

BOOKS

Speaking out for inclusion

Portland writer's words would be banished under Measure 9

BY ORIANA GREEN

It was certainly gratifying when Rodger Larson's coming-of-age novel *What I Know Now* was added to Portland Public Schools' sexual diversity reading list.

His 1997 book tells the story of 14-year-old Dave and his struggles with sexual identity. It has been well-reviewed, has been nominated for big awards and has inspired heartfelt fan mail.

One Ohio teen wrote Larson that it was the best book he'd ever read. "I love that kid," Larson enthuses over a recent lunch. "He was just coming out...it makes me feel awfully good that this might have helped him."

But if Measure 9 passes, Larson's book and hundreds like it would be removed from Oregon public school libraries. "My voice would be banned," he says, clearly worried about a return to the ignorant era of his own upbringing.

Larson, 57, grew up on a large wheat and barley ranch in the central valley of California, which is the locale for *What I Know Now*. In the book, which is set in 1957, Dave's isolation mirrors Larson's own at the time.

And like his character, Larson had a period of wondering about his sexuality during his teen years. "But I convinced myself I was straight," he says, recalling how afraid he was even to look up homosexuality in the card catalog, scared someone might see him.

So how autobiographical is it? "It has a real emotional truth, and that truth is my experience," Larson confides. "But the events are much larger than anything that happened to me."

Larson grew up and spent four years in the Air Force during the height of the Cold War at a radar center stationed in Corvallis. "I learned to love Oregon—I even love the rain," he claims. "As a writer I work well with the internal rumination it inspires."

Larson eventually settled in Portland, where he has lived for 30 years now, "so it's really home."

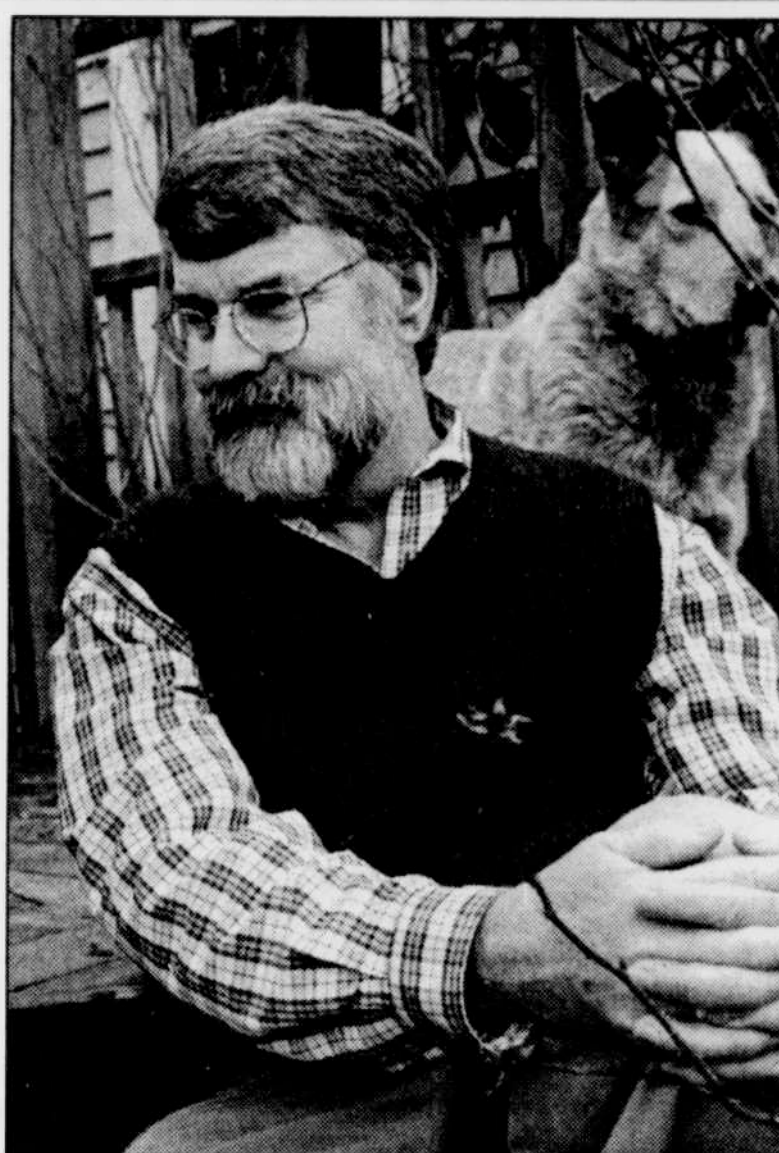
During his early years in the Rose City, he worked as a landscape planner for the Parks Department, experience that also found its way into his book. "The central metaphor of the book is building a garden, so I used my own knowledge," he explains.

And during those same 11 years Larson was also married, still trying to convince himself he was straight. "When I began to divorce and come out, I didn't want to do the landscaping work anymore."

What followed was a granddaddy of a midlife crisis. Larson coped by going back to college and eventually earning a master's degree in creative writing.

He also met and fell in love with his partner, Andy Simon. They registered as domestic partners during the "1,000 Years of Commitment" ceremony Sept. 9. "We'll add our 20 years," Larson says proudly.

But writing in his journals is what really kept him sane. "It helped me process what was going on," he recalls.



Rodger Larson and his buddy, Malouf

Before long, he realized he had bigger aspirations and began studying with Portland novelist Tom Spanbauer as part of his critique group. "I credit him with a lot of my growth as a writer," Larson reveals. "I could tell there was a step I needed to make between amateur and professional...my words needed to trigger emotions for the reader...and he helped me get to the poetry of language."

After a stint teaching at Metropolitan Learning Center, Larson now leads his own critique groups for fiction writers in his home. "I tell my students to aim high...a couple of them are close to getting published," he says.

And Larson is taking his own advice. He just finished his second novel, *Raindog*, and has high hopes for its publication.

Although his first book was also written for an adult audience, because of the vicissitudes of publishing, it ended up classified as a book for high schoolers. Larson is determined that won't happen with his latest effort.

"*Raindog* is about a very caring, tender and meaningful relationship that includes graphic and passionate sex," he explains. It's also about a 16-year-old boy and a man twice his age, who is also mute.

Why mute? "It's a metaphor for being silenced as a gay person," he says.

And does he foresee his sexuality being part of all his books? "I think being gay is such a big part of who I am that it'll always be there in some way."

So how did Larson get his big break? The stories you've heard about how difficult it is to get a book published are true. Larson now has a highly regarded New York agent, but lest anyone think it was easy, consider he sent out 46 query packages during a six-month period. Number 47 did the trick.

Now that he's found his true calling, he's enjoying all the attendant duties, even giving readings. "Writing is very independent and lonely, and you have this relationship with this other person you never meet...and readings are a chance to get feedback from readers," he explains.

RODGER LARSON will read from *What I Know Now* and his new book, *Raindog*, during the next meeting of the Literary Triangle 7 p.m. Sept. 22 at Barnes & Noble Lloyd Center, 1231 N.E. Broadway. Call (503) 331-1307 for more information.

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