

Brokeback Mountain's Montana Slope

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“Where is the ranch boy who thinks he may be gay?” Melissa Kwasny asks in her critique (published in *Writing Montana* [Montana Center for the Book, 1996]) of the epic anthology of Montana literature *The Last Best Place*. That ranch boy—born dirt-poor just south of Montana’s border, bred in Annie Proulx’s rich imagination, and conspicuously missing from the western canon—is now sauntering twenty-five feet high across America’s multiplex screens. His newfound visibility, at odds with his taciturn instincts, is another phenomenon—not unlike killer blizzards or same-sex desire—best handled with Ennis Del Marr’s classic stoicism: “If you can’t fix it you gotta stand it.”

According to Kwasny, canon can be problematic: “It has an unspoken message that comes with it.” But lay a graceful tilde over the word, thereby transforming sacred text (canon) into geographical trope (canyon), and we stumble upon the “control zone” for many a sexually curious westerner. For while both wilderness and wilding sexuality have been largely bulldozed by the hetero-industrial complex, historically Ennis and Jack Twist and their ilk have always been kicking around this region, heading for the slopes and loving in the canyons. In 1908 Edward Stevenson, the first American to publish a defense of homosexuality, declared: “The wide agricultural ‘West’ . . . is pervaded with uranian [homosexual] tendencies.” Forty years later, Kinsey would note, “the highest frequencies of the homosexual which we have ever secured anywhere have been . . . in some of the more remote sections of the country. . . . [T]here is a fair amount of sexual contact among the

older males in Western rural areas.” In his study of nineteenth-century western fiction, Chris Packard confirms that the cowboy is fundamentally queer: “His code permits few ‘norms’ . . . but his popularity grants him wide latitude in terms of exercising his queer power.”

Proulx’s observation of a sixty-year-old ranch hand in a bar in Sheridan inspired *Brokeback’s* tale of displaced desire. Proulx is a former technical writer who researches the hell out of her subjects. It’s likely that the real-life surveillance and imagined scenarios unfolding in Proulx’s landscape are augmented by ample readings in the western genre. From Wister’s *Virginian* to Missoulian Kim Zupan’s story “The Mourning of Ignacio Rosa” (published in *The Best of Montana’s Short Fiction* [The Lyons Press, 2004]), ranching literature is bolstered by a solid (if unappreciated) sidebar of homoerotic-tragic fiction. Proulx must surely have tapped some of these queer reserves.

In fact, I view the Montana-based, genre- and gender-transgressive fiction of Thomas Savage as both literary ancestor and companion pieces to “Brokeback Mountain.” When Savage’s 1967 novel *The Power of the Dog* was republished by Little Brown in 2001, it featured an analytical afterword by Proulx. Proulx categorizes Savage’s work as a late entry in the “golden age of landscape fiction” alongside Cather and Steinbeck. For readers who hunger for more of *Brokeback’s* air, Savage’s fiction is a perfect—though no less tragic—counterpart. While Proulx’s protagonists in “Brokeback Mountain” enter and leave this world inauspiciously—impoverished and orphaned, undisciplined and victimized—Savage tells the stories of Montana’s landed gentry, the concerns Jack and Ennis would work for or (if they were lucky) marry into. Savage’s

men are not immune from falling from grace however, and given their inherited advantages, they fall hard.



In 1863 Thomas Savage's ancestors struck it rich in southwest Montana mining districts, developed the area, and launched a ranching dynasty that straddled the border of two states. His grandmother Elizabeth Yearian, "the sheep queen," was Idaho's first woman legislator, and his grandfather, Jack Brenner, was a Montana legislator. Savage was born in 1915. When he was five, his mother remarried. Mother and son moved to the Brenner ranch in Horse Prairie. The adult Savage worked as a riding instructor, dude ranch operator, railroad brakeman, shipyard welder, and English professor before turning to writing full-time, and migrated from West to East Coasts with his wife Elizabeth (also a novelist). In 1944 Savage published his first novel, *The Pass*, and launched a forty-plus year investigation of queerness in the Beaverhead Valley. Even after reissue of *The Power of the Dog* and *I Heard My Sister Call My Name* in 2002 (as *The Sheep Queen*), Savage's apparent betrayal of western myth excluded him from that circle of writers who are celebrated for elevating Montanans' self-esteem and property values. After Elizabeth's death, Savage moved to San Francisco to, as his family puts it, "take part in the lifestyle there." Thomas Savage died in 2003.

On the surface Savage's Montana is a world of "the usual and the expected, the appearance of the sun, the chilling voice of wild geese wedging south, the breakup of the ice, the shy green grass on the slopes, the heady breezes that disturb the purple camas. Sun, geese, and waving camas all point to the knowable

future, and the world was well" (*Power*, 265–266). Characters preside over sprawling ranches, build the infrastructure that links the Beaverhead Valley to Salt Lake City stockyards or Butte's amenities, and attempt to keep the valley "beaten, roped, and hog-tied." But the cycle of seasons and work belies darker currents. Nature does some wrangling of its own. Sometimes a man loses his land, or a lover. Sexually ambiguous ranch hands find their voices, and introverted, ostracized youngsters save the day.

In the mythic West Savage unravels, manhood is defined by one's ability to control land—and sexuality. In *The Corner of Rife and Pacific* (1987) John Metlen's ranch—where "damp soil exuded seminal odors and the air was rich with the promise of growth"—is his identity. "Such aristocracy as existed in the West was based squarely on ownership of the land," Savage explains. "It's a privilege to be able to piss on your own land. If you can't piss on it, you don't own it." John worries that his son Zack will not take over the ranch, and his wife responds, "Why should a man be trapped because he's a man?" When the Metlen ranch is finally repossessed, John is emasculated. Forced by economics to move to Dillon, where the eyes of close neighbors "cast a lien" on one's property, he begins to rethink the "hidden contours" of his life.

John is haunted by the memory of his childhood association with the outcast David Lubin, and conflates this memory with his son's unconventional traits. As a youngster John had "taken a new gun to bed, but only because his father had given it to him." David, on the other hand

played the piano, which is a thing usually done by your mother or your aunt. He was of fragile build,

they called it scrawny, and his eyes were careful not to meet anyone's. . . . David knew the social order on the playground and in the halls of the high school. And David had accepted that order, every bit of it, and dismissed it as a cripple dismisses his clubfoot—simply a part of him (52–55).

Social acceptance of David “could not be granted in that town, in that day, or in any town, in any day. Sheep steer clear of goats. . . .” John is shocked when Zack, now a soldier, bounds from a train and hugs him “in public, in town, in a country where it is understood that no man touches another man.” In time that shock is absorbed by John’s own quiet defection. Looking back, he regrets not befriending David Lubin: “Maybe if he had, things would have been different for them.”

Written twenty years earlier, *The Power of the Dog* provides an example of how “things could have been different” for two males in the rural West—and brings us closer to *Brokeback’s* shadow. Middle-aged bachelor brothers George and Phil Burbank run the family ranch south of Dillon in the 1920s. George marries a widow from a nearby railroad town, and inherits her twelve-year-old son, Peter. George’s desertion brings out an animosity in Phil that leads to a series of showdowns between Phil and those whom he believes are encroaching on his all-male idyll. Phil is rude, a misogynist, a racist, and he takes pleasure in belittling his intellectual inferiors. But Phil also has a capacity for passion and a vulnerable past, subtler qualities that tend to wither in the clashes generated by Phil’s villainy.

Savage uses geology to reveal Phil’s softer side. A hillside

serves as a gauge for a mystical gift—the ability to “arrange the facts of Nature into patterns that would stir the senses.”

In the outcropping of rocks on the hill that rose up before the ranchhouse, in the tangled growth of sagebrush that scarred the hill’s face like acne he saw the astonishing figure of a running dog . . . in pursuit of some frightened thing—some idea—that fled across the draws and ridges and shadows of the northern hills. But there was no doubt in Phil’s mind of the end of that pursuit. The dog would have its prey. Phil had only to raise his eyes to the hill to smell the dog’s breath. But vivid as that huge power was, no one but one other had seen it . . . (66–67).

Phil discovers that Peter, like “one other” before him, sees the running dog.

Phil, at that moment in that place that smelled of years felt in his throat what he’d felt once before and dear God knows never expected nor wanted to feel again, for the loss of it breaks your heart. . . . The boy wanted to become him, to merge with him as Phil had only once before wanted to become one with someone . . . (262–263).

Encoded in Phil’s “Hound of the Hills” is the memory of an older cowboy pursuing, and catching, the ranch scion. Bronco

Henry was “that best of cowboys” who “made one of the prettiest rides a fellow ever saw.” He also broke from “the usual tribe of men,” both by loving men, and by defying death in the corral. Phil returned Henry’s affections, but he could not prevent Death from reciprocating Henry’s scorn. A young Phil had watched helplessly from the top rail as the only person he thought he could love was trampled. Twenty years later Phil takes up Henry’s mantle, trains his desire on Peter, and sets in motion his own demise and *Power’s* breathtaking finish.



Savage’s and Proulx’s stories are not “gay” in the pop culture sense; they are run through with homoeroticism, but they are contextualized more by homophobia than idealized homosexuality. Proulx’s stark “Brokeback Mountain” delivers the sex, but withholds an ultimate ride into the sunset. Savage, a more lyrical writer, whose oeuvre is rooted in a less tolerant time, conceded, “the thing unsaid is more potent than the thing said.” Together, these innately western fictions do not aspire to uplift or console. But they are pragmatic. If the gay lives of Jack, Ennis, Phil, and Bronco Henry end unhappily, they do so to remind Montanans of our constitutional obligation to restore the dignity of even the queerest “tough old birds.”