

STORM RIDER

Author Craig Lesley's new novel is also a personal journey.



BY DAN HAYS
For the Statesman Journal

Writer Craig Lesley makes connections. Lesley's way of explaining how and why things are linked makes all his books, but especially "Storm Riders," his newest, reach inside your mind and help it to understand, reach inside your heart and warm it.

With his new book, he's exploring a new connection for readers.

It begins in Alaska.

In a recent interview, Lesley said he would like President Clinton to issue a formal and specific apology for Angoon, a rebuilt Tlingit village in Alaska.

It had to be rebuilt because in 1863 it and another Tlingit village were deliberately destroyed, with loss of life, by United States gunships as part of an effort to eliminate the Tlingit culture and force any survivors to assimilate into white culture.

An apology, Lesley states flatly, must be made for that action.

More than 100 years after Angoon was blasted, Craig Lesley took into his home, in his words, a damaged foster child from Angoon and tried to raise him.

The damage dates back to the day the shells fell on Angoon. How so?

Connections.

"When you take away a people's culture," Lesley said, "you take away their lives. The separation from their culture leads them into despair, and, in the case of many Native Americans, into alcoholism."

The child that Lesley took in and raised for 10 years was a Tlingit, a relative of Lesley's first wife. He was also the victim of fetal alcohol syndrome and all its devastating effects.

"Storm Riders" is an autobiographical novel based on Lesley's experiences with his foster son.

"The thing I want people to realize most as they read this book," he said, "is the challenges and rewards of working with a damaged child. A lot of people take on a cocaine baby or an FAS child and have no idea what they are getting into."

Did he know when he brought that child into his family? "I didn't have a clue."

Lesley was born in The Dalles, and while he attended college at Amherst in Massachusetts and at Whitman College in Wash., he has spent much of his life in Oregon. At the moment, he holds the Hallie Ford Chair in English at Willamette University in Salem. His duties include connecting Willamette students and the larger community with the writers in their midst. He also teaches creative writing. And he is no stranger to teaching. To accept the 3-year Willamette appointment, he took a leave of absence from his position as writing instructor at Clackamas Community College in Gresham, a position he greatly values.

He also writes novels. "Riversong," "Winterkill," "The Sky Fisherman." Each is

'Storm Riders'

AUTHOR: Craig Lesley
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AVAILABLE: At B. Dalton, Borders, Jackson's Books, Rosebud & Fish, Waldenbooks, Willamette University Bookstore

AUTHOR APPEARANCE: Craig Lesley will make a personal appearance 7 p.m. Thursday in Jackson's Books, 320 Liberty Street SE. He will speak with patrons and sign copies of his books. There is no charge. Call: 399-8694

endowed with grace and wisdom, style and substance, and the great mysteries of the human heart: who are we, and how can we deal with each other?

The first two novels are based on historical truth. "The Sky Fisherman," he said, "is pretty autobiographical." But "Storm Riders" is overtly autobiographical.

Like the fact that young "Wade," as he is called in the novel, created such personal and family turmoil that he contributed to the breakup of Lesley's first marriage. And the fact that 9-year-old Wade was present at the death of a toddler. Just what he saw and what he did we can never know. Also like Lesley's foster son, Wade's bizarre behavior increased as he grew older, and Lesley began to feel that his new family, his wife and daughters, were threatened by Wade's presence.

Hard facts. Facts that Lesley confronts head-on in "Storm Riders," an emotional hammer of a book that never lets us hide by thinking "it's only fiction."

The book was a long time in coming, much longer after "Sky Fisherman" than Lesley would have preferred.

"I had to have two hips replaced," he said, "plus the book took a long time to write because finding the balance between some of the harsher realities and some of the rewarding realities" of raising a damaged child was not easy. And the connections also had to be right.

Lesley knows that Wade's mother was an alcoholic in part because of the attempted erasure of her culture and thus the attempted erasure of Native American individuality. But there are, he insisted, even more connections.

"In some ways, we're not stopping this problem (FAS) at the source," he said. "The real Wade's mother had 17 children and they were all damaged."

He paused for a moment. "Seventeen children. I want to know why we don't do something about this."

That pain, that passionate rage against absurdity and injustice, charges the pages of "Storm Riders" with tangible life. Deliberately paced, fluent in time, "Storm Riders" is the intensely intimate tale of a man who

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AUTHOR CRAIG LESLEY

attempts to connect with a child he loves. It is a tale of joy and separation and fear and guilt and even despair, all written in a prose that sings like winds.

Lesley's evocation of place is accomplished in simple sweeps that make us feel the Alaskan woods or revel in a short walk in the New England countryside, or shiver with claustrophobia in the confines of a university's married student housing.

Separate ideas? No, there are connections.

Connections are always on Lesley's mind. "I love the students at Willamette," he said. "It's a great school. I'm looking forward to making the connections between Willamette and the larger community."

One question that will haunt readers of "Storm Riders" is, what became of Wade? And is there still a connection between Lesley and his foster son?

Lesley saw him as recently as January of this year. "Wade" is back somewhere in Alaska (Lesley won't say just where). "He is just getting by," Lesley said. "He gets state support. He does odd jobs, sells soda, but he still needs supervision." He hasn't re-assimilated into Native American culture. "That's an idea that should work," Lesley said, "and there are tribal traditions still in place that would help. But not enough of them. To a certain extent, you're looking at a damaged culture."

In other words, the shells are still falling.

What is it like where Wade lives? "Every car has something wrong with it," Lesley laughed. "After you've been there for three or four days, you know which car is coming by the noise it makes. They have a track at the school, but no one goes out there to jog by themselves, because of the bears. People drive somewhere you would expect them to walk, because of the bears." And the government won't let them shoot the bears. The government hasn't made the connections.

"Storm Riders" is a deeply affecting, almost mystical book. You'll come to know the characters as though they are real people. Of course, in a sense, these are real people.

Lesley was asked if Wade realizes he is damaged. The question made him solemn. "He would like to have a normal family and a normal life," he said.

Then, after a pause, "a lot of people like Wade have the capacity to glimpse, at least, the kind of lives they would like to have."

They make connections.