional role he assumed, he robbed me of the opportunity for derision.

The important thing here, it seems to me, is that my original impulse to burlesque him was not the impulse of the novelist. It was the impulse of the pamphleteer or the smart-aleck or something. The novelist deals with people, not with the impersonations of attitudes.37

Later, in The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie remarked:

"Brother Weatherby . . . came to command my admiration, regardless of our differences. By God, if I could say so in his presence, he was a man."38

Although Guthrie could not abide by Brother Weatherby's religious beliefs, his grudging admiration for the strength of his preacher's convictions shows

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38 *The Blue Hen's Chick*, p. 203.
through in *The Way West*. Watching Weatherby officiate at a funeral, Dick Summers thinks:

Preachers and medicine men—they were cut from the same cloth. They made out to know what nobody could. Companyeros to the Great Spirit. But he didn't smile now. He just looked into the faded blue eyes and the old face, and knew it for a fact that Weatherby believed what he said.\(^39\)

Later in the book, Lije Evans, leader of the train, pays tribute to the minister in another way. When he calls Weatherby to the tent of a dying boy, to provide reassurance in the last moments of life, Lije "felt like thanking God for preachers."\(^40\)

Despite this admiration for Weatherby the man, Guthrie makes no effort to conceal what he obviously feels is the bitter irony of a fundamentalist funeral oration. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," Weatherby intones at the funeral for Summers' wife. "Do not grieve. God works in mysterious ways."\(^41\)

Weatherby might have been talking at any one of the funerals which young Bud Guthrie attended for his six brothers and sisters who died early in life. In a bitterly poignant passage in *The Blue Hen's Chick*, he

\(^{39}\) *The Way West*, pp. 33-34.


\(^{41}\) *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
recalls:

... my memory is full of funerals, of the cold, still parlor, of the cold coffin and the cold, still body lying in it. My nose is full of the stink of carnations, and my ears hear again the whine of God's will-be-dones, and both sicken me. I'd rather smell wild onions and listen to the wind and shut from thought my wonder at the simple, fearful, maimed minds that forgive their God His trespasses.42

Only once in The Way West does Guthrie's treatment of Brother Weatherby approach ridicule. After referring to Weatherby's belief that the Lord had "singled him out" to do His work, Guthrie draws a parallel:

A bitch in heat went by, trailed by all the dogs in camp, including old Rock, and they all lifted their legs, one by one, at a little hazel bush and trotted on, each hoping, even the littlest, that the Lord had singled him out, too.43

Occasionally a Guthrie character will make an irreverent remark that suggests a capacity for mischief rather than ridicule. In These Thousand Hills, Tom Ping remarks, "Turn the other cheek and we both lose our ass!"44

If, in The Way West, the victims of a fundamentalist upbringing begin to appear, it is in These Thousand Hills that Guthrie makes the effects of primitive religion

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42The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 13-14.
43The Way West, p. 40.
44These Thousand Hills, p. 131
an important causal force in the behavior of his protagonist. As pointed out earlier, the legacy of guilt left to Lat Evans by his parents disturbs him throughout his life. The puritanical doctrines adopted in childhood virtually govern his behavior as a man.

It is interesting, in one sense, to compare Lat Evans and his friend, Carmichael, with Guthrie and his long-time friend, George Jackson. Both Carmichael and Jackson seem to be made of the "tougher stuff" which Guthrie says is necessary to escape a fundamentalist childhood unscathed. In *These Thousand Hills*, Carmichael can understand Lat's fear that his association with a prostitute be made public, though Carmichael himself would not harbor such fear:

This, too, he understood, thinking back to his first times with women, to the green fears and the shame and the longer concern with what good people would say. They didn't matter to him now, none of them, the talk as little as the rest. They didn't need to. But they mattered to the Lat in him. He could understand.45

The alienation of Lat's best friend, Tom Ping, is directly attributable to Lat's puritanical heritage. Worried about what people would say, he refuses to stand up for Tom at his marriage to a prostitute named Jen. The logic Lat uses as he brings himself to the refusal

is predictable. He thinks:

Stand up and be counted. Let everyone know. Read it in the paper, in the Benton Record. . . . Send home a clipping. Mr. Tom Ping--Miss Jen--what was her last name? Mr. Albert Gallatin Evans and Miss Callie Kash of Miss Fran's well-known establishment, attendants.

As Lat's life unfolds, it becomes obvious that the influence of his upbringing permeates every level of his life. He works with a puritan zeal that allows little time for enjoying the pleasures of life. He leaves Callie for a scrubbed, Christian school teacher of whom his parents will approve. He becomes an active churchgoer again.

In the end, Lat takes a significant step toward breaking some of the bonds of shame and guilt that have hobbled him all his life, but in doing so he sacrifices a promising political future. After being told by his grandfather that his mother "birthed a bastard," he allows Tom Ping to call him a "son of a bitch"--a searing public insult to a puritan mind. Lat walks away from the charge as if relieved that it had been made and was out in the open. Carmichael describes Lat moments later:

A man laid bare, he thought, peeled to the bone, without explanation or apology carrying his skull on the skeleton that was left of him. There

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46 Ibid., pp. 192-193.
was a word for it. Magnificent. That was the right and crazy word. 47

It must have been a temptation for Guthrie to end the novel at this point, with Man facing up to the evils of puritanism. Lat, apparently at the cost of his political career, has thrown off some of his shame. But that answer would have been too pat for a novelist of Guthrie's stature. In the final chapter, he adds the irony that gives the story its ring of honesty. When Lat's wife, Joyce, has learned about his affair with the prostitute, she is brought to forgive him by applying the same fundamentalism that branded him as a boy and that he has just faced up to honestly for the first time. "Entreat me not to leave thee," Joyce quotes from her Bible, "or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest. . . ." 48

It should be obvious at this point that the anti-fundamentalist undercurrent in Guthrie's novels seems to become stronger with each successive effort. In The Big Sky, his attitudes in this regard are almost solely reflected in the philosophizing of Jim Deakins. The crippling effects of puritanism are only suggested; they are not demonstrated in the lives of characters. In The Way West, written a year later, victims begin to

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47 Ibid., p. 344.
48 Ibid., p. 346.
appear. A frigid wife, crippled by guilt, is the unwilling cause of a chain of unfortunate events affecting several characters. But, it is in *These Thousand Hills* that the damaging psychological effects of a primitive religion are explored most deeply.

Significantly, Guthrie's next novel will extend this theme to what is perhaps its logical conclusion. This novel will portray the confrontation of Victorianism with the "free and easy" ways of the West. A principal character will be patterned after Guthrie's father.49

By pulling examples of anti-puritanism out of context from Guthrie's books, one runs the risk of making him look like some crusading Don Quixote, whose conscious mission is to charge the windmills of guilt, ignorance and fear. This, of course, is a false image. If Guthrie is a crusader in this respect, certainly he is not a conscious one. He simply is writing as honestly as he can, using a perspective that admittedly has been influenced by his upbringing, as has everyone's.

Although his portrayals of 19th century fundamentalism often are drawn from his own experience, Guthrie believes they are a fair representation of the attitudes of the time.

In one sense, his background was a boon to his writing, because it provided him with first-hand knowledge of the puritan mind. It helped him, Guthrie said, "to deal with a person who bears the onus of fundamentalism. I can understand that person pretty well."  

Although he considers himself an agnostic, Guthrie is not without a moral code. "Even after you've thrown overboard all the superstitiousness of life you should preserve the best ethics of religion," he said. "I stand up for my ethics."  

Speaking about The Big Sky to a Montana Kaimin reporter some years ago, Guthrie called the book "embarrassingly moral." He was talking about the theme of atonement that runs through the novel. Boone Caudill, he noted, is ruined by his own evil. Caudill contracts gonorrhea in a St. Louis brothel, unknowingly transfers it to his Indian wife, and ultimately to his infant son, who is born blind. In the belief his son was sired by Deakins, Caudill kills his friend, another

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50 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

51 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.

52 Mary Lou Collins, "Book Banning Dispute Rages in Kalispell," Montana Kaimin, April 28, 1962, p. 7. The Montana Kaimin is the student daily newspaper at the University of Montana.
form of atonement, Guthrie contends.

Caudill, the mountain man, brings disease, lust, greed and savagery to unsoiled Big Sky country, and they combine to destroy the life he loves. When he finds that he belongs neither in civilized society nor in the mountains, the atonement has taken its final form.

In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie recalls that he emerged from college as "a rebel." The term seems appropriate in regard to Guthrie's view of morality. Randall Swanberg, a close friend, says Guthrie is "a rebel against convention, particularly religious convention, hypocrisy and cant." Yet Guthrie is not libertine in his own actions. "Bud likes to be outrageous, but he probably is more prim in his relationships with women than most," says Swanberg. "In 20 years, I have never seen him make a pass at a girl, and he has had the chances."

Mrs. Hanusa also used the word "rebel" to describe Guthrie. "He's usually on the loser's side and he knows he's on the loser's side," she explained.

When The Big Sky was published, fundamentalist

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53 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 52.
54 Swanberg interview.
55 Mrs. Hanusa interview.
furor was aroused in various Bible pockets, including Guthrie's home town of Lexington. Thomas Clark remembers:

Bud's good Indiana Methodist conscience bothered him a bit in staid old Blue Grass Lexington where so many damned fools, ignorant of the realities of the opening of the West, tittered behind the stairway like a bunch of snaggle-toothed boys about to turn a back house over on Halloween.\[56\]

Even in Montana, the state whose history Guthrie had brought to life, there was opposition to his book. In Kalispell, several clergymen and parents used their influence to get the book banned from the high school English curriculum and from classroom discussion. The Big Sky was called "immoral and pernicious," and "a four-letter word novel." One Kalispell minister said:

The book is nasty and there's no way of getting around it. I have read the book and the parts in objection--stink! The book wouldn't get off the ground if it wasn't for all that smut.\[57\]

Guthrie, in California at the time, defended himself by telephone interview. "The doll house conception of life in much of literature is immoral because it is dishonest," he told the Montana Kaimin, "and an author has the duty to be honest." He added,

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\[56\] Clark interview.
\[57\] "Book Banning," Montana Kaimin.
referring to Boone Caudill, "When a person is ruined by his own evil, is that immoral?"^58

In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie reveals his view of "Moralists as to sex":

I am not the first to find that these moralists have dirty minds. They live preoccupied with carnality, obsessed through indulgence or rejection. Shaped by young circumstance, unfamiliar with the turns of history, deceived by excisions, additions, amendments and tortured constructions of writ, they stand dedicated or stricken on ground they don't know to be shaky. Scholars say our times are permissive, and no doubt they're right, but sometimes I wonder.

A wanton society I wouldn't want, but I'd welcome a more liberal and rational one, one in which fears about the here and hereafter weren't employed to discipline sex.^^59

As to moralistic criticism of his books, Guthrie writes:

Fortunately, or unfortunately, my own writings have never provoked wide attack, but here and there—in Kentucky, New Mexico, Maryland, as I recall, and, so help me, Montana—pious vigilantes have demanded that they be removed from required reading lists and taken out of libraries. Their target nearly always was The Big Sky, though one group insisted that The Way West be shot down too. I can't report in detail the outcomes of these high-minded endeavors. I haven't followed them. And in only one case, on an appeal from a beleaguered librarian, did I so much as write a letter of defense.^^60

The April, 1958, edition of Nieman Reports

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58 Ibid.

59 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 122-123.

60 Ibid., pp. 112-113.
explained the circumstances of the case of that beleaguered librarian, and printed Guthrie's letter of defense:

Note: Last November the grand jury of Whitley county, in the hill country of Kentucky, discovered that The Big Sky was available to borrowers in the public library at the town of Corbin.

On the complaint of a missionary whom news stories identified only as Mr. Davis, the grand jury read passages which Mr. Davis had underscored as examples of "lust" and thereupon decided that neither adults nor children should be allowed to read the book. It asked the librarian why it was being circulated. It recommended that the next panel investigate further.

The state Library Extension Division naturally was upset. It feared that its whole program might suffer as a consequence of this one instance. And so it asked A. B. (Bud) Guthrie, Jr., the author, for a statement that might widen understanding.

For the sake of the program and its participants—and with what good nature he could summon—Bud made the following reply. 61

THE PETER RABBIT LIBRARY?
By A. B. Guthrie, Jr.

To each, his opinion.
On that principle we Americans have operated and do operate well, indeed at least as well as people anywhere.

But the principle does not imply that uninformed and bigoted opinion should weigh equally with that which is informed and dispassionate. Quite the contrary! Out of the conflict of sentiments, foolish and narrow and thoughtful and broad and in-between, we believe that our people can and largely do choose courses that are wise and good. Our history, our legislation, our judicial decisions all support us, if not wholly, in that belief. The censors, the book-burners, the people who would impose their own fears and faiths on all of us—we put them eventually in their places, for there exists a hard sense in the American people. They like the climate of freedom. They know, if not

61"In Darkest America—Guthrie and the Missionary," Nieman Reports, 12, April, 1958, p. 17.
always consciously, that censorship is indoctrination. Each cherishes the right to do his own thinking, to choose his own reading, to defy the extremists who, in their exclusive wisdom, would make him a copy of themselves.

All this is by way of preface to some reflections on my own work and the Whitley county grand jury's criticism of The Big Sky and its presence in the Corbin Public Library.

I am not writing for my own sake. The Whitley jury has done me a favor. Its report means increased sales. But other people are involved: and the issue is important aside from personalities and personal advantage.

The writer of fiction, if he is serious and conscientious, strives to re-create and illuminate experience. It is not his right to falsify. He has to be honest to his materials. He has to be honest to himself. He operates in the conviction that if anything is important it is truth as he has been led to see it.

Critics, like the Missionary Davis who brought the complaint to the Whitley grand jury, disagree. They would have authors prettify experience. They would have the writer make a doll house out life, though by Mr. Davis' very calling he acknowledges it is not a doll house but a house, so to speak, of hovels as well as mansions. With no understanding of the office of serious fiction, these critics ask the fictionists to be dishonest—as if morality were promoted by misrepresentation! Mr. Davis obviously does not believe, with The Book, that the truth will set you free.

I can defend The Big Sky as an accurate representation of a time and a place. There is not a word in it that cannot be supported by reference to sources. Fifteen years of thinking and study went into it. I believe I can say that all the prime as well as many secondary sources were consulted. My notes fill half a dozen drawers. Authorities on the fur trade are virtually unanimous in acclaiming it. It has been translated into I don't know how many languages, a dozen at least. The library is rare in which it is not available.

I am embarrassed to recite these facts, for the recital smells of immodesty. Yet the facts are important to a judgment that I wrote the book in the conviction that an honest novel of the fur trade never had been told.
With these points behind us, I would ask the jury: Was anyone, man or child, ever corrupted by a word? A word, after all, is only a sound on the tongue or symbols on paper. To the vulgar and profane ones, most of us have been and are exposed, and without apparent ruination.

Then if words don't corrupt people, what in writing does? Attitudes perhaps, just perhaps. The false. The cheap. The trashy. The deliberately mischievous. The Big Sky never has been accused of these, never at least until now if it is now so accused. It is almost embarrassingly moral. Through it runs the theme of atonement. It is the story of a man who reaps what he sows. If anyone can find in it any profit in evil, let him speak! But if any defender asserts the converse, that it shows virtue always rewarded, let him think twice!

The news stories report that Mr. Davis underscored what he thought were objectionable passages in my book and that the grand jury based its criticism on his samples. It ought not to be necessary to remind anyone that expressions taken out of context carry no authority. It is the blunder of the ignoramous and the trick of the cheat to characterize a man or his work by divorcing words from those that precede and follow. By this device almost any writer and almost any speaker can be damned. So I would ask members of the next Whitley grand jury to examine all the evidence—that is, to read the book in its entirety—before reaching a decision.

An adverse decision, even then, would be wide open to attack, for it is a part of our system that judgments like these need be supported by evidence. The Big Sky has been in print for more than ten years. I don't know how long the Corbin Library has carried it, but long enough surely for numbers of people to have read it. Has any single one of them been corrupted as a consequence? Until, under rules of evidence, such an instance is proven, the book stands clear. Without such enforcement any judgment against it is and would be subjective and infirm.

If The Big Sky is to be banned for what is called its "lust," what is the library to stock? I ask the names as they pop into my head. The Bible? It chronicles some sinful doings. Shakespeare? He isn't always what Mr. Davis would term
wholesome. Voltaire? Dreiser? Sinclair Lewis? Hemingway? DeVoto? Steinback? Cozzens? Who? This random scattering of questions represents but a fraction of a list far too long to enumerate. Remove from the shelves all volumes that can be so listed, and Corbin will have no library, or at best one that might appropriately be named "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" Library.

Finally, it is the business of librarians to operate libraries. They qualify by experience, training, special education, study of function and so are above the crowd, as the banker or mechanic or accountant or farmer is above the crowd in his specialty. Thus it not only appears brash, it is brash for people who have no particular qualifications to challenge the book selections of those who do have.62

Guthrie, in his autobiography defends his use of "bad" words:

In writing, I do not use so-called bad words for shockers. I use them when they seem right, and only then. I am aware of the difference in impact between words heard and read, spoken and printed. Bernard De Voto, speaking to this point, said that one "goddam" on a page was worth twelve and twelve on a page were worth nothing. Out of boredom, out of the feeling that the writer lacks craftsmanship, I dislike prose that for any reason abounds in four-letter words. It follows that James Jones and Norman Mailer and Henry Miller are not for me, though I oppose any ban on their works. And I wonder, assuming for the moment that words are the soul-shapers that censors assert, which harms people more, the honest illumination or the doll-house reconstruction of life. Are youngsters prepared for encounter and challenge, for adversity, evil and full ecstasy, who have read only the perfumed and truncated versions of human experience that their elders call wholesome? A young man on perpetual make told me once that churches provided the best hunting grounds.

62Guthrie, "The Peter Rabbit Library?," Nieman Reports, 12, April, 1958, pp. 17-18.
I've been tempted at times in censored communities to attempt a case against sellers of "My Wild Irish Rose." If the bloom that the lyricist hopes to take from his girl is not the hymen or maidenhead or--put it down--cherry, I'll eat all the compilations of synonyms. A very dirty thing, that song!

If only for the absence of evidence or the least tatter of it, I do not believe that any word corrupts. Though only the reckless and inconsiderate would abandon all euphemisms on whatever occasion, the fact is that they awaken in mind, often with swollen effect, the expressions they substitute for. At bedrock they appear, or a great many do, as the fearful and gutless and untidy avoidances of essences by obscene imaginations. 63

Despite the charges of some critics, Guthrie's morality is evident in his books. It is a morality washed clean of what Guthrie believes are the soil-stains of puritanism and fear-based supernatural religion. He expresses this morality, which encompasses a kind of duty to self, through Curtis Mack, in The Way West, when Mack is pondering his responsibilities in life:

It wasn't to God. . . . It wasn't to the train. It was to self. Its purpose was to square himself with self, to equalize accounts and so walk upright in the sight of Curtis Mack. That much remained, that stubborn much, of what was taught him as the way of heaven. 64

Lat Evans, in These Thousand Hills, finally starts to see how his life has been governed by guilt. Much of

63 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 111-112.
64 The Way West, p. 304.
his behavior, he seems to imply, has been right, but perhaps for the wrong reasons, perhaps out of fear rather than compassion:

To be right, he told himself, but to be right for the right reasons! To square things up, he told himself, but to square them only by squaring with himself.65

Perhaps Guthrie is trying to say that love, not fear, should motivate man. He expresses the importance of compassion in a poetic passage near the end of his autobiography, when he describes his thoughts as he watches the small animals outside his cabin at Twin Lakes:

Idly, while I've watched, I've wondered what I want, where I stand and what's my doctrine. A simple answer came, though the years have taken part of its fulfillment.
To lean, but, more important, to be leaned on, For that's what friendship's for
To be loved but to love,
Or what's the use?
To be generous toward life,
Else I lose myself.
Above all else, to care!66

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65 These Thousand Hills, p. 345.
66 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 260-261.
CHAPTER X

Guthrie always was interested in both fiction and journalism. As a journalism major at the University of Montana, he wrote short stories and poems for the English department's literary magazine and was a reporter and editorial board member of the student newspaper, the Montana Kaimin.

He left the newspaper profession late in life to pursue a career as a free-lance writer for several reasons. One was that his experience as a newsman was neither challenging nor profitable enough.

Reporting for work at the Leader in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1926, he was enthusiastic about his upcoming career in journalism:

At last I was a newspaperman, if only a cub, not a country newspaperman, either, but a member of a staff of a seven-day-week daily, whose subscribers numbered nineteen or twenty thousand. I was what I was trained for, I was what I wanted to be, and if my first assignments were piddling, time and effort would lead me to bigger ones. Good days. Happy days. Days of absorption and excitement. Days of learning the community as only a newspaperman learns a community. In hope, in growing assurance, in young fulfillment, I was enchanted until the years wore the shine off newspapermaking.\(^1\)

\(^1\)The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 77.
He has said:

Promotions in function and title came to me quickly, through resignations and dismissals and want of active competition as much as through merit. By 1927 I was writing editorials in support of the Republican party and its choice for governor. I covered the ensuing session of the legislature and, through the years, a score or so more, regular and special, and learned early the importance of liquor to legislation. I was made city editor, managing editor and finally executive editor.

But titles don't mean much in newspaper making. The man elevated in rank is likely to find himself doing the same old things almost for the same old money. Nominal promotion and financial reward don't always go hand in hand. And more often than not editorial salaries are so low as to make ridiculous the cries of publishers over the absence of bright young candidates for the newsroom and the departures of seasoned reporters for positions in public relations, radio and TV. While managing a staff and doing more incidental chores that I like to think about, I used to write editorials, for I got a dollar extra for each one published and was happy to get it.2

In 1938, Guthrie applied for the Nieman Fellowship program. He said:

I didn't expect, or perhaps even want, to quit newspaper work then. I wanted to know more and to improve in my occupation through knowing. I felt the need of exposure, of the challenge of ideas and attitudes foreign to my Bluegrass and Montana provinces. A man just once in Manhattan, never elsewhere on the eastern shore, never anywhere much except in the West and high South, could do with some cultivation.

I can't remember why I thought I might qualify. I had been a deskman for a good many years, and deskmen, good or bad, are largely anonymous, strangers to recognition for want of bylines and circulation in public. My number-one item was the small

2Ibid., p. 91.
honor of having had a feature story included in an anthology called Headlining America, issue of 1937. The subject was the 1936 inauguration of Happy Chandler as governor."

The feature story to which Guthrie refers demonstrates that he was a journalist of impressive ability:

Kentucky had a new governor today, a smiling, somewhat florid 37-year-old who won his first political campaign by singing "Sonny Boy" in the country school houses of Woodford, Scott and Jessamine counties.

In the Albert Benjamin Chandler who squeezed through a packed inaugural stand Tuesday afternoon to take the oath of office there were still some signs of the old "Happy" Chandler, the youthful state senator who delighted rural school mams and their juvenile charges by crooning in the corridors of the capitol, who took the floor too often for a first-termer, who was so hail-fellow-well-met that more restrained associates looked upon him with an indulgent condescension.

There were still his open-handed friendliness, his wide smile and his ready flow of words.

But it was an older and more thoughtful, a maturer and more decisive "Happy" who Tuesday became the governor of 2,600,000 people.

Back in 1930, fellow senators would have howled had you predicted that within five years this well-meaning upstart playboy would be sitting in the executive chair. Why, with his obliging readiness to sing a syrupy song, his thoughtless presumption in debate with more seasoned men and his boisterous back-slapping, he was becoming a joke who detracted from the dignity of the senate. Chief executive? Rather, one-termer in the upper house, then back to private life.

Even when he was nominated and elected lieutenant-governor, the wiseacres of the hustings looked upon his further success as a rather sour political joke, brought about through the powerful backing of the aged and eccentric Ben Johnson.

It was as lieutenant-governor that Chandler

\[3\] Ibid., p. 145.
began that development that was to carry him eventually to the executive mansion. None were more astonished than the colleagues who had tolerated him good-naturedly in 1930 when the one-time "Sonny Boy" began to show that he was capable of convictions and determination. Behind that smiling face and beyond that geniality of nature, they found to their amazement, there lay stout opinions and there lay courage.4

His first application for a Nieman Fellowship was rejected, but a second—in 1944—was accepted. With his family, he moved to Boston for a year's study. At Harvard, he expressed his deep concern for improving newspaper writing. Theodore Morrison, Guthrie's Nieman writing coach, recalls:

In the fall of '44, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., had the idea that Nieman Fellows while at Harvard might well devote some study to the craft of writing. He and others of his vintage offered me the flattering but alarming privilege of presiding over a shop course. . . . I can remember that we considered magazine articles, editorials, short stories and verse, with other kinds of copy. Undeniably, the lucky excitement of this first seminar was the chance to hear a succession of chapters of Guthrie's novel, later published as The Big Sky. Guthrie's extraordinary talent for fiction, a talent as natural as water finding its level, has been widely recognized; he has permanently enriched the record of America in his novels. But I should like to pay him a tribute on another score, too, as a generous human being, interested not only in his own success but in the success of others, notably newspapermen. The Nieman Foundation exists "to elevate the standards of journalism." I don't know

how one man can do more to accomplish this end than by watching out for ways to open gates and enlarge opportunities for younger men in the business in whom he has perceived talent and imagination.  

Guthrie has commented:

The Nieman program was great, but to me it had a blank in it. Here we were, all of us, reading, listening, studying, passively hopeful of enlarging our calibers. But where was the practice range? Where the means to re bore and sight in the tool that we shot with? The figure is throwing me. Where and how could we learn to be better writers? Newspaper copy, with bright exceptions, was notoriously dull, subject to misconstructions, guilty of illogic, painful to respecters of language. Wisdom poorly communicated lived by itself and died lonesome, a matter admitted. But where then to go? The Harvard catalogue didn't say.

Louis Lyons nodded. Yah, we were right. How about a seminar, a weekly seminar? Maybe Morrison would conduct it.

Morrison would. Without extra pay, at the cost of his own work as poet and novelist, without much recognition except from all nine of the ten of us who participated, he gave what he had to give. It was not insubstantial.

Bob Bordner, prime authority on the Cleveland Press snake, stopped me after one session, "You know, Bud," he said, "the words I've admired most in my writing have to be killed." He smiled under his longhorn mustache. "Too smart."

Without having seen his copy, I knew what he meant.

Guthrie and Morrison believe that journalistic writing is not good preparation for writing fiction. Guthrie, said Morrison, had to rid himself of

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5Morrison, "A Reader Unburdens, and Comes up with Some Sound Criticism," Nieman Reports, 2, April, 1950, p. 3.

6The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 173.
One can sometimes very sharply perceive the crippling effects of journalistic habit when a news­writer tries to write a piece of fiction or a magazine article. A journalist with a novel or an article on his mind thinks that though he may not have tried that kind of thing before, his professional experience as a newspaperman at least puts him a long jump beyond the amateur. Just give him a little more time than he is used to, he thinks, and his years of practical operation as a journalist will count in his favor. They may not do so at all. They may count against him. He may first have to see what journalism has done to his writing habits, then slowly learn or recover quite different habits before he can go ahead. But it doesn't matter, you say, whether a journalist writes a novel or an article. It's a pleasant success if it happens to him, but he should stick to his profession of journalism. I should say that his helplessness in the face of his story or his article is a measure of how journalistic convention has affected his mind, a measure of the difference between writing cut to the conventions and rigidities and writing that thinks only of the best way to transmit the material and the intended effect to the mind of the reader.

I have put the matter sharply, no doubt extremely. Many newspapermen write admirably, many papers are earnestly experimenting and studying ways of escaping conventions and rigidities where it is possible. Still, the conviction I have expressed has enough general truth, I believe, to be worth exploring.

Other observers consider journalistic experience valuable to a fiction writer. In a review of The Way West in Editor & Publisher, the late Prof. Roscoe Ellard of

7Morrison letter.
The eye, objectivity, and restraint of the trained reporter are strikingly manifest throughout.

In a crowded little office this week at William Sloane Associates, his publisher, there was much of Bud Guthrie—reporter, city editor, and executive editor of the Lexington (Ky.) Leader—as he pulled a chair backwards between his legs and told E&P about his newspapering and the role he thought it had played in his new assignment as outstanding novelist of the early West.

"My newspaper stories I'm proudest of," he declared, "disclosed the high death rate among children in Fayette County, Kentucky, because of improper health methods to prevent dysentery. The Leader's stories brought reorganization of the county health department and marked decrease in deaths from the disease.

A reporter's gleam came through the brown horn-rimmed glasses from which dropped the strong, sharp lines of his face. Gray slightly streaked his brownish hair. "After years in a city room," he chuckled, "I can write under almost any circumstances—when the radio is blaring and the kids are playing. It has to be a major ruckus to bother me."

Bud Guthrie—pardon, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., who critics agree is one of America's most important novelists—grinned as he rocked informally on the chair he straddled. He is 48, looks like a city editor, and teaches a course in writing at the University of Kentucky.

"A newspaperman works daily with words, gets facility with them," he said. "If he turns to creative writing, that facility helps him acquire the new techniques. But if he lets himself write in patterns, if he uses the same approaches to stories—that's easy to do—his style becomes stereotyped, dull and declarative."

At this point, William J. Sloane, his publisher, prompted: "Don't you think that one of the differences is that newspapers deal with the end result of crises, not with what caused them? In a suicide,
the newspaper will lead with the death. In a novel that's the last page. Fiction deals with why people act, not so much with what they do."

Guthrie nodded and rocked on his chair again. "Newspaper work is not necessarily a stepping stone to writing fiction as so many beginners believe," he cautioned. "One day can be same as another. Suicides, accidents, deaths have a wretched sameness.

"Reporters see a body on a slab. Sure, they ask why the girl jumped out of the window—poor health. And they dismiss it. They don't go very deep into motivation, compulsions, the way fiction does."

At that point, Ellard interjected a parenthetical rebuttal:

(Prof. Roscoe E'Lard, "Newsman for 21 Years Called 'Great Novelist,'" Editor & Publisher, 82, Oct. 22, 1949, p. 26.)

The article continued:

"Beyond five years of newspapering," Guthrie suggested, "the youngster whose aim is to be a novelist may become so accustomed to the declarative style that writing fiction will increase in difficulty."

Kenneth Roberts, a newspaperman who developed into one of America's foremost novelists, complained in his recent book, "I Wanted to Write" (Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y., E&P Aug. 13), "It is hard to tell dreamy-eyed youngsters who come to me with hard-wrought but undisciplined and immature writing what I know I ought to tell them—'What you need is

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10 Ibid.
at least five years on a good newspaper."

Ellard concludes:

There are discipline and maturity, human richness and wisdom in "The Way West." It is powerful with understatement, dramatic with untheatrical factual reporting.

Never does Guthrie obtrude himself as commentator on the human nature, the psychology of his character's action. Motivation is sure, valid, set down with reportorial, almost Shakespearean objectivity—clear, terse, fact after fact. You understand it, accept it, re-live it as experience of the West, unaware it is fiction, not some Ernie Pyle, Hal Boyle or Meyer Berger of a century ago you are reading.\(^{11}\)

Neither does one of Guthrie's friends, author Dan Cushman, believe journalism experience to be a handicap. Cushman, also an ex-newsman, understood Guthrie's difficulty in changing from journalistic to fiction style, but he added:

On the other hand, it taught him what form consists of. It's through rules like the Five W's that you develop this. You may not be Michelangelo, but you know how to put a story together. Bud's journalism experience has had a salutary effect, and he should be happy because of it. He's living proof it pays off.\(^{12}\)

Guthrie returned to the Leader following his Nieman term. However, he resigned as executive editor to become a free-lance writer soon after publication of The Big Sky. He regards those 21 years as a newspaperman

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) Cushman interview.
with mixed emotion:

The institution, the establishment—not The Leader except as a small part of it—is the target of my pot shots at journalism. I look back with a sense of indebtedness not unmixed with complaint on my years in the newsroom. Sometimes I ask how many years were misspent. Oftener I find pleasure in the view, in the recalling of old incidents, the redoing of old deeds, the refreshment of faded pride, the renewal of friendship. Good men grew up under me or despite me, and I matured under them. Four of us won Nieman Fellowships. No paper of even roughly comparable size had such a record. Perhaps none has yet.

When someone asks, as someone inevitably does, whether I don't miss the smell of printer's ink, I answer no. I am glad to have escaped the disciplined madhouse of the newsroom, glad to have found more fulfilling and freer employment, glad to have made and to be making more money. If regrets remain, one is the loss of that community intimacy that is a newspaperman's special possessions, that knowledge of subjects and men and associations and stresses that lie underneath news. Maybe I would like to edit a paper if free of checkreins. I suspect there's that much of the messiah in me. And, call it habit or a recognition of values, I still read the papers I get—spot news, editorials, columns, sports, even the stock-market reports.13

In his autobiography, Guthrie expressed this criticism about his former profession:

I do not know how the journalism graduate enters the newsroom these days. We did so on tiptoe, thinking back to the recent madcap careers that gave the business a touch not found any more. If he enters, I wonder if he's more concerned with overtime than well-done. He may not enter at all, having chosen radio or TV or any of other numerous specialties listed in a generous curriculum. Journalism schools, like all bureaucracies, are pregnancy-prone and have birthed families, in part legitimate, that the high courts have surnamed Communications.

13The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 195-196.
The schools, I'm sure, have raised newspaper standards, yet the degree is impossible to establish. Only a few dailies, a comparative few, are first-rate. At work against excellence is economics. The large and hopeful, free and incorruptible policy, though it does sometimes, doesn't come easily to an endeavor that has grown to involve hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. That kind of money rules in favor of compromise and restraint. The corruption of possession enters the operation and, inevitable, the blight of the corporate mind. Pushed to his last line of defense, the corporate or individual operator may say, as he has said, "Look! I run this paper. I damn well can do what I want to do with it." It is here that freedom of the press becomes the freedom not to be free.

These observations don't imply a defiant dishonesty. They point to an understandable, if regrettable, caution, restriction and appeasement through silence, all of which the publisher can defend, to himself anyway. He is afraid, though he dislikes to admit it, of great areas of human interest and hot conflict. He doesn't want controversy or canceled subscriptions.

It would be unfair not to acknowledge the improvement that has come about in two or three decades. Words and subjects once taboo are now common. We read much of birth control, not so long ago avoided or treated sketchily because it meant the sure arrival of virulent committees. When cigarettes were first suspect as cancer causes, too many papers spiked that news in deference to advertisers. Now we're kept informed. Honest words like "abortion," "rape" and "pregnant" once kept us deskmen busy seeking substitutes. I suppose "piles" would pass now, too, though in older days on my paper it was a word all right in advertisements but offensive next door in the news columns.

Allow the progress then, with thanks, but don't go overboard.

Good magazines tend to be freer, yet they too have their fears. I would count it forlorn to submit to any of them an article about the prevalence of perverts at Y.M.C.A.'s.

But book-publishing! Have something to say and say it well enough, and it will appear between covers, let the toes hurt that it tramps on. Here, with book publishers, stands the great redoubt of freedom of the press.
The quality that editorial fondness calls objectivity doesn't quite go over with me, either as reader or writer. It is impossible of attainment; even the choice of an opening sentence in a news story is a subjective decision. Not that I argue at all for the slanted story but that the vaunted objectivity is flat, that it has not the dimensions that promote understanding. A reading of Page One leaves the reader blind with the dust of events, unable to see clearly where the dust comes from. The reader needs interpretation as informed and as honest as informed and honest minds can make it. The current solution to the problem—and I fear it is the only one—is the editorial page and the syndicated column. The good papers make an honest and often successful attempt to provide what the news stories don't or can't. Yet the gospel that the reporter has no opinions troubles me as it always has.

In place after place the working newsman performs at a peril that is half his creation. In the popular image he is a cynic; yet if old observations are valid, he is the opposite. His cynicism is merely a cloak for ideals. He wants to believe he's worthwhile in his niche and that the sum of the niches is wise and unselfish service. It is as if, through self and association, he must justify his habitation of earth. He lives in the hope that he and his colleagues are making his paper the good and effective social influence that a good publication should be.

Now suppose he meets restraints, denials, positions he cannot in conscience support, as he will and in many cases should, since inexperience however lofty makes a poor pilot. No matter. He meets enough wrong resistances, enough dubious pressures. He protests and yields and protests and yields, and slowly his will atrophies. He may retreat then into the celebrated cynicism of the craft. It is far more likely, though, that he will let his wish for virtue seduce him. He will rationalize. His paper does some good. Why, it does a lot of good. The positions of the publisher come to have merit. By this manner of thinking, by this diminishing adjustment, he justifies himself.

Corruption out of idealism by surrender!  

14 Ibid., pp. 197-199.
Guthrie also is critical of the leadership—or lack of it—he received as a young reporter for the Leader:

Our managing editor in those early years consisted of a pipe, a bluster and a faint heart. He used the whip to cover his shakiness, and it took a little time or a friendly tip to find you could disarm him. Faced up to, he socketed the whip, and first thing you knew, he had his hand on your shoulder, his pipe out of his teeth and his mouth full of compliments.

He lived in terror of libel suits and consequently mutilated our copy. John Doe, if he was in trouble with the law, wasn't John Doe; he was a man "reputed to be John Doe" or "said by police to be John Doe" or "booked as John Doe." Our man, we used to say, would be uncertain of his own identity if he found himself in jail. A bare recital of facts, if it reflected on anyone, had to be conditioned. His favorite conditioner, set between commas and inserted more or less at random in suspect sentences, was "so the story goes."

The m.e. hardly knew good copy from bad. If ever he had heard of parallelisms or the sequence of tenses, he held the knowledge too precious for practice, as do too many newsmen, if they've heard, to this day.

He took pride in his headlines, and no wonder. In the neighboring town of Richmond a hospital patient died soon after eating his lunch. While it was and is a miracle to me that more patients don't succumb to hospital fare, it remained for the m.e. to add two and two. He captioned the obit:

**EATS DILL PICKLE, DIES**

A contributor, or stringer, to a number of big-city dailies, which accepted his copy with amazing credulity, he slavered over what he called human-interest stories. A small country girl rode a turkey to school. Or so the story goes. Another fell ill when told there was no Santa Claus. Ah, but there was. Gifts from all over began to pile up at the small railroad station near which, by
report, she languished. No subsequent story of
his reported that no one could find her.

In the oil fields east of Lexington a crew made
a pet of a big country dog. The well being drilled
showed some promise, and it was decided to shoot it.
Came a morning so nippy that the explosive required
warming up before use. It was poured into a basin
and set near the fire. While the men waited,
inattentively, the dog licked it up. Then dis-
covery. Then panic. Away the men sprinted, in
all directions, and after them, from one to another,
bounced the living bomb, happy with the game. A
flushed rabbit averted calamity. The dog took
off after it. The rabbit ducked under a fence.
The dog tried to jump it, caught his foot and fell
and went boom. Nothing remained of him, not even
a hair, but a great hole in the ground marked where
he'd hit.

The story has an unreported but hardly more
credible sequel. A New York paper grew dubious
and sent a reporter to determine the facts. The
Leader's stringer, who had submitted the facts in
the first place, was fazed not at all. He took the
visitor to an abandoned rock quarry and said,
"There's the hole."

Yet we couldn't really dislike James M. Ross.
We knew he did his poor best in a too-busy position,
and we saw him more as a man miscast than as an
incompetent and often unpleasant boss. And we
agreed on one virtue of his. He knew Kentucky
names and backgrounds and, thus qualified, often
saw stories where less informed editors didn't.

Under those early circumstances, if we were
to learn at all, we had to learn by ourselves.
We did so by banterings, sly digs and sober dis-
sussions. We educated ourselves—and in more than
craftsmanship. After I had become city editor,
Joe said to me once, "It's all right to direct,
but you don't have to act like a top sergeant."
That piece of advice stays me to this day.

The owner of the Leader was a friendly and
unpretentious man who knew nothing of newspaper-
writing but did know that the future of the Republic
resided in the Republican party. Most of the
editorials were written by an aging Presbyterian
minister who addressed himself with mild earnest-
ness to country congregations on Sundays. His
loves were Prohibition, the Bible, and the bootstrap
five-year-plan strivings of the Russians, whom he considered the unhappy but amiable and indomitable creatures of circumstance.

Yet with the encouragement of a then young general manager and out of our own sense of the responsibility that freedom imposes on the press, we got out a good and unshrinking paper, one almost never suppressed in its coverage, if only because most of us wouldn't work under trespass. 15

Guthrie says, "My biggest criticism of journalists is that they don't know grammar. Their sequence of tense is bad. For example, they'll write, 'He said he will go to the convention.'" 16

Another common error, he claims, is exemplified in the phrase, "Joe Doe, 58, president of XYZ Corporation and prominent in civic affairs...." 17

He believes the journalist's aversion to word repetition is carried to a ridiculous extreme:

In journalism, word changing is a cardinal rule. Repeat snow and you get "white stuff." Repeat banana and what do you get? The yellow, oblong fruit. When repetition is right, use it. Don't try to think of another word when you don't need to. Isaac Walton demonstrates this when he said, "The last trout I caught I caught on a worm." 18

Guthrie regrets the passing of the old headline style:

15Ibid., pp. 87-89.
17Ibid.
18Ibid.
Headlining was harder then than in these days of easy and ragged non-style. We believed in balance—which is to say that headlines had to be flush with the column rules left and right or uniformly indented from the first line on down, with no more difference in length between or among them than the room occupied by an em or at most an em and a half. That wasn't all. Good headlines, we said, had to be enclytic, never proclytic. We meant—if the terms are not clear—that the first line had to hold a meaning in itself, enlarged or modified by the second line, which in turn didn't hang on the third.

We took pride in the results, perhaps with some justice. I'm inclined to think so when I see what passes for headlines these days. The one merit of the ragged style is that it's fast. Any deskman who can read can slap something on top of a news story without thinking twice. The achievement of balance took time, though practice shortened it. I got so I thought in column widths. Example:

MOON ORBITING
FAR FROM NEW,
COW MAINTAINS

Nowadays the same story might be headlined:

COW SAYS SHE
WENT OVER
MOON FIRST

Guthrie said his thoughts on news writing mirror those of Theodore Morrison, as expressed in a Nieman Report article. Here are some of Morrison's observations:

If it is a condition of the trade that a writer must sometimes blow up a news story out of nothing, then to that extent he is injured as a writer—and his reader is injured, too, whether he knows it or not—for any purely literary skill that makes one piece of emptiness more adroit than another is too unimportant to bother about. The same may be said about editorial writing. If a man is put to the moral choice of expressing views that he regards

19 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 92-93.
as false or dangerous, or asked to take a heroic stand on an artificially manufactured and unreal issue, his problem as a man is the same as his problem as a writer. We think of newspaper writing as the responsible and skillful transmission to a reader of what the reader needs to know or has a claim to be told for his enlightenment or his interest. Hence the recurrent emphasis throughout these papers on a need for greater opportunity to supply interpretation and background with the news, for bolder and more skillful copy-desk work toward this end, for more time and more facilities by which the reporter or editorial writer could post himself on topics requiring special knowledge. Conditions that affect the choice of one kind of content rather than another, and affect the strategy of presenting the content, are conditions that very importantly affect writing. Writing is words, but skill in words comes into play only after the writer has digested his material and found its appropriate method of presentation.\(^\text{20}\)

Guthrie is skeptical of the value of journalism schools. When he was editor of the Leader, he would prefer to hire college graduates with majors other than journalism. "I could teach them what they needed to know about journalism," he said. He added, however:

One thing that can be said for the journalism schools—and it may be the only thing—is that you do get practice in writing. This isn't always true

\(^\text{20}\)Morrison, "A Reader Unburdens and Comes up with Some Sound Criticism," Nieman Reports, p. 4. Morrison also criticizes newspaper writing for not grouping related ideas together, for not providing the reader with a "sense of expectancy," and for sentence composition that does not have the subject and predicate arranged in the most natural manner. Most newspaper writing, he claims, lacks "skillful and needed transition." Too many journalists employ the "hugger-mugger" sentence, which "uses all the connective resources of our loose and sturdy English grammar to glue as many pebbles together as it can—and uses them badly, so that all logic and subordination are destroyed." pp. 3-7.
in English departments.\footnote{Guthrie interview, March 1, 1969.}

According to a 1968 interview, Guthrie's view of newspapers appears to have mellowed somewhat. In the Oct. 6, 1968, \textit{Great Falls Tribune}, reporter Dick Coon wrote:

\begin{quote}
Known from time to time as a critic of Montana newspapers, Guthrie thinks newspapers in the state have notably improved. "I find greater freedom in them now, less bias and far less respect for sacred cows although I sometimes think they are a bit timid. "Really there is nothing wrong with Montana dailies, except that limited size restricts their coverage. As for the weekly newspapers, the ones I know have lost all their personality."\footnote{Dick Coon, "Success Long Way from Mastery," \textit{Great Falls Tribune}, \textit{Montana Parade}, Oct. 6, 1968, pp. 1-2, 4.}

Guthrie is encouraged that magazine journalism has adopted some of the devices of the fiction writer. \textit{Time} and \textit{Newsweek} have profited by using fiction techniques, he said\footnote{Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 31, 1968.}, adding:

\begin{quote}
Fiction writing has greatly improved the writing of all non-fiction. Many of the techniques developed in fiction are used by non-fiction writers. Strange things have happened to non-fiction. A good many years ago, the use of an anecdote to introduce a non-fiction piece was thought to be bad form. Now it is done all the time.\footnote{Ibid., Oct. 18, 1968.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{Guthrie's own non-fiction magazine articles}
demonstrate the increased use of fiction techniques in journalism. In "Sheep and Goats," which was published in Atlantic Monthly in 1945, Guthrie's style was straight objective reporting. He writes, "The Rocky Mountain goat is rarely seen on its native range except by big-game hunters. This is not because the goat is wary, for it is in fact a foolishly curious and incautious beast. . . ." His later articles employ many of the fiction techniques he used in his novels. For example, his article on Idaho in the June, 1954, Holiday describes a sun "hot as a blister" and lakes "blue as paint."26

Clearly, however, Guthrie still considers fiction vastly superior to journalistic reporting in analyzing human behavior, as illustrated by this interpretation:

The reporter reports the visible, the heard—he can't go any deeper. I'm always reminded of that by a widow who died in Lexington . . . her husband had been an entomologist. She had a life size picture of him in her living room and when she would be speaking to a friend she would turn to the picture and say, "Isn't that so, Enoch?" A reporter could never catch that but what a piece for imagination. The paper carried the standard obituary--time, place, funeral arrangements.27

Perhaps the fiction-journalism argument is academic.

26Guthrie, "Idaho," Holiday, 15, June, 1954, p. 34.
As Louis M. Lyons, former Nieman Foundation curator, said:

A. B. (Bud) Guthrie, one of the notable authors of our time, escaped if you like, from journalism, through a Nieman Fellowship. In a writing course at Harvard with Ted Morrison, he began his first great novel, using his American history course with Fred Merk as his research laboratory and going on to win a Pulitzer Prize.

But Bud Guthrie is a top feather in our cap, and we want to think of journalism as broad enough to embrace the reporting of America and the interpretation of its life and issues, thru whatever media, newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, books, films.28

Perhaps because of his realistic writing approach, which does not soft-pedal the hardship and tragedy of the western experience, Guthrie's humor often is overlooked.

"I do have a sense of humor," he has remarked. "I don't think anyone has ever commented on that."\(^1\)

Guthrie's humor is robust, lusty and often irreverent. He loves tall stories and tells them with skill. Here is one by Dick Summers in *The Big Sky*:

"This child shot a kind of corner onc't," said Summers, "and I swear it saved my hair."

"So?"

Summers fired his pipe. "It was ten years ago, or high to it and the Pawnees was bad. They ketched me out alone, on the Platte, and there was a passel of 'em whoopin' and comin' at me. First arrow made wolf's meat of my horse, and there this nigger was, facin' up to a party as could take a fort."

Allen said, "I heerd you was kilt away back then, Dick. Sometimes be damned if you ain't like a dead one."

"Ain't near so dead as some, I'm thinkin'. It was lucky I had Patsy Plumb here with me." Summers patted the butt of his old rifle. "This here piece now, it don't know itself how far it can shoot. It scares me, sometimes, dogged if it don't, thinkin' how the ball goes on and on and maybe hits a friend in Californy or maybe the governor of Indiana State. It took me a spell to get on to it, but after while I l'arn't I could kill a goat far as I could see him, only if he was humpin' I might have to face half-around to lead him enough. Yes, ma'am. I've fired at critters and had time to load up ag'in afore ball

\(^1\)Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
and critter come together."

"Keeps you wore out, I'm thinkin', travelin' for your meat."

"That's a smart guess now. Well, here this child was, and the Pawnees comin', and just then I see a buffler about to make over a hill. He was that far away he didn't look no bigger'n a bug. I made the peace sign, quick and positive, and then I p'inted away yonder at the buffler, and the Injuns stopped and looked while I up with Patsy. I knewed 'er inside out then, and I waited until the critter's tail switched out of sight over the hill, and then, allowin' for a breeze and a mite of dust in the air, I pulled trigger."

Summers had them all listening. It was as if his voice was spell, as if his lined face with its topping of gray hair held their eyes and stilled their tongues. He puffed on his pipe, letting them wait, and took the pipe from his mouth and drank just a sip from his can of whisky.

"The Pawnees begun to holler again and prance around, but I helt 'em back with the peace sign and led 'em on, plumb over the hill. Took most of the day to git there. But just like this nigger knewed, there was Mr. Buffler, lyin' where the ball had dropped down on him. I tell you niggers, the Pawnees got a heap respect.

One after the other, they asked could they have meat and horns and hair, figgerin' it was big medicine for 'em, till there wasn't anything left of that bull except a spot on the ground, and dogged if some of the Pawnees didn't eat that!" Summers let a little silence come in before he spoke again. "I ain't never tried any long shots since."

"No?"

I figger I ain't up to it. I swear I aimed to get that old bull through the heart, and there he was, plain gut-shot. Made me feel ashamed."^2

In These Thousand Hills, Carmichael tells a humorous story about the firing of the big IT, a cannon strapped to the back of a mule. Fort Benton white men,

^2 The Big Sky, pp. 204-205.
mischievously hoping to scare Indian bystanders with an impressive cannon shot into a bluff across the river, readied the weapon. Carmichael says:

"One of 'em touched a match to the fuse. "The fuse fizzed and fizzed, and Mister Mule opened one eye and then both, and he flapped his ears back and let out a snort while the crew hol­lered whoa and hung hard to his head. Huh-uh! The mule hunched a hump in his back and began buck-jumpin' around in a wheel, the cannon bobbin' its big eye at one and another and all of us innocent bystanders while the fuse et down toward the charge. 

"For a shake no one could move, but just for a shake. Me, I found myself lyin' behind a scatter of driftwood, and some feller was tryin' to scratch under me like a mole, prayin', 'No! Don't shoot! No!' to the mule. 

"That feller tunneled me up over my fort. The mule was wheelin' and the fuse fusin' and the cannon pickin' up targets, and them innocent targets, I tell you, was wild on the wing or dead flat on the ground or neck-deep in the river, duckin' like hell-divers when the muzzle swung around. But the Injuns stood still, waitin' for the tall dust to blow. 

"Then, like a close clap of thunder, the cannon went off!

"It didn't hurt anything. What with the mule's jumpin', it had slid back, down on the slope of his hump, so's the ball skimmed his tail and went into the ground. 

"Men began comin' from cover and trailin' up in the dust and the powder smoke, smilin' pale and damn silly. 

"I walked over to Two Plumes, who was standin' with his arms folded like before, with nothin' in his face that showed anything. 

"'How?' I said, 'How chief like 'im?'

"He answered, 'How?' and let the rest of it wait, but in that Injun eye was a gleam. Then he said, 'Paleface jackass poop.'"3

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3These Thousand Hills, pp. 99-100. The same story, in somewhat different form, appeared in Guthrie's collection of short stories, The Big It.
Glimpses of Charlie Russell can be seen in Guthrie's humorous stories. "The Therefore Hog" has all the flavor of a Russell yarn:

Just once did I get the best of a bed hog, and that was in Ogalally, Nebraska, in 1881 or thereabouts.

He was a ranch cook name of House--Slaughter House we called him of course. The main thing about him, outside of being cantankery like all cooks, was that his eyes was so weak he couldn't tell bacon from beans without his specs on. The specs was as thick as one of his flapjacks, which a man had to sit straight to look over. His mind wasn't that deep, but he thought it was, specially after he had read a book or sucked a bottle. Both of them items was failings of his.⁴

In "The Keeper of the Key," Guthrie relates the hilarious consequences when the town bumpkin, Frank Newcomb, takes over as justice of the peace:

When they were all in, Frank Newcomb brought his stomach up from his belt and looked around with those blue eyes, serious as a barn owl, and knocked on the desk with his knuckles. "Oh yeah, oh yeah," he called out, "this honorable court is now in session, so help me God." He pointed to one of the prisoners. "You're drunk. Five dollars."⁵

Guthrie's humor often is mischievous. In These Thousand Hills, he describes the gaseous disturbances of a dog during a poetry-reading session and the efforts of all to pretend they don't notice:


⁵"The Keeper of the Key," in The Big It, p. 161.
Lat had lost himself in the words until close to the end. Then he took a careful breath, making sure. The old dog, lying gassy, slipping wind no nose could miss.

Only on rare occasions does his humor seem contrived. In such an instance in The Way West, young Todd Fairman hears a mule seller refer to a horse as "that big bastard there . . ." Moments later, the boy tells his father he wants "the big bastard." Says the mule seller:

Beats all . . . how they pick up things. Now where'd he hear that, you reckon?7

Some of Guthrie's favorite stories are based on fact. In Murders at Moon Dance, Buck tells a story Guthrie heard from old-timers in Choteau:

"Them days," he related, "we didn't have no undertaker in Moon Dance, but we needed a coroner, if only to kind of make sudden death official, and so we elected Zeke.

"Zeke was quite a feller," he went on. "Right fancy dresser, he was, and mighty sober and dignified in his manner. Well, he hadn't been in office more'n a week until they found a freighter froze to death up on the bench. Been dead two-three days, and he was stiff as a poker. Just to try Zeke out, the boys decided to have an inquest, and so they put a door across a couple of sawbucks in the Moon Dance Mercantile Company, and put the froze freighter on it.

"We was all anxious to see how Zeke would do," Buck proceeded, "and so when he showed up there was quite a bunch of us there in the store. Zeke had prettied up considerable for the affair. He had

6These Thousand Hills, p. 233.
7Ibid., p. 23.
put on a pair of choke-bore pants and a coat with long tails to it, but the crowd seemed to fluster him some, at that. He kind of got himself together though, and went over to the door where the body was lyin' and studied it very sober-like. Then he went around to the other side and did the same thing, ending up by stickin' one finger out and touchin' the corpse."

Buck paused to give emphasis to his conclusion. "He turned to us then," he resumed, "and he said, 'Boys, this man's in a damn bad fix.'"  

Guthrie obviously enjoyed writing "The Fraudulent Skunk," a short story about a sheepherder named Shorty who drives smart aleck cowboys from the Moon Dance Saloon by using his pet skunk as a weapon.  

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Asked if the story of Shorty and his skunk was based on fact, Guthrie responded wryly:

No, I made it up. But I had heard—I don't believe it for a minute—that if you pick up a skunk by the tail, he's powerless, because without those back feet on a foundation he can't exercise that sphincter muscle.  

Guthrie also enjoys poking fun at himself and has done so in magazine articles. He relates his difficulties in milking a cantankerous cow and creates a memorable word picture about applying medication to the teats of the kicking animal:

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8 Murders at Moon Dance, pp. 44-45.  
10 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
There are patented substances, promoted as unguents and balms for the relief of chap, fly bites and general inflammation. I tried these, though applying them was like working through an electric fan.\(^\text{11}\)

Guthrie obviously delights in telling stories about Mary Lizzie Keating, his landlady in Lexington who cussed and drank hard and rebelled against "pretense and primness and over-pitched piety." A few samples:

"Bud," Mary Lizzie said while I was at breakfast, "this evenin' come straight home from work. The dandelions will be in full bloom. You can pick them. I'll put them to set with a dose of yeast and cornmeal like my distiller friend told me, and shortly we'll have somethin' to drink."

That afternoon was warm and slow with the onset of spring fever. On our street, as I hastened home, men back from work sat on front porches, pleasantly sweating, and housewives sat with them, reluctant to cook while the sun smiled away winter. Vegetating they watched me, and a sense of guilt overtook me that young people these days won't understand. In many minds alcohol equated with sin, and even the wets, as they called them, felt the brush of the wing of public damnation.

To hold my pickings Mary Lizzie had hauled out and placed in the backyard a light plywood box big enough to contain a piano. I plucked the blooms and pitched them in. But when I started to horse that great box around to the front, I saw the neighbors looking, no doubt for evil and food for talk, and I let go the box and mounted the side-entry stairs.

I was too craven to help. I stood on one foot, then the other, thinking Prohibitionist thoughts while my lidded eyes traveled the street.

Now, up from Maple Avenue, appeared the Methodist minister, bound for the parsonage just a few doors beyond us. He was a little man with a little mustache and large dedication.

\(^\text{11}\)Guthrie, "Nothing Difficult About a Cow," Harper's, 206, January, 1953, pp. 73-76.
I kept still, Mary Lizzie kept plucking and chucking, and the preacher kept coming. Abreast of her, he halted and said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Keating."

The greeting arrested her. She looked over her glasses, and guilt was inside her. "Oh, Reverend, thank you. Good evenin'."

He asked what she was doing.

It seemed a long time before Mary Lizzie replied. He couldn't see her gears grinding. "Well," she said, drawing the word out while the gears ground, "you see, the dandelions have taken my yahd, and a friend of mine told me if I burned the blooms then I'd be shed of them." She finished with some satisfaction.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Keating," he told her and reached in his pocket and got out a jackknife and sprang the big blade. "Let me show you."

He took hold of a plant and cut it off deep at the roots and went to another, then another, and more. The kindly deed done, he straightened and wiped off the blade and folded it home and reached for his pants pocket. "That's the way, Mrs. Keating," he said. "You've just been wasting your time."

Her voice was meek. "Reverend, thank you."

Still on hands and knees, Mary Lizzie watched him mince up the street.

Then she turned, glaring over her glasses, and said: "Bud, that son of a bitch has ruined our crop."

Guthrie also enjoys telling about the elderly poet he met at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She explained to him how she sold her verse:

"Nothing to it," she said. "If I want to pick up five or ten dollars, I write a godgimme. It's a sure thing.

I asked, "A godgimme?"

"Of course," she said with a lovely and incredible cynicism. "You know: 'God give me a garden

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12The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 101-103.
with a hollyhock in it."\(^{13}\)

Several amusing stories about his days with the newspaper are recalled by Guthrie:

I had to watch my associates. They'd slip to the composing room, as Colored Notes, Sunday sermon themes at non existent houses of worship. There came to mind: "The Goneness of the Past," "To See Saint Peter, Put Your Headlights On" and "The Inevitable Shall Not Come to Pass." Sly practice aside from Colored Notes needed but sometimes didn't get the editorial eye. Once, having to leave the desk, I asked Dan Bowmar to take over. A story from city hall came to him instructing householders how best to put out for collection their coal-furnace ashes. Dan marked it Page One and over it posted this headline:

CITY INSPECTOR EXPLAINS HOW TO GET ASHES HAULED\(^{14}\)

Tom Larson, Guthrie's father in law, exerted an important influence on Guthrie's humor. Guthrie recalls:

In his spur-of-the-moment facility for saying the unexpected, for putting wit and essential sense into a capsule, he belonged in the company of Will Rogers, Charlie Russell and other gifted old-timers now mostly dead. He came home very wobbly one night after a reunion with out-of-town cronies. In the bedroom adjoining her room Mother Larson heard him bumping around. Next morning over the breakfast table she said, "You must have had quite a load on last night." Tom speared another flapjack, "Yes," he answered. "Should've made two trips."

We had a custom, he and I, of going out on the town one night during each of my summer vacations. Once, at about midnight, we decided we'd had enough and were about to take leave when a party of friends sailed in and hove to. So general is the practice

\(^{13}\)Ibid., pp. 188-189.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 93.
of treating in small Montana saloons that drinks were ranged around us almost before we said no. "Pretty rugged," I said to Tom the next day. He nodded and asked, "How many did we have after we quit?"

Thomas Clark, Guthrie's neighbor in Lexington, said this about his sense of humor:

Those were wonderful days when the young Guthrie was cavorting around engaging, with his old friends, Dan Bowmar, Joe Jordan, Cecil Carpenter, Dud McCloy and his old friend out of Dickens Mrs. Mary Lizzie Keating. Bud was a master joker, and our community was kept astir with all the tricks that happened. I still live in the house I built in 1939, and next to the one Bud built in 1940. Many a time in a nostalgic vein I look over to the stoop by the kitchen and wish that in some way "The Great Guthrie" would come out and yell some belittling epithet at me. He was a master dish washer, a fine chicken picker, and a housemade of many accomplishments.

There are so many stories about Bud Guthrie in Lexington. As I tell you in my letter he was a practical joker, and sometimes was the butt of practical jokes.

Once when we had moved out to our new houses Bud yelled to me from his famous stoop and told me to come over, that he wanted to show me a rare plant which had just been given him by someone downtown for his back yard. I took one look at it and saw it was a Virginia creeper, a damned weed that both of us were trying to kill and Bud didn't know the difference. This was the case of a southerner putting one over on the arid West.

Bud clipped the bangs off of a neighbor child to his eternal regret. Nevertheless he was able to talk his way out of about four fifths of the hell he might have caught. Ask him about the time he clipped Mollie Rylands curls.16

15Ibid., p. 237.
16Clark letter.
Guthrie's own anecdotes reveal his sense of fun and mischief. A few examples:

After he wrote *The Big Sky*, Guthrie jokingly promised Ed Templin, a good-sized Lexington friend, that he would autograph his book with the inscription:

For Ed Templin, a newspaperman with a great deal in front of him--and no little behind.

Later, when Templin brought the book to be autographed, he asked specifically that Guthrie write that inscription.¹⁷

Once a well-endowed woman entered the newspaper office in Lexington carrying a copy of *The Big Sky*. Wearing a low cut dress, she leaned over Guthrie's desk and asked him to autograph her book with "something personal." Guthrie recalls "gazing down into the valleys," and wrote the following bemused inscription:

Dear Mary Lou:. Remember?¹⁸

After drinking heavily the night before, Guthrie and George Jackson were sitting in the kitchen of the Twin Lakes cabin. Guthrie stared down at his feet, then told his companion, "Look around the table, George, and tell me if that is a mouse on my toe cap." There was,

¹⁷Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
¹⁸Ibid.
indeed, a mouse perched on his toe, Jackson informed him. "If there hadn't of been I would have joined the WCTU immediately," Guthrie said.\textsuperscript{19}

In Great Falls, Guthrie told his friend Dan Cushman that he wanted an amanuensis, someone to take his dictation and to correct spelling and grammar. This desire prompted a long standing joke between the two men. Guthrie recalls that he used to relate "an apocryphal story that I once got my face slapped for asking a comely woman if she wanted a job as my amanuensis."\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.
CHAPTER XII

The ugly reality of Guthrie's books—the violence, the killing, the tragedy—sometimes has been criticized. The studious reader observes, however, that Guthrie in no way condones violence and killing or gets sadistic pleasure from tragedy. Actually his accounts of killing never fail to point out the horror of man destroying his own kind. Consider, for instance, the lynching of Bigsbee in These Thousand Hills:

The horse lunged. Bigsbee bounced against the cantle of the saddle and jerked against the rope. It swung him up to 4 o'clock. He swung back and thrashed, his breath screeching in his twisted neck. In time the thrashing and the screeching stopped. The body swung slower and slower. It turned on the rope, front, back, front, and from the crooked mouth beneath the blindfold the tongue oozed out. It was Hector who spoke first. "There's a good man now."  

The reader senses Guthrie's contempt for Curtis Mack, who needlessly kills an Indian in The Way West:

He was close enough to hear the echo of voices sounding thin on the chill of morning, when he saw the Indian in the tree. At first he took him for a big coon, or maybe a bear, and then, coming closer, he made out the shaved head with its comb of hair and the blanket gathered around the shoulders. From his vantage point above the lower growth the Indian was watching the camp. He was holding to his perch and watching.

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1These Thousand Hills, p. 239.
Mack stopped his horse. The Indian had no gun and no bow that Mack could see. He would have a bow though, if not a musket, hidden by his body or the folds of his blanket.

Mack dismounted and tied his horse and walked ahead, stepping soft. He began to feel the blood beating in him, and the breath light and quick in his throat.

At this range he couldn't miss. He had only to raise his rifle and line up the sights and squeeze the trigger. He couldn't miss, not if he chose to shoot.

He looked around for other Indians and saw none, and listened and heard, far off from pulse and breath, the voices of women cooking breakfast and the deeper tones of men catching up their teams.

Even with the blood thumping in him and his lungs working, he couldn't miss, not if he fired. There was the barrel lifting and the sights lining up and the finger waiting on the trigger.

The Indian turned, his sharp face composed but watchful, and his eyes ran over the back country. Mack saw them nearing, saw them widen and fix in the shocked instant of finding him. They cried out. The eyes, the wordless mouth, the whole face cried, "Please! Please!"

The Indian dropped as the rifle cracked. He didn't shout or sing out. He hung for a bare instant, the please fading from his face, and then he dropped.

Mack ran up. The Indian was dead all right, dead as a damn doornail. He lay crumpled in the bushes with his old blanket and his proud wisp of hair, face turned up, mouth loose—a runty, thin man with scars on him and the marks of hunger, a Kaw who had asked please and got his answer, and now wouldn't have to ask any more or go without, either.

Death, violent or not, never is romanticized by Guthrie. In The Big Sky, Streak's death is told in sordid detail, and in The Way West, the reader is not spared the

\[2^\text{The Way West, pp. 73-74.}\]

\[3^\text{The Big Sky, p. 209.}\]
agon of young Toddie Fairman dying slowly of the rattle-
snake's poison. For Dick Summers' dead wife, Mattie, in The Way West, death has no dignity:

They had scrubbed Mattie and combed her hair and laid her out with her arms crossed on her chest, and she looked like death-by-fever, as Summers had known she would. For a long minute he looked down at her, hearing Mrs. Evans breathe by his side and feeling the women waiting for his words. He saw the new dress they'd bought and saw the hands worn and ingrained with dirt in spite of scrubbing and the color of old fever on the brow and cheeks. The hair, now that he came to look at it, was whiter than he remembered. He wouldn't see her any more, dyeing homespun with bark or copperas or indigo, or sewing, or making candles, or mashing flint corn for starch, or looking at the sun mark on the kitchen floor to tell what time it was. All that was left was the still, shrunk body, and come morning it would be gone, too, and it would be like Mattie never lived except as he remembered her.

The loss of six of his brothers and sisters and later his mother influenced Guthrie's attitude toward death: "... my memory is full of funerals, of the cold, still parlor, of the cold coffin and the cold, still body lying in it."

Of his mother's death, he wrote:

We went out of the house on the day after Mother's death and took a long walk through the fields. The March afternoon was fair enough. What little snow there was was melting under a benign sun. Already the gophers were poking from their burrows and running

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4 The Way West, p. 181.
5 Ibid., p. 32.
6 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 13-14.
frisky after winter's sleep. The crows were back from southern rendezvous, ahead of time for mating. Soon the bare fields and the bare stands of willows would be green again. Even now the signs were showing. Ahead, the new season. Ahead, new love and life and summer sun. Behind me, with the tone of ages in his voice, Father kept saying, "Aye. Yi. 'The years that the locust hath eaten.'"

We were lost, all of us, and Father most of all. Nothing seemed familiar, quite. The remembered pastures, the groves along the Teton, the stone-blue, snow-white lift of mountains we had known, the notch cut deep by Deep Creek in whose canyon we had camped and knifed initials on the aspen trees in years before--these lay or stood aloof, known yet now not comprehended. Things don't change, not things like these, I thought, not thinking here was platitude; the eye of the beholder did.

What speech we spoke was superficial, made light by heaviness, made remote from me not alone by loss but by the re-enactment of those last ugly moments at the bedside. The involuntary bowel movement as the coma deepened. The harsh reach for breath. The wasted face and figure. The mouth open and, with the fatal dentures out, turned in. The unclean, shriveled finish of nobility. Death knew no dignity. That's what undertakers were for--to prettify with wax and paint and powder the wretched residue. And yes, ma'am and sir, the cost of the casket includes all our services.

'Aye. Yi. The years that the locust hath eaten.'

As that passage suggests, Guthrie's view of death makes him especially sensitive to the implications of growing old. Often, it is Dick Summers who expresses Guthrie's thoughts about aging:

"It was as if Missouri never was, nor farming, nor Mattie and her fever. Those were the days of his giving up, of growing old before his time because his world was old. Hell, he wasn't old now except in mind, except by mountain reckoning. Forty-nine. And his limbs were strong and his eye keen yet,

\[\text{Ibid., pp. 132-133.}\]
and he could answer to a woman. It was the way of thinking that made him old, the knowing that he had outlived his time. He could farm in Oregon and grow with the country, as Lije had put it, if only the thing seemed worth the try. If only he hadn't known the Popo Agie. 8

Offered an Indian woman for the night, Summers hesitates because of his age:

Why did he ask instead of act? He didn't believe in the sin the preacher did. Men and women were made different for a purpose, like hes and shes of any breed, and mostly he had done what he wanted and got up and forgotten, except now and then for a thought of the half-breeds he might have left behind.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

But still he asked and, asking, knew it was the age in him that asked, for young Dick Summers would have gone ahead. Age asking not what was right and proper but was he an old fool who thought to find the lost, high spirit under cover of a robe, in the body of a woman who would be lousy but also young and tender and warm for him. He knew the answer. He would cover her and lie back and realize it was no use except for the minute's now-dead fever, and though would circle in his head so that he couldn't rest full and easy as of old. But still . . . but still . . .

Overhead he heard the whistle of wings, and of a sudden the name came to him, the name of her who'd been with him there on the Popo Agie's banks. Broken Wing, it was, as near as he had been able to make out from the Crow. The One with the Broken Wing.

A breeze fanned the graying fire, reddening the ashe, and all at once the Indian dogs woke up, baying at the sky.

He guessed old fires had a right to shine, if they still could, and dogs to holler at the moon.

He got up.

"What you smilin' at, Dick?" Evans asked. "Was I smilin'?" Just feeling good, I reckon." 9

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8The Way West, p. 218.

9Ibid., pp. 224-225.
When Guthrie described the thoughts and actions of men close to death, he was able to use his own experience. As a young man, he nearly died from what he believes was equine encephalitis:

It is curiosity that makes dreadful the prospect of death. It is the thought of not knowing. Here our own fish-hook snags us, said John Burroughs, the naturalist, in calm resignation when he reached seventy. We are thinking from being and thus extending live sensibilities to the insensible grave. Dead men don't wonder what's new. Roll on, infinity!

But the snag is a snag until a man ceases to feel it, and so, save for a relative few who want death not so much as removal from life, we all dread termination, even those who foresee association with the angels. Angels wouldn't be likely to subscribe to the Times.

More, though cold reason carries him farther, it's next to impossible for a man to imagine a world without him. It is made real by his fingers and feet. It exists in his eye. It wouldn't smell except for his nose or sound if his ear didn't hear or have taste except for his tongue. Without his awareness, nobody, nothing, a cipher voider than the cipher atomic warfare could write. Impossible, this barren prospect. A man goes on his way, often cheerfully, often dejectedly, but in either case insured against death essentially until, late or soon, the policy lapses.¹⁰

When Deakins is near death on frozen Marias Pass in The Big Sky, his delirium has the ring of authenticity:

It's a empty feelin' I got inside now. Seems like this damn bullet hole makes me oncommon hungry, so's I can't rightly tell whether it's chest or belly hurtin' me. Still, nothin' hurts like it did. It all seems far off, like as if a man pinched his leg when it was asleep. Ain't nothin' hurts me too bad. I'm all right. I'm comin' along. It ain't no work to talk, I tell you. Don't fret yourself,

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 147-148.
Boone. Words come out'n my mouth just like water tricklin'.

It's like a stream flowin', easy and light. We seen a sight of rivers, clear and purty rivers. We had us a whole world to play around in, with high mountains in it and buffer and beaver and fun, and no one to say it was his property and get the hell off.

A man can think his mind to a nub and not know anything about God. He's got to die, I reckon, to find out, and then, if he's dead like a dog or cow, he don't find out then. That's what frets me, Boone, maybe not even knowin' after I'm dead and so never knowin' in all my life.

Boone, my mind's so crazy-like. It comes to itself and then it goes off again, seein' things and hearin' them and gettin' all mixed up. It's clearin' now, and I see you plain and no one else in here, and outside it's cold as all hell and the snow more'n ass-deep to the tallest Injun a man ever saw. It's come to me there ain't no meat. There ain't been meat for God knows how long. It was a dream I had about the elk. Christ, you're dyin' yourself Boone, thin as a goddam blade you are and your eyes big as plums and even your hands skinny.

Look, Boone, I ain't got long. When my mind's right I can see that much. I'll be under come tomorrow or next day. Ain't no use to say I'll make it. Ain't no use to try. Hear?

Me and you never et dead meat, but meat fair-killed is meat to eat. There's a smaller or two on my old ribs. Take your knife, Boone. Git it out. I ain't got long, nohow. Goddam your old skin you hear? Boone!11

Later, when Boone shoots and mortally wounds him, Deakins comes closer to knowing the unknowable:

This was the way it was at the last. A man faced up to death alone, his sight dimming and his hearing dulling off, and he so lonesome the heart squeezed up to nothing and the mind drew back from thought. The world pulled away from him, the lodge

11 The Big Sky, pp. 306, 308.
and the air and the clouds and dark hills outside and folks that stood about, until only the ground he rested on seemed close. This was the way it was with Jim Deakins, laid out with a bullet hole in him and no one alongside to touch his hand and ease him over. This was the way it was with Deakins, who had been ready to wrong a friend and spoil a woman's life and had got hold of himself but messed things up all the same, and now no chance to set them right. He had to lie helpless and lonesome, but not much afraid any more, while over him and over the lodge that shut him in the deep sky deepened over the empty plains. He heard talk, breathed by the breath but not sounded by the voice. "I'll know about God, I reckon, now." After a while he realized that it was his lips that had spoken.12

About to freeze to death in These Thousand Hills, a wounded Lat Evans mistakes a chinook wind for angels' wings:

There was a whisper in the night, a distant stirring, a sort of blowing music that the ear kept reaching for. It could be no more than dream or fever, or the murmur of tired blood inside the head, for all was quiet here--no flutter of tepee, no shrill of wind or rasp of snow, no click of brush. And yet, and yet, at the edge of hearing, the singing rustle, like a low chant from the land or like the flurry of far wings.
Lat could feel the slow tap of his heart, tapping blood toward hands and feet and parts that blood would never reach. Slow pulse on pulse, and blood enough to feed the mind, which sharpened as the body failed, as if God let a man have one last look before blowing out the lamp. He needed to turn over, to huddle closer in his covers, and by and by, when he found the will and strength, he'd do so. After a while. Everything in time. Easier to lie than to move.
Was it angels on the wing, that far-off rustle? The dark angel soon to take him to the Light? Or the devil riding? It was nothing. It was whatever crazy thing the mind made up. And it didn't

12 Ibid., pp. 341-342.
matter. Angel or devil, up or down, let it come, harps and golden streets or fire and brimstone.

A dog barked outside, and the young buck here in the tent spoke out in his sleep and breathed short and shallow afterwards, as if the one word had worn him out. Two for the Light then. Two for hell's heat. A pair for the happy hunting grounds. The music blew closer, faded out.

Tom was trying to rub himself warm again, his hands in the dark sounding harsh against clothing and skin. Better to be so near dead as no longer to care. But thanks, Tom, for sticking. Thanks for not making a break when you might have. Thanks for it all. Will you see the grave's covered with rocks so the wolves won't get to it? God restoreth the soul, but the body still likes to be kept in one piece, not gnawed on and chewed up and left scattered as filth. You can understand that, Tom?

A little gust of wind worried the tepee and cried away, and another came in its place, and another, running ahead of the breeze that began to blow steady.

So that was the music. That was the rustle of wings. The warning of wind where winds always blew and after the warning the wind. That was all there was to it.

Nothing looked so big at the last. What were women then, or a girl that he could see just as a flash of yellow hair? What did it matter that Tom could be so coarse, or that he himself had felt guilty thinking so? What was sin, or punishment if it did come? What was home and the drawn-off memories of it? What was life or death, and where was the mortal dread? The little things counted, like deciding whether to move, like feeling the cold as something close and far off at the same time and letting it have its way, like struggling against a cough because a cough hurt. A person just waited.

He felt he could turn now, and he eased over and brought his knees to his middle, and slowly it came to seem that he was warm at last, warm and comfortable and drowsy as it was said a freezing man came to be. A good way to die then, with nothing hurting and the mind swimming out into sleep.

Tom awakened him with a tap on the cheek. "Hey, boy! Hey?"

"What?"

The smudge of Tom's face in the dawn light of the tepee broke wide in a smile. "Lat, by God she came!"
The chinook came! Warm as spring outside!"\(^{13}\)

With his unusual insight into the physical, emotional and psychological reactions to impending death, it is not surprising that Guthrie himself doubts that he would be a good soldier:

 Granted unhappily that we need him, the man on horseback along with his obedient underlings is at odds with American tradition. Who makes a career of Army, Navy or Air Force? Not men, I think, who deeply feel in blood and bone the commonality of man. The accident of birth date kept me from two world wars—but I'd have been a doubtful asset anyhow. Too independent and perhaps too fearful. And too reluctant to kill. In extremity I suppose that I would shoot a man, but a sorry memory would abide. It can and will be argued that it's a lucky thing there weren't and aren't more of my kind.\(^{14}\)

Guthrie's aversion to killing extends to animals, but it was not always so. As boys, he and George Jackson enjoyed hunting near Choteau. Guthrie recalls:

 Prairie chickens, with their nervous laughter, fluttered from the thickets and could be shot. So could the teal and mallard on the potholes, and the jack-rabbits that bounced over the flatlands, leaving puffs of dust in seasons when stockmen searched the sky for rain.

 Shooting small game, catching fish, gathering berries a boy got the feeling of being one with Robinson Crusoe or the Swiss Family Robinson.\(^{15}\)

Then one day he shot two coyotes:

\(^{13}\)These Thousand Hills, pp. 123-125.

\(^{14}\)The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 51.

\(^{15}\)Guthrie, "Town to be a Boy in," Venture, 1, October, 1964, p. 12.
One of the coyotes wasn't dead, I found as I walked up to him. He lay without struggle looking at me, looking through and beyond me, with no fear of man now in his yellow eyes but only with the resigned and final wonder of death. I had to put another bullet in him, this time in his wondering brain.

No longer do I like to kill or see things killed. When slaughter justifies itself by simple economics, I yield, although reluctantly. Sometimes, rarely, even yet, for the sake of pan and palate, I'll shoot a bird or beach a fish, but there's little sport in the act. And I'd as soon blast a trusting milk cow as fell an elk or deer. The watcher lives to see watched things again, and while life maybe isn't precious, to put an end to it is mournful.16

At his Twin Lakes cabin, Guthrie remarked that his attitude toward hunting extends "really towards all manner of killing." He continued:

But I don't think that makes any difference in my books. It makes a great difference to me. That's why you see creatures all around here--these ground squirrels--Columbian ground squirrels--I won't kill them. I've got chipmunks, two families of grouse, that feed around here like chickens.17

Guthrie's experience with the coyote and his recollection of his father blinding the family dog in a fit of rage probably contributed to his agonizing portrayals of dying animals. In a short story based on the dog-blinding episode, Guthrie writes about a remorseful father who must destroy the now-helpless dog, Ebbie:

Father was on the back porch. He had his shotgun in one hand and Eb's head held up in the other, looking

16The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 17.
17Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
to make sure, Charlie guessed, that the good eye 
wasn't good anymore. He let the head down and took 
hold of the collar and said, "Come on, girl," and, 
turning, saw Charlie. "You stay back, son!"
"I got to see, I tell you. I got to see."
Father didn't say any more. He just breathed 
deep and started leading Eb off the porch. She 
bumped against the door frame as they went out. 
The dogs lying in the back yard got up and backed 
off, watching.
Father took Eb over to the vacant lot, almost 
to where they had found her yesterday. The dogs 
trailed after them, Tip in the lead.
Father's hand worked the pump, throwing a 
shell in the chamber, and Eb's tail waved at the 
sound of it. Charlie thought if she could see she 
would be prancing.
"Sit down, girl. Sit down."
She let her hindquarters down and looked up at 
Father out of her blind eyes, and her tail waved 
again. In the dusk Charlie could see the ugly fur­
row that the matter from her hurt eye made.
Father stepped back. The shotgun was a long 
time coming up. Charlie couldn't look when it was 
leveled. He couldn't believe he stood there in the 
dark waiting for the shot, waiting for Eb to be 
killed, waiting for this cold and awful end.
The roar of the gun shook him. It brought his 
head around. Eb had sunk to the ground. A little 
twitching was running over her body. After a minute 
it stopped and Eb didn't stir at all except for one 
curl of hair moving to a breath of air.
Father went over to her and stooped and put 
his hand out and rested it on her side. He didn't 
speak, not for a long time, but just stooped and 
let his hand lie soft and kind on her side. He 
moved his head a little, and Charlie saw the side 
of his face downturned to the ground, and of a sud­
den it seemed to the boy he had never seen the face 
before, never seen the sadness there and the kind­
ness, too, and the marks of wild, dark angers that 
he couldn't help.
Father's voice sounded tired. "Run to the wood­
shed and get the spade, will you son?"
When Charlie hesitated, Father said, "We'll dig 
a grave under the Balm of Gilead. I think she'd like 
to lie there."
Charlie turned and ran for the woodshed, and a 
great sob formed in his stomach and tore at his throat
and burst out of him. He got around the corner of the shed, where Father wouldn't see him, and his legs let him down on the chopping block. He thought that all his life he would see Eb sinking to the ground and Father's sad, dark face downturned on her and the tears in Mamma's eyes. He didn't know for whom he cried, for Eb or Father or Mother or himself. He only knew, while sobs racked him and the tears streamed down his cheeks and put the taste of salt in his mouth, that now he had to cry.18

A glimmer of that recollection can be seen in Guthrie's description of a dog-killing incident in The Way West:

The rifle sounded again, and now they could see McBee, the smoking gun in his hand and out from him, away from camp, a black dog broken in the back. The dog began to howl, the high, steady howl of deadly hurt. He scrambled in the grass, trying to get up, trying to ease himself, while the howl thinned high like a whistle. McBee strode toward the dog, picking up a club as he went, and the dog turned, as if expecting help, and got the butt of the club on his skull. A boy ran out, crying, and a woman after him. The woman cried out at McBee while the boy bent over his dog, and McBee said something and turned away, toward Evans and Summers, as if his business was too important for him to listen.19

Margaret Marshall, who reviewed The Big Sky for The Nation, commented that Guthrie's characterization of Teal Eye was less vivid than his brief description of a dying beaver, whose eyes reminded Boone Caudill of the

19The Way West, p. 55.
Indian girl. Here is that passage:

He saw now that she had been at work on her leg. A little bit more and she would have chewed herself free. There were just the tendons holding, and a ragged flap of skin. The broken bone stuck out of the jaws of the trap, white and clean as a peeled root. Around her mouth you could see blood.

She looked at him, still not moving, still only with that little shaking, out of eyes that were dark and fluid and fearful, out of big eyes that liquid seems to run in, out of eyes like a wounded bird's. They made him a little uneasy, stirring something that lay just beyond the edge of his mind and wouldn't come out where he could see it.

When Boone Caudill shoots a buffalo, Guthrie describes the animal:

The buffalo's eyes were fading. They looked soft now, deep and soft with the light going out of them. His legs still waved a little. Summers put his knife in his throat. "We'll roll him over, and this child'll show you how to get at good feedin'."

In These Thousand Hills, Godwin recalls the slaughter of buffalo:

"So's we paddled down and there, close to the mouth of the Yellowstone, they was makin' a crossin'—more buffalo than a man could count in all the time since old Adam, more'n there's a name for or a spyglass built strong enough to find the lead and drag of. The pilot he banged right into the middle of 'em and backed up the paddles so as to stay there, and everyone run to the rails and began blazin' away, with rifles and fuses and scatter guns and

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21 The Big Sky, p. 184.
22 Ibid., p. 110.
pistols and peashooters and whatever threw lead. Three hundred dead game sports there was, allow a few one way or the other, all havin' the time of their lives while the buffalo swam crazy and wore themselves out, a big bunch just drowndin' and a bunch gettin' bullet-killed and the wounded and weak boggin' down in the shore mud and waitin' there helpless while a hell's slew of wolves danced on the bank."

Godwin got his pipe and filled it. "We left 'em there, all except three cows that we hauled in to eat. Some of that meat spoiled before we got to it."

Needless killing by mountain men helped destroy their paradise, Guthrie suggests. In The Big Sky, he wrote:

> It was as if the land was deserted, except for the elk and deer and the buffalo and the bear. Everywhere one saw them, at every bend, on every island, on every bar—not the great herds of buffalo that made the earth tremble, but the wanderers, three or four or a dozen, browsing on the bottom grass, drinking in the stream. The hunters killed enough meat for a dozen crews, taking only the choice parts, spiking them to a great pair of elk antlers that had been placed in the prow. At night and in the early morning the wolves howled over what was left.

> In an article in Holiday, Guthrie remarks:

> I've never known an outfitter who really liked to kill. He indulges his dudes, to be sure, and takes them to hunting grounds and isn't critical of their blood lust. He may shoot an elk or moose or deer for meat as a matter of economics, but he doesn't shoot for trophies, nor does he shoot for what is called the fun of it. He is too close to fellow creatures to be brutal, more interested in seeing beast and bird alive than in seeing them dead. I speak of all the guides I know, and I know

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23 These Thousand Hills, pp. 90-91.
24 The Big Sky, p. 155.
and have known many.  

He also was speaking, he might have added, of himself. Like the guides, he does not condemn those who hunt:

I am not too critical. I liked to hunt once and do not know whether it is maturity or decline that says to let life live, that tells me to forego the gun in favor of the eye. A kill is a removal and a loss, if like me, you like to watch. For the sight of being and grace it substitutes the sober sight of meat.  

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CHAPTER XIII

Prejudice against the Indian ran strong in the mountain man and in wagon train companies, and Guthrie meets this fact squarely. His white characters rarely speak favorably about an Indian:

... with no nabob about, they the Crows talked small and so dirty that even a trapper noticed it.\(^1\)

An Indian wasn't a match for a white man, not a real man with two good arms.\(^2\)

With whiskey a man could get anything he wanted from the Indians—from all of them, anyhow, except for the Commanches, who didn't care to drink.\(^3\)

Them Rocks! Piddlin' people if ever I see any. Ain't as good as plain niggers, be they, Sam?\(^4\)

... who, any more, was afraid of Indians, of the gut-eating beggars that even the proud tribes had become?\(^5\)

He an Indian had a dull, silly, friendly look on his face like a man might expect to find on a no-account dog's if it so happened a dog could smile.\(^6\)

When Boone Caudill angers a "civilized" white

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\(^{1}\)The Big Sky, p. 225.  
\(^{2}\)Ibid., p. 232.  
\(^{3}\)Ibid., p. 243.  
\(^{4}\)Ibid., p. 344.  
\(^{5}\)These Thousand Hills, p. 111.  
woman, she screams: "You git! Git off our place, you—you murderin' white Injun, you!"

Dick Summers in *The Big Sky* and Lije Evans in *The Way West* are among the few Guthrie characters who will defend the Indian. Here is a conversation between Summers and Russell at a rendezvous. Russell speaks first:

"Such impudence! Those Bannock rascals coming in to trade, but still refusing to give up the horses they had stolen!"
"Injuns think different from whites."
"You mean they don't think."
"Stealin's their way of fun," Summers explained.
"They'll have to learn better, even if the learning comes hard. We gave the Bannocks a lesson. Killed thirteen of them right here and chased after the rest and destroyed their village and shot some more during the three days we fought them. In the end they promised to be good Indians. Bloody business, but necessary."
"Maybe so."
"The only way to settle disputes with hostile Indians is with a rifle. It writes a treaty they won't forget."
"Maybe," Summers answered again.
"They'll sing small in a few years. A wave of settlers will wash over them. The country won't be held back by a handful of savages."

In *The Way West*, Evans and Tadlock argue over whether a captured Indian is to live or die. Tadlock says:

"I'll kill an Indian or two before this trip's

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"No sense in killin' one that didn't do you wrong," Evans told him. "One's like another."
"You faulted Mack for killin' that Kaw."
"I wouldn't expect you to acknowledge that the circumstances are different."
"Tadlock," Evans said, "I'm peaceable, but, by God, it's hard to keep from twistin' your neck!"

The hatred and prejudice of Guthrie's characters do not reflect his views. Asked about a prejudiced statement spoken by Boone Caudill, Guthrie answered, "That was Boone's opinion." When they do not represent the viewpoint of a character, Guthrie's words about the Indian can be both respectful and compassionate, as in this description:

By a miracle Hole-in-the-Leg rode his horse still, but his leg bloated his pants leg and bulged through the slits cut to allow for the swell. Not even pride could keep him these days from riding one-sided. His face was as old as the face of suffering, as young-old as the face of a sure-to-die child. His eyes started ahead as if opened on things beyond this earth and this sky and this close wind-riffle of grass. But the hard present of him showed, chiseled in cheeks and chin.

When the point-of-view comes back to a white man, so does the white man's bias. Watching the same badly wounded Indian, Tom Ping thinks:

Not Hole-in-the-Leg but Swole Leg, Swole-Big-as-Hell Leg, Swoll-to-the-Grave Leg. And there would

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9The Way West, pp. 210-211.
10Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
11These Thousand Hills, p. 126.
be one good Indian.\textsuperscript{12}

Guthrie's Indians usually are not admirable fellows. Fee Simple is mentally ill and Robideau is a killer in Murders at Moon Dance. In The Big Sky, Poordevil is pathetic and ridiculous, while braves talk Boone Caudill into believing that his friend fathered Caudill's child. In These Thousand Hills, an Indian tries to beat Lat Evans in a horse race by flinging his blanket in Evans' face.

But there is good as well as bad in Guthrie's Indians. "I always liked Red Horn," he says of the Piegan chief, "and Teal Eye."\textsuperscript{13} He points out further that "the very fact that Boone Caudill settled so comfortably with the Piegans might say something for them."\textsuperscript{14} Of the braves who planted the seed of suspicion in Boone's mind, Guthrie notes that they also "urged Boone against violence,"\textsuperscript{15} an entreaty he ignored.

Guthrie never has attempted to write from the viewpoint of an Indian or a Negro, partly because he does not consider himself qualified to do so. Dan Cushman considers this a correct course of action. "Never give

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 122.

\textsuperscript{13}Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
a point of view to a minor character. There is a limit to an author's presumption," Cushman says. He questions whether anyone but an Indian can write from the viewpoint of an Indian, and he notes that he avoided taking that viewpoint in his novel about Indians, *Stay Away, Joe*. William Styron, says Cushman, received severe criticism for his *Confessions of Nat Turner*, because he tried to write from the viewpoint of a 19th century Negro slave. "The critics are saying, 'Who the hell is Styron to write from a Negro's point of view.'"16

It was not until after the time of the mountain man that the prejudice against the Indian turned to open antagonism. Guthrie says:

Actually, the old mountain men didn't hate Indians; they would kill them on occasion, especially if they stole their horses. But there wasn't that active animosity that came later during the real Indian wars. I'm sure most people had prejudices against them--thought about them as heathen savages --but the feeling got worse as time went on, as the white man encroached more and more on the Indian's holdings, and drove off the game.17

The Blackfeet Indians, victims of that encroachment, have the special respect of Guthrie. He writes:

No prouder Indians ever lived, and none braver or more belligerent. With their allies, the Gros Ventres, they warred and hunted and held frolic from

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16 Cushman interview.

17 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
the Green River far into Canada, from the lands of the Flatheads to those of the Sioux and Crow. Battles they might lose but wars never. What defeated them was smallpox brought up the Missouri by white men in 1937. The Blackfeet died by the scores, by hundreds—indeed, by thousands—and, so decimated, never rose again to old-time strength. Yet they remained warriors, those who lived and their successors; and by individuals and groups they remained an ever-present danger until at last the white man had his way.

Clearly, Guthrie is not proud of what the white man did to the Indian:

The red man was the savage, the white man the civilizer, or so most Western writers had it before guilt began to ride us. Against them stood, and stands, the brutal consideration that in the years 1863 to 1885 ten appointed agents labored (or did they?) with the Blackfeet. But take one off that total; though confirmed by the Senate, he never served. The terms of the remaining nine, not allowing for the gaps when the Indians had no agent at all, averaged only two years and three months. And of the nine, one was "relieved" of duty, one "removed," and two "suspended."

Maladministration, of course. Some agents were crooked, some incompetent, one or more, perhaps, conscientious but undone by politics and by the ineptitude or cupidity of superiors. Often suppliers of Indian food and goods were in on the game. The Indians had either to undergo cold and hunger, and sometimes starvation, or to steal. The stealings were regarded as added proof of Blackfoot incorrigibility.

In 1907 my father, then publisher of The Acantha, put an exhibit in evidence.

"On the last day of the recent county fair," he wrote, "a little incident occurred which, to one noticing it somewhat closely, furnished material for reflection. The stock parade had been formed, and the horses and cattle were being led down Main Street when they met the usual Indian outfit of two or three lean pack ponies, a small and badly worn wagon with

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18 Guthrie, "Town to Be A Boy in," p. 10.
tumbledown cover, the whole presided over by an Indian and two squaws and followed by three or four hungry dogs.

"Naturally the Indians made way for the parade, but they were not attracted by it, and the squaws soon were busy with the garbage heaps on vacant lots nearby. It was a meeting of the old and nearly dead past with the latest of what is modern; it was aboriginal savagery, somewhat enlightened and improved, coming face to face with conditions of civilization and passing them by with indifference which forbade even momentary curiosity.

"The incident called sharply to mind the apparently utter unconcern which progress in its march has for individuals and races. It seems to be externally ordered that the less fit must cease, must perish."

Other evidence of the kind existed in plenty, though not many men looked beneath surfaces. A boy then, I once saw at the old slaughterhouse on the Teton a lean Indian eating a piece of discarded gut, uncooked and unclean. I thought he was eating by choice. And it was said that the breeds in the cabins on the south fringe of town devoured, of all things, skunks. Maybe they did, and maybe they had to. Some of the youngsters from Breedtown came to school smelling powerfully.19

Guthrie's sadness over the plight of the Indian is expressed poignantly in his observations at an Indian graveyard he and Swanberg visited near Lander, Wyoming:

One grave had inscribed on it: "Buried like a white man." We looked at it quite a while. But for his white brother this Shoshone would have been tied in a tree and left to birds and weather, but now he was underground and had dirt in his mouth and was proud of it. Proud to be buried like the men who had forced their ways of life on him and done so many of his fellows in. Sometimes a man

19Ibid.
imagines he can hear the angels crying. 20

Guthrie's characters often are prejudiced against Negroes as well as Indians, and he does not gloss over this reality. Even his heroes, like Lije Evans, reflect the overt racism of the time:

He could live and fight fever and trade at the store and hope maybe someday to buy himself a nigger and so have more time for doing what he wanted to do. It wasn't that he wanted a passel of niggers and a big house and fancy horses, like some had in the cotton country in the south of the state. Maybe he didn't want even one nigger. He was a slave man himself, but still, come right down to the quick of it, he didn't know as one man had a right to own another, black or white. 21

Guthrie gives more than passing treatment to only one Negro in his three major novels. This is Happy, the servant in Miss Fran's house of prostitution. Happy is an Uncle Tom—kind, faithful and obedient, and never forgets his low station. The portrayal is true to the period, and Guthrie does not attempt to moralize about the life Happy must lead.

As a member of society, Guthrie is deeply troubled by today's racial strife. His view of his own prejudices during his years at college is cynical and self-deprecating:

20Guthrie, "Adventure with History," Holiday, 14, July, 1953, p. 86.

21The Way West, p. 4.
An instructor of forgotten name had asked his students to list their prejudices. I couldn't think of one and wrote down "None." No prejudices, but we didn't want a Jew in the fraternity and were careful about that. There was only one Negro on campus, a fine boy, too, as all admitted, but he was a Negro. It was fortunate we had no Indians in the student body. Everyone knew about Indians. No prejudices, just a normal capacity for realism.22

He recalls an incident in the South that taught him a lesson about racism:

Prejudices? The first prejudice! A man tends toward the accepted positions of the society in which he moves. He may recognize their injustices. He may resist them. But race prejudice is a cancer in all stocks, white, black or brown, Christian or Jew, and needs constant watching and examination even by those who lay claim to immunity.

I knew from experience in Lexington that separate and equal education was separate but not equal and had said as much. I knew that the Negro enjoyed no equality before the law and I had spoken out. I doubted he ever would have equal opportunity, at least in my lifetime, and regretted that he wouldn't. I kept hearing, and kept denying, that Negroes were pushy and took separate seats in buses just so white people would have to sit with them. "Hell," I would answer. "If there's a vacant seat, I take it myself unless I spot a friend." Some people, advancing bits of evidence that I protested, called me a "nigger lover."

Then, one sleepy Saturday afternoon, I was waiting alone on a bus. As it pulled to a stop and I was about to step in, someone knocked me aside. I turned and saw a heavy colored woman where I had stood, and the unsuspected cancer broke open.

"Goddammit," I said, "you can get on first! You don't have to knock me down."

She cowered like a whipped dog. "Mistuh," she told me, panting, "I was waitin' a block up the street, and the white bus driver wouldn't stop for me, and I been doin' day work and got to get home to tend to

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22The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 51.
my chirren. So I had to run."

I apologized, thinking about carcinogens.

Never again, I told myself after that Nieman term, would I be so susceptible. Never again would I settle almost comfortably in a tainted tradition and accept as much as I had. If not born equal, men were born with the right to an equal chance. I would fight for that kind of equality, for an equality that offered fair chance and equated equals with equals while recognizing the vast differences among men whatever color.23

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23Ibid., pp. 183-184.
CHAPTER XIV

In a review of The Big Sky and The Way West, Dayton Kohler struck at the bedrock of Guthrie's perspective of the west:

Together, The Big Sky and The Way West sum up two periods of the history of a region, the age of the explorer and trapper and the age of the settler. At the same time they reveal a deep tension in their author's own mind. It is clear that Guthrie is of two opinions about the frontier experience. As he projects it through the story of Lije Evans and the "On-to-Oregon" company, it is good, a promise of law and social stabilization in an area that has been solitary and wild. But in the closing chapters of The Big Sky and in the musings of Dick Summers the reading is that the white man defiles nature through motives of greed and ruthless conquest. These books present the same mixed social theory that we find in The Prairie, where Leatherstocking and Ishmael Bush represent the same opposing viewpoints. We are told that Guthrie is planning two more novels to make up a panel of four about the West. Perhaps his own views will be clearer in the next novel of the series.

Although Kohler correctly finds Guthrie to be of "two opinions" about the development of the West, he is wrong in assuming they are not compatible. Guthrie contends that one can accept civilization's expansion while disliking some of its consequences. He asks:

Don't we all have that dichotomy...? As I get older, I dislike more and more what goes in the name of progress. I dislike crowds and I hate to see our wilderness disappear--very, very much. If

that's a dichotomy, then I'm a victim of it. I don't know how you want clarity on that big a subject /The West/. Am I going to take the pulpit and argue for either /viewpoint/? That would be rather stupid.2

Certainly Guthrie saw promise in the settlement of the West. Lije Evans' ebulation might be Guthrie's own when he says of Oregon in The Way West, "Yonder it was, yonder was home, yonder the rich soil waiting for the plow, waiting for the work of hands, for the happy cries of children."3 Still, those who developed the West also helped destroy it:

Each passing generation of actual inhabitants loses the West, and each succeeding one rediscovers it. For mountain men like Jim Bridger and Tom Fitzpatrick the end came when beaver thinned out and Londoners ruined the market, to boot, by quitting fur hats in favor of their newfangled silk ones. It came for the hide-hunter when he had killed all the buffalo and put himself out of business. In Montana a bunch of them named a place Belly Ups. It came for the placer miner when the placers played out. With the wolves gone, the West was gone for the wolfer. The cowpuncher rode high, wide and handsome, but not for long after some fool invented barbed wire. Fences, internal combustion and the increasing number of pilgrims finished the good life for Charlie Russell, the famous western painter, himself once a pilgrim. His later years were years of lament. Owen Wister married the West, only to divorce it when it turned false. Today's aging homesteaders, destroyers of one West, pine for their own good old days.4

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2Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.


Few present-day inhabitants realize that their
carelessness, like that of the mountain man, is helping
to ruin the world they love. Guthrie writes:

"... Montanans don't take too much stock in
plundered-planet talk. The stockman finds it hard
to believe that ranges can be overgrazed. All we
need is rain, he says, searching the dry, blue sky.
He doesn't always realize that once the streams ran
clear that now run rusty. He'll agree with the
ag-college man I talked to who ventured the opinion
that, although trees and cows and people might all
die, the native grasses, as natural-selection survi-
vors of the hordes of buffalo, would go on forever.
What bothers the stockman is Government interfer-
ence. Lord, how he hates it; except, of course, for
the tariff, which doesn't strike him as inter-
ference, anyhow."

Asked if this tendency to "destroy the thing you
love" is inherited from the mountain men, Guthrie said:

"Yes, I think it's more than a vestige. Of course,
part of that springs from--oh, I'll call it more or
less late Christianity, 17th or 18th century, in
which we got terribly anthropomorphic--the world was
made for man, to do with as he pleased. And I think
that relates somehow to Christianity."

Yet, Guthrie does not condemn the mountain men:

"Admit they were not tame to begin with, else
they wouldn't have been there. The circumstances
of a wild life made them still wilder. Loneliness
and the hazard and day-by-day unpredictability undo
the moralities, and these men, though by choice, were
lonely most of the time, imperiled often, and sub-
ject always to chance. A broken leg or the loss
of a horse or an arrow from nowhere could bring
death to a man, to any man no matter how careful.
Like the turns of the sharp-turning weather, life
was a gamble, perhaps to be lost to a fellow fur hunters

5Guthrie, "Montana," Holiday, 8, September, 1950,
p. 38.
6Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
offended in a moment of fun, to a man, that is, like yourself. You never could tell...

It is easy to fault them, to call them wanton and profligate and thoughtless of tomorrow and God. Too easy. These were great men in their way, and their way was the way of courage and resource, if also the way of the undisciplined wild, as it became the nature of things. We are deep in their debt, though they served us unconsciously and rued the results. They were the pathfinders, the trail breakers, the spade men for America's westering.

Who, but they, for foremost example, discovered South Pass, that break in the great solid wall of the Rockies through which thousands of home seekers were later to labor?"7

Guthrie is an outspoken conservationist. His opinions were influenced by his friend, Bernard De Voto, with whom Guthrie took an Air Force junket up the soon-to-be-dammed Missouri River in 1951. Guthrie recalls Devoto's opposition to the proposed damming plan of the Corps of Engineers:

I see Benny looking small but looming large there with the brass. General Pick, with an air almost mystical, supports the Corps and the Plan. He talks of the needs of generations unborn. He sees industries where industries have never been and to our minds never can be. He speaks of war and the military advantage of a developed Missouri. And Benny stands up to him and asks how many trans­continental railway lines, easily reparable if bombed, could be built with the money that is going into vulnerable dams. The question goes unresolved.

The Corps doesn't promote itself, say its spokesmen. It doesn't encourage projects. It merely answers public demand. And Benny, restraining himself, replies with a euphemism for nonsense. He knows better.

It was in their great and narrow dedication that

the Engineers provoked us. It was in their bureaucratic caste. I suggested to one of them that reforestation and the restoration of grasslands might be a better means of flood control than dams. "Maybe so," he answered, "but that's not our job. Our job is to build dams."

What about silt on this highly silty river? How long before the reservoirs filled up and dredges had to be employed? No problem there, I was told almost airily. First there was the dead water, deep and unmoving in the reservoirs. What did it matter if it was replaced by silt? I suspected some illogic here, but my man went on. Studies proved, he assured me, that silt would pose no difficulty for—I believe he said—something like one hundred and sixty-four years. That time seemed short to me, short for posterity, short for the substitution for a river of a shallow, soupy sea. More, having seen many reservoirs fill up quickly, I was doubtful of his figure. 8

In a Great Falls Tribune feature article Oct. 6, 1968, reporter Dick Coon wrote of Guthrie:

He says, in the policy of building more dams, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers' pledge "seems to be 'my bureaucracy—right or wrong."

"I begin to fear now that even the Forest Service, which I have supported, might soon be called the Department of Recreation.

"Witness its suggestion that the Lincoln back country be opened to motorized traffic. It would argue perhaps that the wilderness should be opened to 'inexpensive entry'—presumably it costs less to travel by Cadillac than on foot or by horse."

With tongue in cheek, Guthrie states, "As for a new dam on the Sun River, I suggest that all flood-endangered West Great Falls could be bought and demolished for less than the price of reservoirs, wherever located." 9

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8 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 210-211.
In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie compared beavers and human dam-builders:

"The Beaver... has to be logging, whether trees serve the purposes of food or dams or not. He has to be busy as a beaver and, under this compulsion, is as dedicated as any bureaucrat. More, like the Corps of Engineers or the brass of Reclamation, he can't endure the sight of running water."

Guthrie's interest in conservation is intertwined with desires for space and privacy. In a letter to Joseph Kinsey Howard in the preface of Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome, Guthrie wrote:

You used to say, quoting Thoreau, that you wanted a broad margin to your life. You even titled a book Montana Margins because here you found them wide. In the Montana State University magazine, Venture, you were quoted:

"This sums up what I want in life--room to swing my arms and to swing my mind. Where is there more opportunity for creation of these broad margins, physical and intellectual? Where is there more opportunity to enjoy the elemental values of living, bright sun and clean air and space? We have room. We can be neighbors without getting in each other's hair. We can be individuals."

Amen.

But at the same time you always argued for resource development, for instance for the cheap power which would attract industry which would create jobs. It was typical of you to want communities to prosper, to want people to enjoy opportunities. So, though you spoke in terms of small home industry, weren't you really on both sides of the fence as most of us are today--margins on the one hand, masses on the other?

A man can't oppose growth, I guess. He can't be unconcerned about the needs of people. But he still can regret our shrinking margins, recognizing himself as a personality split beyond the guiles of

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10 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 257-258.
In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie wrote about the encroachments of civilization on his Twin Lakes country.

It used to be the animals and I had privacy. Eight hundred acres, no matter that they're poor, provided range enough. We could roam and run and take a dip, knowing that the sky, eccentric though it might be, was free of peering eyes. Now planes spy on us and take pictures, I suppose, always by my impression when the human hiker halts his steps on nature's orders and stands or squats exposed; and their drone in any case is alien and unwelcome, reminiscent of the fact that progress leaves us no retreat. Not often but too often they are Forest Service planes and private kites; and yesterday there came a jet. So perfected that it can't work up a sweat within the speed of sound, it broke the barrier with its synthetic thunderclap and upset the animals and me and shook the bones of this old cabin, which seemed to me to whimper all night long while the west wind tried to soothe it. Old things ought not to be shook up. Price of survival, the smooth brass of the Air Force tells us smoothly.

The jet cleaved the air, leaving against the unoffending sky the white cut of its swipe. I watched it out of sight, hoping it would fall on a scientist.

In a wild moment once I undertook to underscore, by means of a hillbilly song, my hoary and admittedly excessive attitude. This humdinger was to be the cry of a mountain man like me—who wanted space and air, but folks moved about, and as folks do they bred a crew till only the air was bare.

Hiatus here because, after this infirm beginning or something close to it, I skipped the next and connecting verse and under a strong wind, sailed into the chorus. It went this way:

11Preface, Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome, pp. ix-x.
Keep them jaybirds outta my sky,
Where only birds was meant to fly,
And the Lord on High
Says you're coming too nigh.
Keep them noisy, nosey, pyznus jimcracks
Outta my sky!12

On another occasion, Guthrie wrote:

Now in his blind ambition man has become a
force both geographical and astral, and strange
moons sail the sky, and the man in the moon is a
frozen dog, and science has discovered in a fist of
dust power enough to make dust of our mountains.13

In a speech delivered at the College of Idaho
on Jan. 21, 1967, Guthrie demonstrated that he still is
one of conservation's angry men:

I am offended that industry and automobiles
pollute my air. I am offended that industrial and
human wastes pollute my waters. I am offended that
my lovely canyons become shores of stagnant lakes.
I am offended that bulldozers rape my once-lovely
meadows and uplands. I am offended by the greed of
man and his blind disinclination to keep his numbers
within the numbered teats of my planet. I say "mine"
throughout because they are mine. Beauty, the beauty
of nature, admits all to life ownership if we are
discerning enough to lay claim.
I keep going back to Montana because it is my
home. An anti-pollution law is in the making there.
It offers industry a tax inducement to lesson or
remove the emphysemic belches of its chimneys. Thus
it would pay offenders not to offend. Al Capone and
his bully boys had something of the same thing going
for them. It exempts automobiles, perhaps the first
befoulers of our atmosphere. They will be embraced
in time, and who cares if not in time for the victims
of lung cancer? And it exempts the mill or mills

12The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 258-259.

13Guthrie, "Our Lordly Mountains," Holiday, 24,
July, 1958, p. 106.
judged to emit nothing injurious to health, thus
giving them the right to stink our air up. I do
not like air that smells of the toilet, nor am I
impressed by the progressives who say, "It smells
like money to me."

Fundamental to my thinking here, I suppose, is
a remark made by a Canadian Indian. "We borrow this
earth from God." Let us, then, not defile it. Let
us nourish and cherish and preserve it and pass it
on, loved, to those who come after.¹⁴

The Myth--the never-never land of good guys, bad
guys, Noble Savages and rancher's daughters with blond
hair and pure hearts--is a major obstacle for anyone who
writes fiction about the West. Certainly Guthrie's
perspective of the West cannot be fully understood until
his confrontation with the Myth is examined.

Guthrie has been more successful than most
writers in making inroads on this popular but false
image of the West, but he has failed to destroy it.
Pulp novelists and television writers still enjoy a
lucrative market for their "shoot 'em up" outpourings.
In film versions of Guthrie's books, Hollywood inserts
the fantasy he so painstakingly avoided.

"The Myth is invulnerable, imperishable . . .
indestructable," Guthrie has said.¹⁵

¹⁴Guthrie, "Reflections in Passing," speech
¹⁵Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
He admits that his first book, *Murders at Moon Dance*, is a typical example of the "gun and gallop" formula western. However, *The Big Sky* dispelled some prevailing misconceptions about the mountain man and the Indians, and *The Way West* was moderately successful in smashing the image of the Noble Pioneer.

*These Thousand Hills* was less successful. This book dealt with one of the most firmly entrenched areas of the Myth—that of the fast-drawing, straight-shooting cowboy who would rather kiss his horse than his girl. Using a standard western plot, Guthrie undertook the challenge of writing a novel about late 19th century Montana cattlemen. He would create reality out of the trappings of the Myth. Dan Cushman said, "He tried to use cliches to his own advantage . . . but he failed."¹⁶

Although Guthrie dislikes the Myth, he understands why it is so popular:

... western critics keep asking why actual Westerners buy the myth of the West when they know better. Why do they read and write formula western fiction, which takes a germ of fact and by artificial insemination procreates a whole colony? Why do they go to western movies? Why do they sit hypnotized when the gunmen of legend comes on the TV screen? Why do they affect big hats, jeans or frontier pants and cowboy boots when most of them never bridle a horse, can't harness a team, and live by virtue of commerce in oil or insurance or underwear?

¹⁶Cushman interview.
Because the "becauses" are common to all of us. Because the state of knowing better never has been fatal to fantasy. That a time never quite was, that a represented thing never happened, that hero and "heavy" in actual life weren't that way, all these detractions grow niggling against gallop and gunshot. And except for the plainly functional, all styles of dress are affectations anyway, made popular by custom, designers, whim or whatever.

Occasionally, Guthrie must write within the confines of the Myth, as he did when he wrote the screen play for Shane in 1951:

Although Jack Schaefer, the author, betrayed some ignorance about the West that I knew—he came to know a lot more—his prose had drive, and it introduced into the myth of the West a couple of elements which, if not unique, were fresh and engaging nevertheless. One was that the story came from the observations and through the senses of a small boy. The other was that a triangle was kept innocent by the admiration of each character for the others.

The screen play Guthrie wrote did not go beyond the confines of the Myth, but it did introduce some realism within those confines:

The studio and the director, George Stevens, wanted to produce a superior western, within the western's limits. The Robin Hood Idea, you know. Well, it worked out very well. But I like to think we added to the Myth. My first morning with Stevens I said, "Do you know one thing, George, that offends me? You see all these western pictures, people getting shot down—I ain't never saw a funeral! Those bodies still lying all over the landscape?"

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17 Guthrie, "The West is Our Great Adventure of the Spirit," Life, p. 93.

18 The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 216-217.
And he said, "By God, that's a good idea, we'll have a funeral!" It wasn't in the book, though. The book is a very thin book. Just a short story. So a lot of improvising had to go into it.19

Guthrie was happy with the film, though it dealt with the Myth of the gunfighter:

Within its limitations, I was satisfied. There was no help for it. . . . A writer can't always pick his assignments. I mean he's hardly that free financially. DeVoto made a speech about the morality of a writer and he said when you take a commitment your morality is to do your very best, within the limitations of the commitment. And that makes sense.20

The movie received wide public acclaim:

Not for more than a year did I see "Shane." It had been kept in the can, as they say, until "High Noon" passed into sunset, a matter of timing. When I did see it, I sat stunned and incredulous. I hardly recognized my own stuff. It was, if not the best, then high among the best of all the westerns I had ever seen. My conviction was supported by the reviews it received, by the gate it drew and by the inclusion in five nominations for the Academy Award, which I think it deserved. I speak with modesty, for it was the genius of Stevens that made the film what it was. Under a grade-B director it would have been a grade-B picture.21

Guthrie was one of five writers nominated for the 1954 Academy Award for his screenplay of "Shane."22

Asked if there is a place in American society for

19Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
20Ibid.
21The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 218-219.
the Myth, Guthrie said, "Not in superfluity, which is what we have right now. There have been a lot of people entertained by it. If that's the justification, it's all right with me. I just choose not to write that way."  

If Guthrie is of two opinions about the western experience, if he is saddened by the prevalence of the Myth, he nevertheless loves the West and its heritage. "The West is an adventure of the spirit," Guthrie said in an article in Life:  

We are captivated by sheer adventure, by the rediscovery of adventure, by the hard simplicities of loneliness, privation, danger, the elemental contests of man versus nature and man versus man. We are caught up in admiration for the men who went before, as courageous and hardy as we wish to be and never can or shall be. We are atavistic, in rebellion against the conventions and limitations and order and tameness of what we call civilization. Give us the good old raw days! The South has always taken pride in gracious living. Almost from the start the North has had its gods of culture, government, shipping and finance. But more important in our whole thinking and inclination is the old and uncivilized West, the West of rugged individuality, of lawlessness, hardship, license, dispute and resolution by revolver and rifle, the West whether in legend or fact opposes propriety.  

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23 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.


25 Ibid., p. 93.
If there is a prime reason less than mystic for our enduring attachment to the West of fact and story, it can now perhaps be capsuled. The West freed us. It emphasized and emphasizes us as individuals—this in an elsewhere and nowadays world which at its freest and best still dwarfs individuality by congestion and restricts high adventure to a Sunday afternoon picnic. The West still makes the blood sing as it used to sing when hearts were stout and vistas inviting and the limit of hope in each of us was the far-western sea.\footnote{Ibid., p. 97.}

In an article in \textit{Holiday}, Guthrie wrote:

Mine is the young land, the young, raw, hardy land, though such are the uses of words that men call it the Old West. Old? Old only because it holds close to the days of its youth. Old because new is a name for today—which, when you think of it, is older than yesterday.

Call my West anachronistic. Call it unprogressive. Call it rude. It is still mine. Some of the reasons are obscure, and some can't be defined at all, and still others may be unreasonable, but it is still mine.\footnote{Guthrie, "The Rockies," \textit{Holiday}, 18, July, 1955, p. 98.}

Montana and Montanans have the special affection of Guthrie:

Montanans have a certain tough gaiety, an almost automatic refusal to be downed by circumstances. The Montanan's bloody head, unbowed, sees something funny in the blood. He makes a joke out of it. He buys a drink, not for escape but as defiance. One of them, who knew what it was to be lost in the mountains, said he'd always take a deck of cards with him thereafter. If he got lost, he'd start a game of solitaire, in the certainty that some damn fool would look over his shoulder to ask why...
he didn't play the red ten on the black jack.  

Guthrie likes the habit Montanans have of leaving their change on the bar while they drink. He says:

Free spending is a habit among Montanans, an attitude toward money perhaps stemming from the mountain man, who was contemptuous of possessions, or from the gold miner, who thought he always could make another strike, or from the stockman, who might be broke but never was broken.

The frontier is so close that social stratification hardly exists in Montana. The man of money and command plays poker with his barber. There's no worship of ancestors, of landholders, little kowtowing to money, not much regard for the dubious bases that snobbery rests on.

However, Guthrie cannot look on his state "with complete pride." He has been critical of prejudice against Indians:

... some Montanans are likely to feel, without assessing causes, that Indians and "breeds" are thieves and no-goods, for whom nothing can or need be done. Too bad, they'll say, the way the South treats Negroes.

He describes the intellectual climate of Montana as being "somewhat short of salubrious" and tries to

28 Guthrie, "Montana," Holiday, p. 36.
29 Ibid., p. 34.
30 Ibid., p. 35.
31 Ibid., p. 91.
32 Ibid.
33 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 224.
explain why:

I cast about for reasons and doubtfully put first the item of communication, the low state of which is less a fault than an inevitability. Granted that the Anaconda Company's virtual monopoly of the daily press, now ended through sale after intolerable years, can be laid to weak popular will, the problem surpasses mere ownership. Our towns are small. Our cities, too. Small communities can't support big papers—which isn't to equate bigness with goodness—and, though little papers may be excellent, lack of space keeps them from being thorough. . . .

It is a temptation to say that lack of communication, that alone, distorts and confounds Montana politics and gives rigidity to choice. In any case the political view, though clear, is not enchanting. For a long time the state's two corporate giants, Anaconda and the Montana Power Company, virtually ruled the state. For reinforcements they looked to the cowcounties east of the Continental Divide, where a belief in individuality and a man's rights extended to and made personal the impersonality of corporations. But there grew up the Farmers' Union, a formidable organization devoted to price supports, public power, cooperative endeavor and in league with labor, to assaults on the companies and the capture of the Democratic party. For both sides economics comes ahead of party allegiance.

Two more nearly direct opposites could hardly found, but there's one choice. The man of independent mind steers a lonely course between an American Legion mentality and that of the maddened man with the hoe and the handout. If he sides on occasion with the companies, he wears a copper collar; if on occasion he sides with the opposition, the F. B. I. ought to inquire into his loyalty. . . .

... a sort of anti-intellectual vigilanteism, an inhospitality to deviation, both in and beyond politics and economics, does exist. Difference all too often is suspect and unwelcome.34

Lack of communication is not Guthrie's only

34Ibid., pp. 225-226.
explanation for this anti-intellectual atmosphere:

"Lives without context," Jake Vinocur once said. He was a professor from Montana and a Jew from somewhere, possibly a ghetto where, for all I knew, lives could claim context.

We sat on the grass at my mountain home, under close stars, and around and away were the lights and shadows of a Montana night. It was an hour of no wind. Even the nearby aspens stood unworried, asleep without fret. On some far hill a coyote sang, deepening silence. And it seemed to me that Jake had put into three words all we had spoken.

This time was good, I thought, this time of silence and seeing, this rare time of felt union with the universe, these minutes escaped from a clock. Ahead and behind, first and last, to come and have come and gone—what were they? The past and the future and now, which wasn't now now, because it slid back in the thought of it, under eternal stars that might be under death sentences, too. Time was timeless and, by logic, then nothing, the great nothing that was the everything that was nothing. Minutes, days, months, years, centuries—they were no more than names, human inventions to mark the turn of a leaf and the swing of far suns. In timelessness existed the dead and the quick and the unborn, all in a context that Jake may or may not have meant to suggest.

"Today in Choteau," he said in his friendly, provocative way, "I stood on the street for a time, and a young woman in a convertible kept cruising the drag looking for something—something, I felt, she couldn't identify. But she kept driving back and forth, going slow, watching the sidewalks. What is it, Bud? An insufferable vacancy? The need of something to put between herself and the undertaker?" It was then that he said, answering himself, "Lives without context."

Now a breeze stirred, and the aspens danced anxiously, and I steered the talk toward my fruitless but somehow satisfying exploration of time.

"Maybe I follow you," I said. "No thought about precursors and successors, about relationships in the human adventure, about kinship to the dead and unborn and all that goes with it?"

Jake was silent, maybe examining what I had said, maybe thinking his own thoughts.
"About the sense of continuity in time, as if they considered the knowing and feeling of flow unrewarding and needless?"

He nodded, thinking beyond me, I thought.

We were talking about Montana, and we generalized, both knowing that our generalizations, true and false and tentative, applied to other of men's demarcations.

But we knew that new country, like Montana, had few really old fields to cherish. Less than a century ago there had been no Montana. There were nor progenitors to relate past and present and future. We were a melting pot, melted quite well among native Americans, if there were any, and Germans and Irish and Danes and Welshmen and Norsemen and Jews and whatever others, yet not melted by history and ancestry into a flux. The shortage of attachments shortened the future to the next pay-off and the upcoming season; and the little bars in the little wheat-elevated towns did a good business, and the juke boxes punished even deaf ears; and, come Saturday, that check that the bartender is holding will clear. Here was the now, isolated from old and unforeseen nows, the now by tongue just expressed and by time just sent to the past.35

Indians in a bar in Browning reminded Guthrie of his talk with Vinocur:

The young couples danced with huge enjoyment and grace, danced the jitterbug instead of the old tribal steps, danced to the beat of a needle on wax, not to the thump of a stick on a hide, and over and over, between gulps of beer, they fed coins to the box for one song. It went:

I've stayed around
And played around
This old town too long.
Summer's almost gone.
Yes, winter's comin' on.

And there were Jake and I, seated on the grass

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35Ibid., pp. 226-228. Dr. Jacob Vinocur, a professor of English at the University of Montana from 1954 to 1966, was in 1969 the vice president for academic affairs at Northern Michigan University.
again, watching the stars. Lives without context. Lives without connections, excised from tradition, withered in the graft from red man to white. Lives unsure and fearful. Only there, back in Browning, within limits, in beery vacuum, was home.36

Guthrie's property at Twin Lakes near Choteau is a microcosm of the West he has written about. When he writes about this area, he reveals a love of nature that is fundamental to his western perspective:

April in Montana is a harsh and fretful month, a time of wayward winds and unpredicted snows and rains as cold as snow. If the sun shines for a day or two or three, the eager willows swell, and sap warms the wintered aspens in the foothills, and magpies start building nests like twiggy basketballs — but all too early, all too soon. Snow will come again, and cold, and the reaching grasp at new life be discouraged and postponed. Ordinarily, that is.

It is the last of April, and we have just had a big snow which, after a dry winter, is good for grass and wheat but bad for birds and buds. Even now there is a touch of storm in the air, and the sun, after trying to shine, seems ready to give up.

I am at Twin Lakes, looking more often out a quart-sized picture window than at this waiting page. The place is a pocket in the great eastern apron of the Rockies, and I have kept the unimaginative name, not wanting to monkey with history even if I could persuade people to indulge my monkey-shines.

I am alone, but when I look down at the floor I see my old dead dog again. She hates cold and misty-moist weather and gazes up with pleading eyes, knowing I am God and could change things if I would. I dislike to disappoint her. All gods must feel regretful.

Outside, the snow is melting but the sky still overcast. Clouds obscure Ear Mountain, but I know it rises there, four miles away, and on brighter days will bolster me again. The green grass shows

36Ibid., pp. 230-231.
on the shoveled path beyond the window, and birds are feeding on the grain that I have scattered. Now is the season of the junco, the Oregon snowbird. In sight are some two dozen of them, perky little creatures, smaller than English sparrows, with dark hoods pierced by white beaks and marks of rusty red on backs and sides. They arrive to feed as if on signal and on signal wing away, shortly to return together. Something about the window keeps confusing them as it does not other birds. Four or five have hit it, leaving bits of down on the glass, and one lay shut-eyed and gasping afterwards. I went out and picked him up and brought him in and, though confident of his identity, checked him against my key to birds. In an hour he got his breath and vision and fluttered hot-pulsed in my palm and on release set out uncertainly.37

Guthrie, who spends his summers at the Twin Lakes cabin, finds fulfillment in his seclusion:

For me and potentially perhaps for nearly everybody, retreat is restoration. It can hardly be a steady way of life except for hermits, of whom I know but one, yet on occasion strengthens us for the fretful and alien world we have created. It satisfies heired hungers, the hunger for return to origins, for slow and unimpeded views of earth and sky and their inhabitants, for once-easy privacy—all simple hungers grounded deep. Life, I say, and my life with it. If my fur and feathers need not my company, still I need theirs.

Friends come to see me, of course, and sometimes casual visitors, and I enjoy them and their enjoyment of my place. And I enjoy good loneliness, which is not loneliness at all for, beyond the screen, a chipmunk begs for peanut butter.38

37Ibid., pp. 253-258.

CHAPTER XV

Guthrie is a disbeliever in absolutes of any form. Swanberg has said, "Bud's outlook is that there is no such thing as black and white. There's only gray. You never get a choice between good and evil. They are in conflict with themselves all the time."\(^1\) His writing reflects this perspective. In The Writer, Guthrie once wrote:

... characterizations fail because they ignore, or simplify, the complexities of the human spirit. Standard portraiture are no good. The practice of making a man or a woman stand for a trait is no good.\(^2\)

To illustrate that point, Guthrie related a personal experience:

A few weeks ago I was in the mountains of Montana, at a summer cabin just four miles away from a small dude ranch. This has been a dry year in Montana. Up in the hills the usual crop of wild fruit, of raspberries and chokecherries and strawberries, has been scant. As a consequence, a black bear, driven down from the highlands by hunger, had taken to raiding the garbage cans at the dude ranch. Shots fired over his head didn't scare him away for long. Morning and night he appeared again to paw over the leavings in the cans.

The dude rancher didn't want to kill him. Anyhow, it's against the law to do so except in actual

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\(^1\)Swanberg interview.

emergencies. And at the same time he was worried lest one of his guests blunder into the bear at night.

So he called the Wildlife Service and asked for help. The Wildlife Service sent a man up.

Now it happened that I was there, a non-paying guest at the place, when the man arrived.

He was a young man, long and lean, with a face that looked as if it liked to kill things. He had a brand-new .270 Remington that he showed me with pride, wiping the prints of my fingers from the blued-steel barrel after I had handled it.

He also had a bear trap, a heavy, spring trap with hooked teeth, capable, he said, of holding a 1,200-pound animal. He set it in back of the lodge, and posted signs for travelers to keep away. Around the trap he threw a few pieces of beef scrap.

We went back to the cabin then and had dinner—supper, we call it in Montana, and the gang got to telling stories and singing songs while the darkness fell.

It was about 10:30 o'clock when the cook, back in the kitchen, heard the clank of the trap. She came running in to tell us, and the lean, hard young man leaped to his feet and grabbed up his shiny rifle and asked me to come along with the flash. He told the others to stay back. You couldn't tell, he said, the bear might break out of the trap, even out of a trap that would hold 1,200 live pounds.

We two stumbled out into the dark and climbed the hill back of the cabin, and there in the light of the flash was the bear. He wasn't making a sound. He wasn't grunting or roaring or squalling at the steel teeth in his leg. He would rear back against the chain spiked into a heavy tree and, failing in that, would rear and bat the trap against the trees around him.

That was what we saw—the bear lunging and rearing and batting the trap against the trees. What we heard was just the clank of the metal and the hard strike of steel on wood.

"Hold the light steady," the young man said.

He brought up his rifle, and for a minute it seemed to me he hesitated, as if somehow unwilling to line up the sights.

Then the rifle barked and the bear slumped down, and we waited to make sure he was good and dead before going closer.
He was. The lean young man had cracked his skull.
We went up after a minute or two, and the young man stooped, and I could see both his actions and the look on his face in the wash of the flash. He put his hand on the bear, gently, and said, "There, boy," and then he turned his young killer's face to me and said, "Goddam such a job, anyhow."
Why do I tell this story? What is the point of it? Can you guess?
It seems to me to have a good many points. I've told it, first of all, to underscore the subject of this article—which is characterization.

What is the manifestation that made this young man a character, a human being, rather than the symbol of blood-thirst? It was the final show of compassion, wasn't it? Now it seems to me that when you hunt bears in fiction—or doves, for that matter, you need to do so with compassion. (You may substitute understanding if you want to. The word compassion seems to me nearest to what I mean.) It appears to me that compassion is perhaps the most important single quality, the first requirement of the writer of fiction. Your villain isn't all villain. In degree he's a victim of circumstance. He's rooting in the garbage because the berry crop has failed, like this unhappy stumble-bum of a bear. Or he's shooting because he's had to make a choice, maybe the wrong one, to be sure, like the young hunter.

If we let the bear be the hero of this story, what do we have to know about him, except that hunger has driven him from the hills and into the trap? There's one thing--can you guess it?--that must be added. Well, that if you had happened to stumble into him in the dark, he might have wiped half your face away with a stroke.

So you regard your characters with compassion—not uncritically, either, mind you. You understand them. You know what makes them tick. You are at once critical and sympathetic, with the consequence that these creatures of your mind emerge full-blown on paper. Without the full understanding, without that compassion, you have one-sided, incredible, flat figures. You have the kind of symbol that the bear hunter seemed to me until I heard him say, "Goddam such a job anyhow."

Given compassion, you don't horse your characters around. You don't trot them out just to show what fools or rascals they are. You present them as human
beings, maybe cruel, maybe evil, maybe grasping, but always human and credible, always against the background or always with the pinch of grace that gives them the third and necessary dimension.\(^2\)

Guthrie's ability to see the good as well as the bad extends to life in general. His perspective is essential to what he considers a truthful portrayal of the human experience. In a speech at the University of Montana in 1949, Guthrie said:

There are no answers. There are only approaches to answers, tentative, temporary, reversible. We go through life wanting answers, wanting final, everlasting, absolute, guaranteed answers; and often in our hunger and our fright and our selfishness, we tell ourselves we've found them. But there are no answers.

Neither, in the large sense, are there clean choices. There's another negative—the imperfections of choice. This is not right and that wrong. This is not wise and that foolish. This is not noble and that ignoble. This is not virtuous and that sinful. This is fifty-one percent right, fifty-two percent wise, forty-eight percent noble, sixty-three percent virtuous. Every choice entails a sacrifice in rejection, an onus in adoption. . . .

Maybe you're asking yourselves what all this has to do with writing and particularly the writing of fiction. I think it has a good deal to do with it. Fiction writing is the exploration of personality in relation to event—or that's part of what it is. If it succeeds it is an illumination of life. It gives the reader at least some bit of insight, some flash of awareness, some additional understanding of human experience. If it doesn't communicate, it fails, and if it has nothing to communicate, it fails too, or it ought to. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. It seems to me that the inquirer, with all his confusions and contradictions and irresolutions, should have more to communicate

\(^3\)Ibid., pp. 359-360.
than the man who closes the riddle of experience
with the absolutes of yes and no. . . .

One of the disappointments of our later years,
it seems to me, is the discovery of the mixed quality
of things. We want to believe in pure reason, in
final answers, in bright choice, and when we find
we can't we feel disheartened and undone. But the
discovery is a challenge, too. From all my unwelcome
uncertainty where do I go? I try to go ahead inquiring
in the hope—I didn't say assurance—that honest
inquiry in time will bring answers; and in the assurance
that choices, if never perfect, can be more truly
made; that, in the clear recognition of outward circumstance
and inward failing. 4

Eighteen years later, in a speech at the College
of Idaho, Guthrie said:

The fact is that the longer I live, the less
certain I am. Old convictions have been forsaken—
most of them—and new ones accepted only in apprentice-
ship. If on occasion I seem to speak with assurance,
remember that most of us assert ourselves most surely
when we are most unsure. 5

Guthrie avoids certainty in conceiving a character
for his fiction. Men are neither all good nor all evil
but a mixture of the two qualities. He found western
writer Owen Wister to be more human than his heroes
because he is "more complex and hence less decisive.

I find him . . . more, let us say, like the
rest of us in the face of hard and miserable choices.

4Guthrie, "Twenty-six Years After," remarks made
at the University of Montana when he received an honorary
degree of Doctor of Literature, July 21, 1949. Published
by Public Service Division, University of Montana.

5Guthrie, "Reflections in Passing."
Take, for example, his experience with a Western host, a brutal rancher, who became so infuriated with a used-up horse that he not only booted it insanely but gouged out its left eye. That experience—Wister's friend, Teddy Roosevelt, insisted on the omission of the eye-gouging—became a chapter in "The Virginian." The Virginian righteously beat the hell out of the rancher. Not so Owen Wister. "I was utterly stunned and sickened at this atrocious cruelty, and walked back to my own horse and sat down, not knowing very well what I was doing. . . . But the situation was a hard one. Here I was, the guest, and the very welcome guest of a stranger, who had done all he could to make me at home because I had come to see his friend. . . . So my worldly wisdom, for I think this is all a low argument, prevailed over the higher course. . . . By God, as I rode back over those dry steep slopes, I found myself once or twice hoping the horse would fall and kill him. And I remain the moral craven who did not lift a finger or speak a word." 6

Guthrie's characters face the same hard choices as Wister, who realized that his host was not all villain. Lat Evans, in These Thousand Hills, must decide whether to take part in a vigilante hanging party or to allow his cattle to be rustled. He joins the party, but not without nagging doubts about the morality of his action.

Guthrie believes that a writer learns about the "mixed quality" of people through self-examination, not observation:

Within you are the seeds, the possibilities, of all the people on the whole face of the earth. (If that's taking in too much ground, it still has

the substantial element of truth.) In you are cruelty, rascality, perversion and, I'll add, the opposite sex. And in you are nobility and goodness and regularity and all the virtues. The one difference between your endowment and that of any of your fellows is one of degree. Some of you won't believe this, but I think it's true. The difference is only one of degree. Man and woman are joined in the human spirit, and villain and hero, and the ugly and the beautiful.

So learning human nature is learning yourself. So the writing of a novel is self-exploration, self-discovery, self-realization.

I don't know that you become better because of this self-probing. I know you become more knowing. I know you have to do it—or at any rate I have to do it—when I write a novel.

I call this understanding of people through self-knowledge the final feat of the imagination in fiction. Unless you can accomplish it, unless you can put yourself for the moment in the shoes of any one of your characters, I think you don't have fiction. You have the imitation, the unsuccessful imitation of fiction.7

He suggests that the books of Harold Bell Wright and Norman Mailer both present a false image of life, if from opposite ends of a sex spectrum:

Life is contradiction and compromise. When we treat it as if it weren't, we commit the contradiction of contradictions. We are false to what we know, to what we are, to what we have observed. For purposes of illustration, let's take an easy case. You older people, at least, will remember Harold Bell Wright and his books. One of them was called When A Man's A Man. Mr. Wright couldn't see or wouldn't say that when a man's a man he has certain male impulses. He would have called them manly impulses and meant something entirely different. His manly impulse, on paper, was to respect

7Guthrie, "Characters and Compassion," p. 361.
motherhood—any old motherhood—protect chastity and undress in the dark. When a man's a man, he's darn near too manly to become a father.

Where's the other extreme? I think you'll find it, for instance, in a recent book, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. Here are a bunch of soldiers faced with the possibility of death, even the probability of it. And nearly all their thinking, nearly all their acts are so earthy and vulgar that we ask ourselves, in shock, were G.I.'s like this? I am unable to believe that in circumstances of peril a man occupies his brain exclusively with reflections on women and privies. I think some of them would have been thinking in other terms. I think they would have been asking what all this barbarous business was about. I think they would have been wondering about eternity. I think some of their concern, in the face of death, would have been with wives and children and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers left behind. I think they would have cast back to happy boyhoods, or sad ones, to earlier thoughts, to the promise that life once seemed to hold and no longer did.

So I think Mr. Mailer's characters, though there is a little of these patterns in them, lack the saving touch that makes people real, on paper. I think most of them do at any rate. I think he has failed to perform the final feat of the imagination. We must allow here for the possibility that he thinks in a frame foreign to most of us. Maybe his imagination was stretched to its limit and still brought forth two-dimensional figures. That is a limitation that all of us must worry about. If we have it, I think we'd best give up fiction writing.  

Characters in virtually every Guthrie book search for absolutes but fail to find them. Armand Elroy Falk, author of a master's thesis on Guthrie's writing, considers the search for certainty to be the unifying factor of four major themes. He writes:

Boone Caudill destroys his whole world in an attempt to find certainty of beaver and squaws. Dick

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 Summers wanders aimlessly seeking a dream of a girl by the Popo Agie. Lije Evans gains Oregon only to find that Oregon doesn't have what he expected and soon is spoiled by men just as the beaver country was spoiled. The only person with certainty is Lat Evans and his lies with the rules of men and leaves a distinct impression of being second best. ... Curtis Mack is searching for a certainty which leads him to kill and seduce the innocent and which leads, finally, to a very uncertain compromise with his wife and with himself. Jim Deakens searches for certainty all his life and when he dies from Boone's bullet is still seeking. Mercy McBee seeks certainty of love with Curtis Mack and finds only the bleakest of uncertainty. Brownie Evans finds his Mercy McBee an uncertain girl and finally in the gap between books becomes a man with an "extra-sore" religion, a thoughtless form of uncertainty which gives the illusion of certainty.

Even autobiographical Charlie Bostwick who is seeking some sort of certainty in human nature finds only that which repels him, drives him back, that which he cannot accept. All of the characters seek certainty in love, in father, in the adult world or in God, and all are disappointed, at least in part. Mr. Cutter in "The Wreck" seeks the certainty of all these things, a wife, material goods, obedience to the rules, and he ultimately discovers that the only thing certain is uncertainty, to him the purposelessness of life.9

Perhaps Guthrie's perspective of uncertainty has origins in his rejection of fundamentalism, which—at least for the agnostic Guthrie—was the rejection of certainty. Uncertainty was reflected in Jim Deakens in The Big Sky during his soul-searching religious soliloquies. He ends his ramblings with thoughts like, "You can't tell, though," and "It all sounded against nature,

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but men believed it and a man couldn't tell.\textsuperscript{10}

In a \textit{Holiday} article about "The Great Rockies," Guthrie reveals his own hunger for an answer to the eternal mystery:

High plains and mountains may diminish a man, making him a mite against immensity, and that is good; or he may enlarge and liberate him, and that, too, is good. In either case he finds kinship to the universe, finds himself a part of mystery and matter, a sentient bit of the great, elusive sentience that most men believe in and forever seek.

Gazing out on distances that defeat the eye or at upthrusts that the mind can't quite embrace, sometimes he feels himself on the very edge of understanding, so close to the eternal mystery that one stage more will lay it bare, one stage and there's the grand design and his position in it.

A shudder runs along his skin. He strains for the crowning light. If only—if only. It is forever veiled to him, and yet he knows exhilaration. He takes a final look, feeling height and distance in him and a cry of far discovery and, if camping, goes fulfilled to build his evening fire and watch the flip-switch of the stars.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10}The Big Sky, pp. 98-99, 219.

CHAPTER XVI

Many of the writers who influenced Guthrie during his college years no longer impress him:

A lot of early reading—you know, when you're at a more impressionable age—you like, but that doesn't mean you'll like it later. Lots of young people like Tom Wolfe. Well, I think he's a pretty desperate writer. He's for sophomores. The woe-is-me boy. I wish he'd lived long enough to grow up. Maybe that was past him, I don't know.

In The Blue Hen's Chick, he writes:

I think it forlorn, with few exceptions, for anyone after the passage of years to reach back in an attempt to recapture old and great impressions. The same response no longer is in us. We see our youth, but as strangers to it; and the writings that awakened and exalted and depressed and helped to mold us seem dull and unprofitable.

I may be too nearly absolute. A penalty of authorship is the restriction of range as a reader. The present-day author, if he works at his craft, if he comes to some understanding of what is really good prose in fiction or fact, finds fewer and fewer books that enthrall him. For myself I'll never read again a line of Sinclair Lewis. Reaching back once, I discovered I couldn't go on with Tess of the D'Urbevilles, under whose cloud I had lived for so long. Dreiser, for all his power, is too awkward to take. Afraid of disappointment, I haven't reread Frank Norris, much as I used to like him. Shaw is too wordy. Swinburne is too easily expert, Mencken too showy, Wolfe too much woe-is-me. Of the authors who used to engage me I find Conrad and his smoky prose perhaps the most rewarding now.

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1 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

2 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 53.
Guthrie admires the writing of Earnest Hemingway and "some of John Steinbeck." However, his favorite book is *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller:

I've read it twice. It is the best book I've read perhaps in the last 20 years. He defies all conventions. He pays absolutely no attention to my conventions. Part of the time he is just telling, or reporting, which is foreign to my methods. The book is all mixed up--it has humor, pathos, tragedy --and it isn't until the end that it all jells. Some of his stuff seems completely off the story line. I fear he is a one-book man, but that isn't a criticism. You don't see how he can keep up the pace.

Guthrie enjoys the writing of Montana authors such as Dorothy Johnson, Joseph Kinsey Howard and Dan Cushman. "I'm one of the foremost fans of Dan's *Stay Away Joe,*" Guthrie remarked. "I wish I could have written that book." He added that Cushman had been able to sell everything he ever wrote, an accomplishment Guthrie has not equaled.

Howard, author of *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome,* was a friend of Guthrie and owned a small cabin near

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3Guthrie interview, Nov. 15, 1968.

4Ibid.

5Guthrie has more to say on this: "I still have a children's book that I can't sell, and I can't figure out why. It consists of animal stories we told my kids when they were little. My animals talk and think. The juvenile editor of a publishing firm said she didn't like them because anthropomorphism was out. She didn't mean that--she meant that personalization of animals was out. This throws out Winnie the Pooh, *Wind in the Willows* and *The Jungle Book.*" Guthrie interview, Nov. 15, 1968.
Guthrie's at Twin Lakes. Cushman says:

Joe Howard meant more to Bud than any other writer. His novels were not printed—he was Great Falls' Keats. He hung over Bud, helped show the way, raised obstacles.6

Curiously, Guthrie does not consider Howard to have been an important influence on his writing. He remarks:

Joe and I were very, very close friends. We shared a common interest in the West. He was influential, I suppose, in that we encouraged each other to get on with it. . . . 7

However, Howard must have helped shape many of Guthrie's opinions through their close association. In his preface to Howard's Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome, Guthrie wrote:

Dear Joe:

They want me to write a piece about you and your first book.
I wish I could talk it out in the way that you and I used to talk in those long bull sessions in Lexington and Missoula and Great Falls, not to mention the Teton canyon where the sight of your old cabin always reminds me of them.

As I look back, I see that our differences of attitude were seldom great and hardly ever enduring, though by nature you were the more liberal. By attrition we wore them down to mere grains or to nothing at all. Now, if I seem to quarrel with you on one point, I'm quarreling with myself, too.

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6 Cushman interview.
7 Guthrie interview, Nov. 15, 1968.
When Joseph Kinsey Howard died in August of 1951, I said that Montana had lost her conscience. Who but he could push and lead us to a recognition of our shortcomings? Who would tackle prejudice and privilege and so awaken us to them? What voice would speak for the neglected, the oppressed, the victimized? Or for our misused inheritance of soil and water and timber? Who would give vitality and direction to the sense of right? Who would see and set us straight? No one, I thought, and I was wrong. Joe Howard still speaks and, speaking, exemplifies some lines he liked:

Take my life you choose and study it:  
It gladdens, troubles, changes many lives.  
The life goes out, how many things result?  
Fate drops a stone, and to the utmost shores  
The circles spread.  

Howard's death at age 45 was a blow to Guthrie. "I still can't drive by his cabin without feeling sad," he said.  

Not all Guthrie's relationships with his colleagues in fiction writing have been friendly: Cushman said:

Some western writers are jealous of Guthrie. He has got all the acclaim. Jack Schaefer hates his guts. Shane was a very ordinary book and Guthrie re-worked it when he wrote the screenplay. The movie was a smashing success, and Guthrie got the credit for it.  

Asked if any western historians were influential in his writing, Guthrie responded:

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9Guthrie interview, Nov. 15, 1968.  

10Cushman interview.
No. I have some I think are best, but I met them after I started writing. One is Thomas Clark—I wish he'd write more. He doesn't seem to be productive these days. Wally Stegner, who is a very fine artist, is another. He wrote both fiction and non-fiction. The non-fiction included Beyond the Hundredth Meridian and then he's got a book on reflections from his childhood, on re-visiting the scenes, and this is called Wolf Willow. It's a very, very nice book.11

The historian who holds Guthrie's greatest admiration is the late Bernard DeVoto. Guthrie and DeVoto had a mutual interest in the West, and each had written a trilogy on the subject. In 1951, they took a trip with Army Engineers by plane, water craft and automobile from the headwaters to the mouth of the Missouri. Guthrie recalls:

There on the bosom of the Missouri, we were explorers. No fences came to view, no cultivated fields, and if occasionally we saw a solitary cow, it was a buffalo. Only old things in sight—the wood cuttings of beaver, the bark of cotton-woods gashed high by the ice that had just gone out, the white pelicans of ancient record, a beaver on the shore and then in the stream, his tail spanning water like a pistol shot. Then he would be gone, leaving for a moment the rippled history of his going. And of a sudden a great willow-fretted sandbar yielded to the river and fell churning close to us, and the Missouri took over its tenancy. It had changed its course. Just as of old. Just as if the old were now. And Benny and I were Lewis and Clark, seeing as they saw, running aground as they did, getting sun-burned and calloused and developing that look of wonder that stares at you from old reports. We looked at each other. He called me Deacon. I called him Pope or

11 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
Brigham Young. But we were Lewis and Clark. Or we were Maximillian or Bradbury or Brackenridge or any of those old explorers, now reincarnated. We were mountain men.

We drifted on. We knew where we were, in a sense, the old sense, but we had little idea of our position with reference to the upstart towns that had been established during the century and a half we had so happily erased.

But on a high bank, a little boy was fishing all alone, his eye fixed on the red bobber below him.

We pulled closer to him, and Benny yelled, "Say, son, can you tell us where we are?"

To the author of Across the Wide Missouri, the boy yelled back, "Mister, you're on the Missouri River."  

DeVoto died in 1957. In a memorial lecture at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, Guthrie said: "Wherever Benny is, I hope there is a West there. I hope there is a wide Missouri."  

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13Ibid.
CHAPTER XVII

Some 30 years after he began writing his first novel, Guthrie still considers his craft extremely challenging. He told a reporter:

A writer has to be prepared for a long, lonely apprenticeship and disappointment after disappointment. If he perseveres, he will learn and may be successful, but success is a long way from mastery.¹

Since The Big Sky made him a successful novelist, Guthrie has lectured about his craft at writing conferences throughout the country. He taught creative writing for a short time at the University of Kentucky. "Like his father before him, Bud is a born teacher," said Thomas Clark, Guthrie’s friend and fellow faculty member.² However, Guthrie is skeptical of the value of most college courses in creative writing:

Too often the teachers themselves are frustrated writers and hence at odds with the craft. Too often, absorbed in symbol, theme, mood and what not, they leave the student as lost as before. And sometimes, out of their own failures, they are sour at the prospect of student success. Where to go then? I vote for good writers’ conferences, of which there are several.³

²Clark letter.
³The Blue Hen’s Chick, p. 181.
Guthrie recalls that he and his former tutor, Theodore Morrison, "fiddled with a never-finished textbook for those who wanted to write fiction."\(^4\) Some of their "maxims" appear in Guthrie's autobiography. Here are a few of them:

Avoid when you can the pluperfect, alias the past perfect tense. By unexplained magic the past tense becomes present in reading. The pluperfect asks the reader to go backward in time to what is over and done with and hence less engaging than what happens now. The trick is not so difficult as you may imagine. Ordinarily one "had" is enough.

Example: He had rowed away from the island, leaving the boy. The boy stood at the edge of the water and shouted curses and gestured. "Come back, goddam you! Come back!" By and by distance stilled the voice and dusk enveloped the boy.

Seldom is the passive voice as good as the active. It slows the flow by asking the reader to relate the verb, not to a following object, but to a preceding subject. Here is a special point for reporters. Journalism too often demands that a key word be the beginner, as in: Resistance, even to the extreme of the hydrogen bomb, was promised if . . .

Remember how important is figurative language, imagery if you wish. A strong wind is not so strong as a wind like a hand in your face. In the area of imagery comes, too, the use of adjectives to modify nouns they don't really belong with. It used to be at hazing time that college sophomores tonsured the heads of freshmen. A journalism student wrote that one sophomore, having captured his man, plied the eager clippers. It was the sophomore who was eager, of course, but the transfer of the adjective made him all the eagerer. Finally, one sense can be employed to strengthen and enlarge the expression of another. Though it is poetry, E. A. Robinson's "The Dark Hills" is rich illustration.

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 175.
Dark hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors under ground . . . 5

Examples of adjectives modifying nouns "they
don't really belong with" appear frequently in Guthrie's
writing. In a Life article, for example, Guthrie refers
to "the unimagined miles." 6 He also put into practice
his suggestion about employing one sense to "strengthen
and enlarge the expression of another." In The Big Sky,
Boone Caudill says "God dammit" with the set of his back. 7

In Murders at Moon Dance, Guthrie had not yet
learned to blend his action and dialogue with his descrip­
tive and summary passages. In his later books, he would
learn to weave them together. He explains the necessity
for this technique:

For convenience in teaching some teachers divide
fiction into three parts--scene, summary or synoptic
action and description. The terms mean what they
suggest. Scene is action and dialogue. It is
dramatization. It is theater. Summary bridges
intervals in which nothing of much importance has
happened. Description is description--of weather,
geography, general or immediate setting. No matter
the first importance of scene, it is well to remember
that the three words are merely handles for analysts.
If taken in practice as separate parts of a three­
sectioned whole, they work ruin. So, another maxim:

5 Ibid., p. 176.
6 Guthrie, "The West is a Great Adventure of the
7 The Big Sky, p.
The good writer does everything at once. This is a way of saying that good fiction avoids inertia. A passage devoted exclusively to description, with no relationship to the seer or even with a remote one, discourages readers. But how do everything at once? How put scene, summary and description together? A simple example: "'We been ridin' this damn range for two months,' Bill said, yanking his saddle horse to a stop and squinting up at a sun that burned hot as a blister."

Not always do you have to write summary. Sometimes a white-space break serves as well or better. 8

When Morrison read the first few chapters of The Big Sky manuscript, he remarked that Guthrie's internal monologue, in which he wove story detail into the thoughts of his characters, was the best feature of his writing. 9 It still is. Swanberg is correct when he says:

The most distinguishing characteristic of his writing is that he's always inside his character. You'll never see him speak about a character—he probably brings this to a peak of perfection more than any other American novelist. 10

Consider how Guthrie tells the reader that the wagon train in The Way West has been stopped by the river while the propriety of using buffalo dung for fuel is debated:

Higgins had to smile to himself. People tickled him, especially maybe men when it came to women. Like now when the wagon train had been corralled. Like here on the Platte bank where the men had drawn

8The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 178-179.
10Swanberg interview.
off so's to be able to take up the subject of what Byrd kept calling manure. Manure, that was it, or buffalo chips or dung. To most of them, even to some of them that used the world regular, it wouldn't be fittin' to give it the name it was known by best, since women, although absent, figured in the argument. In something like the same way people talked nice in the presence of a corpse. 11

Guthrie comments, "I don't approve of the 'author-on-the-page' technique. This is where the author goes outside his characters to make a point. Like, "Dear Reader: Look what trouble is ahead for our hero!" 12

On another occasion, he said, "I try to get within my characters, understanding somewhat what they will say or do or how they will react to given situations. I try to be completely in them." 13

Some of his internal monologue is written from the viewpoints of women, and this adds additional challenge. "It comes very painfully," Guthrie said. "But if a man exercises his imagination enough, he'll come to it, I think. It's a severe test, but I think he will... It's a matter of being with her completely." 14

In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie notes how characters can be utilized to tell details that otherwise

12 Guthrie interview, Missoula, Oct. 18, 1968.
13 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
14 Ibid.
would be flatly reported:

Your characters are yours to command, so command them. But exercise care. You can not make them be false to themselves. You can not show your power. Yet it is possible to bring a sudden end to a scene or to carry it on and enlarge it by manipulations of cast that arouse no suspicion. And it often sharpens a scene, though the scene be planted in the sensibilities of one character, to suggest his appearance and mood by means of a line or two of quotation from another. Suppose Joe is upset and frightened, it doesn't matter by what. Because he is your man, you may say—and very likely will—that he is upset and afraid and tries to hold his knees steady and forces a smile so as to cover his fright. Even were these lines put professionally, would they serve as well as an observation by another character? You might gain effect by having Jim say, "What's wrong with you, Joe? You look like you just seen a ghost."

Guthrie always tries to write with rhythms—proper accents:

I'm acutely conscious of that. Not that I want it to be poetry, but if you get the rhythm right and your accent right, it makes your writing much better reading, I think. At any rate, that is the way I write.15

He has said:

If you want to write a strong sentence you can't have it tail off. Take the sentence, "They sailed away." This has funereal suggestions. They're never coming back. But the sentence "Away they sailed!" That's a happy voyage. You'll see them again.17

Occasionally, editors will destroy the rhythm of

15The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 177-178.
16Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
his writing, to Guthrie's annoyance. There were two examples of this in his latest published article in the Jan. 26, 1969, Family Weekly. Apparently in the interests of letter conservation, the editor changed the phrase "... that stay the year around" to "... that stay the year round." In the second case, the phrase, "... the light that I'll leave on for him" was changed to "... the light that I'll leave on just for him." Such changes "knock hell out of the whole rhythm," Guthrie says. Referring to the last instance, he asks, "Why didn't he simply add the word "alone" if he wanted emphasis? That wouldn't have destroyed the rhythm."\(^{18}\)

He continues, "Sometimes I ignore rhythm—during action scenes when a staccato is best. But most of the time you do need rhythm, whether it's iambic, trochaic or what-the-hell."\(^{19}\)

However, Guthrie warns against sacrificing good word usage to achieve rhythm:

> Every word must bear its weight. Not for rhythm, not for roll, not out of love of your effusion, can you afford weak words. Which is not to say that you cannot manage rhythm and accent. It is to say that you must work, that you must discard much that you have liked and find through agony the necessary muscle. For want of a better place there may be

\(^{18}\)Guthrie interview, Missoula, March 1, 1969.

\(^{19}\)Ibid.
included here the sometimes foolish and the usually superfluous words that beginning writers employ as adjuncts to dialogue. "She smiled, 'Where have you been?'" As if a smile enunciated. "He mused, 'What happens now?'" "'What?' he barked." "'Go to hell!' he said angrily." "'Goddamnit!' he cursed." The list is endless. These danglers--stretched figure, verb and adverb--are marks of the amateur.20

Guthrie might have drawn his list of "danglers" from his first book, Murders at Moon Dance, which contains dialogue like "'Hal and Tamnation!' ejaculated Svenson."21

He has never forgotten the lesson he learned from his college English instructor, Prof. H. G. Merriam:
Avoid modifiers unless they are absolutely necessary.

Guthrie says:

I used to like big words, when I was young. . . . I don't like them at all now. And I don't like adjectives and adverbs. I use an adjective occasionally; very seldom an adverb. Simplicity sounds so easy but is so hard. That's what I always aim for. Simplicity.22

In The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie suggests:

Leave something to the reader. He has perception and imagination, more than you may think. Don't restrain him in your nest of adjectives and adverbs. Let him fly, remembering that nouns and verbs are the guts of language. Here's where the beginner goes astray. Having fallen short in the use of nouns and verbs, he tries to enforce his prose with adjectives and adverbs and, though he

20The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 180-181.
21Murders at Moon Dance, p. 15.
22Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
doesn't know it, thereby makes it weaker.\textsuperscript{23}

Although writing is by nature a lonely business, a novelist's characters should not be in seclusion long, Guthrie says:

Fiction is association, not withdrawal. It is love and hate and agreement and conflict and common adventure, not lonely musings on have-beens and might-have-beens. Mark as typical of the amateur the opening that finds Joe or Jim or Ethelbert waking up in a hotel room, alone and hung over. Where had he been? Who was that redhead who took him for drinks and dinner last night and then said she had to go home? At this point Joe sits up and runs his hands through his hair, which is seen by the author—who's lurking around somewhere—to be curly and tousled. Joe doesn't see it. He doesn't think about it. He has other things on his mind. That guy who bopped him? Damn him! What had it all been about? He wishes he could see through the mists. He wishes he had an eye-opener. Oh, God! Maude had been right when she said the big city wasn't for him. Maude was always right. Pretty, too.

We, the readers, are on Page Five now and will say goodbye. Goodbye and good riddance.\textsuperscript{24}

And:

A writer should keep asking himself: What am I doing to my reader? He may be doing what was never intended, with the consequence that he'll lose his reader through boredom or disappointment or both. He may fail to place the reader where the reader can perceive and participate. The reader, even though ignorant of the cause of dissatisfaction, needs to be rooted, needs to have a sure position if he is to enjoy a course of experience. Unsure, he's uncomfortable. Edith Merrilies, perhaps the greatest of classroom teachers, used to ask two

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{The Blue Hen's Chick}, p. 177.

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}
questions not altogether irrelevant here. The questions were "Whose story is this?" and "What is this story about?" The writer had better be sure he knows and, more important, that the reader does, too. False leads, the arousal of expectations never fulfilled, are common with the amateur writer and disappointing to the reader. The man who said the end of a story should be implicit in the beginning must have been talking about false leads at least in part. What has been said in this paragraph and elsewhere bears on the first necessity: The reader must believe. "Plausibility," Miss Merrilies kept saying, "is the morality of fiction."^25

Years after the maxims were written Guthrie observes:

The suggestions in The Blue Hen's Chick are still good. Of course, I'm speaking within my own experience. I'm not demanding at all that every writer follow my suggestions, but I think they'll prove helpful in most cases. And while I know more, I think, than I put down there, so many of the things would have required far more space and time, and some of them you discover as you are writing: "Oh, I can't do it this way--I'm being too bold about it or bald. This line will work better." And of course I hardly entered the whole question of viewpoint. DeVoto wrote a whole book on that in the world of fiction, and I didn't want to get tied up in that, because it's very hard to condense.26

Guthrie admires style expertise, whether in writing or in any other profession or craft. "I envy the good carpenter, plumber or bartender," he says.27 In The Blue Hen's Chick, he wrote:

^25 Ibid., p. 179.

^26 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

Reviewing my changed and changing judgments, I keep returning to Alfred North Whitehead, the philosopher, in whose words I find challenge and faith and respect for true craftsmen of whatever kind. He wrote:

The sense of style is an aesthetic sense, based on admiration for the direct attainment of a foreseen end, simply and without waste. Style in art, style in literature, style in science, style in logic, style in practical execution, have fundamentally the same qualities, namely attainment and restraint. The love of a subject, where it is not the sleepy pleasure of pacing a mental quarter-deck, is the love of style as manifested in that study. . . . style, in its finest sense, is the last acquirement of the educated mind; it is also the most useful. It pervades the whole being. . . . style is the ultimate morality of mind.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{28}\)The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 53.
CHAPTER XVIII

At the 1954 Pacific Northwest History Conference in Helena, Guthrie explained why he chose to be a historical novelist:

I write historical novels, historical novels of the West, out of a long-time interest in the westward movement in America. I can't remember when the subject didn't attract me. John Burroughs, the naturalist, said, "I am in love with this world; by my constitution I have nestled lovingly in it. It has been home." I think I can say that I have been and am in love with this West I write about. It has been home, too; home seen the more lovingly and I hope the more clearly because the impassable years lie between us. The years impassable except to the imagination, except to devotion. Along the beavered streams of Montana, I hear the old shouts of the fur-hunters. On the ridges I can see the Blackfeet passing. An arrowhead found in some dusty buffalo run becomes a chase. An ox yoke becomes a wagon train. An old spur belongs to Andy Adams, the cowboy from Texas. Indian, mountain man, home-seeker, gold-hunter, gunfighter, cow-puncher, cattleman, honyaker--they people this world. They move against the great backdrop of plains and mountains that echo still to shouts and whispers and curses and prayers; to the whines of dry axles, the cries of babies, the boom of a cap and ball. And all of this and all of them are dust; except that they rise from the dust through the magic of what we call daydream in youngsters and imagination in adults. No matter. They are dust and they arise; and, arising, give richness to life.

I suppose I am a sort of antiquarian. Flint and steel interest me more than the everlasting match. I prefer a muzzle-loader to a machine-gun. I can get excited over a wagon train, not much over a Constellation. Kit Carson and Jim Bridger stay in my mind after the boys of the wild blue yonder
have left it. I like old cherry more than knotty pine.
So, if I was to write, it was natural that I turn to the West and to its earlier days.¹

Guthrie found historical novels to be in literary disrepute. He admits they deserve that status:

The historical novel, as you know, is by reputation a sort of tramp in the parlor of letters—and not altogether through pure prejudice. We historical novelists at times have worked pretty hard for that reputation.²

In an interview with Harvey Breit in the New York Times, Guthrie said:

What offends me about historical novels—there are two things I guess—are the buxom gals bouncing around on strange davenports; and second of all, of a novelist simply relying on history as props for the book. It is the history lugged in lock, stock and barrel. It is the bringing in of great chunks of undigested history. There is a notion that one proves himself a good novelist by proving he knows history. It is the perfect non-sequitur. The history is secondary and has to be digested and in its place.³

Guthrie stressed this point at the Helena conference:

The tired author too often is tempted to throw in a tired chunk of history. These chunks constitute a hurdle, or a series of hurdles, that

²Ibid., p. 1.
the reader may or may not jump in order to find his hero on the other side. A good historical novel has to be on open highway, with no slows or stops for the road blocks of antiquity. It has to be more than ghosts among the gimcracks. It has to be more than history faintly inhabited by figures. It has to be people, it has to be personalities, set in a time and place subordinate to them. Perhaps the hardest lesson for us historical novelists, . . . is that it isn't event that is important; it is human and individual involvement in and response to event.4

The principle involved in that advice has meaning to all writers of fiction, not just historical novelists, as Guthrie noted in The Blue Hen's Chick:

A handicap for beginners—perhaps the first trouble and certainly a particular trouble in efforts at fiction—is the felt requirement of an organized body of wisdom and the impressive display of it in a chunk or in chunks. Heaved into the flow of a story, the amateur thinks, it proves the right to write. What is proved is that the writer is an exhibitionist who needs a story doctor's advice to zip up. The egotism natural and maybe necessary to a writer, of which this prideful and bald demonstration is a prime symptom, must find its satisfaction in ways other than the localized proof that here is a man of parts.

A maxim follows. Whatever the wisdom of a writer, it does and must exist in dispersion, to be drawn on in fiction as fictional circumstances suggest, to be expressed bit by bit in the actions and reactions and thoughts and conversations of characters. To attempt an authorial concentration is not only to damn a story; it is to deform and disavow wisdom.5

Although Guthrie often includes famous persons

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5The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 173-174.
as background figures in his novels, he never allows them to take a direct part in his story. "Joe Walker, Jim Bridger, Provot, Dave Jackson, Jedediah Smith, all of these people I've mentioned, but I didn't want to bring them in on a scene." The notable exception was Father Van, the pioneer Methodist preacher, whom Guthrie met as a boy. Guthrie included him in a church scene in *These Thousand Hills*.

Guthrie avoids actual incidents as carefully as he avoids actual people:

Neither in *The Big Sky* nor *The Way West* did I take an actual incident. I made up my own crew and my own incidents, relying for background on my general knowledge—or even specific knowledge—of the people involved. I don't like to put words in the mouths of real people. They may have said this but the chances are they didn't. I don't know, this seems to be a little like the disfigurement of a headstone to say they said so and so. No one can prove they didn't but neither can you prove they did. I don't like that.

On rare occasions, however, Guthrie does allow his characters to take part in actual incidents. In *The Big Sky*, for example, Boone Caudill, Jim Deakins and Dick Summers attend the Rendezvous of 1837 on the Green River in Wyoming.

Guthrie commented on the use of actual characters

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6 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.

7 Ibid.
during his interview with Breit:

Mr. Guthrie thought, and after a bit he said: "I'm not proposing that this is the way historical fiction should be written, but it is my way. I believe in fidelity of time, place and circumstance, but I believe in keeping the actual characters out of the book. I don't like to do violence to the character, to history... Historical personages seem to me to have an integrity that we'd better not monkey with."

This sentiment was, perhaps, related to what Mr. T. S. Eliot had meant about not tampering with nature. "Yes," Mr. Guthrie replied. "It is this: if you deal with actual people, then you are imprisoned in the annals of history. If you do do with actual characters, and treat them with respect, you will not have as true a novel as you would if you were to create your own people. Paradoxically, by creating your own characters you will have a greater representation of truth."

In an article for *The Writer*, Guthrie remarked:

You ought to know my Uncle Oscar, readers say to an author. If he isn't a card! You could make a real book out of him. Could you? Characters in a novel, if they exist in the reader's mind, are not scraps of observation. They are not Uncle Oscars as meant when suggested. They are Uncle Oscars as altered, amplified and completed in the author's mind. And so they aren't Uncle Oscars at all. Uncle Oscar just provided the provocation, the beginning germ of character--that is, if you wrote about him at all, which I don't advise you to do.

Guthrie touched on this point again when, years later, he was asked if he drew his fictional characters from real people:

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No. They're completely fictional. Sometimes I get a little glimmer about something that I want to put in my characters, but if you're writing fiction, it's a mistake to take a character who is actual. Because he won't turn out as his prototype is anyhow. It's foolishness unless you want to write a biography.\(^{10}\)

At the historical conference in Helena, Guthrie discussed in detail the problems involved when a historical novelist deals with actual incidents and real people:

Shall the historical novelist deal with the actual figures of history, with the actual events, or shall he go outside them? If he goes outside, what shall be his limits? If he employs the record, what violences, if any, may he do it? May he invent words for the mouths of corpses, may he have dead limbs acting as live limbs never did, may he amend the facts, extend the annals? May he have a soldier survivor on General George Armstrong Custer's battlefield, as one author did?

My answer is my own, and I suppose a part of it already has been given. I don't like to tinker with the facts. I don't like to assume, no matter if I can't actually be proved wrong, that an actual mouth said something or that an actual body did something that has no support in the record. Liberties like these tend to muddy history, as the little story of George Washington and the cherry tree has muddied history. And they seem to me to be almost acts of disrespect, like disfigurements of headstones. If we use the record—I'm talking of known events, known people, known words—then, ideally at any rate, we must let ourselves be the prisoners of it.

But the position poses still another and difficult question. Things don't happen in the shape of novels, not once in an age. They happen haphazardly or anticlimactically or in contradiction to the demands of literary form, with violence to the rule of rising interest and climax and proportion.

\(^{10}\)Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
Fiction isn't fact; it is the representation of fact, which writers hope is truth; and as representation it requires authorial management of the facts. So how can one have a novel if he sticks absolutely to the record? I guess the answer is he can't.

The alternative remains. At least it seems to remain for me. I haven't had to use the record, in the degree, I mean, that we've been talking about. In writing of the mountain man or the traveler to early Oregon, I didn't have to deal with an actual keelboat trip, an actual party of fur hunters, an actual journey across the plains. I could make up my properties, my adventures and my cast, using the real paraphernalia as models for my own, the real adventures only as suggestions, the real characters as background figures, held within the limits of what I could learn of them. As background, the people of history would help to establish time, place, atmosphere, general situation. Besides, they had at least to be mentioned. How could any reference to Jim Bridger or Jed Smith be omitted in the story of the beaver trade?

It probably doesn't need to be said that even this approach involves commitments to fact. The author has to be true to his period and his place. His people have to talk as people did, dress as people did, employ the techniques that people did. The concerns of real people have to be the concerns of his cast. The big events, the big questions, the big conflicts of the times can't be ignored; they must be reflected in the degree that they would have been had his characters been sure-enough persons.

The field is freer, nevertheless, and I think the novelist working in it may discover profits more important than mere convenience. I think he may find his novel is a better novel, a more illuminating novel, a novel really truer to times and people than if he had chosen to star actual event and individual. I don't know but that even the writer without too great a respect for the record would find that to be true. There are limits even to the violences that may be inflicted on history. The writer in this freer field can point up theme by the manipulation of the details in which theme so often is lost. He can underscore significances because he is the master and not the servant of his materials. And
so he can give us a story in the round, a story with a beginning and an ending held together by more than the chance chain of episode.

But it isn't easy, even with invented crews and circumstances, to avoid the amendment or enlargement of fact. That is one of the reasons that I said no answers to the problem were complete answers. Somewhere in your story the man of your mind may collide with the man of history. Somewhere the imagined situation may mix with the real. The man of fact has to speak; the real situation has to be dealt with. So what do you do? Well, I do the best I can. I try to make the man true to character— and I don't let him talk very much. I avoid, if I can, any alteration of situation, even very minor ones. These deviations from the rules I've made for myself don't disprove the rules. The rules are still good. It's just that they're sometimes beyond my reach.11

Guthrie, paraphrasing Edmond Gosse's observation, has said that "one of the elements, or demands, of successful fiction writing is a continual, slight novelty."12 One of the advantages of the historical novel is that it offers "the convenience of easy novelty," he says, adding:

It isn't difficult thus to season a re-creation, not if you know your time and place and people. Employed rightly, the little fact that people of early-day St. Louis used to use bear oil in lieu of lard, heightens and helps to help the reader's interest. For such a fillup the author of contemporary fiction likelier than not has to invent.13

Guthrie confronted the question of why historical novels should be written at all. Here are his answers:

12 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 180.
First, not enough history is being taught, not enough is popularly known. The historical novel, if not a defensible substitute for history, still is better than nothing.

And, even if students were taught enough history, and if adults knew enough, the historical novel, it seems to me, could be justified. This is so if only because the good ones clothe the bones of history with flesh and re-create for us the people, problems, passions, conflicts and social directions that, in non-fiction treatment, remain dust for too many of us. Men aren't known by their actions, or let us say that they don't live and breathe and acquire dimension through a knowledge of them alone. Men must be known through the why's of action, too. Understand a man thoroughly, and you can predict how he'll act. The best of the historical novelists seek to do that—to understand men and to acquaint you with them. Thus their actions become, not accidental or inexplicable, as many actions are, but of a piece with the men themselves. And so actions and men both are real, both persuasive and together illuminative of the record. . . . I am immensely indebted to patient and painstaking men who gathered and put on paper the materials from which I have borrowed. It seems to me, however, that the historical novel may find some support in the unhappy circumstance that so much of history is badly written and hence discouraging to the reader. . . .

If the historical novel needs a further, and moral, justification, the justification can be found, and in it also a support for the position that not enough history is taught or known. I'm speaking particularly, though not exclusively, of the American historical novel. I believe all of us become better citizens, better and richer human beings, through a familiarity with the dreams and deeds of the men and women who went before us in this adventure that we call the United States of America. I think we cannot appreciate freedom, opportunity, progress, convenience, or obligation, without this understanding of spent hope and sweat and blood and treasure. And I'm afraid most of us don't understand.14

14 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
CHAPTER XIX

Writing fiction never has come easy to Guthrie:

For me, writing is a slow and painful business. It demands concentration and search and presents the obstacles of dissatisfaction with what could be said better. And there's no immediate reward in putting words on paper. The reward, great but fugitive, is in having written, in having found the word, the line, the paragraph, the chapter that is as good as ever you can make it.¹

He once told a reporter, "Writing is not a gift—let's dispose of that myth right now. Writing is damn hard, lonely and painful work, and no one can call himself the master of it."²

He refers to his typewriter as "my partner and enemy,"³ and curses it at times for producing "junk or no pages at all."⁴ He admits being "glad of interruptions. They take me from the typewriter, and I find excuses for not coming back."⁵ But he makes himself return:

In the laborious and lonely business of writing, how force, or cozen, yourself into facing the

¹The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 186.
³The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 200.
⁴Ibid.
typewriter? Three recourses exist for me. If I have done a fair day's work and know what comes next, I knock off, assured that I can proceed in the morning. Under less happy circumstances I often gain some degree of momentum by retyping in the morning the final page I completed the night before. And sometimes I tell myself, "I'll work a half hour today and that's all." It seldom is all.5

In Twentieth Century Authors, Guthrie is quoted as saying:

After twenty years and more in a newsroom, I'm not bothered by noises and interruptions while at work. It's just the writing that bothers me, always, under any circumstances. Writing is a desperate business. I think I would quit it but for the high if unassayable rewards. Maybe I would anyhow if I didn't have to earn a living.6

Guthrie's insistence on perfection limits his productive capability:

I'll never be prolific. . . . I can't let a thing go until it's right—not just right, but right with me. Every chapter, every paragraph, even every line must be the best I can make it. . . . I've sat down on The Blue Hen's Chick and spent a full day on one line of dialogue.7

When Guthrie was writing in Great Falls, Randall Swanberg recalls that "he would prowl. He'd take walks in miserable weather--spend the entire day--and would

5Ibid., pp. 255-256.

6Twentieth Century Authors, p. 399. Guthrie's friend Dan Cushman does not subscribe to this idea of "the lonely anguish of writing." He contends, "writing is the easiest way writers know to make money." Cushman interview.

7Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.
end up with two paragraphs... some of his writing, though, is sheer poetry; he'll take a long time putting a word in proper context, polishing and polishing."

Dan Cushman says:

Bud is better than you think he is. Try to rewrite him—or Somerset Maugham. Their writing sounds easy and careless, but this is deceptive. Bud's competence is frightening... He knows how to put a cathedral together—he has a genius for it.

Marguerite Hanusa, an old friend of Guthrie's, says he is "a lyric writer—he thinks and rewrites a long time for a single phrase. He's a fast thinker but very deliberate." Guthrie's brother, Chick, thinks he may be too deliberate. He says, "I suspect that he sometimes labors too hard now to turn a phrase..."

Although he was referring mainly to Guthrie's manner of speaking, Harvey Breit of the New York Times saw purpose in that deliberation:

A modest man is Mr. Guthrie, who cares about what he thinks and tries to say what he thinks with exactness and concreteness; and so, if sometimes Mr. Guthrie's statements are slow in coming, they lose nothing in earnestness, or honesty, or depth.

8Swanberg interview.
9Cushman interview.
10Hanusa interview.
11Charles M. (Chick) Guthrie letter.
Guthrie believes most persons have a misconception about the most difficult part of an author's work. "People imagine you're up against it for material, and are always offering you stories to write. 'We'll split 50-50,' they tell me. They think writing is the easiest part of it. It isn't."\(^{13}\)

He lost 30 pounds writing The Big Sky, according to The Saturday Review of Literature, which reported that he "drank a lake of coffee, smoked 400,000 Camels, wound up with a bad stomach. 'I work painfully,' he groans. 'I bleed.'"\(^{14}\)

His writing drains his emotions as well as his physical strength. Breit reports:

Was that how Mr. Guthrie felt--flat? "I'm flat," Mr. Guthrie said. "I get no reaction after I finish writing. I don't begin something else. I kill time, mark time, stew around. I guess it's because of my characters--if they mean anything, I guess I identify myself with them and it's emotionally exhausting."\(^{15}\)

Twenty-three years after The Big Sky was published, Guthrie observes that writing still is a "desperate undertaking": "It's always tough. I guess the toughest part

\(^{13}\)Guthrie interview, Missoula, Nov. 15, 1968.


\(^{15}\)Breit, "Talk with A. B. Guthrie Jr.," p. 39.
is putting a sheet in the typewriter and saying, 'Page One.'

When Guthrie refers to his "work," he is not speaking only of his time at the typewriter. "I don't know when I'm working," he wrote in The Blue Hen's Chick. "If I get stuck on a page, the way out may come to me while I'm shaving." 

George Jackson recalled an incident that illustrates Guthrie's ability to work on plot and character problems while he is doing something else. Jackson was having "eye trouble," so he closed his barber shop and visited Guthrie at Twin Lakes. Although Guthrie was supposed to be writing, Jackson found his friend was fixing the fence, cutting wood and doing other chores. On the second day of Jackson's visit, Guthrie still had not written a word. He was playing solitaire, Jackson recalls, when he suddenly "shoved the cards away. He pulled out his typewriter and typed for about three quarters of an hour. Then he got up and said, 'Well, I whipped that sonovabitch.'" Jackson had not suspected that Guthrie had been working on that passage all the time. "In the back of his mind, he was kickin' it over," Jackson

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16 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
17 The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 252.
said. Guthrie recalls the incident. Until that moment playing solitaire, "I couldn't see my way through a jungle of prose," he explained.

Asked once how much time he spent on the last chapter of The Blue Hen's Chick, Guthrie responded:

You can't say how long a thing like that takes--because you don't know how much thinking you do about it. When I really got down to it seriously I suppose it took me two or three days to get it the way I wanted it. I'm a very slow writer.

Mrs. Jane Haugen, Guthrie's sister, also noted that Guthrie gives considerable thought to characters and plot before beginning to write. "When he sits down at the typewriter, he is ready," she says. Sometimes he is working while he is reading "who-dunnits," Mrs. Haugen says. "He is reading the words, but in the back of his mind he is working."

Mrs. Haugen, with whom Guthrie has lived for the

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18Jackson interview.
20Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
21Mrs. Jane Haugen interview, Missoula, March 1, 1969. Mrs. Haugen recalls that she once tried to throw away her brother's collection of paperback "who-dunnits" and pulp westerns, and he asked her not to do it. "Why?" asked Mrs. Haugen. "You've already read them." "Yes, but I'll forget them and read them again," Guthrie responded.
past few years in Missoula, believes one of the reasons for Guthrie's divorce from his late wife, Harriet, in 1962, was that "I don't think Harriet knew when Bud was working. He'll sit at the kitchen table, ostensibly doing nothing. Sometimes, when he is reading, you have to shake him to get his attention, because he doesn't always hear your voice."22

During the past few years at Missoula, Guthrie has followed a loose daily schedule. Mrs. Haugen, an elementary school teacher, says:

He usually gets up about 9 a.m., and reads the newspaper most of the morning. He reads everything. ... About 1 p.m. he goes downstairs to work. Sometimes he is still working when I get home from school. Usually, he works from about 1 until 4 in the afternoon.23

Guthrie's office is in a basement recreation room. His desk and small library share the room with a ping pong table.

He asks his sister to read chapters of his current novel as he completes them. She says:

I've told Buddy the reason he wants me to read them is because he thinks that I'm the typical Joe Doakes--that if I can understand them, anyone can. I put a check mark by the passages I don't understand and we'll talk about them later. I say, 'Buddy, you may know what you're talking about here,

22Ibid.

23Mrs. Haugen interview.
but I don't get it.' He seems to think it helps, and I appreciate the opportunity to read them. 24

Guthrie seeks criticism of his newly finished chapters from only a few sources. "Too many critics are like too many cooks," he says. "Everyone will take your writing apart for different reasons. Pick one critic and stay with him." 25

He has said:

I know, almost completely, when the chapter is done as well as I can do it. This doesn't mean I'm unwilling to welcome outside suggestions. Indeed, sometimes suggestions are made and I can see where I've been in error, and I correct it then. But you don't go around to just anybody, showing them your manuscript because you'll collect such a variety of ideas that you'll be in a state of confusion. And some of the suggestions will be no good, anyhow. 26

Guthrie always has been sensitive to criticism of his writing. Mrs. Hanusa says, "He doesn't take criticism very easily. He can give it. I know he doesn't take mine." 27

She remembers an incident at Twin Lakes when two visiting writers told Guthrie, in an apologetic manner, what they felt were shortcomings in his writing. "Bud

24 Ibid.
26 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
27 Mrs. Hanusa interview.
said, 'That's all right,' but he didn't like it," Mrs. Hanusa said. 28

Occasionally, he is upset by a book review. Dan Cushman recalls:

Bud cares about what people think. . . . He's too sensitive to criticism, although a lot of it is unwarranted. There was a silly review by David Lavender. . . . I drank booze with him all evening after he read that; he was very annoyed. No writer enjoys being taken apart by a talent smaller than his own. 29

Guthrie's fellow Montanan, Dorothy M. Johnson, remembers being "so upset by a vicious review of one of his books that I wrote him saying how unfair I thought it was." When she received Guthrie's appreciative reply, Miss Johnson remembers being surprised that an author of his stature would be so sensitive to book review criticism. 30

If his sensitivity is a source of pain, it also is vitally important to his writing. His ability to appreciate the problems of others has allowed him to get "inside" his characters more than most novelists. Reporter Dick Coon wrote:

. . . he is an introspective individualist with a

28 Ibid.
29 Cushman interview.
tremendous amount of sensitivity. He has an instinctive empathy for the problems of people; in other words, he cares. He seems to have an ability to "sort people out." Perhaps it comes from a talent for enjoying life and, on the other hand, enduring the sad moments. Only "Bud" Guthrie knows for sure.  

Many of the sad moments came in the past 10 years. Guthrie had marital difficulties and divorced his wife in 1962. She died in 1968. He drank too much and got the reputation of being a cocktail party boor. He became lonely and saddened by growing old. Occasionally, he doubted his ability to write.

His divorce was "an upheaval in his life," Mrs. Hanusa said. She added:

When they moved to Great Falls, Bud was a celebrity. This led to drinking and more drinking. . . . The trouble was with his wife. . . . They reached an impasse. It was hell for them. He had always loved her very much. It was a bad experience.  

Guthrie's sister has said:

Buddy was not as social minded as Harriet was. In a way, this helped Buddy when he was on the rise. She helped him go out and meet the people he needed to meet. But once he established himself, he no longer needed this, but Harriet did. They would go to cocktail parties, although Buddy didn't enjoy them. With too many drinks under his belt, sometimes he'd use some words that would offend.

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32 Mrs. Hanusa interview.
33 Mrs. Haugen interview.
She remembers when Guthrie left a party and walked many blocks home because he couldn't get Harriet to leave. She admits, however, that "Buddy sometimes had the feeling he should keep the party going. He felt it was his duty... and also there was the feeling that maybe he wanted to rule the roost." Of Guthrie's conduct at such occasions, Swanberg has said, "Bud likes to be outrageous... He likes to shock people." Guthrie's occasional doubts about his writing ability are reminiscent of Hemingway in his later years. "I don't often re-read anything I've written but when I do I have the terrible suspicion sometimes that I can't write that well any more," Guthrie has remarked. Swanberg comments that "Sometimes Bud gets very depressed, thinks he's not worth a damn." After his divorce, Guthrie lived in Lexington and Los Angeles, writing and re-writing The Blue Hen's Chick. They were unhappy years, and he returned to Montana to live with his sister in Missoula. His brother has remarked, "I think he has been lonesome, which may account

34 Ibid.
35 Swanberg interview.
36 Guthrie interview, Twin Lakes.
37 Swanberg interview.
for his slavish devotion to writing."  

It would appear, however, that the troubled years are over for Guthrie, although perhaps they have left a state of melancholy that did not exist before. Mrs. Hanusa said, "He has come out of his drinking, but there is a sadness in his life. He has softened so much. He's older ... he has mellowed."  

She has read the first eight chapters of his new novel, and believes that his writing reflects the sadness of the past several years.

If—as his brother says—he has been lonely, that problem recently was eliminated. Guthrie married Carol B. Luthin April 3, 1969 in Helena, Mont. "I asked Buddy why he wants to get married," Mrs. Haugen said, laughing, a few weeks before the marriage. "He has everything he needs right here except sex. Peggy and I just love him."  

Now 68, Guthrie does not work as many hours as he did 20 years ago when he finished _The Way West_ in six months. "He's not quite the energetic person that he

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38 Charles M. Guthrie letter.
39 Mrs. Hanusa interview.
40 Mrs. Haugen interview.
once was," Mrs. Hanusa says. He has restricted his writing activities almost entirely to his current novel.

Mrs. Haugen said:

Buddy turns down quite a few book review assignments. He has reached a stage where his productive time should be spent on his own endeavors—not somebody else's. The time is gone when Buddy can get up in the morning and crack off a book review before he gets started on his own work. That's for a younger man.

Guthrie also has discontinued public appearances, except on rare occasions. In his last speech at the College of Idaho, he remarked:

I don't know why I let myself be cozened into appearing before you people. I dislike to make speeches. They not only frighten me; they embarrass me, for public appearance implies an importance I am far from feeling. It has the odor of egotism. It was three or four years ago that I swore off the exhibitionism of speech-making. Keep in mind that an author is an exhibitionist at one remove. His face and figure are his writings, which he wants people to admire, of course. But he is likely to dread the immediate exposure that actors enjoy. It follows that few authors, including me, are good speakers—except, by luck, on the typewriter.

Free of book reviews and public appearances, Guthrie has devoted himself to his novel, which he believes is about eight months away. Mrs. Haugen says, "He's got better conditions under which to work than he

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41 Mrs. Hanusa interview.
42 Mrs. Haugen interview.
43 Guthrie, "Reflections in Passing."
ever has. Buddy has told me, 'My writing is slower but it is better.' 44

Although he lives and does most of his writing in Missoula, Choteau still is home for Guthrie. Twin Lakes still is his "pleasure place," as Mrs. Haugen says. And Choteau residents still are proud to claim the principal's son who rose to prominence as a novelist but never renounced his origins. In the Oct. 10, 1968, Choteau Acantha George Coffey wrote:

We home folks take everything of Bud's as a matter of course as we do most everything else of ours under our big sky. But Bud is a blue chip in our portfolio of ownership of shares in "People Incorporated." He is one of us. He is OURS. We are proud of him. We appreciate him for what his writing has done for us here at home as well as for all else he surveys. His great talent for seeing beyond and underneath the commonplace, in vivid color, has revealed to us things we just didn't realize were there. Like a paleontologist who sees a multitude of life embedded in fossils of common sandstone, he sorts, examines and then portrays for us things we otherwise would overlook.

Who of us would ever have envisioned the big sky? Who would ever have beheld the glory of these thousand hills? Who would ever have comprehended the trials and tribulations of the way west? Who would ever have hung a portrait in the gallery of exciting characters like "SHANE?"

If we take Bud apart and put him back together we may rightfully claim him as our own.

Here's health to you, Bud. May more coups keep coming out of your teepee. 45

44 Mrs. Haugen interview.
One morning when I was in Charley's studio I pulled an old ivory-handled six-shooter from its holster. He had carved a steer's head in the ivory, and the passing years had enriched the coloring. I tried the gun's lock, having always liked to hear the click of the old Colt. The hammer wouldn't stand cocked; the dog had been worn away.

"That gun has seen better days," I said, idly returning it to the holster on the wall.

"She sure has," Charley replied. He squatted in a hard-bottomed kitchen chair before his easel. "Did I ever tell you how I got her? No? Well, it was one of the crookedest deals I ever made. I was a kid then." He stepped down from the chair, chuckling, and put his palette and brushes on it. He lighted a cigarette.

"My brother an' another feller was camped in Judith Basin. I was wranglin' hosses for the Bear Paw Pool outfit. Our wagons wasn't far from where my brother was hangin' out, so one mornin' I saddled a hoss an' rode over to see him.

"There was nobody around the cabin when I got there. Its door was wide open, so I went in to size things up. Hangin' on an antelope's horn that was stuck in the wall I saw a six-shooter in a brand new holster. The bright sunlight that streamed through the door landed full on the six-shooter's butt, an' it was made of mother-of-pearl. All the colors of a fine fire-opal was jiggin' an' glancin' on it. Wow! It was silver plated, the barrel was chased with a vine of gold leaves on both sides, an' every chamber of the cylinder had a little vine of gold leaves. I balanced it in my hand, fondled it, an' itched to own it myself.

"I heard a hoss comin' an' got cunnin'. I chucked the gun back in its holster an' started for the door. In comes my brother.

"'How!' he says. 'Where'd ya come from?'

"'Just rode over from the wagon. Been here quite a while. Some shack ya got.'

"'Yeah,' he says right short.

"'Got a new gun, I see.'

"'Yeah.'

"I looked at the six-shooter like I hadn't seen it before. 'Some butt on it,' I says, careless as I could.
I took it from its holster an' handled it an' then dropped it back in. 'Where'd ya get her?'

"'Sent back to the States for her last month. Hungry?' he asks.

"'Yep,'

"'I'll cook ya something,' he says, goin' into a little lean-to that had a stove in it.

"I followed him. 'How'll ya trade guns?' I was itchin' all over.

"'What ya got?' he asks, cuttin' a steak from the ham of an antelope an' layin' it on the table.

"I had just bought a good Colt forty-five. She was blued an' clean as a wolf's tooth. 'She's brand new an' a dead-center,' I says, braggin'.

"He shoved his gun across the table an' cut another steak. 'Oh, I don't know," he says, like a father that's thinkin' of givin' somethin' to his youngest kid. 'My gun's a lot of trouble--all fancy; gotta keep shinnin' her all the time. You're a kid an' like to caper round the gals.' He stopped workin' on the steak an' looked at me, 'If you're dead stuck on my gun, I'll trade ya even up.' He put the meat in the fryin' pan an' salted it. He hadn't even looked at my gun.

"Even up! Wow! I changed holsters so quick I got the new one on my belt wrong side to.

"My brother stirred up the fire an' I started for the door to try my new gun. There was a tomato can with a big red tomato on it about twenty-five yards from the shack, a bully target. I stood in the door an' used both hands to give the gun the best of it an' pulled down on that red tomato. Bow! My God, if it hadn't been for the top of that door frame that gun would have split my skull wide open. Roar? My ears was ringin' like church bells. Hit the can? Hell, no; I didn't even hit Judith Basin.

"I looked at the gun. One side was all smoky. I tried to cock the damn thing an' couldn't; the cylinder wouldn't turn. It couldn't 'cause a shavin' of lead as thick's a slice of bread was wedged in between it an' the barrel. They didn't line up, didn't track. Bullets had to round a corner to get out. An' every bullet that left that gun was a cripple, a half-bullet. But nothin' would be in danger from the gun except the man that pulled the trigger.

"I was stuck good an' plenty but I didn't let on. I poked my fool gun into my holster an' went to the door of the lean-to where my brother was fryin' the meat. He was grinnin'; mebby he was laughin' out loud. I couldn't 'uv heard him if he was. 'Guess I'll be ridin',' I says.
My voice sounded as if it was down a well.

"'Ain't ya goin' to eat?' he asks—or I thought he says somethin' like that.

"'Nope,' I says, an' I pulled out right away. I didn't even look back.

"By an' by my hoss flushed a covey of prairie chickens. I'd been worryin' about my ears, but I heard them chickens cluck when they flew away an' I was tickled plenty. Pretty soon I got so's I could hear meadow larks.

"In the Gap I saw a rider comin'. It was Bill Deaton. Right away I figgered on tradin' guns with Bill. Bill always had a good outfit, from saddles to spurs. When I got near I dug my spurs into my hoss so's he would dance and get the sunlight caperin' on the butt of my gun.

"'Hello, Kid. God Almighty, that's a pretty barker ya got there. Lemme see her,' he says, pullin' up beside me.

"I handed her out an' I was mighty glad I'd rubbed the smoke off her.

"'Man, she's fancy, ain't she? Where'd ya get her?'

"I thought if my brother's yarn was strong enough to hook me it might tangle Bill, too, so I said, 'Oh, I sent back to the States for her last month.'

"'Pretty gun; damned pretty gun,' he says, 'pretty's a white-faced calf. Yes, sir.' he says, balancin' my six-shooter in his hand. By God, that butt would make jewelry, wouldn't it, Kid, jewelry for a lady, hey?'

"'Sure would,' I says. But I didn't tell him that was all 'twas good for.

"'How'll ya trade, Kid?'

"'Oh, I don't know. What ya got?' I rolled me a cigaret like I didn't care a damn.

"'This,' he says, handing out that gun you just looked at. She was as good as they made 'em.

"'Well,' I says, 'I'm gettin' sick of polishing my gun. She's pretty fancy. You always have a rattlin' fine outfit an' ya like to shine round the gals a lot. If you're dead stuck on my gun, I'll trade even up.' I spoke like it didn't make any difference to me.

"'Wow! you'd 'a thought my gun was a fly an' old Bill was tryin' his new gun. I lifted my hoss up off the ground with my spurs an' held him there, touchin' nothin' but the high spots all the rest of the way to the wagons.

"I didn't see old Bill again till the fall round-up. He was reppin' for an outside iron an' was
with our wagons. Neither of us mentioned our gun trade. Both of us had different reasons for lettin' it alone. "One night when me an' him was alone by our chuck-wagon fire I let my curiosity get the best of me. 'Did ya ever shoot that gun I traded ya, Bill?' I was sorry the minute I spoke. "'Once, Kid, jest once. She knocked me an' my hoss down flat; yessir, flat!' "'What'd ya do with her?' I asked, seeing he wasn't very sore. "'Jest what you did, you dirty damn crook, an' I been hidin' out ever since.'"

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