

PW Review

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★ **Burning Fence: A Western Memoir of Fatherhood**

CRAIG LESLEY, St Martin's, \$24.95
(368p) ISBN 0-312-31846-4

Tricky business, fathers and sons," writes novelist Lesley (*Stormriders*) in this magnificent memoir of growing up in the 1950s in a hardscrabble American family. Lesley tells a gut-wrenching story of betrayal, abandonment and redemption. His father, Rudell, left the family when Lesley was a young boy, and his mother struggled to make ends meet, traveling from town to town around central Oregon seeking "a fresh start" and usually finding disappointment and heartbreak. Lesley persevered, however, excelling in school, attending college and finding a career teaching. Perhaps seeking atonement for his father's sins, Lesley took in a Native American boy. Later diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome, the boy proved more than Lesley could handle and was eventually sent to a foster home. Lesley renders subtle, compassionate portraits of the people in his life: his cruel stepfather, "quiet in a threatening way"; his uncle Oscar, "the kind of straightforward, stand-up guy a small town relies on"; and his half-brother, who "didn't get the calling to be a minister until after the devil tempted him to be a hit man." Try as he might, Lesley could not escape the pull of his father. Even after his mother made him promise to stay clear of Rudell, Lesley sought him out, turning to him in a last-ditch effort to save his desperately troubled adopted son. Tavern brawler, prospector, elk hunter, fence builder, Rudell burned with down-market charisma and drew Lesley to him. Never mawkish or sentimental, Lesley's work makes something beautiful from the wreckage of a tumble-down family. (*Sept.*)