

# Craig Lesley (1945-)

By John Davies

In both his fiction and nonfiction, writer and teacher Craig Lesley speaks for his fellow rural western workers. His novels and short stories assert the power of unobtrusive virtues, such as skill, hard work, group loyalty, courage, 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. A three-time winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, Lesley sets much of his writing in central and eastern Oregon.

Born in The Dalles in 1945, Lesley was raised by a single mother in the central and eastern Oregon towns of Pendleton, Baker City, and Madras. While doing fieldwork at age fourteen, he suffered life-threatening injuries when he was run over by a peppermint chopper, a trauma he later wrote about in a short story. Lesley also worked in his uncle's sporting goods store in Madras, was a guide on the Deschutes River, longshored in Alaska, and worked at the Bunker Hill Lead and Zinc company in Kellogg, Idaho.

Lesley served a three-year appointment as the Hallie Ford Professor of English and Writer in Residence at Willamette University. He also taught at Lewis & Clark College for one year as a Visiting Fiction Writer and Writer in Residence.

Educated at Whitman College, the University of Kansas, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, he was a teacher of English and creative writing for over fifty years. He held positions at the Great Lakes Maritime Academy and at colleges and universities in Oregon and Washington, including Clackamas Community College in Portland, where he was on the faculty for twenty-five years. He was Hallie Ford Professor of English and Writer in Residence at Willamette University, Visiting Fiction Writer and Writer in Residence at Lewis & Clark College, Senior Writer-in-Residence at Portland State University, and a member of the MFA faculty at Pacific University.

In his fiction, Lesley combines careful research with personal experience and a subtle sense of the spiritual. *River Song* (1989), for example, draws on a year he spent among Native fishers on the Columbia River, and *Storm Riders* (2000) combines autobiographical material with an investigation into the history of the Tlingit village of Angoon, Alaska. Lesley transforms these elements through the alchemy of fiction into stories of ambiguous redemption. Indian-white relations and the search of fatherless or estranged sons for father figures are major themes in Lesley's work. His writing is strong in social and natural detail and observation of character and is precisely placed in landscape and history and in the lives of working Oregonians.

Lesley examines and re-evaluates the motif of male western toughness, resourcefulness, and individualism. His male protagonists gain a growing sense of responsibility for family, people, and the land. Women characters act as moral touchstones, and their stories also suggest a different West. He shows people and communities in Oregon places, getting by through skill, endurance, versatility, 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 Natives and whites, separately and together, recovering and passing on their memories and traditions.

In 1984, *Winterkill* received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award and the Western Writers of American Golden Spur Award. *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories* (1991), an anthology edited with writer Katheryn Stavrakis, Lesley's wife, won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award in 1991; and *The Sky Fisherman* won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award in 1995. Lesley has also published short stories and a memoir, *Burning Fence* (2005), and was co-editor of two other anthologies.

## Sources

Craig Lesley's website

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