

BY THE SOUND BY EDWARD DORN

By Peter Donahue



RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

The smattering of years that Edward Dorn (1929–1999) spent in Seattle and the Skagit Valley in the 1950s represents a formative period in the influential poet's career—a period in which he produced a number of significant works featuring the region, including the classic Northwest novel *By the Sound* (1971).

According to Tom Clark, author of *Edward Dorn: A World of Difference*, Dorn first came to Washington in 1949 while still a college student in Illinois. After working the summer on a logging crew near Mount Pilchuck and at Boeing in Seattle, he returned to Illinois but soon thereafter found his way to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he met poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley.

In 1952 Dorn returned to Seattle, took a logging job in Monroe, and spent his weekends in the Seattle public library. "I like it here and I will say it," he declared to a friend about Seattle. Before long, he met his first wife, Helene. He also published his first poems, and though tempted to enroll in the University of Washington to study English, he chose to pursue his own course of reading and writing.

In 1954 Dorn returned (with Helene, their new baby, and her two children from a previous marriage) to Black Mountain to finish his tutelage under Olson and Creeley. By 1955, though, he was back in Seattle, but only briefly before settling his family 65 miles north in Burlington so he could take another

temporary logging job. He struggled for the next three years while he and his family lived in the Skagit Valley.

Dorn depicts this period of struggle in *By the Sound* (first published as *The Rites of Passage* in 1965). It is set during the winter, when the wet weather is "nasty, and nagging" and there is never enough firewood to keep the house warm. Carl, the protagonist, staves off destitution by picking up odd jobs. He goes from stomping down silage blown into silos to helping a born-again hell-raiser who runs a chicken farm. The farmer evangelizes to Carl while performing autopsies on diseased hens—"The kidney is corrupt!... It is vile. Vile. It has succumbed to vile-ness"—and yet he leers at Carl's wife after Carl introduces them.

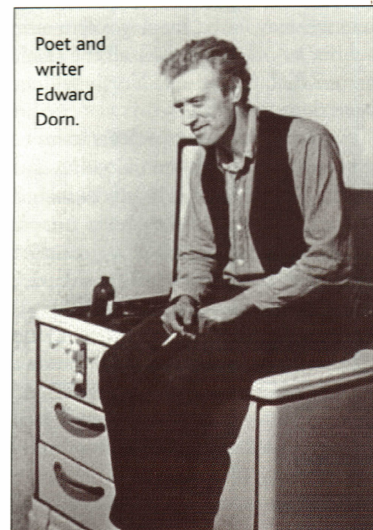
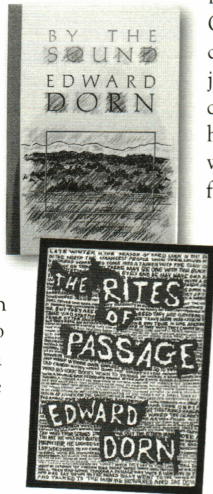
Throughout the novel Carl keeps company with an assortment of underemployed, hard-drinking characters who "cling to life as though it were precious when all their experience...tells them it's cheap." They wait out their days in the unemployment office or, if they can pay the \$75 membership fee, the union hall, then hit the taverns and return to their dilapidated farmhouses and pea camp shacks. Like Carl, they're usually married with a passel of kids. These characters include James, a handyman/scavenger, and Billy, a drifter trying to settle down, with whom Carl mostly knocks around.

After waiting to land jobs at the refinery in Ferry Town (Anacortes), Carl and Billy secure work at a dam site up the valley (on the Baker River near Concrete). What follows is a harrowing depiction

of the grunt work inside the tunnels and penstocks of a hydroelectric plant. Whenever a dropped wrench echoes down the shaft or the seeping water rises above their shins, the men fear the flood gates have burst and they'll be washed away before they can scramble to the hatches in the powerhouse.

Dorn retains a deep sense of the humanity of the people he portrays, and, whether his characters are digging clams at the beach, poaching a deer in an alder thicket, or just staring at the river from its muddy banks, he maintains an abiding appreciation for the landscape of the Skagit Valley. Dorn's prose has an unself-conscious honesty to it (reminiscent of early Dos Passos and Steinbeck) that makes his characters particularly sympathetic and the setting particularly appealing.

In addition to *By the Sound*, Dorn wrote a series of prose sketches and poems set in the region. Among these is "1st Avenue," which recounts his Dante-esque journey



Poet and writer
Edward
Dorn.