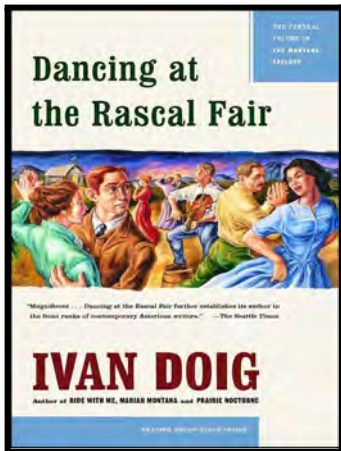




BOOK BUZZ

Dancing at the Rascal Fair Reader's Guide



Dancing at the Rascal Fair

By Ivan Doig

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A Simon & Schuster Reading Group Guide

About the Book

From its opening on the quays of a Scottish port in 1889 to its close on a windswept Montana homestead three decades later, this novel is a passionate and authentic chronicle of the American Experience. When we meet Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay -- emigrants, "both of us nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double-damnedest not to show it" -- they are setting off for a new life in a new land, in America, in Montana, "those words with their ends open." We follow their fortunes in the Two Medicine country at the base of the Rocky Mountains: the building of homes and the raising of families, making a living and making a life.

Here is the tale of the uncertainties of friendship and love; here are sheep-shearing contests and raucous dances in one-room schoolhouses; here are brutal winters and unrelenting battles of the will; here is a love of delightful and heartbreaking intensity and another love, born of heartbreak, of an equally moving and stoical devotion.

Questions for Discussion

1. At the start of the book, Angus thinks back on his and Rob's decision to emigrate from Scotland and wonders what Rob's "deep reasons" were. What do you think? And how does Lucas serve as a symbol of the West's promise and perils?



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2. The novel takes place over thirty years and spans several generations. How does Doig convincingly allow so much time to pass and yet focus on specific events, moments, and exchanges between characters with precision and effect? What narrative methods does he use to create a sweeping saga that is also a nuanced portrait of people and place?
3. The numerous historical events woven into this fictional tale include the influenza epidemic, the establishment of America's national forests, and the First World War. Can fiction bring a milieu alive more vividly than "straight" history?
4. Ivan Doig has described the way his characters speak on the page as "a poetry of the vernacular" and has said that he strives to craft the "poetry under the prose." Find examples of how Doig creates dialogue to show how Angus and Rob become more Americanized over the years.
5. What does Angus's love of verse, and his habit of quoting it, say about his personality? What does he seem to seek by turning to poetry and song? What effect does Doig achieve by peppering the book with Scottish verse? What special significance lies in the lyrics of "Dancing at the Rascal Fair," which the author composed to serve as the book's title?
6. Doig believes that "writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country: life." Yet setting is anything but a passive backdrop in Doig's fiction. How does the grandeur of Montana dwarf the lives of the characters or make them seem more expansive and dramatic? How does the unpredictable Montana climate parallel the stormy relationships depicted in the book?
7. Angus remarks that "the Atlantic was a child's teacup compared to the ocean that life could be." Discuss the water imagery throughout the book, from Rob and Angus's transatlantic voyage, to the droughts the homesteaders suffer, to Rob's eventual fate.
8. Throughout the book, Rob and Angus worry over the "perils that sheep invite on themselves." Can a parallel be drawn between the sheep, with all their promise and vulnerability, and the homesteaders who tend them?
9. Do you believe that Anna truly loved both Isaac and Angus, or was she simply sparing Angus's feelings when she told him she would know where to turn if her marriage went awry? Had Anna lived through the influenza epidemic, do you think it likely that she and Angus would have re-ignited their relationship?



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10. Angus calls his marriage to Adair a "truce." Discuss the ways in which Doig explores the interplay of obligation, compromise, loyalty, and affection in their marriage. For which of these two victims of unrequited love do you feel the most sympathy? Considering Adair's knowledge that she is not Angus's true love and her admission that she is ill-suited for homesteading life, why does she stay so long in Montana? In the end, did you find Angus and Adair's relationship practical and companionable or tragic and sad?

11. How does Doig develop Rob and Angus's lifelong friendship? Trace its arc over the decades. How realistically does Doig depict the eventual rift between them? What do you think caused the drastic change in Rob's personality toward the end of his life?

12. In the final chapter, Angus reflects: "Hard ever to know, whether time is truly letting us see from the pattern of ourselves into those next to us." What does this novel say, finally, about the mysteries of human relationships and the human heart?

About the Author

The grandson of homesteaders and the son of a ranch hand and a ranch cook, Ivan Doig was born in Montana in 1939. He grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front that has inspired much of his writing, making it into his own "Western Yoknapatawpha," according to critics. His first book, the highly acclaimed memoir *This House of Sky* (1978), was a finalist for the National Book Award, and his eight books since then have received numerous prizes.

A former ranch hand and a newspaperman, Doig is a graduate of Northwestern University where he received a B.S. and a M.S. in journalism. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington and honorary doctorates in literature from Montana State University and Lewis and Clark College. In the century's--end San Francisco Chronicle polls to name the best Western novels and works of non-fiction, Doig is the only living writer with books in the top dozen on both lists: *English Creek* in fiction and *This House of Sky* in non-fiction. He lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who has taught the literature of the American West.

Dancing at the Rascal Fair is part of Doig's Two Medicine trilogy, which follows the fate of the McCaskill family in America. *English Creek* resumes the trilogy in 1939, and *Ride With Me, Mariah Montana* leaves the McCaskills in 1989. Doig's latest novel, *Mountain Time*, is a contemporary novel with sisters Mariah and Lexa McCaskill as major characters.



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Recommended Reading

Wolf Willow, Wallace Stegner
Penguin, 1990

Old Jules, Mari Sandoz
University of Nebraska Press, 1985

Earthlight, Wordfire: The Work of Ivan Doig, Elizabeth Simpson
University of Idaho Press, 1992

A Bride Goes West, Nannie T. Alderson and Helena Huntington Smith
University of Nebraska Press, 1969

A Son of the Middle Border, Hamlin Garland
Penguin, 1995

The Jump-Off Creek, Molly Gloss
Mariner, 1998

Giants in the Earth, O.E. Rolvaag
Harper Collins, 1999

Letters of a Woman Homesteader, Elinore Pruitt Stewart
Chapters, 1998



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