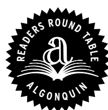
West of Here

West of Us: A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion



West of Us

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I'm a camper. It's what I do. Between late February and mid-October, I'm usually camping. Sometimes that means hiking twelve miles and three thousand vertical feet with forty pounds strapped to my back, and sometimes that means my ass falling asleep in a lawn chair as I scribble mad notes in front of a campfire with a case of cold beer within arm's reach. Sometimes it means parking my '76 Dodge motor home on a bluff at Kalaloch in a nasty squall and watching the waves pound the shoreline while the moho rocks like Jericho. These camping trips are my lifeline as a writer, and as a person. Without these trips, the wilderness of my spirit might have been tamed years ago. And probably I wouldn't be much of a writer. Most certainly, I'd be hell to live with.

My expeditions almost invariably begin by crossing the Hood Canal toward the steep leeward face of the Olympic Mountains and driving west down the Olympic Peninsula to camp in one of the river valleys—the Dungeness or Elwha or Sol Duc or Hoh or Queets or Quinault. The interior of the Olympic Peninsula is some of the most rugged terrain in North America and some of the most pristine wilderness you're likely to find anywhere. The Olympics were among the last unexplored mountain ranges in North America, and clearly one of the most unique. To this day, there's no passage over the mountains but by foot.

The fact is, were the interior not so rugged, it likely would have been logged into oblivion before it ever won National Park status. Everything around the edges has been decimated. For fourteen decades, the peninsula has been logged continually and heedlessly in all directions—along the shores of the canal, the strait, and the coast, upriver through the bottomlands, and over the foothills. Perhaps the

mightiest stands of Douglas fir and cedar and Sitka spruce to ever take root on earth were plundered for profit. The Elwha River was dammed. The Salish Indian tribes were displaced and, in some cases, lost not only their ancestral lands but their federal recognition. The grizzly and the wolf were all but totally eradicated. The salmon runs were fished nearly to extinction. Most anything that once flourished perished in equal measure. But the robber barons still couldn't tame the heart of the peninsula—too rugged.

Now, in order to get anywhere near the heart of the Olympics, you've got to endure a pretty ugly drive—more of a stubbled moonscape than anything else, stretching thousands of square miles around the periphery of what is now National Park land. The towns ringing the peninsula, once thriving, steaming lumber and mill hubs like Shelton, Port Angeles, Forks, and Aberdeen, aren't much prettier to the untrained eye. These ragged towns hit the financial skids decades ago along with the moribund timber and fishing industries. And though these towns may be reeling economically, may be a little rough around the edges, they have a lot of fight left in them despite the damage done.

This clash of destiny and fierce reality is the story of the Olympic Peninsula. It sounds a lot like America's story. The story of a culture haunted by its own destiny. The story of a culture forced to reckon with its own mistakes. And yet, it is also the story of a culture that still manages to hope—some might argue to the point of delusion, though I'm not one of them. You'll find the root of my optimism growing somewhere on the banks of a nameless creek near the heart of the peninsula. As long as that exists, I have reason to hope.

IN 2007, I set out to write a big, shaggy, egalitarian novel about my beloved Olympic Peninsula—a novel Walt Whitman might have liked. Not a historical novel but a mythical novel *about* history, or more precisely, a deconstruction of what we generally call a history. Rather than employ a wide-angle lens for the task, I wanted to present a kaleidoscope of perspectives, and events, and convergences, and possibilities, to tell this story. After a lot of hair-pulling, I surmised

the best way to frame all of this potentially overwhelming information was to firmly plant all of it in the place itself. That way, readers would never lose their bearings for long, no matter which time line or character or event I threw at them. This allowed "place" to assume the traditional role of protagonist, enabling me to treat all the other characters democratically and with roughly equal narrative weight. Because in my experience, too many histories favor one side of the story.

I wanted this novel be full of wonder and adventure and mystery and humor, because these are the things that sustain us. I wanted this novel to surprise and sadden and give thanks to the undying spirit of wilderness that lives inside of all of us. I wanted this novel to be as big and beautiful and complicated as the peninsula that inspired it. A tall order, but I did my best. I'll leave it to you, the reader, to decide whether *West of Here* fulfills any of these ambitions. Me, I'm going camping.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story of Port Bonita from so many different perspectives, rather than use just one omniscient narrator? Do you like this approach? Why or why not?

2. What did you like or not like about the author's use of a nonlinear approach in telling the story, of shifting the story between two time lines? Did you prefer reading about one era over the other? Why do you think Evison chose to tell the story in this manner?

3. In the midst of the narrative, Thomas and Curtis, the two young Native American characters, seem to change personas, shifting from one century to another and then back again. What do you see as the significance of having these characters briefly inhabit each other? What do you think the author is trying to say about our accepted notions of history?

4. Why do you think the author decided to mix fact with fiction regarding the history of the Olympic Peninsula—renaming some places but not others, for instance? Did this approach make you want to research which elements were fact and which fiction?

5. Some of the characters from respective eras seem to have obvious parallels—for example, Ethan and Jared Thornburgh and Dalton and Dave Krigstadt. Discuss some of the less obvious parallels between characters, and also discuss parallels between events and relationships.

6. With which character did you most closely identify? And with whom would you most like to hoist a Kiltlifter or two?

7. What do you think of Krig's decision to leave Port Bonita? Beyond the personal significance for Krig, do you sense a larger significance to his departure? How might the story be different if he stayed?

8. Do you truly believe people can change, learn from their mistakes, take new directions? Do you believe people are trapped by their own history, destined to make the same mistakes over and over again? Or do you believe, as Franklin Bell believes, that people are essentially an amalgam of their experiences, incorporating both the good and the bad, following the curve of life rather than pursuing a whole new path?

9. Do you believe that individuals can change the course of history, despite all the trappings, obstacles, institutions, and opposition put in place to prevent that? Or do you think that most individuals are marginalized by the political process or economic limitations or both? Or is history just a big puppet show whose choreography is beyond the reach of people like Rita and Jared or Ethan and Eva?

10. We tend to think of history in terms of big, sweeping events, but in *West of Here*, the history of Port Bonita, and of the settling of the Pacific Northwest generally, is shown through a series of small happenings, as though we are looking at events through a kaleidoscope that constantly shifts our perspective and shows us the many sides of daily life. Do you feel that this approach works to make the novel more or less dramatic than it might have been had Evison focused on just the big moments? How does it influence your understanding of what life might really have been like for western settlers?

11. In the novel, the settlers of Port Bonita arrive there with personal goals; some want to make money, some want to create the future, but they all have dreams of what is to come. In what respects do you feel the settlers succeed in creating a future for their descendants, and in what ways do they fail? Apply this same perspective to your own hometown and assess how successful its founders were in creating a place for future growth and the personal happiness of the town's citizens.

12. Ethan Thornburgh is convinced that the damming of the Elwha River is the key to creating the best future for Port Bonita and its citizens, yet by the end of the novel the dam is choking the town's economy, and it's about to be torn down. What parallels do you see between the mistakes made by Thornburgh and his generation and the decisions being made in today's world, as politicians and administrators try to shape the future of America and the world in general?

KEITH BROFSKY

Jonathan Evison is the author of one other novel, *All About Lulu,* which won the Washington State Book Award. In 2009, he was the recipient of a Richard Buckley Fellowship from the Christopher Isherwood Foundation. He lives on an island in western Washington.

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