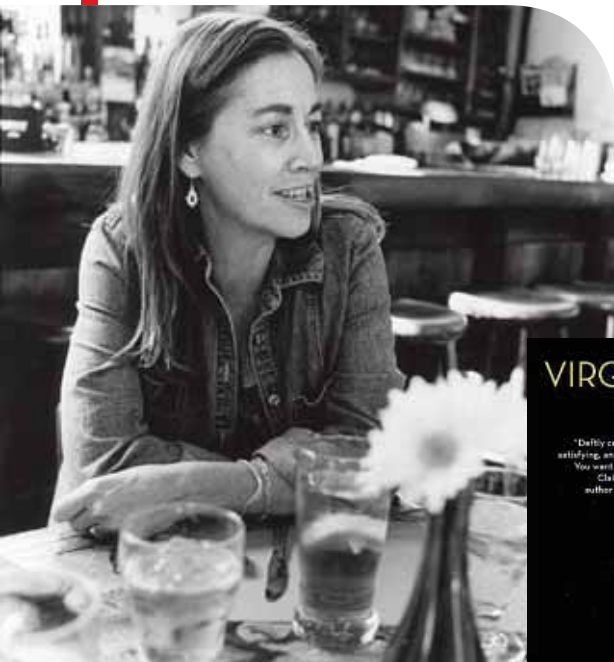
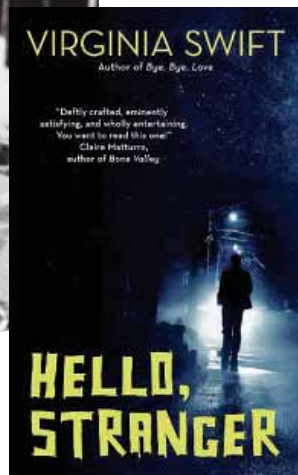


# Writing The Big Empty

WHY WYOMING IS PRIME TERRAIN FOR MYSTERY WRITERS.



Alter egos—Craig Johnson (top) was a New York cop, and Virginia Swift (above) is a professor at University of New Mexico.



**S**paringly populated Wyoming is the ninth-largest state in the country, but with less than 500,000 residents (as of 2005), it's the least populous—which means there's a heck of a lot of terrain where you can chuck a dead body. At least that's what it means for Wyoming mystery novelists, of whom there are many. Craig Johnson, Virginia Swift, C.J. Box, Margaret Coel, Ron Franscell, and Lise McClendon are just some of the mystery writers who call the Big Empty their literary home.

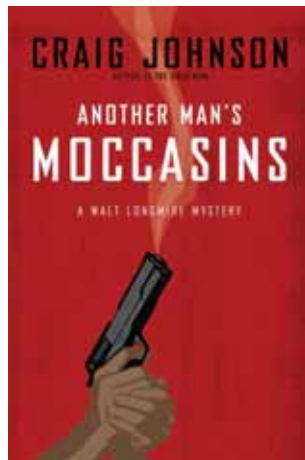
"Everyone calls it the Big Empty. It does provide a pretty fantastic Western landscape," says **Craig Johnson**, 48. "Odd people are drawn into a vacuum, and you'll meet really interesting people in Wyoming."

With more mule deer and antelope than humans, you might say Wyoming is also the last least-known state. "There's a reason for that,"

Johnson says. "Wyoming doesn't have the infrastructure of five-star restaurants and Starbucks coffee places. There are an awful lot of amenities that people have grown used to that we simply don't have. For a lot of corporate America, Wyoming flies under the radar." Which makes it an ideal place for a writer's imagination to thrive. What's more, Johnson says, "It's also a place of extremes in weather and topography, and that lends itself to mystery and crime fiction."

The personable Johnson lives in Ucross, a tiny town in north-central Wyoming at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains. A former New York cop, he's into motorcycles and pickups. Story lines for his protagonist, Sheriff Walt Longmire, often emerge from state newspapers. Then Johnson likes to follow up with real-life Wyoming sheriffs. That's what he did to find a good narrative for *Another Man's Moccasins*. "What's the worst-case scenario that Western sheriffs come up against?" he asked. "Every one of them said, 'A body dump.' Meaning, on some lonely stretch of I-25 or I-80 in a rural county in the middle of nowhere at 2 in the morning, a car pulls over to the side of the highway, a trunk opens, and somebody throws a body out, then drives off."

Once he has an idea like that to incubate, Johnson comes up with a believable story arc and supplies strong character devel-



VIRGINIA SWIFT PHOTOGRAPHY: MIGUEL GANDERT

opment, social commentary, a smattering of Northern Cheyenne and Crow characters, and whodunit suspense. That's been his winning mix for detective novels like *The Cold Dish* and *Kindness Goes Unpunished*.

Seductive humor on the High Plains is the forte of **Virginia Swift**, whose Mustang Sally mysteries revolve around a country-rock singer who has become a professor and amateur sleuth in the progressive university town of Laramie in southeastern Wyoming. This is home turf for Swift in a couple of respects: She herself is a professor (at the University of New Mexico), and she used to live in Laramie. "It might have been the second town in the state to get lattes," Swift says. She continues to draw on her former hometown for local color in the life of the consciousness-raised liberal Sally Alder, who slings clever one-liners and engages in romantic forays in between righting wrongs.

For the 55-year-old Swift, Wyoming provides great material. "There are a lot of guns, many guns," she says. And lots of history: "A lot of the big-time ranch families in Wyoming came from England," Swift says. The state also has the kinds of contemporary problems that sharpen her social commentary. *Hello Stranger*, Swift's fourth mystery, is about rising real-estate prices. "That's a great Western theme right now: what it means when interlopers—or maybe we should call them antelopers—start showing up in a place."

Still, Swift reflects, "Everyone thought that Wyoming was going to be the next Montana, but it just doesn't seem to be happening anywhere except in the northwest corner of the state with Jackson Hole. Wyoming *has* gotten yupped up a little bit." And yet, no big migrations of relocators diluting the state's essence and changing the kind of character—and *characters*—that remoteness breeds. A perfect setting for writers who like big forces like Nature to play a part in their stories.

The great outdoors is where **C.J. Box**, 50, sets his macho plotlines involving game warden Joe Pickett. If Joe's a guy who isn't even one hormone in touch with his feminine side, he can still observe a herd of pronghorn antelope with the profound appreciation of a poet: "Hundreds of them out there, red-brown and white, glowing when the sun hit them and lit them up." In other words, a natural man. A Wyoming man.


"Wyoming might be one of the



Cheyenne-based C.J. Box likes setting plotlines for game warden Joe Pickett in The Cowboy State.

least understood states," Box says. Which makes it the perfect outsize place to work out issues of the New West with the independent Joe Pickett checking protocol at the door and diving into controversies. "Joe is kind of a throwback Western archetype of an independent lawman with a great big territory," Box says. "He's very fallible and he's real. He won't give up on things; he'll follow them through no matter what happens." And he'll follow them wherever they take him in that great big territory. Box, who lives outside of Cheyenne, keeps Joe moving

around, from the glitzy Jackson Hole in *Out of Range* to Yellowstone Park, where the geothermal activity turns the plotline grisly in *Free Fire*. Wherever Joe may follow a hunch, there you'll find Box evoking Wyoming's beauty and majesty.

Box's background in journalism serves him well as he travels the state talking to locals for research. When he goes home, he does a plot outline and then writes 1,000 words a day. He's written books set in Idaho and Colorado, but Box mostly sticks with Wyoming mysteries because the place has the kind of true grit and tenacity that earned the Big Empty its other tagline. "The motto of Wyoming is The Cowboy State," Box says. "Although that kind of culture still exists everywhere in the West, it may exist more prominently in Wyoming because no one will let go of it." 

—Wolf Schneider

## GOOD BETS IN WYOMING MYSTERIES

- **Craig Johnson**  
**NEWEST RELEASE:** *Another Man's Moccasins*, set in Wyoming with Vietnam flashbacks. Coming May 28: *The Dark Horse*, which finds Walt going undercover to save a woman accused of murdering her husband.  
**OUR FAVORITE:** *The Cold Dish*, in which we meet ironic Sheriff Walt Longmire of Absaroka County and his buddy Henry Standing Bear.
- **Virginia Swift**  
**NEWEST RELEASE:** *Hello, Stranger*, which finds Sally helping out a suspiciously battered student.  
**OUR FAVORITE:** *Bye, Bye, Love*, where murder draws Sally back into the music milieu.
- **C.J. Box**  
**NEWEST RELEASE:** *Blood Trail*, in which someone's killing hunters. Coming June 23: *Below Zero*, in which mysterious phone calls begin from a girl who may or may not be the daughter Joe believes was murdered six years ago.  
**OUR FAVORITE:** *Blood Trail*. —W.S.