



# West of Here

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At the foot of the Elwha River, the muddy outpost of Port Bonita is about to boom, fueled by a ragtag band of dizzily disparate men and women unified only in their visions of a more prosperous future. A failed accountant by the name of Ethan Thornburgh has just arrived in Port Bonita to reclaim the woman he loves and start a family. Ethan's obsession with a brighter future impels the damming of the mighty Elwha to harness its power and put Port Bonita on the map.

More than a century later, his great-great grandson, a middle manager at a failing fish- packing plant, is destined to oversee the undoing of that vision, as the great Thornburgh dam is marked for demolition, having blocked the very lifeline that could have sustained the town. *West of Here* is a grand and playful odyssey, a multilayered saga of destiny and greed, adventure and passion, that chronicles the life of one small town, turning America's history into myth, and myth into a nation's shared experience.

## West of Here Details

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Author : Jonathan Evison

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# From Reader Review *West of Here* for online ebook

## Matt says

When it comes to books – strike that. When it comes to life, I am a creature of habit. I get into certain routines (some might call them ruts), find my comfort level, and grow content to stay there. This annoys my wife, because many of my routines involve me wearing sweatpants for an entire weekend. Similar to my sartorial choices, my reading habits often display a lack of breadth and imagination. I simply love history, and so I tend to read books about history. I can read for months entirely ignorant of the fact that there are sentences in this world that have nothing to do with the Crimean War or the short, unhappy presidency of William Henry Harrison.

Fundamentally, I know this is a bad thing. The mind, like a muscle, needs to be challenged; horizons, like the waistband of my sweatpants, need to expand. This mindset has allowed me to get around to reading certain classics of fiction, such as *War and Peace* and *Bleak House* and, regrettably, *Moby Dick*.

Of course, these venerable favorites have left me with a literary blind-spot: contemporary fiction. Since the age of thirteen or so, when I finally stopped buying the newest Tom Clancy hardcover the second it came out, I have woefully lagged behind the cultural zeitgeist. It took me a year after its publication date to get to National Book Award finalist *Then We Came to the End* and National Book Award winner *Let the Great World Spin*. It took me a decade to finally read *The Corrections*.

Suffice it to say, people ignore me at the water cooler.

Jonathan Evison's *West of Here* broke me out of my rut and helped me stay, fleetingly, ahead of the book-world curve. And what inspired this break in character? I have nine words for you: a high concept plot featuring elements of historical fiction.

Frankly, Evison had me at "historical."

*West of Here* takes place in the fictional Washington State town of Port Bonita in two different time periods. The first time period is 1890 and tells the stories of various dreamers, explorers, iconoclasts, mystics, ne'er-do-wells and prostitutes. The second time period is 2006 and tells the stories of the various descendants of these dreamers, explorers, iconoclasts, mystics, ne'er-do-wells and prostitutes.

Plot-wise, the two time periods run in roughly parallel directions, though the end-goal in one is the exact opposite of the end-goal in the other. In 1890, the overarching story is the construction of a dam on the Elwha River that will hopefully provide electricity and prosperity to Port Bonita; in 2006, the overarching story is the removal of the dam on the Elwha River, which has harmed Port Bonita by destroying the salmon population.

There really isn't a plot, though, at least not in the sense that all the various characters and their actions are moving the story towards a unifying conclusion. Rather, this is an ensemble piece, with dozens of characters separated by 116 years. These characters' stories are told in short chapters that explore the novel's themes, chief among them our attempts to move forward in life while chained by the past:

[S]tanding on the divide, with the wind whistling past his ears, Mather could not shake a

certain disillusion in knowing that what lay in front of him had already been discovered, had no doubt seen the restless footsteps of other men. Paradise, if it existed, lay somewhere behind them – perhaps they'd trudged right through its midst without recognizing it...

"We can reach the bottom by sundown," he said. "There, we can camp."

"Onward," said Haywood wearily.

This theme is further expounded by a wise old Indian (in fiction, is there any other kind?):

"We are born haunted," [Lord Jim] said, his voice weak, but still clear. "Haunted by our fathers and mothers and daughters, and by people we don't remember. We are haunted by otherness, by the path not taken, by the life unlived. We are haunted by the changing winds and the ebbing tides of history. And even as our own flame burns brightest, we are haunted by the embers of the first dying fire. But mostly," said Lord Jim, "we are haunted by ourselves."

The structure of *West of Here* is intricate, but should be familiar to anyone who ever watched ABC's television series *LOST*. The narrative jumps back and forth between 1890 and 2006; between the hardy pioneers of the past and their shiftless ancestors in the future. At first, the leaps seem random, a bit willy-nilly. But as you read further, you realize that certain characters and scenes are mirror-twins of each other, and that the action in 1890 is informing the action in 2006 (and vice versa). For example, in 2006, a parolee named Tillman sets out along the wilderness path that the 1890 explorer Mather trod in his attempt to find new lands to conquer.

The beginning is a bit slow going, as you are introduced to a wide assortment of characters without any real idea of their place in the firmament. It takes awhile for everyone to introduce themselves; it takes awhile more to remember them in subsequent chapters.

Even as I progressed, I wasn't enjoying myself. The problem, I think, is that Evison's human creations initially present less as people than an assortment of quirks. In 1890, for instance, you have an intrepid explorer; a progressive feminist (pregnant, with no husband!); a whore with a heart of gold (a historical fiction requisite); and a Klallam boy who cannot, or will not speak. In 2006, there is an emasculated husband (is there any other kind); a dedicated parole officer; a former high school basketball star obsessed with Sasquatch; and a Klallam boy who cannot, or will not, speak.

Over time, some of these quirky folks gain depth and shading and become characters worth following. I'm thinking especially of Dave Krigstadt, the Sasquatch hunter. His loneliness and brooding sense of failure, which he processes through his Quixotic search for Bigfoot, makes him worthy of headlining his own novel.

Others, though, never rise above their eccentricities. That is the main thing I noticed while reading: how I loved following certain story lines and felt deflated when I followed others. In the case of the Indian characters, I don't think anything could have salvaged my attention. To me, mystical Indians are just too far embedded in the realm of cliché. Ditto the storyline of the prostitute and her vicious pimp, which felt like a tired imitation of Old West novels of yore.

For the most part, however, the problem isn't that the storylines are intrinsically bad; rather, a lot of them don't necessarily have anything to add.

My diagnosis: I think *West of Here* needed to be half as long or twice as long. That is, some storylines needed to be excised completely or given more space to breath. For instance, there is Hillary, the sexually confused Fish & Wildlife employee, who finds herself a pregnant lesbian by book's end. I never developed any interest in her plight because she wasn't given enough pages to make her real. By the time we leave her, she has failed to rise above the peculiarity of her situation. (Lesbian! Pregnant!). Reading Hillary's chapters was like watching a movie in which the studio has forced the director to remove a half-dozen scenes.

I also got this sensation with two of the main characters in the 1890 section: Ethan Thornburgh and Eva Lambert. When Ethan comes into town, he is eminently likeable: an eternal optimist with a long list of great ideas. It is his destiny to build the dam that will put Port Bonita on the map. However, for a long stretch of the novel, he all but disappears, and when Evison checks back in with him, his personality has abruptly changed and he is transformed into a massive prick. Meanwhile, his lover, Eva (who I found shallow and annoying), who has been Ethan's foil for hundreds of pages, is unceremoniously shipped away.

My solution: The novel is already pretty long, but I'm always for addition, rather than subtraction. If you have a pretty good 500 page book, you might as well shoot the moon and go for a great 800 pager.

This is among the many reasons that I am not an editor.

Of the two time periods, I thought Evison had a surer grasp on the modern-day. There were times that the 1890 sections felt a bit anachronistic, especially in terms of the dialogue (of course, Larry McMurtry and *Deadwood* has convinced me that all period dialogue has to be highly-stylized in some form or another). Furthermore, I thought the modern-day character arcs (anchored by Krigstadt, the Sasquatch hunter) paid off better than its 1890s counterpart.

In the end, the novel's shortcomings did not detract from my overall enjoyment, which was fairly considerable. (Once I got the hang of things, I burned through the book very quickly). After all, *West of Here* deserves a lot of praise for its audaciousness and ambition and its thematic consistency. Evison juggles a lot of balls and it's not surprising that some of them drop. Even though certain plotlines aren't as successful as others, he weaves everything together so well that many of the rough edges are smoothed over quite nicely. The resulting mosaic proves an effective way to discuss the novel's big ideas.

It helps considerably that Evison is a very good writer. Specifically, he has a real talent for nature writing. Evison is at his best evoking the beauty, grandeur and potential terrors of the wilderness. The scenes of Mather's Expedition on the Olympic Peninsula are fabulously tactile, to the point where you can feel the insidious chill seeping into your bones.

*West of Here* is studded with wit, humor, and bursts of magical realism. Ultimately, though, it is defined by its poignancy. In its title, in the yearnings of its characters, it taps into something essential in humanity: the belief in something better over the next horizon; the hope that no matter how much time has passed, we still have it within ourselves to change; and the knowledge that even though we can't run away from our ghosts, we can run away.

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## Patty says

For a novel about conquering the frontier, *West of Here* is refreshingly free of frontier wisdom. In fact it's also wonderfully free of platitudes of any kind, which is incredibly rare in a novel of its scope.

As someone familiar with the area in which the story takes place, I was impressed by how well Evison captured the landscape, and also how he captured the general mood of contemporary small town Washington state.

The stories in the book are entertaining, compelling, and compassionate. Aside from a few drunken injuns, there are no cardboard caricatures here, each personality is very much its own, and I found myself empathizing with just about all of them.

It wasn't suspenseful or stressful, but that the story kept me turning pages.

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## Christopher Swann says

*West of Here* sticks with you for a while. That might not seem odd, given the size of the novel (nearly 500 pages). But it doesn't read like a big novel, not in the sense that you have to wade through several hundred pages. It certainly *feels* like a big novel, and how could it not? Two timelines a century apart, multiple characters, multiple plots and subplots including a wilderness expedition, building (and later un-building) a dam, a parole officer searching for his newest parolee, doomed romances, troubled parenting, madness, and Bigfoot.

What stands out about this novel is that—while it is certainly making a splash, and deservedly so—it does not stand out or call undue attention to itself. It does not show off linguistically with archaic words like “granitic” or “discalced” or “isocline.” It does not have a boy wizard or an autistic child or a serial killer or a dog as a protagonist or narrator.

What *West of Here* does have is a hell of a story, a sweeping, epic tale of a community and the wilderness around it, both at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. And characters. Does it have characters. These are people who are as unique, and odd, and funny, and irritating, and fascinating as the people in your neighborhood. In this sense, it is old-fashioned: characters + plot = story. No more. No less.

And at the end of this novel, I was sad to say goodbye to all of these compelling, maddening, glorious people: Krig, Mather, Ethan, Eva, Hillary, Franklin, Timmon, Curtis, Adam, Rita, Thomas, et cetera. Their trials, failures, and victories seemed to become my own as I read on. And I didn't want them to end.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck turns his back on civilization and lights out for the territory. *West of Here* embodies a similar hearkening for something better, something beyond, something just west of here. In this, it is a quintessentially American novel, and a very fine one indeed.

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## **Katrina says**

Jonathan Evison's "West of Here" is a gritty, full bodied epic set in the fictional town of Port Bonita, Washington. The beginning pulls the reader in with beautiful, assured narration and indelible characters who embody the spirit of the pioneers who ventured west in search of opportunity. These are men who set out to move the course of a river, who imagined selling ice gathered at mountain tops, who envisaged electric stairs, and who dreamed they could save the culture of a people. These are women who believed their voices and actions were valuable; for one woman that meant to send her child away to a better life, for another, to break out of a destructive pattern, and for another, to attempt to stop big-money progress with the power of the written word.

A few chapters in, Evison introduces a whole new set of characters as he travels forward in time to the lives of the descendants of the men and women who settled Port Bonita. The transition comes as a surprise but as the reader comes to know these new characters he won't mind being ripped from the earlier group. Connecting the two time periods are the Elwha river, the men who tried to tame it and their descendants, the Native American settlement of Jamestown, and an odd shaman-like out-of-body experience in which the Native American boy, Thomas, switches places with a modern day Khallam Indian, Curtis.

The themes are familiar: man versus nature, Native American wisdom versus progress, the tangible versus the mysterious, but Evison's quality of writing and depth of character take these themes to an enviably high level. By the end, the reader realizes the author has threaded these two disparate sets of characters seamlessly to offer a rich, multi-layered novel that satisfies.

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## **Jackie says**

"Port Bonita is not a place, but a spirit, an essence, a pulse; a future still unfolding.... Onward! There is a future, and it begins right now."

This is a quote from the last few pages of the book, but it's truly the essence of the book as well. Evison has referred to this book as his "little opus" with some humor--this is a chunky book. But it covers 126 years (1880-2006) and is told in 42 voices (I didn't count them--he did), so what else could he do? What is interesting is that the only true character is the place: Port Bonita and the Olympic Mountains and the river that runs through them. The people are the temporary and every changing scenery to the life of this place.

Don't get me wrong--there is plenty of "people plot" to the book--we learn the stories of everyone from daring explorers to whores to preachers to parole violators to high school jocks gone to seed. Everyone is trying to find their way in some manner--to a better life, a grand discovery, to fame, to love, to freedom, to a shiny future of some sort even if they don't know how to articulate that or even really know what it is that they are looking for. But whatever they are searching for, the spirit of the place infuses and inspires them--there is a bit of mysticism to the story both blatant and subtle.

The book is written with all the considerable passion Evison has about the real place that he has fictionalized

for this book. That truly is what makes this book the memorable tome that it is. It is an opus indeed. Well done, maestro!

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### **Dan says**

I picked up an ARC of *West of Here* at this year's BEA and I am glad I got a chance to read it as early as I did. This book is a sweeping epic, it's as if Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* and Eugenides' *Middlesex* had a love child. While reading you can actually feel the Olympic Peninsula all around you just as you could feel Oregon's coastal forests in Kesey's great book.

*West of Here* is like a freight train, it starts off at a steady pace allowing you to become familiar with its broad cast of characters. The novel continues to building speed and you realize that this freight train's brakes have failed; there is no stopping until you go crashing through to the end.

Evison has definitely outdone himself with his second book. *All About Lulu* was an excellent debut but compared to *West of Here* you can see just how much Evison has matured, and how much he is capable of.

One final question: Is it too early to get an ARC of his third book?

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### **William Ramsay says**

This is a flawed novel from a very good writer. I have trouble understanding what he was getting at in writing it. It's sort of a history of a place called Port Bonita in the far northwest corner of the US. Part of the story takes place in 1889/90. The rest takes place in 2006. The story isn't told as a normal progression - rather, he jumps between the two periods, telling fragments of stories at each jump. The stories involve a large cast of characters. The major flaw with this method of storytelling is that you never really have time to fully engage with the characters. And it's not always clear what one set of characters have to do with another. There is only one character in the modern part who can claim to be a direct descendant of a major character from the earlier part. The stories from all the different times and people are usually interesting, which leads me to think that this would have been a much better project if the author had written it as a series of connected short stories. In that case WE would have managed the connections and not had to struggle with figuring out what the author's connections were. Well written, but confusing.

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

As regular readers know, I only give out perfect tens at CCLaP an average of two or three times a year, and the title has to pass a highly exacting list of criteria to earn it: among other requirements, it must of course be impeccably written, find a great mix between plot and character development, surprise the reader in its greatness relative to the author's existing reputation, and by the end ultimately tell a grander story than what its mere plotline hints at, a not only literal but metaphorical tale that can strongly stand on its own through at



least another generation of readers if not a lot more. And ladies and gentlemen, I've found the latest, Jonathan Evison's epic new *West of Here*, a legitimate saga (but only in the way that TC Boyle's books are sagas too) that spans over a hundred years in the history of a small Pacific Northwest town. And that's ironic and great, because as longtime readers remember, when I reviewed Evison's previous book, the slight coming-of-age tale *All About Lulu* from the now-defunct Soft Skull Press, the biggest complaint I had was that although the writing itself was just fine, I wished Evison had picked something much grander to talk about, ironically stated right as he was undoubtedly just finishing up this newest saga.

And an epic saga it is, no way to deny it; like I said, spanning two timelines from the 1890s and early 2000s, it tells the dual story of the founding and downfall of the tiny yet earnest Washington village of Port Bonita, filled at its outset with men of large visions who wished to turn the place into the next Seattle, but by a century later a crumbling small town full of bumbling trash, people who share their ancestors' last names but almost nothing else. Or is that actually correct? Because although the storylines are quite different, you could maybe argue that what all these characters have in common is a certain yearning about the world, a certain hunger for accomplishing more than they have, along with a largely shared inability to actually achieve these dreams, making it in toto a work about hope, loss and what comes after, no matter which time period you're talking about.

That's really the main pleasure of the book, is to flip back and forth between the two milieus, and contrast the way that the similar problems between centuries manifest themselves in different ways -- from the land grabs and harsh frontier lifestyles of the 1890s, right before the area is finally about to pass into statehood, to the blue-collar jobs and hillbilly existences of the 21st century, when the massive dam that became the defining element of the region (which the 1890s people are there to build) is finally scheduled for demolition, it long ago killing off the local fish population and thus most of the local industry that had made the area such a lovely place in the 1920s and '30s, when business was at its most booming. And admirably, Evison doesn't skimp on the historical research such a story requires; whether we're strolling down a frontier main street or hiking to Mount Olympus, he does an impressive job of actually placing us at that specific time and setting, making a full half of this a piece of legitimate and very successful historical fiction.

But like I said, it's with his characters that Evison really shines, and it's no coincidence that I mentioned TC Boyle earlier; because this is a very Boylean kind of story, full of quirky yet complex characters who run a full gamut of emotions and motivations, telling ironically a grand epic through a series of scenes that often can only be described as goofy: there's the Napoleonic black parole officer, for example, who chugs a gallon of eggnog a day even in the middle of summer; the proto-feminist and single mother who in the 1890s treks out to Port Bonita by herself with child in tow, to live in a miserably mismanaged liberal utopian community and become an investigative journalist in a region with no scandals; and not to mention the dual bored, insolent yet brilliant Native American teenage boys, one from each time period, who somehow manage to magically swap souls for a moment so to simultaneously see their 19th-century camp and the 21st-century Wal-Mart that's replaced it, one of several out-and-out fantastical moments in this sprawling, hard-to-classify novel.

It's a whopper of a story, even more unexpected by his last novel being so twentysomething pedestrian, and I expect that it's going to vault Evison in many people's eyes into a whole new literary category he wasn't in before, one where people at more impressive publications than mine start talking about him in the same breath as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Franzen. It's for all these reasons that today it becomes the first book so far of 2011 to get a perfect ten here at CCLaP, and why I encourage you to check out a copy whenever you have a chance.

Out of 10: **10**

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## **Brian says**

From the first page to the last, I was there. Jonathan's voice took me on a hike through the Washington wilderness along snowy mountain peaks in the dead of winter in the 1890's and I drove past a Taco Bell and Walmart in 2006 in a Monte Carlo sitting next to Rita. I still feel the cold and smell of Merit second-hand smoke.

The structure of this book was thoughtfully and brilliantly created. Jumping from the 1890's to 2006 was not as harsh or distracting as I first thought it might be... especially considering the short chapters and frequent time shifts. The parallel story lines comfortably held hands, fingers interlaced perfectly.

It is a story of seeing nature as a product, a resource, a tool of progress and the consequences of altering this natural resource in order to grow a community. It is also a story about the spirit of people and how through the years that spirit does not change. We move on, persevere, and adapt to our surroundings.

West of Here tells me that Jonathan Evison's time is here... there's a new American writer to keep an eye on. Can't wait for his third book.

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## **Neil McCrea says**

I was lucky enough to receive an ARC of this book from the author back in August. It was quickly read and has often been on my mind since then. West of Here has defied my ability to review it, and not just because the author is a friend.

The Pacific Northwest has been home to both sides of my family for many generations, and both sides have had a deep passion for genealogy and local history. McCreas and McKinneys came over from Scotland and helped found towns from Couer d'Alene, Idaho to Klamath Falls, Oregon to Port Angeles, Washington. They include in their number fishermen and lumberjacks as well as pioneer women who were lawyers and college professors. Evison's novel takes place primarily in Port Bonita, WA, a fictionalized Port Angeles. It bounces back and forth between the 19th and 21st centuries. The 19th century part of the novel could be the story of my grandparents and great-grandparents, the 21st century part could be the story of my employees, employers, and drinking cronies. Writing a review for this book feels a little like writing a critique on my right arm, what can be said about something that is so much a part of me? Jonathan gets it right.

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## **Sara says**

The more I think about the low points of this novel the more I realize how much I truly disliked it. I really, really wanted to like it, and I started out thinking these were great characters and that this story was going to be big on a grand scale....then the 1800s chapters came to an abrupt end, I was thrown into the present with a bunch of pitiful, desperate humans I didn't care much for and all I wanted to do was skip ahead and get back to what was happening with the folks I did care about. I don't want to give a total spoiler review here, but let's just say that I went on to be disappointed not only by the way the female characters I had invested most in were casually tossed aside by Evison, but also by the hokey past/present "link" between Thomas and

Curtis (really, it was so awful that I was constantly rolling my eyes) and the incessant Big Foot jabber, not to mention the pointlessness of Mather's entire wilderness/mountain adventure! The worst part is that this story had the potential to be an epic tale of survival, conquest and redemption but instead turned out to be a shallow, overly-hyped tale....poorly edited and probably hastily published. Sadly, I couldn't help but skim-read the last 200 or so pages and I still didn't feel as though I missed a thing.

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## **Julie Christine says**

In March 2012, the final pieces of concrete and steel of the Elwha River Dam were removed. For one hundred years, man tried to harness the power of this river that flows through the haunting green and glacial interior of the Olympic Peninsula. Before it was dammed (damned), it hosted annual runs of fish, which numbered in the millions - sockeye, Coho, Chinook, cutthroat trout, steelhead, char, among many; it gave life to black bear, cougar, madrona and red cedar. It flowed through the ancestral home of the Klallam people. Removal of the Elwha Dam last year and the Glines Dam this summer mean the renewal and restoration of one of America's most priceless national treasures: the Olympic National Park.

But at the time Washington was granted statehood (1889), the western Olympic Peninsula – crowded with sharp peaks like a mouth with too many teeth and a vast rain forest where ferns and fungi grow to fairy tale proportions – was the last frontier of the American West. Its natural resources were too great not to be consumed by the appetites of entrepreneurs. And so the flow of progress stopped the flow of the Elwha. For eight decades, its power was channeled to fuel the grind and stench of the Port Angeles paper mill and the mammoth timber industry that reigned over the western-most reaches of the United States.

Jonathan Evison's messy and beautiful *West of Here* was published in 2011 just as the Elwha Dam removal project got underway. It is situated in Port Bonita, a thinly-disguised Port Angeles, in the early days of its modern development (circa 1890) and the end days of its reliance on the Elwha for its economy (2006). His cast of characters is large and they are but appendages to the beating heart of the novel's central character: the Olympic Peninsula.

As a reader and writer for whom "Place" is core to my intellectual and emotional orientation, I have a tender spot for stories which ground themselves so firmly into their setting. Evison does this to spectacular effect – giving the same profound sense of place as Ivan Doig's Montana, Edna O'Brien's Ireland, Mark Helprin's New York City (full disclosure: I grew up in Sequim, fifteen miles east of "Port Bonita" and I now reside on the eastern edge of the Olympic Peninsula. This land is in my blood).

This is not clean and tidy historical fiction that follows the strictures of fact. Evison himself states in the author notes "I set out to write...not a historical novel but a mythical novel about history." He anchors the plot in fact – basing James Mather's quixotic winter expedition to plot a route across the Olympic Mountains to the Pacific Ocean on James Christie's Press Expedition of 1888-1889; nearly all place names are real; snippets of Washington state history – Seattle's great fire of 1889 and Port Townsend's subsequent quest to become Washington's most important city (which failed, thank goodness – I love my beautiful, peaceful small town, where those homes and edifices built in its Victorian heyday still offer as much wonder as they do shelter). The novel's backbone is this region's history and it reveals Evison's extensive research.

Evison presents many themes: the degradation to environment and indigenous peoples by the mindless pursuit of progress and development; the burgeoning women's movement of the late nineteenth century; tribal politics and the plight of Native Americans who stumble between a lost past and an uncertain future;

post-partum-depression; the throwaway life of the modern American. Evison has been criticized for presenting this jumble of themes without following them all to their conclusion. I counter by asking when in life do we really have closure? How often are we able to tidy up our moral dilemmas, our own pasts, and march on, certain of our path? Umm...never? Right. Not even with the hindsight of history do we ever achieve certainty.

Greater than his themes, in terms of quantity and quality, are Evison's characters: we live 1890's Port Bonita through the adventures of feminist Eva, explorer Mather, entrepreneurs Ethan and Jacob, civil servant Adam, prostitute Gertie, healer Haw, and Klallam mother Hoko and her troubled son Thomas; Port Bonita of 2006 offers up aging high school athlete and Sasquatch hunter Krig and his hapless boss Jared; Franklin, one of the Peninsula's few black men; ex-con Tillman; Forest Service Hillary; healer Lew; Klallam mother Rita and her troubled son Curtis. And those are just the characters I can remember as I type. But each is rendered with affection – an affection I find striking, because not all these characters are sympathetic. Fairness and empathy are this writer's imprimatur, I believe.

The cast of characters and the shifting progression of the plot in *West of Here*— from one era and storyline to the next and back again – made me think of hanging wet clothes on our backyard laundry rack in New Zealand, where the wind blew ceaselessly. I'd bend down to pull out the next shirt or bath towel and the rack would whip around, presenting me with an empty line or an already-crowded patch. But I stayed in place and kept hanging, knowing in the end it would all get sorted.

I faltered a bit mid-way through (and don't let the 486 pages of text daunt you. Evison's prose nips at your heels – forward motion is easy) because of the bleakness of modern-day Port Bonita. I remember the Port Angeles of the late 1970's and early 1980's, when the timber and paper industries stalled. In contrast to my rain-shadowed, blue-skied Sequim flush with retiree and dairy cash, Port Angeles was a gray and lifeless place. Heavy with damp lichen and lost dreams, it wasn't a place to linger. Evison's reimagining of Port Bonita twenty years later brought back that sense of listlessness.

But just when you think these lives are going nowhere, the author tosses you a laugh-aloud lifeline and a tenderness that promises redemption.

Rather than comparison to today's Lit It Boys and Girls - the other Jonathans (Franzen, Safran-Foer) Dan Chaon, Zadie Smith - whose works have left me out in the cold, I hope I have found a writer with more classic sensibilities and a deeper appreciation for storytelling. I'll keep reading Jonathan Evison to find out.

In the meantime, follow with me the progression of life returning to the Elwha. Return of the River

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## **Andy Miller says**

This disappointing novel is set in fictional Port Bonita Washington, a thinly disguised Port Angeles. It alternates between 1890 and 2006. There were some interesting characters and story lines from the 1890 portion but the transitions to 2006 were jolting and the modern characters were so unsympathetic I found myself looking forward to the return to the 1890 storyline which unfortunately unraveled.

The book of course ties characters from the two eras. One tie involves a mute native american boy from 1890 and a native american high school student in 2006 who is alienated from his school and family and

eventually slips into a coma. The two characters are connected in spirit, and provide the low point of the novel when the 1890 boy mumbles the letters K, F, C in a shaman type of speech(yes, a speech that overcomes his muteness) and his tied to the 2006 boy in his post coma talk as he passes a KFC restruant-- yes, that KFC restruant, and mutters the letters KFC

While there is some interesting history of Port Angeles and nice description of the surrounding Olympics and hiking trails, I would not recommend this book to anyone

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### **Jake Ratliff says**

[finds his baby daughter, Minerva, drowned in the Elwah R

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### **Kerry says**

I was lucky enough to score an ARC of Jonathan Evison's *West of Here* and I have to admit that it surprised me. I knew the man could write, his first novel *All About Lulu* was a lovely coming of age story told with a unique voice that I liked a lot. But *Lulu* in no way prepared me for the staggering scope of *West of Here*.

Set in the fictional town of Port Bonita, Washington, the book follows two timelines. The first timeline begins in 1889 and focuses on Port Bonita's founding and the damming of the Elwha River which gave the town its identity and life. This timeline is filled with men and women of vision and purpose, the world wide open to them if only they can make the right decisions. The second timeline is in the modern year 2006 and follows the descendants of those original founders. But for them, Port Bonita is no longer thriving, the dam no longer their salvation but their downfall. These men and women would like to have the same sense of purpose their ancestors did, but first they must somehow reconcile their past with their future. It might be time for Port Bonita and its inhabitants to make a change.

Jonathan Evison writes colorfully with a lot of humor and genuine affection for his many characters – not one written with anything less than absolute vibrancy and depth. The Washington wilderness itself is a character and his descriptions of it are so effortless and beautiful, you trust that he KNOWS this landscape. He makes you feel it.

The story itself is propulsive. At the beginning you will slowly begin to know the characters and follow them on their paths, learning more and more about them as you turn the pages, then the plot will start to take a strong hold and pretty soon you will be unable to put the book down until you find out what everyone's destinies will be, until you are finished with the book and sad that it's over.

I am intrigued by the amount of research that went into the writing of this novel. What is factual and what is imagination? I want to look into the history of the area myself and learn everything I can about it. It's that pioneer spirit and sense of adventure that captures my attention and imbues in me a childlike sense of wonder at the vastness of things.

So, thanks to Jonathan Evison for writing such a spectacular book. I think this novel is going to be big for him. I'll definitely be buying at least one copy when it is officially released and I encourage you to do so too.

