

## Mark Sundeen

Ellen Meloy Fund  
Desert Writers Award Winner  
Missoula, MT  
[marksundeen.com](http://marksundeen.com)

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I've spent a lot of time in wilderness, working as guide in Utah and Alaska. And many of those places were far more remote than Montello. You can't drive to them. You have to walk or float on a river. And yet being at Montello for a week was the most solitary time of my life. Being alone, with no phone or internet, is far different than traveling through remote backcountry with other people. There were no excuses for not doing my work—and also, a liberating sense that my creative work was all that mattered. That's what there was to do all day.

So what did I do?

I wrote. Each morning I got in a good four hours. I was working mostly on a longform reported story about desert tortoise biologists who discovered a murder victim outside of Las Vegas 31 years ago. The mystery has not been solved. I wrote a few installments of a column for *Outside* magazine. I started a new book project about desert rivers and grief and being a dad. I've never known such a great room for writing as the studio. Of course, there is nothing else to do there than work. The way it is centered with glass walls on the landscape gave me the sensation that the plain wooden desk existed solely for me to make sense of the world while sitting at it.

I ran. It was pretty hot while I was there in August, but the morning were cool. I usually wrote from about 7 to 8, then took a 45 minute run down one of the roads, then was back to my desk around 9. I loved the isolation of plodding down the dust with the mountains in the distance.



I cooked. Mostly simple things. A big pot of posole chile that lasted a few days. When it wasn't too windy I ate out on the porch.

I read. I couldn't get myself to write much in the afternoons. I brought a couple of western epics to carry me through: *The Emerald Mile* by Kevin Fedarko about river runners in the Grand Canyon occupied the first two days. Then I spend the rest of the week on Larry McMurtry's 800-page *Lonesome Dove*, an absolute classic I'd never read before. Perfect for those hot afternoons watching the sage brush dance.

I made a small game at dusk of walking out trying to get cell coverage. Never enough success to make it worthwhile. On the final two days I'd go sit in my car and listen to NPR for a few minutes just to hear some other voices.

I drove to Wells one day to send some emails and buy a few groceries. Naturally I decided to take a "short cut" back to the studio and almost got stuck in deep sand. Not recommended.

One night I heard some strange noises. Irregular pops. Could it be gunshots? Fireworks? It sounded far off. I got out of bed and slid open the glass and listened. It sounded exactly like a tin roof buckling in the wind. But I knew there were no structures with or without rooves anywhere nearby. Also it wasn't that windy. I thought and thought. I could not figure it out. It was a bit spooky, all by myself, hearing mysterious sounds in the night.

By the end of it I'd finished the tortoise story and written the first few chapters of a new book. The time was beautifully productive and restorative.