

A raging fire brings forces of nature and cultures together



Reeling In a Big One

With "The Sky Fisherman," Oregon novelist Craig Lesley hooks a terrific tale of Indian and white cultures

By PAUL PINTARICH

Any friend or longtime fan of Portland author Craig Lesley, especially those who have fished the Lower Deschutes River, will be hooked from the start by this compelling novel drawn from Lesley's boyhood in and around the small Central Oregon town of Madras.

From the beginning we recognize Jake, Culver's uncle in "The Sky Fisherman," from Lesley's stories of his Uncle Oscar, legendary fishing guide and owner of Oscar's Sporting Goods, a Madras landmark. Jake's cronies, the "backroom boys," add an appropriate cast to a regional period piece of the kind Lesley does so well.

Culver, we may assume, is Lesley, narrator and protagonist of this rites-of-passage story that compiles the adventures of Culver during his 16th summer and fall, in a less-crowded Oregon of 30 years ago.

Culver and his attractive mother, Flora, shed of Culver's stepfather, Riley — a hapless railroad worker on the run for arson — settle back in their hometown of Gateway, a mill town that by another name would be Madras.

Lesley's fictional topography places Gateway near the Lost River (the Deschutes), which drowned his fishing guide father, Jake's brother and partner, years ago, and next to a large Indian reservation we may presume to be Warm Springs.

Within the dichotomy of these two cultures — Indian and white, the river's timelessness running between them — Lesley creates a



CRAIG LESLEY

ROBERT BACH/The Oregonian

plot rich with a sense of place and charged with mystery.

Immediately on arriving in Gateway, Norma finds work in a biscuit factory while Culver is hired by Jake, a bachelor, to help out in his sporting goods store.

Jake is a legend in the small community, and Culver quickly becomes the son he never had, a hard worker who mixes easily with the local good ol' boys who gather each morning in the store's back room for coffee, sweet rolls and an exchange of stories and gossip.

"Uncle Jake was the kind of stand-up guy a small town relies on," Lesley writes. "Before going into the sporting goods business, he had worked at the weekly newspaper, so he was acquainted with nearly everyone in town and on the nearby reservation. He had driven ambulance and fought fires as a volunteer when he wasn't guiding on the river.

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THE SKY FISHERMAN
 Craig Lesley
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BOTTOM LINE

"The Sky Fisherman" is an impressive addition to Lesley's growing list of titles, a novel of mature achievement and an evocative portrait of Central Oregon, its people and a vanishing way of life.

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 In short, he was everything my stepfather Riley was not."

Jake is also best friends with an Indian tribal policeman, Billyum Bruised-Head, and longs after an old girlfriend, Juniper Teewah, an Indian artist just returned from a long sojourn in the Southwest.

Intrigue is provided by the death of a young Indian man, Kalim, a former high school basketball star, whose body is recovered from Lost River by Jake and Culver, and by a raging fire that destroys Gateway's plywood mill and threatens the town itself.

The fire is the novel's centerpiece, an epic conflagration that reveals the sterner stuff of what Jake, Culver and the people of Gateway are made of. Two men die, but Jake and Billyum save the day, and Jake becomes an authentic hero.

Before the fire's embers have cooled, however, Lesley's plot is stirred with other complications: Why does Riley keep reappearing? And what is behind the death of two of Gateway's less noble characters, found dead in their pickup while on an elk hunt on the reservation?

Though Flora is dating Franklin, a wimpy biscuit company executive, Lesley makes us wonder whether she and Jake haven't had a past — and what is the real truth behind the drowning of Culver's father?

As he has shown in his two previous and exemplary novels, "Winterkill" and "River Song," Lesley is skilled at working his themes between two cultures, representing each with fairness and understanding.

Lesley, whose close experience includes his caring for an Indian foster

child, conveys the realization that, for Indian and white alike, survival is based on a sharing of natural and spiritual resources.

As flames gobble buildings on the edge of Gateway, whose mill is dependent on trees from the forests nearby, Indian forests are burning on reservation land in a summer of drought and danger. Fire is the common enemy against which all men are allied.

"At three in the morning, everybody left the fire to the relief and mop-up crews, then headed for the Elks Club. White or Indian, member or not, that night everybody was an

Elk, and you didn't have to sign the book."

It is the same on the river, where old hands like Jake have learned to keep themselves alive through a grudging respect for the spirits and superstitions familiar to the native people for many generations.

"When he tried sprinkling some of the tobacco on Jake, my uncle shrugged, but didn't jerk away. 'I guess it won't hurt none.'

"You still got a few things to learn, Jake." Billyum's tone was testy. He put shreds of the tobacco on my shoulders and a little in my hair. "Some of the old people believe

that when a person drowns, if his spirit isn't treated right, the ghost comes back out of the water to claim another. If that happens, you hear the spirit walking around the campfire in wet shoes. When I was growing up, lots of fishermen drowned, and all kids were told to stay close to the fire or the Wet Shoes would get us."

Lesley's story is reminiscent of "Ricochet River," another fine novel, by Portland author Robin Cody, as well as Norman Maclean's masterpiece, "A River Runs Through It." Their hearts feel the same.

Lesley is also typical of a growing number of Northwest writers whose work so adequately portrays a land that they love. From this abiding love they have become transcendent, moving their characters toward a universal humanity while acknowledging those ancient spirits that sustain us.

Appropriately, Lesley concludes: "Thrusting my head back, I gaze at the countless stars. I stare and stare and stare until my balance falls away. Tasting water, I begin swimming toward the firelights."

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ARTS & BOOKS

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