

Powerful 'Burning Fence' explores NW author's hardscrabble youth

BY JOHN MARSHALL

P-I book critic

Think Pacific Northwest and what comes to mind is the big cities, Seattle, Vancouver, B.C., Portland. Or the high country of the Cascades, the Olympics. But there is another Northwest overlooked, the small towns and communities, many east of the Cascades.

This is the overlooked Northwest that the late Raymond Carver, a native of Clatskanie, Ore., explored in his brilliant short stories. And this is the territory that one of Carver's best students – Craig Lesley, a native of The Dalles, Ore. – has explored in memorable novels ("The Sky Fisherman," "Winderkill"), as well as a powerful new memoir, "Burning Fence" (St. Martin's, 357 pages, \$24.95).

Lesley is a revered literary figure in Oregon, beloved for his generosity as a writer and a college teacher in Portland. But he is too little known beyond the Beaver State.

That could change with "Burning Fence" since his memoir comes with praise from such writers as Kent Haruf, Rick Bragg, Ivan Doig, David Guterson, Carolyn See. Lesley has covered much of this memoir's family landscape in his novels, but the popularity of memoir should bring him more readers for this plain-spoken yet quietly eloquent book.

"Burning Fence" is subtitled "A West Memoir of Fatherhood" and Lesley spins forth some remarkable recollections of his ne'er-do-well father and his hardscrabble upbringing in such Eastern Oregon towns as Pendleton, Madras, Baker City and Monument. That his father deserted his wife and son when Craig was an infant is indicative of his hard life ahead, which later included a stepfather who abused him in many ways.

"Burning Fence" is a testament to the resilience of character, despite grim circumstances. But this is an old school sort of memoir, one that does not wallow in woe-is-me and finger-pointing from its author, now 60.



Craig Lesley is a revered literary figure in Oregon, whose new memoir promises to expand his reputation.

COMING UP

CRAIG LESLEY

WHAT: Discusses "Burning Fence"

WHEN & WHERE: 7 p.m. Wednesday at Seattle Central Library, 1000 Fourth Ave., 206-386-4636; 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Eagle Harbor Book Co., 157 Winslow Way E., Bainbridge Island, 206-842-5332

Lesley recounts crucial incidents and conversations with a minimum of present-day reflection, although he does address what might seem an odd focus of his memoir, his father (Ruddell), when his mother (Hazel) was "the hero" of his youth.

As Lesley writes, "Even though I had only eight meetings with my father until I was

well past 40, his influence on me was enormous. Since my mother had criticized him for being 'weak,' I vowed to be strong . . .

"Ruddell's neglect motivated me to raise an alcohol-damaged Indian boy just to show the old man I could succeed as a father where he had fallen down. To be truthful, it was harder than I thought. I stood trapped middle ground between a man who wouldn't communicate and a boy who couldn't."

Ruddell proves to be an elusive figure in Lesley's life, as well as his memoir. He was a decorated combat vet of World War II, someone who probably suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, a master builder of fences, a security guard, a crack shot who paid little attention to hunting seasons or regulations ("it's poaching or hungry kids"), someone prone to "tin-cupping" others, a resident of dilapidated shacks, also a charmer of women, even if he had no use for kids.

Yet Lesley simply cannot resist "the terrible pull of my father's blood" and their sporadic encounters over the years have a heart-breaking quality, as do the writer's attempts to raise his adopted son who suffers from the erratic behavior and mental handicaps of fetal alcohol syndrome. That costs Lesley his first marriage to his adored Indian wife, who tires of caring for her relation and tells her husband, "Things will never be normal for us, will they? I feel trapped. He's like an anvil chained to my neck." It almost costs Lesley his second marriage, too, before he regretfully puts Wade into foster care.

"Burning Fence" paints an indelible portrait of subsistence existence in the pre-Microsoft Northwest; it is a book filled with lives not unlike those of pioneers. Lesley's memoir is a bit too episodic, without a strong chronological flow, but many scenes are unforgettable. It is a book with staying power.

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