

Political Echoes

TWO LOCAL AUTHORS DISCUSS THEIR WORKS

By Camilla Mortensen

It's almost impossible to get away from politics these days. Hate him, love him or somehow merely tolerate him, but Donald Trump polarizes even the fiction we read.

Or sometimes we read polarized politics into our fiction.

Eugene Weekly recently talked to two local authors who come from different political backgrounds and who were not directly addressing Trump in their books but in whose works current politics still resonate.

Debra Gwartney, in her memoir *I Am a Stranger Here Myself*, writes a combination of history and memoir. Gwartney has a launch party for her book March 17 in Eugene.

Stranger melds Gwartney's memories of her childhood in the small town of Salmon and in Boise, Idaho with the real-world tale of Narcissa Whitman, a white woman settler who was killed by the Native Americans she was attempting to convert to Christianity. For Oregon Trail lovers, Whitman was the first white woman documented to have crossed the Rockies.

"I found her intriguing as a negative character," Gwartney tells *EW*, "feeling unsettled about my own history in the West."

But later, as she researched Whitman, who was a missionary, she came to see her as a real person.

"I disagree with so much of what she did." But she

says, Whitman was a pawn, pushed by her mother and the church "with no way to understand what she was getting into."

As a result, the book reflects not only Gwartney's feelings of loving Idaho but also her feeling that she didn't fit in there either. In a family that hunted — claiming to fame being part of the killing of Idaho's last wolves before they were reintroduced — she's left-leaning and has never fired a weapon. *Stranger* also contains a sense of the modern-day ambiguous feeling of loving the West but seeing ourselves as interlopers.

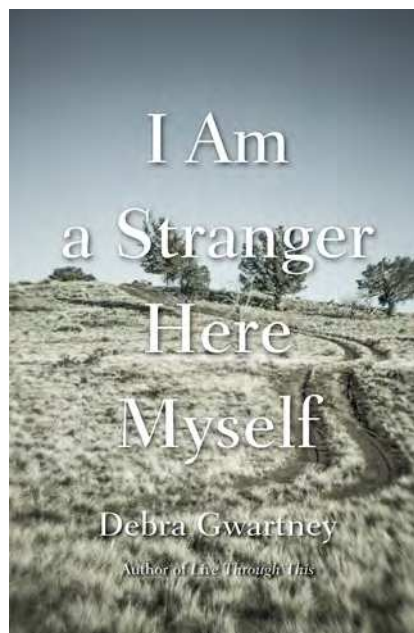
Gwartney says she didn't name Trump in the book, as the memoir dwells on family dynamics, not politics, but she and her father had clashed about Obama in the past and now politics are even more polarized.

"Is there any common ground?" she wonders, "a way for us to stand together and remember what we love and our common experiences?"

When asked about the rawness of writing about one's own family, Gwartney says, "My code is, if I am going to write about my family and they are going to be characters in my book then I will be hardest on myself, and hold my own feet to the fire."

Meanwhile, longtime Republican politician Jack Roberts dropped by *EW*'s offices to discuss his own work of fiction — a collection of short stories published through Amazon.com called *Miracle at Pebble Beach and Other Stories*.

Roberts, a former Lane County commissioner and former commissioner of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, is not doing any local events, but interest in the book was recently piqued when he posted about it on social media.



Roberts says his short stories were written before Trump was elected, but, like Gwartney's work, the book has echoes of the current political situation and unrest. The title story features a golfer who wins the U.S. Open, but his win is challenged after he thanks Jesus for his club selection — unauthorized assistance? So argues an anti-religion group, but the story, Roberts says is not about religion, it's about integrity.

Roberts' writing has a deftness honed by his time writing columns for *The Oregonian* and a flair for an unforeseen ending — *Twilight Zone*-esque, he says himself.

The other three stories in the volume are more overtly political, featuring a senator running for re-

election but dealing with an anger problem, a plague in Africa that leads to the U.S. president walking, and faltering, on a line between safety and racism, and a tale of a Republican African-American man eyeing a run for president — based not on Obama, Roberts says, but former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Despite the political nature of the topics and Roberts' own stance as a moderate Republican, the volume stays away from the ideological narrowness Roberts says he seeks to avoid.

Roberts has considered expanding the last story into a novel, but has mainly concentrated on short stories, writing for his own satisfaction. Years ago, he says, he sent a short story to *The Paris Review*, and it was rejected. But he was told the publication was interested in his writing and would like to see more.

"Well, that's the best I'll ever get," he told himself. ■

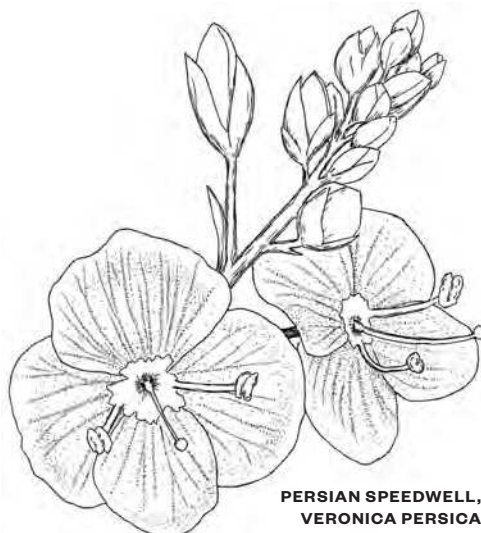
To read Miracle at Pebble Beach, find it independently published and available for \$3.99 at Amazon.com. Debra Gwartney's I Am a Stranger Here Myself was published in March 2019 by New Mexico Press. A book launch is 4 pm, Sunday, March 17, at the Mahonia Building, 120 Shelton McMurphey Boulevard. FREE.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

BY DAVID WAGNER

One of the signature indicators of climate change in action is a sudden occurrence of unexpected, severe weather. The foot and a half of snow that fell in southern Willamette Valley in the last week of February was such an event. I remember the last great snowfall exactly 50 years ago, when the entire region was paralyzed for weeks. At least this time it has warmed up so the snow will disappear soon. Now the concern is that a heavy, warm rain on snow will bring extreme flooding. It's life in the real world.

Many osoberry buds that were ready to open the first week of February have suffered damage from freezing. Their display will likely be less than wonderful this year. We look forward to the appearance of the typical March blooms, if somewhat later this year. Last year they were early. Many of the little flowers that show



PERSIAN SPEEDWELL,
VERONICA PERSICA

up in open areas are not native. They are winter annuals originally from northern Europe, which were preadapted to the Pacific Northwest. Some of the lawn weeds, like buttercup and speedwell, are a pleasant sight.

The shore birds and waterfowl seem to be quite happy. So long as the ponds don't develop a sheet of ice they will be able to forage reasonably well. The little songbirds that hang around our neighborhood have been flocking to the feeders that people have set out. A little fountain that keeps running provides fresh water. Otherwise, they need warm water brought outside.

David Wagner is a botanist who works in Eugene. He teaches moss classes, leads nature walks and makes nature calendars. He can be contacted through his website, fernzenmosses.com.