

FICTION

Lost and found way out West

THE SKY FISHERMAN

By Craig Lesley, Houghton Mifflin
304 pp. \$21.95.

By Valerie Miner

The Sky Fisherman confirms Craig Lesley's prominence in the growing clan of literary writers whose work is rooted in and shaped by the American West. In this strong third novel, he explores archetypal themes of homeland, interracial friendship, geographical rambling and class mobility. It is an adventure tale, mystery, *bildungsroman*, romance and ghost story. Lesley, an Oregon writer and editor, leaves the book's exact Northwest location open. His writing is, for the most part, unsentimental, vigorous and compassionate.

Early in the novel, the narrator — 16-year-old Culver — moves with his mother back to the Lost River Wilderness Area and their small hometown of Gateway. Culver has survived his mother's two marriages and far too many addresses: "My childhood was spent moving from one railroad town to another, each one smaller and more remote than the one before. This constant moving gave me a sense of restlessness, of always being near the edge of something, but of freedom too, and loss."

In classic Western style, Culver's determined mother, Flora, lives for the day after tomorrow. She can't understand why middle-class comfort and respectability elude her. Eventually Gateway does seem to keep the frontier promise implied by its name. She finds a good job at Sunshine Biscuits and Jake, Culver's paternal uncle, hires the boy at his sporting goods shop. Life improves: Flora's boss wants her to train as an office manager. Culver enjoys his work and is made welcome by the "back room boys," the baker, crop-duster, night watchman, DJ and other locals, who gather at Jake's shop to gossip and swap fishing tales.

In returning to Gateway, Culver confronts grief about the long-ago drowning of his father in the Lost River. He is also initiated into the wild beauty of the West. "Blue-green firs timbered the high canyons and tall ponderosas bordered the riverbanks. Occasionally the sweet smell of mock orange drifted in the air. Chutes and rooster tails alternated with deep holes and slick eddies. The rich landscape lifted our spirits, and I was aching to break out the fishing poles."

Adventure shifts to mystery when Culver and Jake find the drowned corpse of Kalim, a young Indian man, with a bullet hole in his back. Left alone with the body, Culver secretly takes \$300 from the dead man's pockets. Later, too late,

the tribal investigator (a boyhood friend of Jake) arrives and admonishes, "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 campground in wet shoes." This prediction and two subsequent murders cast eerie shadows over the novel's climax.

One night, Culver and Jake are stunned to discover a huge blaze at the stud mill and plywood plant. Eight large petroleum tanks are nearby, and Jake's agile courage helps save the town. Culver reflects on his neighbors' reaction to the fire: "Somehow I realized that I was witnessing the best of Gateway, the best of small towns, where neighbors dropped their everyday grudges and risked their lives for the spirit of the community."

It is, perhaps, at this fire where Culver falls in love with Jake — with his heroism, camaraderie, the way he urges Culver to stretch beyond adolescence. Jake is the father for whom Culver has always pined. Life would be perfect if only Jake and his mother fell in love. However, Jake is courting Juniper, a native woman temporarily returned to the reservation, and Flora is dating Franklin, a steady, if boring, white man.

Like Lesley's other work, "The Sky Fisherman" witnesses friendships and antagonisms between whites and Indians. The Gateway whites reveal random bigotry as well as specific resentment about native hunting rights and government subsidies. Culver discovers that racial tensions cross generations when he joins five kids playing basketball. "Two of them were Indians from the reservation nearby, and after we shot for sides, I was on their team. I realized the three big farm boys on the other team had missed on purpose, so they could play together, but I didn't mind. Still, I said to myself, Culver, you remember this is how things work in Gateway." Yet there are occasions of transcendence, when the Indians fight the town fire and later when some white

neighbors help rescue the reservation from flood.

Culver grows close to Jake's friends Juniper and Billyum, makes allies among younger Indians and meditates on native myths: "Old Indian legends claim the stars are campfires at the centers of villages. Around these campfires, the storytellers gather. Their words spark fires, warming the people until the sun rises. One by one, the fires dim and the storytellers slumber until the next night."

Lesley also reveals a nuanced appreciation of white working-class life in his details about food, labor, language and aspiration. When the millworkers are laid off, they buy rifles to ensure meat for dinner. Culver compares himself with the children of rich farmers: "I envied their advantages, but at the same time believed I was better than they were — smarter because I had to rely on my wits, tougher because I lacked their cushion."

If the strengths of this novel are the range of Western themes, the broad social scope and the inventive subversion of fictional genres, its problems relate to subtle issues of craft. The narrative sometimes lacks natural dialogue, adept pacing and graceful language.

Still, "The Sky Fisherman" is an accomplished book. Lesley's biblical, metaphoric invocations of fire and water are powerfully drawn. With poetic repetition, the dramatic Gateway conflagration is foreshadowed by an earlier arson in another town and is echoed in the mysterious fiery deaths of two unsavory white men trespassing on the reservation. The water-logged ghosts of Culver's father and young Kalim are recalled in the final disastrous flood, which damages the reservation and washes another important person from Culver's life. The boy grows passionately aware of the world below him and above.



PHOTO / KATHERYN STAVRAKIS

The strengths of 'The Sky Fisherman,' Craig Lesley's third novel, are the range of Western themes, the broad social scope and the inventive subversion of fictional genres.

"Jake pointed to a section of sky that contained clusters of stars, some stacked in columns, others forming graceful arcs. 'There's the Sky Fisherman. Those stars closest to the mountain are the hip boots.' Straight above is his vest, and the little curved line of stars is a pipe jutting out of his mouth. That long row of curved stars makes up his fly rod. . . ."

"And that fish will never get away," I said. "Maybe that's the best part."

Likewise, "The Sky Fisherman" ends in midstream. Lesley leaves readers floating pensively down the Lost River, mysteries unsolved, romances lingering, specters hovering and Eden, as ever, elusive.

Valerie Miner's latest novel is "A Walking Fire." She is professor of English at the University of Minnesota.