

WINTERKILL

by Craig Lesley

Houghton Mifflin \$14.95

Anne Bromley

WINTERKILL is an impressive first novel for Craig Lesley, who uses the eastern Oregon landscape and the Wallowa Mountains as the imposing backdrop to his story. It is a sensitive portrayal of contemporary Native Americans who manage to integrate lingering tribal traditions with equally entrenched traditions of the descendants of settlers in Oregon cattle towns.

The novel is about Danny Kachiah, a Nez Perce who grew up in Pendleton and now rides the rodeo circuit, working as an interim cowhand on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Now in his mid-'30s, he is an ex-star high school athlete, an ex-husband, and an absentee father. As his story unfolds, Danny emerges as a man who, despite his seemingly rough and unsettled existence, still longs for the young wife who deserted him to pursue her dream of becoming a professional dancer; and as a father who cannot bury his love for his 14-year-old son, Jack, who he has not seen for many years.

When Danny learns that his ex-wife, Loxie, has been killed in an auto accident, he heads for Nebraska to claim Jack from Loxie's second husband. After a bloody battle with this violent Scandinavian farmer, Danny takes Jack away with him, returning to Oregon.

The reunion of father and son, however, is not without strain, and Danny must deal with Jack's "piss-and-vinegar" adolescence. In his efforts to secure his relationship to his son, Danny recalls his experiences with his own difficult father, Red Shirt, who died a drunken death frozen in his wrecked pick-up. Danny is still haunted by the memory of his father and, in many ways, attempts to make sense of his own past by way of the stories and legends that he passes on to Jack. Slowly the trust between father and son grows as they come to learn from and depend upon one another through the activities that define their daily lives: punching cattle, hunting, fishing, and trapping.

The wild and often ghostly beauty of the Wallowa country emerges as a character in its own right, and it is this landscape that binds together Danny, Jack, and Red Shirt. The spirits of the Nez Perce, of Chief Joseph and his people, are powerful presences in the lonely canyons of the Wallowas where Danny takes Jack to hunt elk with an old Klamath friend, Ass-Out Jones, and where Red Shirt once took Danny. Much of the novel centers on this elk hunt, with flashbacks to Danny's own experiences. In Jack's first encounter with the mountains, Danny introduces his son to the heritage of his people:

Wallowa Lake stretched before them, its waters black and silver in the moonlight. A low fog bank hovered over

the south shore, partially obscuring the timbered shoreline. To the west, the densely wooded foothills seemed to rise out of the lake, and behind them, snow-covered Chief Joseph Mountain towered against the background of black sky. Even in the moonlight softening the definitions of its ridges and canyons, the mountain peaked as sharply as a dragon's back.

A slight knoll rose to their right and sloped to the lake's southern shore. At the top of the rise, a stone monument, twice the height of a man, rose from the rustling grasses. Tall sentinel spruces surrounded the monument.

"Let's take a look from up there," Danny said.

A swinging gate placed between two posts held a sign:

GRAVE OF OLD CHIEF JOSEPH
Maintained by Wallowa County
Junior Woman's Club

When they reached the top of the knoll and stood next to the monument, they had an even better view of the lake. A light breeze silvered the little ripples.

"It's incredible," Jack said.

"Nez Perce country," Danny said. "At least it used to be."

Jack tried to read the words on the monument by moonlight. "Old Joseph is buried here, huh?"

"It's a grave," Danny said. "There are probably some bones. A lot of Nez Perce and Walla Walla are buried on this knoll and by the water."

"This place gives me a strange feeling," Jack said.

Danny smiled. He felt it too, just as he had when Red Shirt brought him to the Wallowas for the first time. "It's the Nez Perce in you coming out."

There is often the danger that a story will lose its momentum when legends and/or folklore are inserted into the narrative, when all too often they are interruptions that impede a novel's forward movement. This is not the case in *Winterkill*. The linear structure is not thwarted by the insertions of the Nez Perce lore. If anything, the importance of the stories and sacred ceremonial rites are commentary on Danny's character, the means by which he accepts and articulates inexplicable events in his own experience. Lesley gives tribal lore a personal context and depicts it as a way of healing both historical and psychological wounds. By the end of the novel, the elk hunt has taken on ceremonial stature as Danny and Jack stand quietly, facing the Wallowas for a last look. What they see binds them to the spiritus of the Nez Perce, binds them to each other:

A herd of elk strung along the river like dark beads on a silver necklace. Backs turned to the wind and driving snow, the elk were headed upriver, into the high Wallowas. Danny saw the campfire, still visible through the falling snow, and he imagined the Dreamers telling stories around glowing fires, their words rising like sparks. Danny covered his son's hand with his own, knowing they must return next camp.

The writing in *Winterkill* is first rate. Lesley's style is clear and taut. His descriptions of the Oregon country, the Columbia River, Pendleton Round-Up, and the Wallowa Mountains give resonance to the landscape without making it obtrusively symbolic. His characters are rough-hewn and

funny, the kind of people that will charm readers into wanting to hear more from them. They are motivated mostly by love: father for son; son for father; friend for friend; and all for the country that claims them in ways they are just beginning to understand.

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