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IN SHORT

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FICTION

* WINTERKILL. By Craig Lesley. (Houghton Mifflin, \$14.95.) Danny Kachiah, the hero of this calm, well-imagined first novel, is a small-purse rodeo cowboy and American Indian, "Nez Perce, mostly," who is haunted by the past and by the future. His everyday life is gritty and uninspired - a world of trailer parks, drunken joy rides and brawls in bowling alleys - but ghosts hover insistently at its periphery. There is the Weyekin, a protective spirit that takes the form of a huge wolf, and the shrouded figures who three times appear as harbingers of death. Above all, there is the painful, abiding memory of Danny's dead father, Red Shirt. A hard drinking ne'er-do-well in the reservation towns, Red Shirt was a spiritual mentor in the woods and mountains; a man who taught the lore of the old Nez Perce Dreamers, and a magician who, Danny learns, was once spied transforming himself into an elk deep in the forest. To the burden of Red Shirt's ambiguous legacy is added a more immediate responsibility when Danny's former wife suddenly dies, leaving him to care for their 15-year-old son, Jack. Keenly aware of his own shortcomings, Danny struggles to gain the respect of his cynical, estranged son, and to impart, as Red Shirt had, lessons about the mystical inner life of his people. The subtle blossoming of this father-son relationship, and the maturing of Danny's own character, make it easy to ignore some of the novel's more pat elements. A subplot, concerning a grasping, wilderness-defiling oil company in particular, seems to belong to another, inferior book. There are also several instances when we might wish that an issue in Jack's upbringing would not automatically trigger a memory sequence involving Danny and *his* father. Nevertheless, there are more than a few touches of magic in "Winterkill." - *Richard Nalley*