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SPIRITS AND VISIONS

By Robert Rafferty July 23, 1989

RIVER SONG By Craig Lesley Houghton Mifflin. 307 pp. \$18.95 THIS IS A NOVEL steeped in the traditions and history of the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, where, in 1877, Chief Joseph united the Nez Perce against an order to move to their reservation. During the three-month war, the Nez Perce covered close to 1,600 miles while either fighting to a standstill or soundly defeating 10 separate U.S. Army commands in 13 battles. Eventually, weary and outgunned, they were forced to sign a peace treaty. The Nez Perce War put the tribe's name in the military history books and inspired General Sherman to call it "one of the most extraordinary Indian Wars of which there is a record." Danny Kachiah, the protagonist of River Song and of Winterkill, an earlier Craig Lesley novel, is a modern-day Nez Perce living off the reservation. Though Danny's soul is stirred by the deeds of his ancestors, he is more often distressed by the disenchanting real world around him, a world hanging on the edge of poverty. Like most Indians, he feels he cannot change things, so his answer is to be footloose and enjoy life as it comes. His early days were spent rodeoing, until he finally realized his biggest talent was falling off a horse. Now he does odd jobs, like picking fruit on the Hood River, or whatever else is necessary to get by. Life is lonely, and author Lesley, with a sure eye for detail, captures it well: "Over the years he had cooked thousands

of TV dinners, and the stove's dial was grooved to 350." Change becomes inevitable when Danny's ex-wife, Loxie, dies, and his 17-year-old son, Jack, comes to live with him. Danny has not seen Jack for 15 years. Still, when Jack begins to follow the rodeo path that Danny himself had taken, Danny realizes that he must keep his son from squandering his life. He will do this, he decides, by passing on the traditional Indian ways to his son. However, he is not sure of his own knowledge of these ways since his alcoholic father, Red Shirt, passed little on to him. He must rekindle his ties to the past. That past is rife with spirits and these start to take hold of Danny's life. First there is the Steah-hah, the Stick Indian whose whistle guides Jack out of a forest fire. Then he sees the Night Ghost of his dead wife. He also has a vision of a massacre that took place on a river years before. When the spirits and his visions threaten to overwhelm him, Danny goes to a medicine woman for healing. She tells him how he can appease the Spirits. When Danny protests that "hardly anybody practices those old ways anymore," the woman replies, "And look at the shape we're in." Searching for the meaning of the vision, Danny finally comes across the place of the massacre and once again finds himself confronting a spirit. This time it's Left Hand, his great grandfather, once a warrior at Chief Joseph's side. Danny's encounter with Left Hand reinforces both his desire to learn more about the old ways and his resolve to help the Indians who fish commercially and live along the Columbia River. Called the River People, they are constantly harassed and even attacked by hidden enemies who want to take away their treaty rights to fish the river. When one of the fishing camps is set on fire, Danny's fisherman friend's reply to a policeman's question of who'd want to do it summarizes the situation. "You want a list? Try this: sportfishermen, the state cops, the federal wardens, the sheriff's department, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They all want us off these sites." Throughout the novel, the river is a powerful symbol of Indian resistance to the white man's invasion. As one old man says, "This land here is

sacred land -- holy land for us. The river that's running through it -- that's the blood." Craig Lesley's style, too, flows like a river: starting slowly at the headwaters, gathering size and force, and always irresistibly carving its course to the end. While the plot is a simple, raw-boned tale of a floundering man trying to discover himself in time to save his son, what makes the book worth reading is Lesley's characters, who are drawn with both bold and subtle strokes to be decidedly individualistic, and the seamless weaving of the culture of the Nez Perce and neighboring tribes into the tale. This is not an occult book; however, readers with a low tolerance for stories that segue from the real to the spectral should be aware that the Indian spirits are prominent characters. Fortunately, even the spirit of the Stick Indian is not a stick figure. Robert Rafferty is a writer in Elgin, Texas. His most recent book is "The Texas Monthly Guide to the Texas Coast."