

Reviews

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Winterkill. By Craig Lesley. (New York: Dell, 1986. 306 pages, \$4.50.)

First published by Houghton Mifflin in 1984, Craig Lesley's *Winterkill* won the Western Writers of America Golden Spur Award as the best western novel of that year. It also won the association's award for best first novel. These awards are amply justified, for *Winterkill* is one of the best novels yet written about native Americans. Like almost all native American fiction, *Winterkill* deals with the problems of growing up Indian in a predominantly white society, but it does so with an honesty and a literary sophistication that are truly distinctive.

Lesley's realism is especially notable. James Welch has said that *Winterkill* "breathes life into the Indian experience, past and present," and I think this emphasis on *life* and *experience* is exactly right. The specific experiences rendered are Danny Kachiah's efforts to put his life back together at the age of thirty-four. Kachiah has spent most of his adult life drifting around the rodeos of the Northwest. Early in the book, however, Danny's ex-wife dies and he drives from Oregon to Nebraska to reclaim his teen-aged son, Jack. This strenuous effort signals Danny's determination to reestablish a life something like the one he knew with his own father, the legendary Red Shirt. Danny takes Jack back to the region of his birth—Northeastern Oregon—and recreates the traditional outdoor life he himself experienced as a boy.

Lesley's book evokes its Oregon setting as vividly as Thoreau evokes Walden Pond. It captures the essence of father-son relationships as few books have done, both in the present (Danny and Jack) and in the past (Danny and Red Shirt). What remains of Danny's Indian heritage—or so Lesley seems to suggest—is to be found in the country itself, one's feeling for the country, and the close-knit family we watch Danny reconstitute. The novel ends with a mystical suggestion or two concerning the sacred nature of the woods, but the real source of value here is the human community that Danny and Jack begin to form with a few of the other Indian survivors of their region. Lesley establishes the appeal of such a community without lecturing us about the evils of modern life or the need to return to the old ways. His hero's salvation is one of the most convincing affirmations in recent American fiction.

ROBERT MERRILL

University of Nevada, Reno