



Debut novel paints bleak picture of near future

A century or so ago, blight devastated the dominant tree species of the United States' eastern forests. The mighty American chestnut, once estimated to stand nearly 4 billion trees strong, rapidly succumbed to a fungus in what ranks as not only a decimating ecological disaster, but a phenomenon that created economic and cultural havoc as well.

One suspects it can be no accident, then, that the principal characters in the new dystopian novel, "American War," have been given the family name of Chestnut. Debut novelist Omar El Akkad imagines a second American Civil War in the final quarter of the 21st century.

Now living just outside of Portland, El Akkad was born in Egypt, grew up in Qatar, moved to Canada and became an investigative journalist. He has reported on terrorism in Toronto, the war in Afghanistan, Egypt's aborted Arab Spring, the military

trials at Guantánamo Bay, and the aftermath of the Michael Brown shooting by police in Ferguson, Missouri. In short, the author has seen dystopia made real — over and over again — in the first quarter of this century.

In "American War," the Chestnut family is eking out a life along the ruined margins of the Mississippi Sea. In a world beleaguered with an assortment of environmental catastrophes — rising sea levels, desertification, relentless storms, shrinking resources — political and economic dynamics are shifting on a global scale.

The two superpowers in 2075 are China and the Bouazizi Empire, a North African/Middle Eastern alliance named in honor of the Tunisian fruit vendor whose self-immolation sparked the first Arab Spring uprisings.

The United States, meanwhile, is breaking apart. Refugees from the coasts have crowded into

the country's interior, to the aversion of the long-time denizens there. The desert southwest is aligning more closely with Mexico. And in the southeast, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia have vowed to secede from the Union rather than obey the national mandate to stop using oil as their primary energy source.

With the threat of war moving ever closer, the Chestnut family makes plans to flee to the relative stability of the North. But chaos engulfs them before they can make the move and the family is swept instead into Camp Patience, a sprawling refugee settlement surrounded by a wastewater trench of human sludge.

The camp's name suggests that society expects these displaced people to bide their time, but life does not stand still. "American War" focuses on 6-year-old Sarat Chestnut, and how she is influenced by the conditions

American War — Omar El Akkad Knopf — 352 pp - \$26.95

that surround her as she grows up. The family love that envelops her in early childhood cannot withstand the corrosive forces of disruption, deprivation and violence. As time goes on, Sarat's actions reflect her warped allegiances — and have devastating repercussions.

Although El Akkad sketches a world 60 years into the future, the reader cannot help but understand that the blighting circumstances he presents — climate change, sectionalism, resource wars, refugee camps, and sheer desperation — are already happening in our time. And they are already having their effect.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com

Native Astorian to talk about Finnish epic poem 'The Kalevala'

ASTORIA — Greg Jacob, a retired linguistics professor from Portland State University, will give a talk about the Finnish national epic The Kalevala at 7 p.m. Saturday, April 15, at Suomi Hall, 244 W. Marine Drive.

Jacob will discuss the epic's origin and poetic expression of traditional Finnish culture. In particular, he will explore its homespun teachings, archetypal motifs, larger-than-life characters and an emerging ethnic identity, while explaining the work's meter and poetic structure.

Born and raised in Astoria, Jacob grew up listening to his mother and grandmother speak Finnish. He is president of the Finlandia Foundation Columbia-Pacific Chapter of Portland, and a member of Astoria Lodge No. 2 of Finnish Brotherhood.

Sponsored by the lodge, the lecture is one of the 2017 events celebrating Finland's 100 year anniversary of independence.

The event is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

Learn leatherworking for maritime activities

ASTORIA — An introductory leatherworking class will be held 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday at the Barbey Maritime Center.

Taught by instructor Kenneth Meyer, the class will focus on simple uses of leather for boats.

The cost is \$45 for

members, \$55 for non-members. Call 503-325-2323 to register.

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