



Covenant

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Few people today know the satisfaction of plowing a straight furrow behind a strong team of draft horses. Readers of Bailey's Covenant, however, will come close to that knowledge vicariously as they live it along with Harry Isaacson.

Like Bailey, Isaacson is a Washington state farmer and a military vet who comes home with some new ideas, earns a university education, and tries to make the new ideas fit with old ways learned from his father and grandfather.

A major "new" idea is that the kids he went to school with were all wrong about farming. They thought farming was the lowest thing people could do, and being called a farmer was an insult. Isaacson has realized that without farmers, the world suffers; and he had learned farming the old, hard way from his father and grandfather. As he put those old-fashioned ideas into practice on his farm, he realized that new elements could affect old ways. The pollution of Prince William Sound, in Alaska, made him realize that if such a remote and beautiful region "could be fouled and lied about, probably ruined, for the profit of a wealthy few, then there was no escape."

Against his will, Isaacson was drawn into local conflicts between profiteering and peaceful land use. With his half-Native American wife, Isaacson faced modern prejudices against Native Americans. Running afoul of the local drug lord, Harry discovered his community has the best local government the drug lord's money could buy. While Isaacson scraped for water to grow his crops, local money men easily obtain approval for a real estate subdivision that will take more than all the water the region has. Militia members look for a scapegoat to blame for their illegal acts, and Isaacson, who shunned their group, is a popular choice. Sustaining him through these stresses are Isaacson's convictions that his home and people are worth whatever struggle he must undergo.

The wisdom of some of his Native American friends and relatives-by-marriage supports him in his beliefs. Long Joe, a Native American wise man, told Harry, "A lot of people, especially idle men, look for any reason to fight. If no enemy presents himself, they will pick one." The book's title stems from the recurring theme of "covenants" sounded by Bailey. Through Isaacson, he voices his belief in the covenant between parents and children. "I want to leave a legacy for my children. Not just ideas, but something real, something concrete to begin life with."

It is a rare author who writes perceptively about his own inner maturation process. Bailey does, as he holds the mirror for readers to check their own maturation.

JEAN GOLDSTROM (September / October 2000)

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