

The novels of Don Berry

The Oregon landscape is front and center in these three books from the 1960s

“

I think it must be a thing that happens only in a country like Oregon, where the winter crushes you into the ground and makes you something only half alive. The rush of summer makes you ten feet tall, and you can stand in the morning and feel the strength roll up out of your belly, drawn by the power of the sun.”

Don Berry wrote these sentences. They originate from one of his trilogy of historical novels published in the early 1960s.

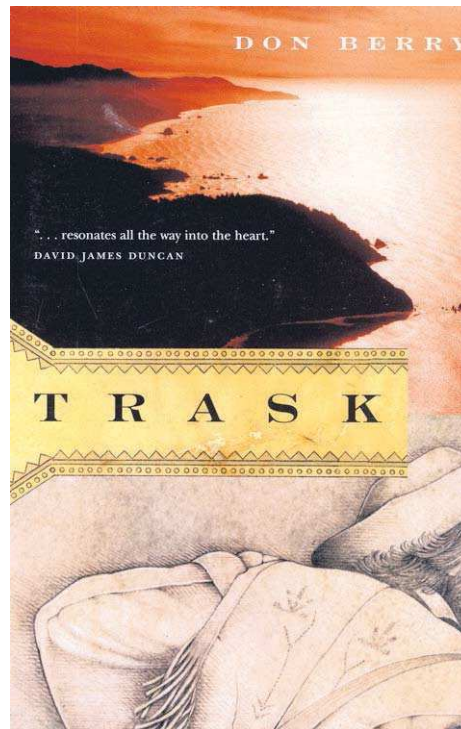
1961 to 1963 saw the publication of three Berry novels, “Trask,” “Moontrap” and “To Build a Ship,” all set in pioneer-era Oregon. Later a critic would call the output, “a spasm of sustained creativity unequalled in Oregon literature.”

The novels sold well and Berry received critical praise, including a National Book Award nomination for “Moontrap.” Berry never published another novel, and when he died in 2001 at age 70, none of his novels were in print. They could, however, occasionally be found as decomposing mass-market paperbacks in used bookstores across the Pacific Northwest.

In 2004, Oregon State University Press performed an invaluable literary service by reprinting Berry’s three novels. They are now available at all coastal bookstores.

“Trask,” Berry’s first novel tells the story of a former mountain man who has settled near Astoria, too close to the “Boston men,” who “saw no more than the surface of the world.”

Troubled by a restlessness, Trask makes a perilous journey to the south, over Neahkahnie Mountain. Arriving at Tillamook Bay, he is instantly seized by its grandeur and hungers to homestead there. In places, Berry’s writing on the philosophical futility of this typical human hunger borders on scripture: “The taking possession of the land is the first — and the final — grasping of a man toward permanence; toward what he has occasionally called immortal-



Submitted photo

“Trask” by Don Berry was first published in 1961 and reprinted in 2004 by Oregon State University Press.

ity for want of a word that means more.”

At Tillamook Bay, Trask meets Kilchis, the chief of the Tillamooks, and in the novel’s soaring Zen-Buddhist-meets-Native-American-shamanism denouement, he goes on a Searching, a quest for a vision. He succeeds in his quest and in the end, “Trask rose to his knees and listened in fascination until a door within him opened and he began to laugh.”

Many of us would love to open Trask’s door, walk through, and laugh in acceptance of something Berry wrote in Trask: “What moves a man — and ultimately, the only thing that moves him deeply — is the finding of his own image, the solid configuration of himself, worked in materials of better staying quality than bone and blood.”

“Moontrap” followed “Trask,” and Oregon City near the Willamette Falls is the primary setting of the novel, which takes place in the aftermath of the Whitman Massacre and white-hot racial prejudice against Native Americans. Once again, the plot involves a restless former mountain man: Johnson Monday is married to a Native American woman and struggling



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Oregon author Don Berry takes in the view of Tillamook Head in Seaside in this historic photo. Berry, who died in 2001, wrote three novels in the early 1960s that were set in pioneer-era Oregon.

to find a satisfying role in a changing Oregon Territory society where, “Things had changed so much. Seed wheat and missionaries.”

When an old friend from Monday’s days in the mountains shows up, various cultural clashes ensue, and Monday is compelled to reconsider who he is and what he believes in. “Moontrap” ends tragically and suggests that Berry felt that a person who wanted to live in concord with the land and not exploit it or its native inhabitants didn’t have a chance against relentless and ruthless commercial and racist forces.

“To Build a Ship,” the story of pioneers living near Tillamook Bay trying to construct a schooner, completed the trilogy. It stands as my favorite because of its depiction of racial tolerance and statements from the narrator like, “After a lifetime which it sometimes seems I devoted to cutting down trees, I am convinced that they were not meant to be cut down. God intended forests to stand eternally...”

Today, some might dismiss Berry as an environmentalist, but his writing about landscape, which predated the professional environmental movement by two de-

acades, should not be so easily reduced. In these novels, all his protagonists exhibit a fully formed ecology with their natural surroundings. They exist in harmony with the land. Achieving that enlightened state is arguably the most pressing political and cultural challenge facing Oregon today.

Many older Oregonians read Don Berry once, but probably have forgotten the experience. The best way to describe reading Berry is that his stories exist as an organic and native species. They grow inside you. They are religious. To read these books today is to experience a feeling like walking in rain without an umbrella, eating out of the garden, climbing Saddle Mountain in tennis shoes, or playing tennis with a wood racket. There is slowness in them.

Try them out again this winter, or for the first time, and let Berry introduce you to his muse, Oregon, and particularly the Oregon Coast. He will make you feel for it in a new old way.

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Coastal Life

Story by MATT LOVE

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