

Our long, hot summer

Portland author Ben Parzybok's latest work, "Sherwood Nation," is a science fiction novel set in a future blighted by climate change

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Ben Parzybok's first novel, "Couch" rose from the primordial sludge of the slush pile at Small Beer Press in 2008. Next month, Parzybok's second novel, "Sherwood Nation" will be released. He will be reading at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 16 at Powell's Books on Burnside.

Parzybok's creative trajectory seems to confirm Newton's first law of motion: an object in motion tends to stay in motion. Part of that may be that he and his partner, writer and Street Books founder Laura Moulton do a remarkable job at keeping up with their artistic pursuits as well as two curious children. The other part? Parzybok set himself in creative motion years ago and aside from the distraction of fatherhood, hasn't stopped since.

He is keen on thoughtful, artistic projects, most of which have a socially just bent. He is the creator of Gumball Poetry, a now-defunct journal published through gumball machines. He was a member of the Black Magic Insurance Agency, a team-based city-wide treasure hunt, in true James Bond-esque caper, high-tech mystery style.

Parzybok is a self-proclaimed technology geek with Luddite tendencies. He is a

developer and runs a startup called Walker Tracker, a narrative, map-based walking challenge for large groups, including cities, universities, corporations and large organizations.

Whereas Parzybok's first novel, "Couch," explored the seemingly mundane task of carrying a couch across town, his latest novel, "Sherwood Nation," examines the function and structure of governments, and in it he hypothesizes about what might happen if governments and people don't react to our changing global climate. The book is a Robin-

Hood like, post-apocalyptic, drought story set in the Portland biosphere.

Sue Zalokar: What motivated you to write your second novel, "Sherwood Nation?"

Ben Parzybok: There were a lot of little seeds.

I technically started the book in Brazil. We had gone there for a family wedding and it ended up being a rather long stay. We were there for six or eight weeks and I was there alone for the last two weeks. I toured some favelas — very crazy, anarchic, enclaves, really. They are sort of their own nations inside the city.

You go in with this impression of what (the experience of walking through a favela) is going to be like and end up with a completely different impression.

There is amazing community organizing going on. There are people who wield power inside that infrastructure. Yes, maybe



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outside society sees them as really dangerous, but inside? Half the work they are doing is social logistics: making sure people have water and that everybody has power because they're all stealing power off the grid. It's really fascinating. So I wanted to play with that (idea) a bit.

I also am really interested and fascinated by history. For example, the city of Rome collapsed in a day. It was besieged, it fell, the city was ransacked. But that empire went through several hundred years of this sort of slow post-collapse period.

I think (the idea for) the drought came accidentally. I am very interested in environmental and water issues of course. But it was also a wonderful way to portray how we might manage as a society and how we might reform and recombine and create new governments in the sort of situation where the government is gone. We can't rely on the United States government or even state or local. We have to combine to build our own city.

S.Z.: You recently participated in the American Library Associations conference in Las Vegas, Nev. One of the events involved you and other authors reading from banned books. (Banned Book Week is Sept 21-27). What book did you read from?

B.P.: I chose Sherman Alexie's "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian."

S.Z.: How can that be banned?

B.P.: I know. It's banned all over. I think it's partially because there are a number of masturbation scenes in there. You know how lethal that is ...

S.Z.: I don't know anyone who masturbates.

(laughter)

B.P.: Exactly. The book has some foul

language. It's one of those books that is crazy that it is banned because it could help so many people. It's an incredible book.

The incredible dichotomy he paints between living on the res and trying to fit in, in the white school where he is actually having success, but it feels false to him in some way.

It should be more read and taught in school. It's really so close to the immigrant experience.

I just read "Cajas de Carton" by Francisco Jiménez. He's a brilliant writer. He came illegally across the border when he was 3 with his parents. His parents were dirt poor and they're giving birth in their shack. And yet he's going and actually excelling in school. His father is sort of super dismissive of anything he is doing in school and is pulling him out to do farm labor.

S.Z.: You have an affinity for computers and technology. Tell us about that.

B.P.: I suppose there is some irony in that. In the world of "Sherwood Nation" there is essentially no electronic technology whatsoever. Maybe it was sort of wishful thinking.

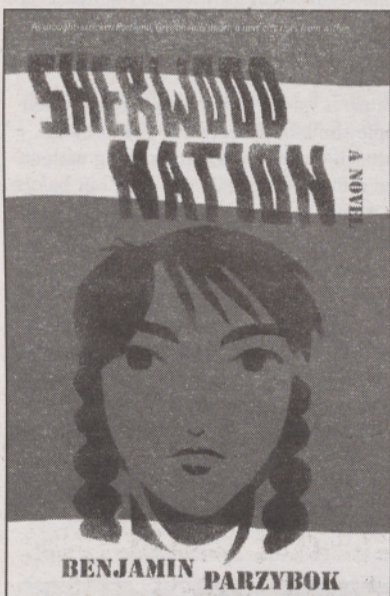
I have a complicated relationship with technology. I've been very addicted to it off and on. I'm a programmer for pay and I run a software startup.

I feel like technology is changing me in ways that I'm not entirely comfortable with. The effects of it are the antithesis of slowing down or being thoughtful or being a deep thinker.

S.Z.: You also have a creative, diverse web presence. Branding oneself as an artist isn't easy, but it is important.

B.P.: The changing nature of publishing does put a lot of pressure on a novelist to promote their book through social media

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