Jim Harrison
1937–

"MY INTEREST IS in what I call the 'art' novel, which has never been a market-driven genre," Jim Harrison wrote in American Literary History. Not surprisingly, Harrison, the outwardly gruff Michigander who has shaped a lifelong passion for poetry into a career as a fiction writer, essayist, and screenwriter, maintains his distance from the mainstream of American letters. Despite a large group of actors, directors, artists, and writers whom Harrison numbers among his friends, he separates himself from the glitz and glamour of Hollywood as well, spending as little time as possible on the "Dream Coasts" (his phrase for New York and Los Angeles). He prefers driving tens of thousands of miles on the blue highways of America, particularly after the completion of difficult projects. His public appearances, aside from rare book-tour stops and speaking obligations, are limited to out-of-the-way bars or hunting and fishing rendezvous with friends and family. A notable exception is that he often travels to France in support of his books, where he is revered as an icon of American literature and where The Road Home, his 1998 follow-up to Dalva (1988), went to number two on the best-seller list, something that his work has never accomplished in the United States. His novella collection, The Beast God Forgot to Invent, was first published in France in early 2000.

Undoubtedly, Harrison’s unwillingness to place himself in the literary spotlight has affected the reception of all his work, but most notably the fiction. Despite a recent, if hard-won, critical acceptance of his work, much of Harrison’s early fiction, influenced profoundly by his work exclusively as a poet in the 1960s, was disregarded as too experimental in style and form to garner a solid mainstream audience.

In fact, Harrison was a poet with a bright future, winning National Endowment for the Arts grants and a Guggenheim Fellowship in the late 1960s, long before he penned his first novel. He draws little distinction between the two forms, instead always seeing the poetry in the fiction that he writes. It is Harrison’s fiction that has received more attention. The body of work the author has published since his debut novel in 1971 exhibits an astounding range of genres, protagonists, settings, and themes: from novel to novella; comic picaro to strong female; wilderness to city to a wasteland somewhere between; food to sex to alcohol to psychosis. Harrison’s fiction hauntingly echoes William Faulkner’s sense of mortality in As I Lay Dying: survive, and feel life at every moment, in every sinew of your being; once you’re dead, you’ll stay dead a long time.

THE BURGEONING POET

James Thomas Harrison was born in Grayling, Michigan, on December 11, 1937, to Winfield Sprague Harrison and Norma Olivia (Wahlgren) Harrison. He was the second of five children. A brother, John, shares the author’s passion for books and literature and was longtime director of libraries at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Harrison has spent his adult life living and writing in northern Michigan, both on the Leelanau Peninsula and in a remote cabin on the state’s Upper Peninsula; he winters in a home in Patagonia, Arizona. His penchant for
immersing himself into topics by researching and experiencing them is legendary in literary circles; in an age of word processors and Internet searches for information he relies on a capacious memory and a legal pad for the writing of his manuscripts. Harrison’s fiction-writing career was nearly derailed before it began when the only copy of the manuscript for his first novel, which Harrison typed and sent to his brother John, was lost in the mail for several weeks during a postal strike. According to Harrison, John was fortunate to find the manuscript buried under tons of undelivered mail.

Typically, the stories that he writes have fermented in his mind for several years before they see the light of day. By the time those stories find their way to the published page, they have changed little from the manuscript (Harrison claims that the copyediting for his most popular novella, Legends of the Fall, consisted of changing one word from the manuscript stage to the finished product). The granary where he writes in Leelanau is littered with esoteric books on subjects ranging from dam building to Native American history to comprehensive tomes on the flora and fauna of North America. The wall in front of his desk is covered with pictures that recall many of Harrison’s characters and his favorite historical figures, and hanging from one of the rafters is a collection of objects with totemic importance for the author, including a pinecone from the forest where one of Harrison’s poet-idols, the thirty-eight-year-old Spanish writer Federico García Lorca, was murdered and the compass that his friend the author Doug Peacock carried with him in Vietnam.

Harrison comes by his passion for nature and a curiosity for objects honestly. His father worked as a state agricultural agent in Michigan and encouraged the young Jim to hone his observation skills, a trait that would become vital in all of Harrison’s future work. The author’s parents encouraged him to read, and the writing life seemed as likely as any for a young man of Harrison’s native curiosity and imagination. After receiving a typewriter as a gift from his father, Harrison began writing poetry, because of what he perceived as a short attention span; the poetic form fit nicely into the restless young man’s personality.

Harrison received a B.A. degree from Michigan State University in 1960, the same year that he married Linda King. The couple has two daughters, Jamie, who has settled in Montana and has published several mystery novels, and Anna. A defining event for the young Harrison was the deaths of his father and sister, who were killed by a drunken driver in 1962. He poignantly recalls the episode, which influenced the twenty-four-year-old writer’s views on the ethereality of life and the permanence of death, in the poem “In Interims: Outlyer”: “And if my sister hadn’t died in an auto wreck / and had been taken by the injuns / I would have something to do: / go into the mountains and get her back.” Images of death, and often more poignantly the anticipation of death in life, appear throughout the author’s fiction as well; Harrison’s characters, realizing simultaneously the finality and the banality of death, are often hard-charging and impetuous.

Harrison received an M.A. in literature from Michigan State in 1965, the same year he published Plain Song, a poetry collection helped to publication by the late Denise Levertov, an early influence who became a mentor to the aspiring writer. The author’s poetry prefigures much of what comes later in the fiction, as it focuses on natural themes and personal relationships filtered through the perceptions of a budding romantic. “Poem,” the first in the collection, simply states Harrison’s relationship to nature: “Form is the woods.” The most widely quoted poem of the collection is “Sketch for a Job-Application Blank,” in which Harrison describes a childhood accident that rendered him sightless in his left eye: “My left eye is blind and jogs like / a milky sparrow in its


socket. . . / O my youth was happy and I was never lonely / though my friends called me 'pig eye' / and the teachers thought me loony.” The image, as with so many of his personal experiences, surfaces repeatedly in Harrison's fiction, sometimes as an overt reference to the incident but more often as the metaphorical blindness of his characters to their surroundings.

\textit{Plain Song} was a watershed for Harrison, whose college career was unremarkable. Harrison often discusses his disdain for the regimentation of university curricula, or what he considers academic hoop-jumping, recalling that the writers whom he admires most, including Sherwood Anderson, Hart Crane, Arthur Rimbaud, García Lorca, and Faulkner, were writers of the first rank despite a conspicuous lack of “higher education.” Despite his early success as a poet, which provided ample opportunity for him to make a life in the academy, Harrison has resolutely distanced himself by choice, eschewing the strictures of academia for the relative freedom, if financial uncertainty, of the independent writer. Harrison’s disdain for the academy is evident in his fiction; for example, in the novella \textit{I Forgot to Go to Spain} (2000) the protagonist recalls, “We all met at Rico’s apartment in the East Village, a fearsome place when I had lived there from 1969 to 1972, soon after gaining my flight from the porch and my M.F.A., similar experiences in the long run. The M.F.A. replaced the B.A. in English as the zenith of valueless degrees.”

Almost as if to prove his point, Harrison had a brief and unfulfilling career as a writing teacher at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he taught for less than two years; he claims that when he left Stony Brook to return to Michigan, the only thing he took with him was a trunk full of student papers, which he had neither graded nor returned. Despite a period of several years when the young Harrison supported a family on less than $10,000 annually, he realized that his best chance for becoming an artist, his love for Gauguin notwithstanding, was to become a writer, the profession in which he could use the vast imagination cultivated by his parents.

In 1968, in response to his desire to advance writing as creative expression, Harrison took his writing one step further when he and his longtime friend and fellow Michigan State alumnus Dan Gerber founded \textit{Sumac}, a literary magazine that featured work from some of America’s finest established and up-and-coming writers and poets, including Galway Kinnell, Charles Simic, Louis Simpson, Gary Snyder, Hayden Carruth, Denise Levertov, Ezra Pound, James Tate, and William Kittredge. In 1997 the journal received renewed critical attention when a collection of work originally featured in the nine-issue run was edited by Joseph Bednarik and published by Michigan State University Press.

Harrison has had time to write fiction and poetry in part because of his prolific work in writing screenplays and essays, a conscious decision to write for a living in the absence of academic support. In all, he has sold seventeen screenplays, including \textit{Carried Away}, an adaptation of his novel \textit{Farmer, Cold Feet}, which he co-wrote with Thomas McGuane, and adaptations of \textit{Revenge} and \textit{Legends of the Fall}, by far his most popular work. He is also a contributor of essays to an eclectic variety of magazines and journals, including \textit{Sports Illustrated, Sports Afield, Outside, Smart, Men's Journal, Antaeus, the Psychoanalytic Review, and Esquire,} where a monthly food column that ran for more than two years in the early 1990s offers an intimate glimpse into the author’s passion for food and drink.

**INFLUENCES**

Harrison’s imagination and his own experiences intertwine to act as fictional touchstones. The author’s connection to the natural world—
fueled by his father's own passion for nature—and the author's immersion in some of the country's wildest places is apparent in all of his fiction. He is an avid sportsman whose closest hunting and fishing friends include writers, artists, and literati McGuane (with whom Harrison maintained a twenty-five-year letter-writing relationship), Russell Chatham, and Guy de la Valdéné.

Harrison is obsessed with describing the details of human experience. More than one reviewer has commented on his passion, and critics of his fiction agree that Harrison's fiction works best when it reaches a middle ground between sensuality and violence, which is tempered with an often dark, blunt comic impulse. Reinforcing themes of alienation and lost identity in all of Harrison's fiction is the shape of the narratives themselves, which are often autobiographical at the same time that they draw on the author's vast knowledge of American—especially Native American—history.

A literary omnivore with a voracious appetite for the world around him, Harrison has been influenced by the work of Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner, Rainer Maria Rilke, Sergey Yesenin, Rimbaud, James Joyce, Knut Hamsun, Colette, André Gide, Günter Grass, and a host of other American and international writers. The literary is a common thread in Harrison's fiction, seamlessly connecting one theme to the next. Wolf (1971), Harrison's first novel, follows the young Swanson as he traverses the Upper Peninsula wilderness in an attempt to transcend the banality of society, while recalling and reconstituting his reality in terms of the books he has read. The protagonist of the novella Beige Dolorosa (1994) is a retired English professor who realizes that the vast wealth of literary knowledge he possesses is ineffective in helping him to cope with a debilitating neurological disease and the embarrassment of university politics. In the protagonist's coming to grips with a life in books and his own mortality, Harrison offers a sense of the urgent acceptance with which he documents his own world.

Harrison's characters also study and emulate philosophers, writers, composers, and great works from Søren Kierkegaard to Saul Bellow to Beethoven to the Bible, but those characters are unique amalgams of everything the author has read or experienced. Because of such varied literary and life experiences, Harrison and his characters shun what the author calls a "mono-ethnic," the desire for individuals to all have homogenous experiences, a concept Harrison described in an interview with Patrick Smith and Robert DeMott as "amazing, in a political sense . . . with all the diversity, to want some kind of unanimity." Harrison argues that our literary characters are neither believable nor wholly human: "Most of the people who eat chicken, beef, or pork have never known an actual chicken, an actual pig, or an actual cow."

Harrison's work, especially his fiction, has received a lukewarm reception by the academy, not because the work is not "literary" enough, but in part because many scholars have detected an underlying misogyny in it. Harrison vehemently denies the claim, as it stems from a facile comparison of Harrison's work to that of Hemingway, a connection that Harrison no longer finds flattering; in fact, he goes out of his way to separate himself from Hemingway's legacy. Harrison responds to such criticism in his essay "First Person Female," where he recalls that the men in his family, "though they fished and hunted strenuously, would never describe these particular activities as 'manly.' That idea seemed to derive from writers of city origin like the tortured Hemingway, who, though a very great writer, seemed to suffer from a prolonged struggle with his manhood. Faulkner was a bit more nonchalant and colorful on the subject, what with his lifelong fascination with the 'pelvic mysteries of the
Despite the fact that Harrison’s most highly acclaimed fiction is written from a woman’s point of view, a narrative voice driven by his writing poetry, the distinction between “macho” fiction and fiction written from and through a man’s experiences is an important one to make.

In his profound identification with poet John Keats’s “Negative Capability,” the ability to reconcile the contradictions inherent in any narrative without succumbing to the brutalizing force of reason, Harrison finds the complex narrative voice that synthesizes aspects of both fiction and poetry. His unease with closure is, as he writes in “First Person Female,” “the capacity a poem or novel must have to keep afloat a thousand contradictory people and questions in order to create the parallel universe of art,” which is key in understanding the author’s creative impulse. Harrison has harbored the idea since first reading Keats seriously as a teenager and told Smith and DeMott that “the hairs on my neck rose when I read about the ‘Negative Capability,’ because that’s obviously what a novelist has to have more than anything else. The best example of this is Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky—that’s what their work is. Nothing human is alien to them. Nothing can’t be examined. They never limit themselves to sexual neuroses like many Americans.”

The limitations that Harrison sees in contemporary American literature manifest themselves through the critics’ insistence on classifying Harrison’s work, particularly his fiction, in order to package the author’s ideas for mass consumption. In an explanation of the ghazals published in his third book of poems, Outlyer and Ghazals (1971), Harrison posits that, in order to maintain the integrity of the artistic vision, a writer must not:

try to bury a horse in a human coffin, no matter how much you loved the horse, or stick some mute, lovely butterfly or luna moth in a damp cavern. I hate to use the word, but form must be an ‘organic’ revelation of content or the poem, however otherwise lively, will strike us false or merely tricky, an exercise in wit, crochet, pale embroidery.

For Harrison, the theory that he espouses for poetry is equally true in all writing. In the same way that the form of the poem depends upon a personal context, Harrison avoids formulaic writing, instead relying on the mode of expression that best suits the content of the narrative and his own vision.

While the fiction and the poetry are front and center in Harrison’s repertoire, his nonfiction is a testing ground for much of the material that makes its way into the author’s creative work. Just before Dark: Collected Nonfiction (1991), a collection of Harrison’s essays culled from the journals and magazines to which Harrison has contributed, offers valuable insights into the creative mind of the author. Those essays contain kernels of ideas for the poems, the novels, the novellas, vignettes, and philosophical meanderings. “Fording and Dread,” for example, offers a cogent discussion of the author’s philosophy of writing and describes Harrison’s passion for writing as a way of reconciling the beauty of literature with the unbearably brief movement of a life through time, “the limitless ambition of the young writer, whose vast, starry, nineteen-year-old nights must come down to the middle-aged man in the northern night listening for more howls, trying to learn what he is with neither compassion nor self laceration,treasuring that autumnal sensuality of one who has given his life’s blood to train his soul, brain and senses to the utmost.” The essay is the expression of the author’s memory and his ability to articulate that experience—sometimes the single, tenuous thread between existence and nonexistence for Harrison and his characters.

WOLF: A FALSE MEMOIR

That ability to synthesize autobiography and imagination suited Harrison well when he wrote
Wolf, after a hunting accident left the author bedridden and his friend and hunting partner Thomas McGuane suggested that the exercise would make the lengthy convalescence more sufferable. Perhaps in response to his confinement—and certainly in remembering some of the adventures of his early adulthood, specifically a cross-country hitchhiking expedition to California after his high school graduation in 1956—Harrison’s first fiction describes both the perceived need for freedom of movement and its consequences on a ravaged American landscape. Carol Severin Swanson, the book’s protagonist, travels the country from 1956 to 1960, but the novel is written “from the vantage of the present—it is a false memoir at that and not even chronological and its author is a self-antiquated thirty-three, a juncture when literary souls turn around and look backward.” Like the Zen that Harrison’s characters intermittently practice (or that Harrison himself relates in a collection of Zen poems, After Ikkyu and Other Poems [1996]), the complexities and contradictions of time have little effect on the protagonist. Instead, he acts on instinct and has little concern for others.

The novel reiterates the claims for the individual that Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman espouse, ways of life in which one becomes one’s own authority apart from the consensus of mainstream society. The narrative recalls Jack Kerouac and his Beat counterparts in the decades after World War II, although Harrison is less romantic than the Beats, instead viewing Americans’ increasing mobility as a cause of the rapid disappearance of wilderness from the American landscape. The result is a rough-hewn, quasi-autobiographical statement on the virtues of the last great place in the American wilderness and a treatise on the profound influence of geography and place in our lives.

Wolf bridges the gap between the author’s notions of fiction and poetry, in the process blending the two to his needs. The subtitle of the novel, “A False Memoir,” suggests that Harrison is experimenting with the constraints of a genre that is new to him. The phrase “A False Memoir” also hints at the play between autobiography and fiction that characterizes much of Harrison’s later work. For Harrison, the connection between autobiography and storytelling is inherent in the process of writing; the two are inseparable and form a synergy that allows Harrison to create characters who are often only barely under control.

**A GOOD DAY TO DIE**

At no point in Harrison’s fiction is that connection more important to the action of a novel, or more overtly violent, than in *A Good Day to Die* (1973), in which the two male protagonists, the alcoholic narrator and Tim, a disaffected Vietnam vet, experience the alienation endemic to the social-protest novel. Around this time, Harrison and friends, including McGuane, de la Valdene, Peter Fonda, Jimmy Buffet, Hunter S. Thompson, Richard Brautigan, and others began making annual trips to Key West, Florida, to fish for tarpon and discuss literature and film. The reveries reached a pinnacle in 1974, when de la Valdene hired French videographers to film the short feature *Tarpon*, a documentary that included the principals fly-fishing for tarpon and philosophizing about literature and life; the film was scored by Buffet. These experiences clearly influenced Harrison’s early fiction.

Although Harrison’s second novel received little of the critical acclaim awarded to Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), it predates Abbey’s better-known work by two years. The two novels deal with similar themes. Harrison’s trio of protagonists decide early in their acquaintance to destroy a dam that blocks some of the country’s best trout fishing. The setting and characterization of the first scene, in which the unnamed narrator is double-
anchored off Cudjoe Key, Florida, with a woman he did not know the night before, are important, as the narrative’s frenetic action takes place in a haze of drugs, alcohol, sexual fantasy, and escapism. The lifestyles and themes that Harrison covers in his first novel are not uncommon to the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the novels of Harrison’s friends and contemporaries, such as McGuane’s *The Sporting Club* (1969), Dan Wakefield’s *Going All the Way* (1970), and Richard Brautigan’s *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), among others.

The narrator’s alienation from “acceptable” society underpins the protagonists’ actions throughout the story. Although the narrator suggests a previous home life and some stability—typical allusions in the lives of Harrison’s characters, even if the reality is invariably much different—his plan is to spend several weeks in the Keys before he heads back north. His life is a struggle for balance between the reality of mainstream society and the release of drugs and alcohol, fishing, and women.

The origin of the narrator’s hatred for the damming of rivers is simple enough: fishing is the only contact point for his otherwise free floating experiences, and the serenity of the stream and the one-on-one parrying with the trout erase for a time the narrator’s problems. The narrator’s dependence on the trout stream has defined his adult life. His fear of anxiety attacks prevents him from feeling safe except “in three minimal areas of Michigan, Montana and Key West,” even though he reluctantly, and without apparent reason, agrees to travel west with newfound compatriots Tim and Sylvia toward the manifestation of their final violent act against society.

The act of destruction is doomed from the outset. The narrator incessantly and unsuccessfully monitors his emotions as signposts to action or inaction, but Tim is unpredictably violent and disinterested in similar self-examination. Although the plan to blow up a dam—any dam, as it turns out—moves inexorably toward its climax from the time that the narrator meets Tim, that plan is nebulous at best. Even the participants are unsure of the dam’s existence, and the narrator’s conception of the Canyon is based on a cartoon-like recollection of Evel Knievel’s attempt at rocketing across the Snake River. Unlike Knievel’s own stars-and-stripes effort, however, the tale is without heroes, and the storyteller’s inability to distinguish the reality of a luckless, drug-addled trio’s actions from the fantasy of the stereotypically intrepid and righteous hero merely signals the extent to which the protagonists have lost touch with society.

As with Carol Severin Swanson’s search for an elusive (and perhaps illusory) wolf in Harrison’s first novel, in which the search becomes symbolic of self and repeated attempts at ordering the past, the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* can only order his memories in terms of place. The final place is a dam in Idaho, a point in the narrator’s reality that can be manipulated and destroyed so that the narrator may reconnect to the physical world. The simple, brutal act of destruction is motivated, finally, by the possibility of closure that the narrator’s past has never afforded him. His willingness to carry out the plan speaks more to a Calvinistic predestination for the failure of the plan than to any impulse for wanton destruction or a desire for ecological conservation, a thought that crosses the protagonists’ minds when they first meet but is left in the dust and confusion of the narrative’s violent conclusion.

The theme that underpins the protagonists’ journey—that of the essential inhumanity with which Americans have handled the “Indian Question” (as Harrison later presents it in *Legends of the Fall* [1979], *Dalva*, and *The Road Home*)—is important to Harrison’s fiction. The protagonists’ association with Native American culture, though, is nearly comic in its absurdity. The trio compare their plight to that of the Nez
Percé, who entered battle with the war cry of their beloved Chief Joseph: “Take courage, this is a good day to die.” The Nez Percé were driven from their homeland and slaughtered; that the protagonists compare themselves to the Nez Percé is bitterly ironic. The narrator’s life has become one of rapid dissipation and decay; instead of becoming heroes by gaining perceived vengeance on society, the three protagonists have been seduced by a culture that, by the time of the novel’s publication, was being exposed as escapist and exhibitionist by Harrison and others.

FARMER

Harrison’s third novel, Farmer (1976), is a more optimistic work that focuses on a specific area of northern Michigan. In writing the narrative from a number of different perspectives, Harrison describes the parochial culture with which he is so familiar. Joseph Lundgren, the novel’s protagonist, dreams of visiting the ocean. Joseph’s imagining other places, however, is out of place in his culture, since only Joseph, of the novel’s characters, fully understands the intricate relationship of the land to its people.

The protagonist sees the unique character of the land and the effect that it has on the families who choose to live in an area that is by turns beautiful and inhospitable, and even though he is restless enough to change the course of his life by having an affair with one of his students, an eighteen-year-old girl named Catherine, he balks at the thought that the immutable landscape should change in order to suit him. Joseph “despised the farms near town that had been bought up by the managerial class of the sheet metal company in the county seat,” and he knows that if the town were to become incorporated, “the farm houses would be modernized and false shutters added. Sometimes white board fences would be built and the outbuildings painted a bright red. Maybe they were trying to make it resemble Kentucky or New England.” The marginal lives that the people make for themselves go through phases of boom and bust, and the landscape of the lives of Joseph’s neighbors are intertwined with one another; most of his neighbors feel little need to untangle those ties.

Joseph’s desire to visit the ocean is kindled by his affair and by the memory of his friend Orin, a pilot who was killed in Korea. Only by reconciling himself with Orin’s death and the love of Orin’s widow, Rosalee, can Joseph finally realize his dream. In the last passage of the narrative, in which Joseph finally accepts Rosalee as his partner, Harrison brings the story full circle. The two prepare to fulfill Joseph’s dream, and Joseph realizes that he does not have to alienate himself from the place with which he is so familiar, as he thought he must. To travel away from home, Joseph knows, is not to repudiate home, but to reaffirm it. The dream-like quality of the understated finale echoes the cycle of seasons that dictates the lives of the inhabitants of Joseph’s culture. With its evocation of the permanence of nature and the resilience of the Midwestern spirit, the circular narrative gives the novel a closure unique in the body of Harrison’s fiction.

The novel has been deemed “regional” because it describes in great detail the lives of the people of northern Michigan, set off from the milieu of the “big city.” Harrison balks at such classification, rather viewing a work on its own merits—as either literature or not literature. For Harrison, the rubric “regional literature” is the result of the continued belief of writers and critics in New York City and Los Angeles that the most creative and original intellectual thought comes out of the city, despite the inability of many of those writers to create three-dimensional characters. More important than pigeonholing the narrative is the marked contrast that Farmer makes from the first two novels in its affirmation of the power of a particular place,
the familiar place that renews itself and heals its inhabitants through its simply stated everydayness. The novel is a strong statement of the dichotomy of life and death that delves deep into existence and finally—for the first time in Harrison’s fiction—readily affirms life.

**LEGENDS OF THE FALL**

Harrison’s penchant for drawing bigger-than-life characters as he does in *Wolf* and *A Good Day to Die* continues with *Legends of the Fall*, a collection of novellas that would give Harrison the popular acclaim that his poetry and his first works of fiction predicted for the author. As a writer living for nearly two decades without the safety net of palatable alternative employment—he survived in the 1960s by working at a number of construction jobs—Harrison was overwhelmed by the success of the collection, which was made possible by the financial support of his friend, actor Jack Nicholson. Harrison has only to say about the success that had been so long in coming that “I didn’t know how to handle it. I behaved badly,” as quoted in a *Detroit News* article by Ruth Pollack Coughlin.

The first two novellas, *Revenge*, which would later become a film starring Kevin Costner, and *The Man Who Gave Up His Name* are often neglected in the collection; nonetheless, they stand on their own as examples of Harrison’s flexibility as a fiction writer. *Revenge*, on the one hand, is a genre piece that details the battle between Cochran, a fighter pilot, and Tiburón, the head of an organized crime family, for the attentions of Miryea, Tiburón’s beautiful mistress. *The Man Who Gave Up His Name*, one of Harrison’s most imaginative pieces, is a story of loss and restoration in which the protagonist, Nordstrom, not unlike *Warlock* later, gives up his life as an executive to become a cook in a Florida restaurant, where he can dance to his heart’s content.

Still, the title story has received nearly all of the collection’s critical attention. *Legends of the Fall* succinctly portrays the immediate effect of several myth-making events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Indian Wars, World War I, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the advent of the automobile—on a wealthy Montana plains family. The result is a lean and taut expression of the life of a man who straddles two distinct epochs in America’s consciousness, one that still condones, and perhaps admires, the actions of the myth figure, and one that has thrown off the romantic veil of innocence that spawned the American myth in the first place.

Harrison based the novella on a reading of the journal of Colonel William Ludlow, his wife’s great-grandfather, and the narrative began to take shape when Harrison set the novella in the wide-open expanses of Montana rather than Michigan. In the narrative, Harrison codifies a western mythos that becomes increasingly untenable in the aftermath of World War I. The themes of alienation and fragmentation that Harrison treats in the novella are not unlike those that one sees throughout his fiction.

One of the narrative’s overarching themes, and one that is repeated in *Dalva* and *The Road Home*, comes from the author’s interest in Native American history. Harrison insists that we are bound by a “soul history,” a notion that he formed in part from his reading of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, who developed the concept of the “collective unconscious.” Harrison defines his term in the essay “Poetry as Survival,” collected in *Just before Dark*: “Our nation has a soul history, not as immediately verifiable as the artifacts of the Smithsonian, whose presence we sense in public affairs right down to [Ronald Reagan’s] use of the word ‘preservation,’ or his cinema-tainted reference to oil-rich Indians.” In detailing Americans’ essential lack of historical perspective, Harrison dismisses romantic notions of cowboys and
Indians and focuses on the destructive chains of events that comprise America’s history in its dealings with Native Americans. Those events would be played out in greater detail in the Dalva novels for two decades after the publication of Legends of the Fall.

WARLOCK

The diversity of Harrison’s themes, and his ability to present an eclectic mix of characters and situations, is nowhere better illustrated than in Harrison’s preoccupation with eating and drinking in Warlock (1981). The narrative is part detective-fiction spoof and part serious novel that takes on the image of the dispossessed, alienated man, images that Harrison would return to most conspicuously in his fourth novella collection The Beast God Forgot to Invent. Images of food and drink are pervasive in Warlock, and they create a thematic continuity in the novel. Harrison’s attention to consumption forms a backdrop against which the protagonist lives out his life in search of the perfect meal. The imagery is derived in part from the author’s own reputation as a gastronome. (Harrison, in the middle of one of his more extravagant feeding frenzies, once braced himself against the running board of a limousine to pull the director Orson Welles out of a car in front of Elaine’s restaurant in New York City.)

The evolution of the protagonist through a series of improbable, life-altering events is accompanied by detailed descriptions of meals that denote success (or, more likely, defeat) for the protagonist Johnny Lundgren (“Warlock”) in repeated attempts at reconciling himself with his wife and regaining his fragile psychic and physical balance. The result, consistent with Harrison’s working within the contradictions inherent in the complex societies that he constructs, is neither heroic nor tragic, but disarmingly ambivalent. Harrison divides Warlock’s quixotic quest into three parts, each of which details the protagonist’s increasing psychic fragmentation, his lack of direction and discretion, brought on by ennui, and his uncanny knack for the failed relationship. The novel’s quirky appeal comes from its use of dark comedy; Harrison proves himself one of the few writers skillful and brazen enough to risk combining farce with “serious literature.”

Despite Harrison’s attempt at implementing characteristics of the farce and a literary style with some obvious ironic overtones, the author insists in the preface that the novel “is an attempt at a comic novel not ruled by Irony, who drags her tired ass, making us snicker cynically rather than laugh out loud,” and that it “aims to draw its energies from more primary colors, say from the dance that is A Midsummer Night’s Dream to those two archfools Don Quixote and Walter Mitty, with the definite modification of a venal Quixote and a gluttonous, horny Mitty.”

SUNDOG

In his novel Sundog (1984), the story of Robert Corvus Strang, Harrison details the life of a
man who must deal with his own physical and psychic alienation from society through introspection and his lifelong relationship with water. Harrison’s fascination with water is apparent in the narrative—to research dams for the novel, Harrison was given a guided tour through a dam by Senator Bill Bradley—and the imagery that pervades Sundog is crystallized in the title poem of The Theory and Practice of Rivers and Other Poems (1986), a limited edition collection published two years after Sundog. In the long poem describing his own relationship to the natural world, Harrison uses water as metaphor for the journeys of life:

The rivers of my life:
moving looms of light,
anchored beneath the log
at night I can see the moon
up through the water

. . . . . . .

It is not so much that I got
there from here, which is everyone’s
story: but the shape
of the voyage, how it pushed
outward in every direction
until it stopped . . .

In the same way that Harrison describes “The rivers of my life,” Strang’s own life moves through a series of eddies and currents that lead him to a fateful decision to entrust his life to the water by physically entering it.

Although Harrison’s portrayal of the self-aware, philosophical, and intelligent Strang differs markedly from the psychotic energy of the protagonists in A Good Day to Die, the complex love triangle between the narrative’s three major characters has prompted some critics to question Harrison’s ability to create convincing relationships. Despite Harrison’s assertion that Strang is a conglomeration of the characters he has known and about whom he is comfortable writing, especially in his personal relationships, some reviewers have found Strang’s character diffuse and unbelievable. That Strang has elicited such varied responses from critics supports the author’s contention that his characters often are denigrated because they do not fit the preconceived notions that readers on the “Dream Coasts” have for their literature. In an interview with Kay Bonetti, Harrison recounted that the impulse to create Strang “came out of my conviction that the American literary novel as opposed to a more commercial kind of novel tends to ignore about seven-eighths of the people. The literary novel often concentrates itself upon people in New York or Los Angeles, academic and scientific communities. People don’t write about the Strangs of the world because they don’t know any of them.”

The narrative is noteworthy for its three distinct voices—Strang, the narrator, and an underlying narrative text that unifies the plot and moves the story along to its conclusion—which describe a tangled ménage à trois between Strang, his ex-wife’s niece Eulia, and the narrator, perhaps Harrison himself. The unifying theme in the narrative, as in A Good Day to Die, is the dam image, a symbol of man’s tenuous control over nature and his desire to impose order on nature. Strang, much as the narrator and Tim in A Good Day to Die, devotes his life to the dams initially through happenstance, although Strang’s lifelong attention to the art of dam building contrasts the short-lived need for destruction that ruins the lives of the three protagonists in the earlier novel.

In an effort to restrain himself from becoming too deeply involved in Strang’s profoundly personal history, the narrator rearranges his notions of reality, insisting that “this is not my story, and I will keep my intrusions to a minimum.” The narrator keeps his promise only intermittently, although his own insights are important to the story’s form in terms of both the relationships between Strang and Eulia, and the narrator’s own understanding of the caprices of a vanishing and increasingly unpopular American idealism. Harrison illustrates that
idealism through Strang’s dogged determination
to continue his work as a builder of dams
despite the limitations brought on by a near-
fatal herbal remedy that he took to cure his
lifelong epilepsy.

DALVA AND THE ROAD HOME

The notion of “soul history” that underpins Legends of the Fall comes fully formed in Harrison’s most critically acclaimed novels, Dalva and The Road Home, related books written a decade apart (Dalva itself being nearly a decade removed from Legends of the Fall). Both detail the lives of the Northridge family. Dalva, the one-eighth Native American ancestor of John Wesley Northridge, searches for her son, Nelse, whom she gave up for adoption when she gave birth out of wedlock at sixteen. Northridge, a missionary and adventurer who sides with the Indians in the time around the Civil War and during the Indian conflicts, keeps diaries of his journeys and his contact with the Native Americans. In Dalva’s present, more than a century later, Michael, a Stanford historian, tries to salvage his career by reconstructing a history based on the diaries. While Dalva’s own story is written as a legacy to her son, whom she finds eventually and with whom she continues the relationship in The Road Home, the overarching theme of the narrative is the way in which the history of people long since dead comes to life and changes the present.

Dalva is divided into three different narrative voices—Dalva’s, Michael’s, and Northridge’s—which combine Harrison’s poetic sensibility with an unblinking eye for the less palatable events of history. Harrison’s narrative technique, with its many digressions and its scrupulous attention to the details of history, creates the impression of suspended time and implies the complexity of reconstructing a family’s history from the diaries that Northridge leaves behind. The novel shifts from Northridge’s own en-
tanglement in the “Indian Problem” to Michael’s personal dilemmas to Dalva’s force of spirit, from first-person accounts of the Civil War and its aftermath to Michael’s not original notion that he is part of the first generation in which “we get to know all of the world’s bad news at once.” For Harrison, the sources of history can come from any place at any time. In that sense, history is not unlike fiction; indeed, Harrison implies that the two are relentlessly intertwined.

Dalva’s character, Harrison told Smith and DeMott, is a conglomeration of the women he has met, the kinds of women who are too often ignored in fiction. “Dalva—and I think that’s probably the attraction of a lot of women to Dalva—I had known a lot of inordinately strong women in my life, but I had very rarely seen them in fiction, even women’s fiction where there’s of course a great deal of whining just like the contemporary male middle-class novel. As I call it, ‘nifty guys at loose ends.’” In “First Person Female,” Harrison writes that he tends “to think of art as essentially androgynous and that gender is biological rather than a philosophical system. . . . On an almost absurd level I thought once that since I’m blind in my left eye, I’m missing half of life—and if I’m writing only as a man, I’m cut in half again. Being down to a scant quarter isn’t enough to sustain my life.”

Like Herman Melville’s Ishmael (the protagonist introduces herself with “My name is Dalva”), Dalva is the controller of her narrative, the only character suited to reconstruct her family’s tale. She has at her command memories of her childhood in Nebraska, memories of Duane Stone Horse, her dead lover and the father of her son, memories of her grandfather and great-grandfather—all histories that have come down to her through both firsthand experiences and the family’s oral traditions. For Dalva, the practice of writing diaries not only orders her thoughts, it also allows her to generate new perspectives on her own life by synthesizing
past events and her felt sense of where they will take her in the present. “Everyone in the history of my family was a letter writer, a diary keeper,” recalls Dalva. “It’s as if they thought they’d disappear if they didn’t put themselves on paper. For a while in my twenties I stopped the habit but it made my thinking boringly recurrent. I resumed the practice so I could get rid of the thoughts and information, leaving room for something new.” Importantly, the writing is also an identity-forming exercise. Dalva, because of her status as the keeper of the family’s history, is necessarily the strongest character in the narrative, and her task requires a vision and balance that none of the other characters exhibits; in protecting the integrity of her family’s history, she continuously makes space for new experiences by writing out the old ones, a process that makes linear time irrelevant for her. The narrative is a history-within-a-history, each successive paragraph a further accretion of the Northridge family’s soul history, which finally divulges to the characters, especially Dalva, the information that allows the protagonist to find her lost son in a staid and simple reunion. Dalva’s character is abstruse, even enigmatic.

In The Road Home, the prequel/sequel to Dalva, Harrison reiterates the connectedness of family through the generations and the generations’ connectedness to nature. He also exhibits a profound sense of the ways that history informs all actions in the present and time eventually annihilates the present in making it past. Harrison’s realization of the implications of time’s passing manifests itself in a poem from The Theory and Practice of Rivers, “Looking Forward to Age.” In the poem, Harrison anticipates his own mellowing and his ability to write the images that encompass death, the most human of all events, at the same time that they imply a simple and contented continuation of the spirit:

I will walk down to a marina on a hot day and not go out to sea.
I will go to bed and get up early, and carry too much cash in my wallet.
On Memorial Day I will visit the graves of all those who died in my novels.
If I have become famous I’ll wear a green janitor’s suit and row a wooden boat.

The narrative in which Harrison’s mature vision comes to fruition is divided into five parts—Dalva’s grandfather John Wesley Northridge; Nelse, Dalva’s son; Naomi, Dalva’s mother; Paul, Dalva’s uncle (and perhaps the father of her lover Duane Stone Horse); and Dalva herself—each an integral part of the Northridge clan’s history.

The result is a harmonious mixing of points of view punctuated by seemingly disparate stories that all intertwine to form the narrative. John Wesley Northridge, the son of the family’s journal keeper, muses that “It is easy to forget that in the main we die only seven times more slowly than our dogs.” His story forms a crucial link between the history of the family’s record keeper and the future of the family, Nelse, who has fallen in love with J. M., an exotic dancer whom he has met in Nebraska. Northridge’s life is one of nearly unbearable love and loss, a theme that permeates the story, with Nelse’s own attempts at wooing J. M. and Dalva’s extended recollection of her short-lived affair with Duane and his suicide off the Florida Keys. Northridge, who in his youth was a passionate artist and devotee of Keats (like Harrison himself), first loved Willow, a young Native American girl, but was forced to stop pursuing her by her family and the moral code of the day.

In his awakening sexuality, Northridge realizes that the romantic notions of the artist are fabricated, that “It is largely misunderstood that the first forays of a young man or young woman into the world of arts and literature, the making
of them, are utterly comic and full of misadventures, rather than most of the dour and melancholy renditions that are made public.” In fact, even though Northridge realizes that the world of the artist is a largely illusory one, he cannot dispel all of his romantic notions. His subsequent love affairs, especially one with the sister of the woman who would eventually be his wife, are life-altering experiences that haunt him until his death. Near the end of his life, Northridge recalls telling his father, the diarist, “John Keats was the greatest man in the history of the world,” adding: “I rather like Keats’s notion of ‘negative capability’ where one cherishes and nurtures the thousands of contradictory ideas in one’s head, rather than trying to reduce them to functional piths and gists.”

Nelse, who has gone in search of his birth mother, exhibits many of the Northridge’s characteristics. He is a naturalist and a headstrong young man, an “enviable nomad” who settles down with a young, married stripper. The interviews that Harrison did in support of the novel offer a glimpse into the mind of a writer who accepts the passing of time at the same time that he works to understand the impulses that drive him to continue writing. In writing Nelse’s character, Harrison admitted that the difficulty he had recreating Nelse’s frenetic energy nearly thirty years after he penned Swanson’s foray into the wilderness in Wolf was a matter of age, a mellowing in Harrison that forced him to research the anger of a man in his early thirties by interviewing such men, not by recalling his own anger.

In the process of searching for his mother, Nelse establishes a relationship with his grandmother, Naomi, under the pretense of doing a phenological (bird migration) survey of her property along the Niobrara River in Nebraska. Between Nelse’s search for his mother and Dalva’s own narrative, Naomi and Paul both reinforce and call into question the history of the family. While Naomi has remained a widow since the death of her husband in Korea, Paul wonders if he is the father of Duane Stone Horse. Both surmise that Dalva and her lover were, in fact, half-siblings. Predictably, the question remains unanswered—after all, the narrative focuses on the reunion of Dalva and her son. The scene from the conclusion of Dalva is replayed, and Nelse and Dalva form the relationship about which Dalva has dreamed for her entire adulthood. Dalva, who suffers from ovarian cancer, retraces her lover’s trail to the coast and ends her life, loaded down by the totems of her past: “I’ve quickly packed my bag with Niobrara stone, the piece of hammock, and the belt I will take with me on my long voyage downward. Nothing else but my body and the fresh pill I had just taken. I send a kiss and a good bye to those I love so much. Naomi, Paul, Lundquist, Nelse, and J. M. I hope I am going to join my lover.”

Dalva’s death, much as the lives and deaths of all of Harrison’s characters, offers a bittersweet closure to a life and places before the reader the unanswerable and unutterable question implicit in all of Harrison’s fiction: What is the nature of truth in the course of a short life spent always searching, paradoxically, for ways to live—and die—with as much dignity as we can muster? The ending of the novel is both a signal of the maturation of Harrison’s vision and a starting point for what will follow.

THE WOMAN LIT BY FIREFLIES

Despite Harrison’s success as a novelist and the reception of Legends of the Fall, his later novelas remain relatively unexplored by critics. In 1990 Harrison published The Woman Lit by Fireflies, a three-novella collection that, in addition to his writing six versions of two screen-plays at the same time, tested the limits of Harrison’s resiliency as a writer. The collection’s title story describes the dissolution of a woman’s marriage to an aging radical who daily becomes
more conservative and more concerned with the fluctuation of the stock market (he listens to tapes called *Tracking the Blues* on long car trips) than he is with his relationship with his wife. *Sunset Limited* and the first appearance of Brown Dog in the story of the same name round out the collection.

The introspective title story illuminates the diversity of Harrison’s style, although *Sunset Limited* has received criticism as a slick screenplay-like effort. Harrison wrote the story when he imagined what it would be like if one of his group of friends—Chatham, McGuane, or de la Valdene—were stranded in South America. *The Woman Lit by Fireflies* and *Brown Dog* (the first novella in a trilogy that ends with the novella *Westward Ho* in *The Beast God Forgot to Invent*) have been more roundly accepted as works typical of Harrison’s talent and vision, although the two novellas have little in common. Critics have generally praised Harrison for his willingness to tackle the issue of psychological abuse from a woman’s point of view and see the protagonist of *The Woman Lit by Fireflies* as a logical progression from the strength of Dalva’s character. Clare, who spends a night in an Iowa cornfield remembering the deaths of her friend, Zilpha, and her beloved dog, Sammy, and having imagined conversations with her daughter, Laura, dreams of living out her life in Paris. The displacement that she feels in the field that night is replaced by the magic of her favorite place.

**JULIP**

Like *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*, *Julip* (1994) contains three stories that, on the surface, have little in common, and the title story is told from a woman’s point of view. *The Seven-Ounce Man*, Brown Dog’s second appearance, continues the character’s misadventures with the law and his attempts at preserving Native American history and his own sense of place within a society that repeatedly shuns him. *The Beige Dolorosa*, a response to Harrison’s own disavowal of the academy thirty years before, shows Phillip Caulkins, a middle-aged academic, trying to reorder his life after the threat of a bogus sexual-discrimination suit and the more frightening prospect of a degenerative neurological disorder.

The title story details the life of a young dog breeder who has affairs with three men who are stalked by her brother when she allows herself to be seduced by all of them. Julip, who holds control over the older men as a result of her sexuality, convinces the men to testify on behalf of her brother Bobby, the shooter, in order to have him moved from Raiford Prison to a mental hospital, where he can receive the attention that he needs. As in his previous attempts at delineating the female psyche, Harrison immerses himself fully in the character of Julip. The difference in tone between Julip and some of Harrison’s earlier attempts at writing from a woman’s perspective (Julip is more sexual than either Dalva or Clare, and the story is more plot-driven than either of the previous efforts) can be attributed to Harrison’s view at the time of writing *Julip* that, as with the difficulty he admitted in writing the young Nelse in *The Road Home*, he and his contemporaries have aged as mysterious and sexually appealing young women remain the same.

**THE BEAST GOD FORGOT TO INVENT**

*The Beast God Forgot to Invent*, also a collection of three novellas, contains exclusively male voices that circumscribe the characters’ conflict with a banal society. The themes that he treats in the stories are not new for Harrison, although the collection carries a more acerbic tone throughout and the comedy is a bit darker than that in much of the earlier fiction. The title story details the last days of Joe Lacort, who has been seriously injured in a motorcycle accident and
cannot remember anything except the immediate present. Lacort's protector Norman Arnz, who sees the world through Joe's eyes, follows both the tracks of Joe's mind and the visible tracks that allow him to keep an eye on Lacort in the Upper Peninsula wilderness. Lacort, Arnz reports, is able to define himself only in terms of his relationship with the wilderness and has "ever so slight an aura around him now in my mind that must resemble the origin of some primitive religion. I just recalled one late June dawn when he arrived quite literally covered with mosquito and blackfly bites, muddy clothes, quite eager to show me the one-hundred-thirty-seven water sounds he had logged in his notebook. What was I to make of this?"

Because of his infirmity, Lacort attracts women who want to take care of him; still, he repeatedly escapes society to act out his newfound innocence on nature and to record his own sightings of a three-form chimera that haunts the wilderness of his mind (or, perhaps, the "real" wilderness).

Arzoo, who analyzes his own life in terms of Joe's, recalls that he went to college at Northwestern and "though it has an excellent scholastic reputation this fact did not reduce the torpor I felt as a student. . . . I am scarcely interesting even to myself. I am the personification of Modern Man, the toy buyer who tries to thrive at the crossroads of his boredom." Harrison's portrayal of the doomed Joe, who drowns after swimming thirty miles into frigid Lake Superior to rescue his dog, Marcia, is sympathetic toward Joe—the story is written by Arnz as a deposition to the coroner who is investigating Joe's case—and symbolic on several levels. The title of the story is a reference both to Joe's belief that he can see a beast in the wilderness that no one else has ever seen and that Joe is unique in his predicament and his response to the life that has been taken suddenly from him. The characters that surround him are no less lost in their own society, increasing the chaos that arises from such a simple premise.

**Westward Ho** is a similar treatise on the venality of American culture and society. In the story, Brown Dog searches for Lone Marten, the titular head of a group of Native Americans who try to protect a Michigan burial ground from university excavators. Marten has stolen a bearskin rug that Brown Dog's uncle Delmore has given him, and in the process of retrieving it the protagonist becomes a chauffeur for the big-shot Hollywood screenwriter Bob Duluth, who is connected to Brown Dog by his own run-ins with the law and serendipity; the two seemingly disparate souls become close through their misadventures, and Brown Dog recovers his bearskin rug. Along the way, Brown Dog is seduced by an aspiring French actress named Sandrine and has to break into the fortress-like home of Hollywood's most powerful producer to retrieve the bearskin.

Brown Dog's reward for fulfilling the improbable mission is a ride home from the Minneapolis airport with Uncle Delmore, the responsibility of helping to raise the children of his ex-love Rose, and, perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to immerse himself once more in his beloved wilderness. When Delmore pulls the car over on the way back to the Upper Peninsula, the sight of his homeland nearly overwhelms Brown Dog, who "half stumbled down through a grove of poplar, cedar and birch to the lake where he knelt in the muddy reeds and rinsed his face in the cold water. On the way back up the hill he took a longer route through the woods, half-dancing through the trees like a circus bear just learning his ungainly steps."

**I Forgot to Go to Spain** recalls *The Man Who Gave Up His Name* in its evocation of midlife ennui and unfulfilled dreams. The protagonist is a wealthy author who has made his mark writing "Bioprobes," best-selling one-hundred-page biographies on famous people. Despite his wealth, the author regrets never having fulfilled his one remaining dream, to visit Spain; his ef-
fort to finally visit the country is nearly derailed
by a dinner with the wife to whom he was mar-
mied for only nine days and the French mistress,
Claire, who lives in Paris on the allowance that
he provides.

The writing that the protagonist does, distilled
from research that his sister gives him and for
which he pays her a six-figure salary, mirrors
the popular writing that Harrison disregards as
a symptom of a throwaway society. Several
times in the novella, the protagonist mentions
the relative worthlessness of his M.F.A. degree,
and he sees the work that he does (more than
three dozen of the “Bioprobes” over a thirty-
year period) as nothing more than a product to
be consumed by a public too happy to be spoon-
fed infotainment. The last project that he has
taken on—and which he vows, finally, to leave
unfinished so that he can fulfill his dream—is,
ironically, a biography of Michael Eisner, the
president of Disney.

The view of the protagonist in the present as
a man who has largely wasted his talents and
energy by working himself into a rut is con-
trasted to his recalling a planned trip to Spain
when he was nineteen. The reverie is prompted
by his sleeping with a young graduate theology
student. The protagonist recalls himself as a
young romantic (perhaps not unlike Harrison
himself) who “planned on talking my way into
spending a night in Miguel Hernandez’s jail
cell, wherever that was. The grim walls would
inculcate me with the spirit of his poetry.” The
plan never comes to fruition, and the protagonist
is left to become highly successful, in one way,
as a writer at the same time he laments choos-
ing a path that has thwarted his passion.

The three novellas in the collection hinge
upon the regret that the protagonists feel—at
being incapable of helping those in need, at
leaving the sacred places that have informed
their lives, and at never having visited those
places that might, through the realization of
dreams, become sacred. More often than in any
other of his fiction, Harrison reiterates his
disdain for the vacuity of American culture and
poses an increased attention to the life of the
mind as the only solution. Still, all three stories,
far from becoming the elegies to “Modern Man”
that they seem upon first reading to be, are
redeemed by the indomitable spirit of place.

CONCLUSION

Despite the different points of view and themes
that Harrison offers in his short works, the
novellas in all four collections are held together
tightly by one of the many threads that run
throughout his fiction: the characters are all
linked by their essential inability to function
within the constraints of a society that has
become alien to them—either through their own
machinations, or at the hands of someone who
represents that society. His characters, then—
both male and female—are not unlike Harrison
himself.

In “A Natural History of Some Poems” in
Just before Dark, Harrison muses that “It is
possible to tread water until you are unable to
do anything else.” Indeed, after consistent
production of fiction and poetry over nearly four
decades, Harrison remains prolific. In 1998 he
published simultaneously The Road Home
and The Shape of the Journey, his collected works
in addition to the long poem Geo-Bestiary,
which reinforces Harrison’s views on man’s
relationship to nature, ecological preservation,
and the shifting shape of life (as in so much of
Harrison’s work, in lengthy discussions couched
in metaphors of rivers and water). Harrison’s
roots in poetry allow him to use those images
to craft fiction that is at once spare, dense, and,
above all, vital. He has become perhaps
America’s most prominent writer of the novella,
and all of his writing—fiction, poetry, and
nonfiction—is important in the body of Ameri-
can literature for the multiplicity of its themes
and the diversity of its voices, as well as
Harrison’s unique expression of the human condition and a keen sense of the natural world, through and against which his characters play out their lives.

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**FILMS BASED ON THE WORKS OF JIM HARRISON**


—PATRICK A. SMITH