Craig Lesley (1945-)

Much of the work of the writer Craig Lesley, born in 1945 in The Dalles, is set in central and eastern Oregon. Educated at Whitman College, the University of Kansas, and the University of Massachusetts, Lesley is the author of *Winterkill* (1984), *Talking Leaves* (1991), and *The Sky Fisherman* (1995)—all winners of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award.

Lesley held many jobs apart from his writing. As a teenaged farm worker, he worked the fields, once suffering life-threatening injuries when he fell under a mint-harvester. He worked in his uncle's sporting goods store in Madras and was a guide on the Deschutes River from 1961 to 1970. He also taught writing at the Great Lakes Maritime Academy and at colleges and universities in Oregon and Washington, including Clackamas Community College, Whitman College, Willamette University, and Portland State University.

In his fiction, Lesley combines careful research with personal experience and a subtle sense of the spiritual. His novel, *River Song* (1989), for example, draws on a year spent among native fishers on the Columbia River. *Storm Riders* (2000) combines autobiographical material with an investigation into the history of the Tlingit village of Angoon, Alaska. These elements are transformed through the alchemy of fiction into a story of limited redemption.

Indian/white relations and the search of fatherless or estranged sons for father figures—in, for example, *Winterkill*, *River Song*, *The Sky Fisherman*, *Storm Riders*, and *Burning Fence: A Western Memoir of Fatherhood* (2005)—are major themes in Lesley's work. His writing is strong in social and natural detail and is precisely placed in landscape and history and in the lives of contemporary Oregonians.

Lesley examines and re-evaluates the motif of male western toughness, resourcefulness, and individualism, and more than one of his male characters gains a growing sense of responsibility for family, people, and the land. Women characters sometimes act as moral touchstones, both good and bad, but his major figures are complex. He shows people and communities rooted in Oregon places, getting by through skill, endurance, and sometimes cunning. There are no large-scale victories for Lesley's characters, but their survival and the transmission of their thoughts and ways of speaking are themselves an ethical and spiritual achievement as he shows Indians and whites, separately and together, recovering and handing on their memories and traditions.

Lesley writes and speaks for the rural proletariat, of which he was a member. In his fiction and non-fiction, he asserts the power of unobtrusive virtues such as skill, hard work, group loyalty, and dogged persistence. His *oeuvre* is part of a new wave of western writing that quietly criticizes received ideas of the West and offers new readings of culture and history.

Lesley lives in Portland with his wife Kathryn Stavrakas.

Written by John Davies

Further Reading:

Craig Lesly's website, http://www.craiglesley.com/

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