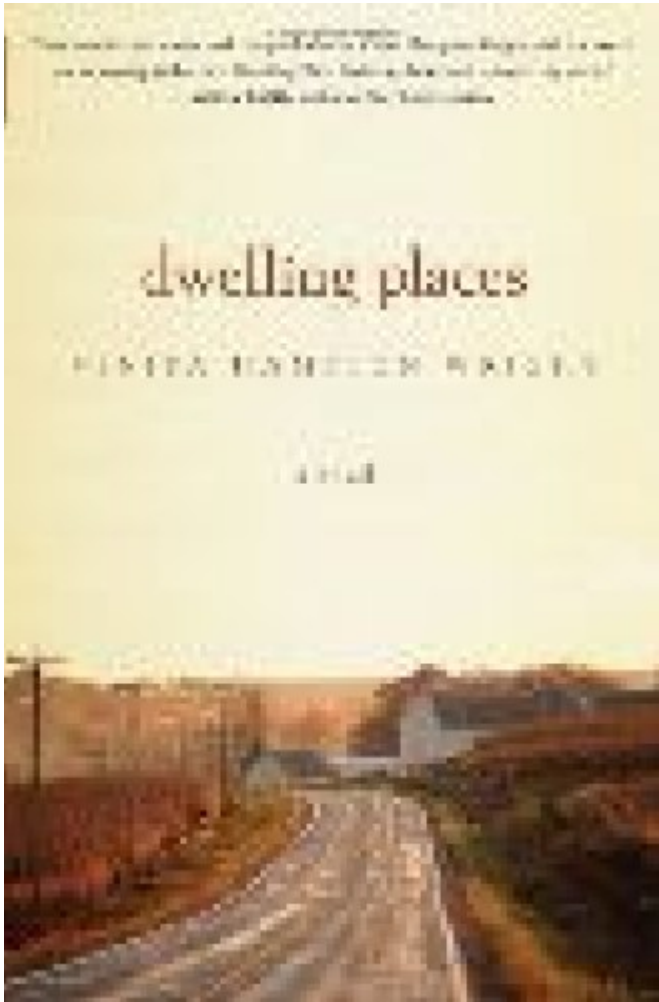


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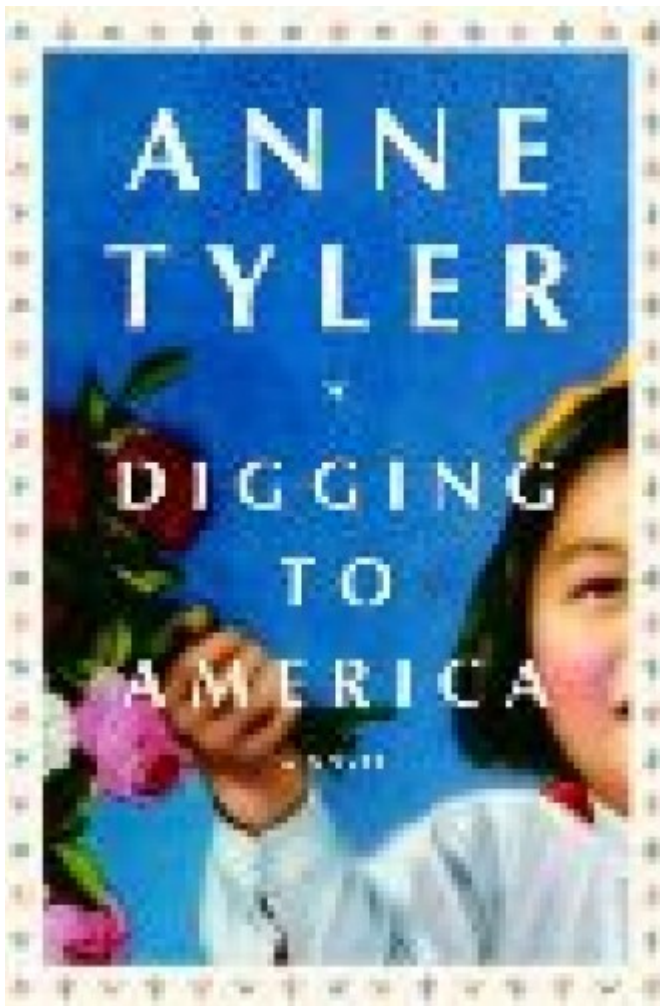
Books in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Dwelling Places

Vinita Hampton Wright
HarperSanFrancisco



Digging to America

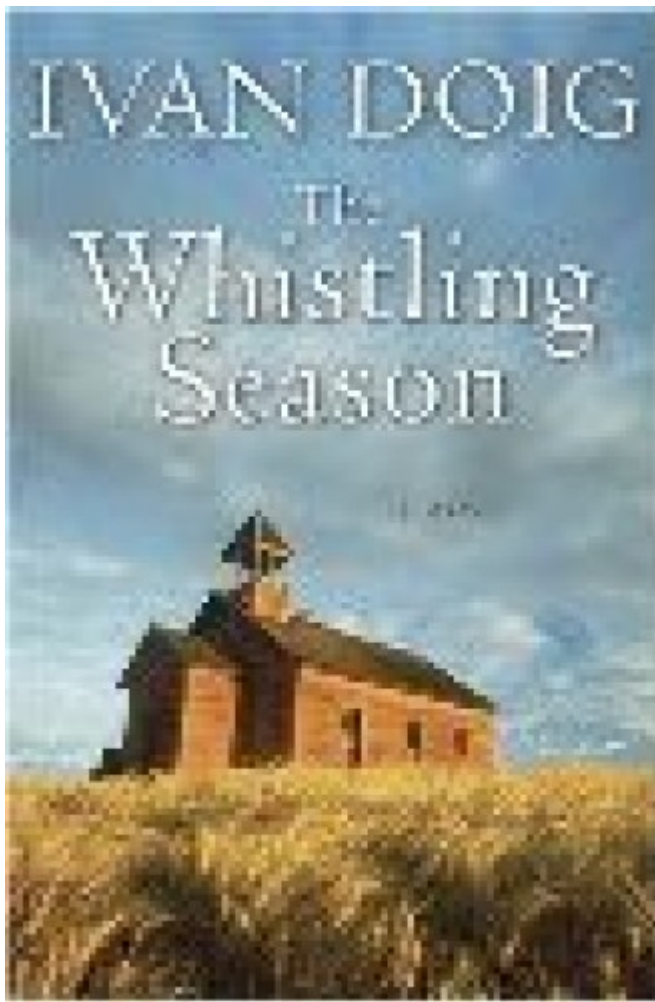
Anne Tyler

Knopf



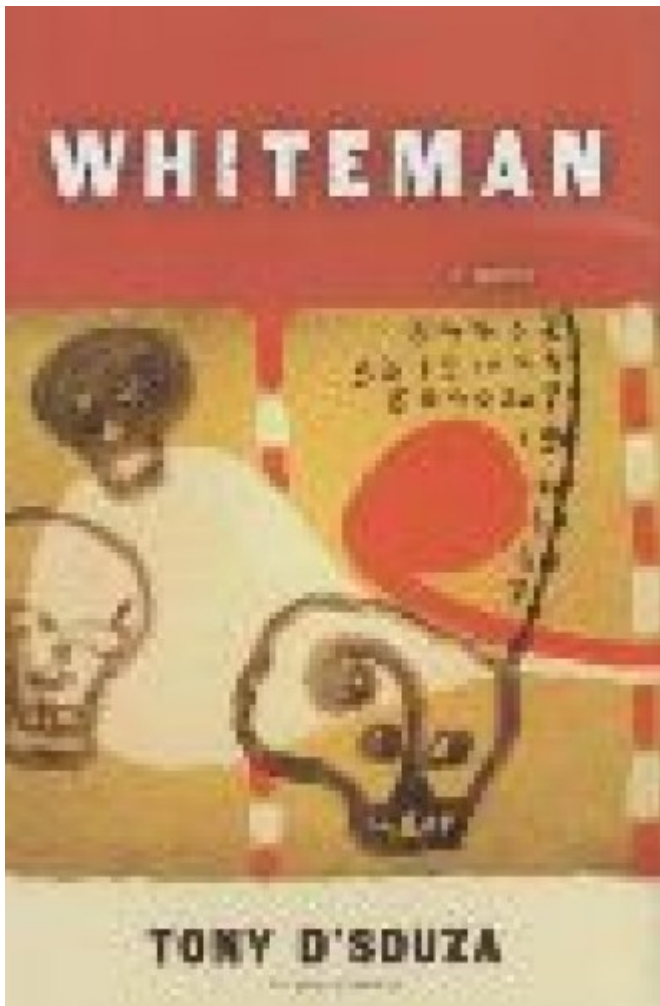
The Short Day Dying

Peter Hobbs
Harcourt



The Whistling Season

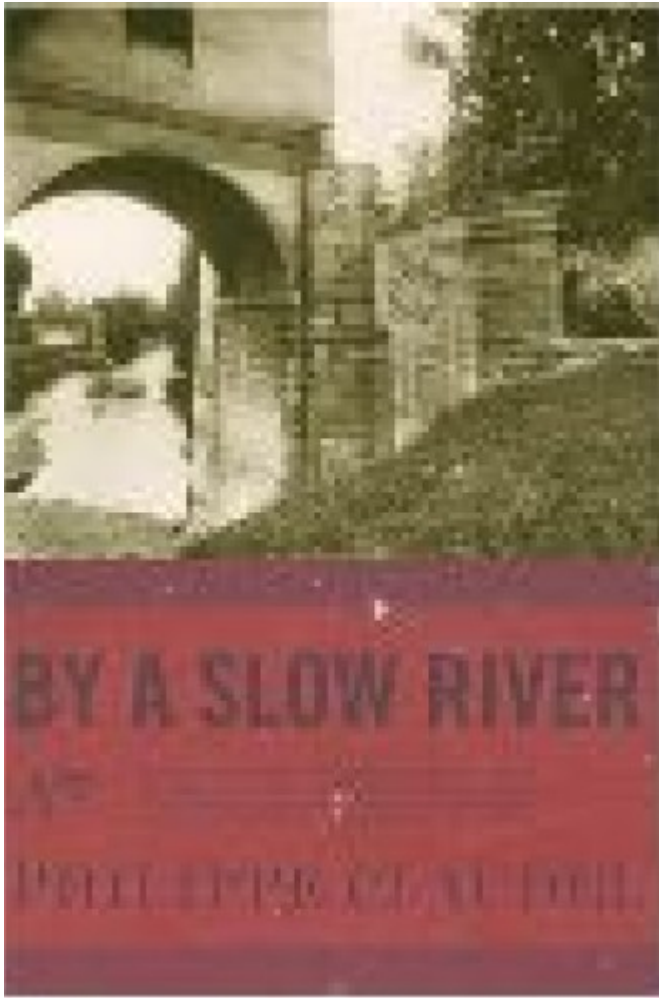
Ivan Doig
Harcourt



Whiteman

Tony D'Souza

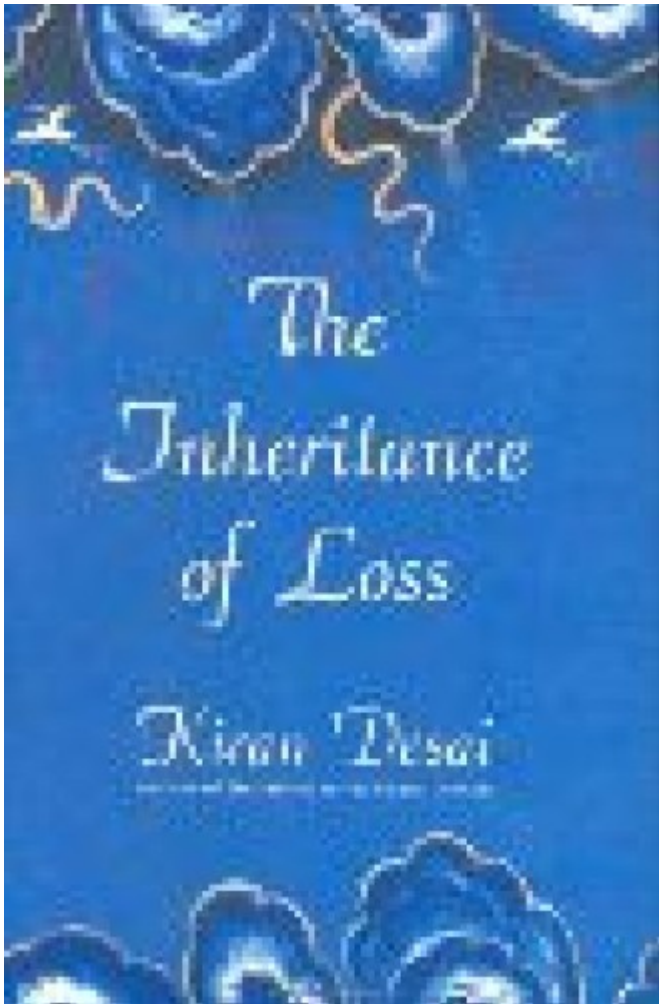
Harcourt



By a Slow River

Philippe Claudel

Knopf



The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai

Atlantic Monthly Press

Two families begin a friendship when each adopts a Korean daughter. The Donaldsons, long established in the U.S., and the Yazdans, whose parents immigrated from Iran, mirror Tyler's own history. (Her husband of 39 years was born in Iran.) She weaves the subtle effects of small misunderstandings and larger cultural stereotypes into the story and sensitizes the reader to the real and perceived cultural differences. The persistence of the families in pursuing friendship and establishing new, shared traditions is an encouragement to all who are trying to do the same.

In her fourth novel, Vinita Wright introduces five memorable members of an Iowa farm family named Barnes. The novel follows their unraveling ties and at the same

time traces threads of graced memory and spiritual renewal. The title may refer to the discrete physical spaces and the separate thought-worlds each narrator inhabits as the family members drift apart. But *Dwelling Places* also evokes the security of Psalm 90: God has been our dwelling place in all generations. Wright's characters, as compelling in their strength as in their imperfection, move slowly toward secure and welcoming spaces such as shared land, shared memory and shared faith.

The author was inspired by the diaries of his great-great grandfather, a Methodist lay preacher. In this fine first novel, presented as journal entries for one year (1870) in southwestern England, Hobbs chronicles the day-to-day life of Charles Wenmouth, a 27-year-old pastor in a small community that is sucked dry by hardship—the death of the town's coal miners and of those who are abandoned when miners die, the grinding poverty, the untreated diseases, the disinterest in a God who seems removed from all of it. At first the run-on style of journal entries with minimal punctuation is unsettling. But it also fits the mental, physical and spiritual crisis of the young pastor (his unidentified illness very likely is malnutrition) and draws the reader in. As Wenmouth walks across the beautiful countryside to visit the sick and the dying, the reader will want to keep him company.

Doig has been writing about western life for 30 years, and he's known for his memoir *This House of Sky*. In *The Whistling Season*, Doig follows the life of a rural Montana family in the early 1900s. When the mother dies, the father crafts an ad for a housekeeper. Rose, answering the ad, arrives from the East with her brother Morrie, an engaging and eloquent teacher, and brings along their family secrets. The larger story is of the author's love for western landscapes, of family and community bonds, of colorful personalities and of humor found during the most difficult of times.

When the Ivory Coast erupts into renewed violence between Christians and Muslims, Peace Corps volunteer Jack Diaz is told to wait for an evacuation notice. Instead of complying, he stays on and slips away to a local village, where he blends in by learning to hunt, to cultivate yams and to comply with (or disregard) village mores and taboos. The ease with which he drops his idealism, even taking advantage of black women prostitutes, is disturbing, yet his integration into the culture permits a more intimate experience of a local culture that is intact except for the breath of war all around it. *Whiteman* challenges First World readers, especially those who would be idealistic missionaries, to examine what it means to work in another culture. Does our presence contribute to the well-being of that culture or to its deterioration? Do we arrive ready to impose our culture, or prepared to be taught and humbled by

another culture's wisdom?

A translation of Claudel's *Les Âmes Grises* (Grey Souls), *By a Slow River* is on one level an engrossing mystery narrated by a village police officer who looks back on 20 years spent solving three murders, then reveals a few terrible secrets of his own. On a second level, the novel is about the ordeal of a village located a few miles from the World War I battle front. While its residents move through their lives, excused from conscription so they can keep a local factory in operation, thousands of young men pass by on their way to the relentless death machine, only to return dead or disfigured and maimed. This is hardly the first novel to deal with the horrors of war, but Claudel portrays those horrors without cliché, creating a melancholy, mournful beauty out of personal ghosts and national nightmares.

Desai's novel is an extraordinary if sometimes overwhelming epic. Two Indians live parallel lives: Sai is an orphan taken in by an embittered and eccentric uncle in Kalimpong, a Himalayan village in India; Biju, a young man from the same village, has managed to emigrate to America, where he fights to survive as part of Manhattan's immigrant workforce. The novel manages to address colonization, chronic poverty, globalization and terrorism. Its outlook is finally pessimistic—the poor are always left behind by the West. Yet the novel is extraordinary for the same reasons—for its scope of ideas as well as its dizzying, rich description of local life in mountainous India. *Inheritance* offers a fascinating immersion into one Indian region—its food, climate, flora, manners, fears, religions and eccentric inhabitants. Welcome to Kalimpong.