

# Johnny Appleseed reborn in harsh retelling

This version of American folk hero not suitable for youngsters.

This review column focuses on books that have a Pacific Northwest connection, but the selection we're looking at this week stretches "Northwest" beyond our customary definition.

Granted, "Fresh News Straight from Heaven" was written by an Olympia-based author, but this novel is set in the old Northwest Territory, the one established by the U.S. Congress in the 1780s when Ohio was considered the western frontier.

Author Gregg Sapp resurrects, reexamines and embroiders upon the real-life story of John Chapman, a barefoot ascetic who, thanks to his unique activities throughout that Northwest wilderness, achieved legendary status. Chapman claimed to hear angelic voices. He practiced peace in a violent time and adopted a vegetarian

## THIS WEEK'S BOOK

**"Fresh News Straight from Heaven"**

By Gregg Sapp

Evolved Publishing

382 pp

\$18.95

diet. His self-assigned mission was to plant apple trees throughout the wilderness, ahead of the tide of settlers. Thus the lore around Johnny Appleseed was born.

Early in this novel, a circuit-riding preacher who meets Johnny for the first time asks if he is "the one they call Appleseed?"

In reply, Johnny pokes fun at his own reputation: "I me-self would prefer to be called the Apple-Proclaimer, the Pomaceous Prophet, or the Fructifier of the Wilderness. But I can accept being called Appleseed."

However, the quirky spirit and blithe heart of this vagabond are put to the test as he roams through a territory that is becoming host to an increasing number of

scalawags, cultists, politicians, misanthropes, drunkards, preachers, prophets, witches and the military.

Johnny, motivated by an intensely personal relationship with his Maker and by an influential text written by the Swedish theologian Swedenborg, believes that he can promote peace by planting apple trees. But he is not the only one with religious convictions. Other characters engage in different practices and expressions of faith — and not all are copacetic.

Some figures in this story are governed less by creed and more by ambition. An array of soldiers and politicians connive to build their reputations through conquest of the wilderness.

But the indigenous people who have lived there for untold generations are determined to push back.

Occasionally Sapp strays from Johnny Appleseed's story to focus instead on the

machinations and power plays between U.S. troops and tribal warriors. Readers will recognize historical names such as Aaron Burr, William Henry Harrison, Tecumseh and Tippecanoe.

The book also addresses — sometimes graphically — the secondary status of women in the wilderness, and suggests possible responses to sexual violence two centuries before the rise of the #MeToo movement.

Let's be clear: This version of the Johnny Appleseed story is not appropriate for youngsters. There are scenes of brutality and depravity that are tough to bear.

But there is much to recommend this tale for mature readers. While the storyline does meander, "Fresh News Straight from Heaven" contains humor, pathos, pungent detail and interesting ruminations on love and conviction and historical what-ifs, with a few totally gratuitous

(but amusing) 20th century pop-culture references thrown in for good measure. This is an engrossing tale.

*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@nwlink.com](mailto:bkmonger@nwlink.com).*

## Crossword Answers

S	E	A	B	E	D	C	E	D	D	W	E	E	B	L	D	S			
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