

THE BOOK REVIEW

LOS ANGELES TIMES SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1984

The pains of an Indian summer

WINTERKILL by Craig Lesley (Houghton Mifflin: \$14.95; 306 pp.)

After Danny Kachiah, a 34-year-old Nez Perce Indian, is thrown from the rodeo steer he's struggling to ride, a cowboy says, "Better get back to the reservation,

Reviewed by Gary Marmorstein

Chief." Danny's anonymity is swiftly established in Craig Lesley's impressive first novel, "Winterkill."

Back home in Pendleton, Ore., Danny carouses with his old pal Henry, and their drunken evening ends in a meadow, with Henry's pickup overturned, Henry's leg busted and two injured cows moo-

ing toward slow death until Danny in mercy slits their throats. Unable to move, Henry hands over a pocketful of stolen money to Danny. In these parts, money is just one more thing to use before the white man takes it away.

The accident, like almost every incident in his life, makes Danny think of his father Red Shirt, found dead with hands frozen to the steering wheel of a pickup after a drunken fight over a peroxide blonde. Danny is himself father to a 15-year-old boy named Jack, who lives 1,000 miles away.

With Henry's money in his pocket, Danny has an unexpected

one-night stand with former homecoming queen Tenley Adams. Weeks later, when Tenley asks Danny not to mention their night together to her new fiance, Danny lies and claims he's already forgotten about it. This is part chivalry, part resignation; he'll never be any woman's dream guy.

Danny gets word that his ex-wife has been killed in a car accident. (Danny's loved ones often meet their Maker behind the wheel) and drives to Nebraska to bring son Jack back to Oregon. Jack's stepfather, a brutal farmer named Hanson, provokes a vicious fight with a radio antenna before father and son hightail home.

Not until Jack's first elk hunt with Danny—the "winterkill" of the title—do these two long-estranged blood relatives reconcile. Many sections of "Winterkill" were

originally published as short stories; Craig Lesley has beaded them admirably. Lesley makes vivid the lush but seemingly empty landscapes of the Pacific Northwest; the Indians' turn-the-other-cheek responses to racial slurs; the pain that comes with bad jokes about people more downtrodden than themselves. He paints small scenes true by that lone detail that clinches conviction.

Unfortunately, the few white people who appear are barely sketched in. The former homecoming queen comes off as a cliché airhead. With farmer Hanson, Lesley misses an opportunity to exploit the social chasm between a minority biological father and a Middle-American stepfather, each of whom lives well below the poverty line.

But Danny Kachiah remains a

figure of complexity, struggling toward salvation—even if salvation means no more than an understanding of his own ancestry and progeny. In a wonderful fishing scene, delirium from a rattlesnake bite causes Danny to imagine his grandfather, father and son all diving into the same river—a river as mythic in Danny's mind as it is physically real and wet.

This is not a scene derived from Nez Perce folklore, but from Craig Lesley's sympathetic imagination. By resisting the natural impulse to make Danny Kachiah's plight symbolize the plight of Native Americans, Lesley has turned Danny into an Everyman who could stand in for any one of us.

Writer Marmorstein recently moved from New York to Los Angeles.