

An Epic Crossing

The new world of Robin Hobb

SHAMAN'S CROSSING by Robin Hobb.
Eos, 2005. Hardcover, \$25.95.

Since her 1995 debut, *Assassin's Apprentice*, Tacoma fantasy author Robin Hobb has turned out three thick trilogies, each more rich and engrossing than the last. Six books are told in the striking first-person voice of FitzChivalry Farseer; three concern a trader family and the origin of dragons. Hobb's talent for character and for transforming fantasy's common elements into something unexpectedly fresh has turned her books into national best-sellers and left readers asking for more stories about Fitz and his companions. But Hobb has said she's not sure she'll return to that tale; instead, she's started a new one set in an entirely different world.

"The soldier sons of soldier sons are soldiers before they are sons," one character says to another early in *Shaman's Crossing*, the just-released first book in the Soldier Son trilogy. In Gernian nobility, first sons inherit, second sons become soldiers, third sons become priests, and so it is down the line, each son's future determined at birth. Nevare Burwell is a

solider son, bound by tradition to follow in his father's footsteps and join the cavalla (horse soldiers). His father is a "new noble," a soldier recently raised to lordship as a result of exceptional service in the war against the Plainsmen, native tribes that resist Gernia's westward expansion. Nevare's father, hoping to instill in Nevare a lesson about leadership and decision-making, sends his son to learn from Dewara, a Plainsman who was the elder Burwell's fiercest enemy. The strange events that follow shape Nevare in inexplicable ways as he lives through his first year in the King's Cavalla Academy, making friends among the other new nobility (segregated neatly and confrontationally from the old) and having his eyes opened to certain flaws in his world by his schooling and his cousin Epiny, a headstrong young woman with underestimated talents of her own.

Nevare's story, like Fitz's, is a coming-of-

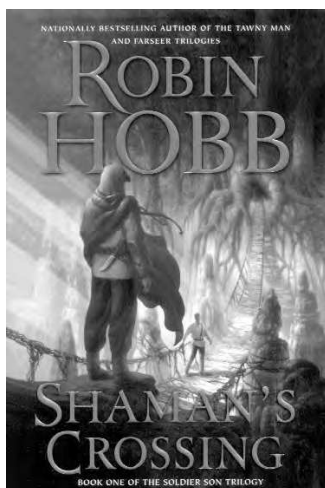
age tale told by a young man finding his place in a unsteady world. But unlike many fantasy characters, Nevare is deeply driven by tradition and duty, determined to follow the path that's been set for him. Asked (via email) if there was any conscious decision involved in the evolution of a character so different than her earlier protagonists, Hobb wrote, "Oh, I'm not that organized!" She continued, "Looking back, I can pick out bits and pieces of what started the story in my head, such as driving past a French cemetery with a high wall, or the portrait of a nobleman in the lobby of a hotel in England, but those things don't really add up to the whole of what Nevare is. As I'm working on book two, he continues to evolve and surprise me. At this point, I can only hope that readers will like him as much as they did Fitz."

Thus far, reaction has been positive, though readers seem to be seeing in Nevare's land more of the American West than Hobb intended. "In many ways, it doesn't surprise me," Hobb wrote. "If you say the word 'cavalry' that is the first image that comes to mind for most people." A broader influence colored Hobb's creation of this new land and its society. "The traditions

are a mix of things. The military tradition of buying a commission comes not from the U.S. so much as from the British military. The society Nevare moves in is one based on a hereditary aristocracy. The incursions of the Gernians into the plains reminds me of colonialism in many different settings rather than the settling of the new world."

Nevare's world is stunningly realized, from the traditions of the cavalla to the surprising, earthy magic of the Specks, the dappled forest people who live beyond the plains. Still, it's thoughtful, conflicted Nevare and the other characters in Hobb's tale that are the driving force. "I don't do 'world building' in the way that most writers speak about it," she wrote. "For me, it always starts with the characters and expands from there. I don't draw the maps or devise the magic first. It always unfolds from the characters." **CW**

Robin Hobb reads at 7 pm Wednesday, Sept. 14 at Powell's Books in Beaverton.



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BOOK NOTES: Tom Spanbauer speaks on "Dangerous Fiction: What Is It?," 6:30 pm 9/8, Baker Downtown Center. \$10 donation for non-Mid-Valley Willamette Writers members ... **Sara Halprin** reads from *Seema's Show*, 7:30 pm 9/8, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... Young literary hotshot **Nick McDonnell** reads from *The Third Brother*, 7:30 pm 9/9, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... Much-loved children's writer **Tomie dePaola** reads from *Angels, Angels Everywhere*, 3 pm 9/10, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Laura Numeroff** reads from the newest in her *If You Give a Pig...* series, 1 pm 9/11, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Jacqueline Winspear** reads, 7:30 pm 9/12, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **John Baur & Mark Summers** discuss *Pirattitude! So You Wanna Be a Pirate? Here's How!*, 7 pm 9/14, Borders ... **Robin Hobb** reads, 7 pm 9/14, Powell's in Beaverton ... **Jean Shinoda Bolen** reads, 7:30 pm 9/15, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Mary Matsuda Grunewald** reads from *Looking Like the Enemy*, 7:30 pm 9/16, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Craig Lesley** reads, 7:30 pm 9/18, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Annie Duke** reads from *How I Raised, Folded, Bluffed, Flirted, Cursed and Won Millions at the World Series of Poker*, 7:30 pm 9/19, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... Windfall Reading Series: **Gary J. Whitehead** and **Laurie Lynn Drummond** read, 7 pm 9/20, Downtown Library ... **Barbara Ehrenreich** discusses *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, 7 pm 9/20, Bagdad Theater, Portland ... Former *Oregonian* reporter **Jim Lynch** reads from *The Highest Tide*, 7:30 pm 9/21, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Lydia Millet** reads from *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, 7:30 pm 9/22, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... **Cynthia Ozick** speaks, 7:30 pm 9/22, Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, Portland. \$25, college/seniors \$18, high school \$5.