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Literary

West of Here
Jonathan Evison
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In January 1890, two men return to Port Bonita, Washington, after a trek through the never-explored Olympic Peninsula. “The valley was a bowl of glorious white, and beyond the foothills the rugged snowcapped peaks of the divide loomed in dramatic relief, crisp against a backdrop of deep blue sky. And right in the middle of it all, Ethan was overjoyed to see his little cabin transformed. Not only did it boast a cedar shake roof but sturdy steps and a porch and, wonder of wonders, a river rock chimney belching black smoke into the whitewashed valley.” With compelling, adventurous language, Jonathan Evison’s new novel *West of Here* defines the magnificent proportions of the Northwestern landscape.

At nearly 500 pages, this novel matches its subject matter in dimension. Larger-than-life characters span a century of civilization in Port Bonita, evoking American legends like Paul Bunyan and Sasquatch. Evison is comfortable with his characters, and confident enough to let them wander the rugged river valleys, acting as the reader’s eyes. Winner of the Washington State Book Award for his novel *All About Lulu* and resident of an island in western Washington, Evison clearly knows his stuff, and opens the sprawling landscape to the reader. “Viewed from the strait, as Juan de Fuca allegedly viewed it in 1579, the heart of the peninsula comprised a chaos of snow-clad ranges colliding at odd angles, a bulwark of spiny ridges defending a hulking central range like the jaws of a trap. The high country was marked by gaps so steep and dark that the eye could scarcely penetrate them, and all of this was wrapped tightly about the waist with an impenetrable green blanket of timber.” Although his descriptions are grandiose, Evison has a master’s grasp of the story: every sentence is earned, and his language, though occasionally ornate, mimics the journalistic style of earlier days. As time progresses, the tone of the novel does too. Following Port Bonita’s hopeful genesis in the 1890s, *West of Here* documents the town’s disintegration and depression. The novel reintroduces readers to the landscape of Benjamin Percy’s collection *Refresh, Refresh* and *My Abandonment* by Peter Rock,

and is a must-read for any person interested in exploring excellent writing about the Northwest.

Weaving a thread of legend, human history, and the all-encompassing terrain of Washington State, *West of Here* looks honestly and deeply at the desires and hopes that shaped the Northwest. Despite the disappointments experienced by the novel's modern characters, the reader is always reminded of the aspirations on which the present day rests—and the need to discover home in the rough, barely civilized West.

Claire Foster