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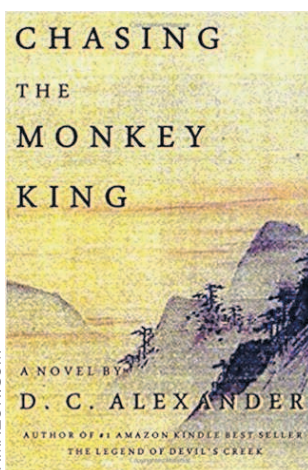
International intrigue in Sino-U.S. murder mystery

D.C. Alexander is back with another smart, convoluted murder mystery. "Chasing the Monkey King" is absorbing enough to distract you on a cross-country flight bedeviled by air turbulence, or to make you forget to reapply the sunscreen when you're reading it at the beach.

A former federal agent and part-time Hansville, Washington, resident, Alexander concocts a tale that begins in the Puget Sound region, but quickly expands to include bureaucratic cover-ups in Washington D.C. and corrupt trade practices in China.

The hero is Lars Severin, a panic attack-prone former federal agent and self-described "alcoholic burnout looking to make ends meet." Recently, that has meant auditing business records for an organic foods certifier. Dull, dull stuff.

But then a former crony from Severin's law enforcement past refers him to a wealthy Seattle businessman. Orin Thorvaldsson's niece has gone missing in China while working on assignment for the U.S. Department of Commerce.



Chasing the Monkey King – D.C. Alexander Createspace – 262 pp – \$7.99

So has her partner. Thorvaldsson is dissatisfied with the U.S. State Department's inconclusive report on their disappearance and wants Severin to investigate further.

Relatively speaking, this is a big-bucks alternative to Severin's agro-gig, and it promises to stimulate what's left of the gray matter that he hasn't yet managed to pickle, so he takes the job.

He also brings in his old college roommate, Wal-

lace Zhang, to serve as his Chinese interpreter. Zhang is another guy who hasn't lived up to his potential. But as the story goes on, it's clear that both men are going to have to draw on their long suppressed stores of resourcefulness to conduct this inquiry.

They fly from Seattle to Washington D.C. to investigate why the State Department's report was so superficial, and quickly learn – off the record, of course – that the powers that be didn't want the disappearance of a couple of mid-level bureaucrats to interfere with a complicated and hugely impactful trade agreement being negotiated with China.

They also manage to meet with the missing niece's husband, who happened to be in China at the time of his wife's disappearance and who seems to be more defensive than aggrieved.

With more questions raised than answered in D.C., the duo books a flight for China. There, they travel from Shanghai with its gleaming skyscrapers through rural lands with

rudimentary housing.

In addition to devising a thoroughly satisfying plot and a snappy buddy relationship that only occasionally gets annoying, Alexander also excels at scene-setting, describing in sensory detail the complexity of life in contemporary China.

Through Zhang, who is outraged at Severin's typically American lack of interest in Chinese history and failure to appreciate China's current standing, the author gives readers insights into the forces that have been at work in China over millennia, and that continue to shape Chinese ambitions today.

And Alexander also provides perspectives into the immensely complicated nature of trade agreements. "Chasing the Monkey King" is entertainment so involving you won't realize you're being educated, too.

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

word nerd

By RYAN HUME

Rhododendron

[rəʊ • də•dɛn•drən]

noun

1. any flowering shrub belonging to the genus *Rhododendron*, part of the heather or heath family. Related to the azalea, the rhododendron can be either evergreen or deciduous, is often used for ornamental planting. And their charming, bulbous flowers — which can bloom in either white, pink or purple — are mildly poisonous.

Origin:

Enters English around 1600 borrowed wholesale from

the French, which in turn was borrowed verbatim from the Latin, *rhododendron*, which is a direct translation of the Old Greek *ῥόδον*, meaning *rhódon*, or "rose," plus *δένδρον*, meaning *déndron*, or "tree," which means that *rhododendron* has literally meant "flower tree" for over two thousand years.

"The largest Pacific rhododendron, *R. macrophyllum*, is in the garden of Jeff and Wendy Grant, on the banks of Collard Lake in Florence, a press release said."

—"Florence couple has largest rhododendron 'tree,'" *The World*, June 5, 2008, theworldlink.com

"Problem: My rhododendron is suffering from root weevil, both adult and larvae.

Suggestion: Use beneficial nematodes; use chemical control as a last resort."

—"Master gardeners hold summer plant clinic in Ilwaco," *Coast Weekend*, Aug. 17, 2015