

Bawdy romp ensnares gods, monsters and humans

Witty, inventive 'The Alehouse at the End of the World' reimagines old stories

Forest Avenue Press, the Portland press that, in its own words, "publishes literary fiction on a joyride," has done it again with the publication of Stevan Allred's randy, rollicking new novel, "The Alehouse at the End of the World."

You'll know you are in the hands of a master storyteller and consummate wordsmith with the first sentence: "The fisherman lived alone at the edge of the sea, in a shack beneath the shade of the tallest shore pine for leagues, on a bluff above a shallow cove." The lulling effect of all of those fricative "sh" words instantly sets the tone. It's time to settle in for an epic tale.

The marooned fisherman has received a mysteriously delivered letter. It contains unwelcome news: His beloved has died. But on her deathbed, the letter says, she vowed to wait for him on the Isle of the Dead.

Stricken with remorse that he hadn't returned to her earlier, and with rekindled hope that he may now have a chance to reunite with her, the fisherman sets off across the sea in his skiff.

Inconveniently, a storm comes up and he is swallowed by a whale.

This is only one of many times that Allred borrows elements from other stories and songs, and sprinkles

THIS WEEK'S BOOK

The Alehouse at the End of the World

By Stevan Allred

Forest Avenue Press

360 pp

\$17.95

them into "Alehouse" with a wink and a nod.

But he incorporates these into a fable so fresh and so sly, so replete with luscious vocabulary and dirty tricks and philosophy, so ripe with love triangles and soulful clams and sinister corvids, that it becomes a kind of scavenger hunt for the reader to detect these borrowed bits of whimsy.

Meanwhile, back at the plot line: After a harrowing time within the bowels of the leviathan, the fisherman washes up on the Isle of the Dead. He is confronted by a trio of birds: a bespectacled cormorant who spouts Latin, a compassionate pelican with healing powers and a tyrannical crow who fancies himself King of the Dead.

With varying levels of acceptance, the birds allow the fisherman to stay, even though he doesn't qualify as a typical dead person.

As time goes on, the fisherman discovers that all three birds are demi-deities with shape-shifting powers. They help him locate what's left of his beloved, but they are chiefly preoccupied with placating the gargantuan beast that has swallowed their island whole.

"THE ALEHOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD" TRAFFICS IN THOSE QUESTS THAT SEEM TO BE ETERNALLY HUMAN: LOVE VERSUS LOSS, RIGHT VERSUS WRONG, HOPE VERSUS DESPAIR.

Then another visitor arrives: Dewi Sri. As the goddess of fertility, her very presence disrupts the normal behavior of the island's denizens. She can be serenely maternal one moment, and intoxicatingly sensual the next.

Can these two interlopers — fisherman and goddess — help save the Isle of the Dead from the beast?

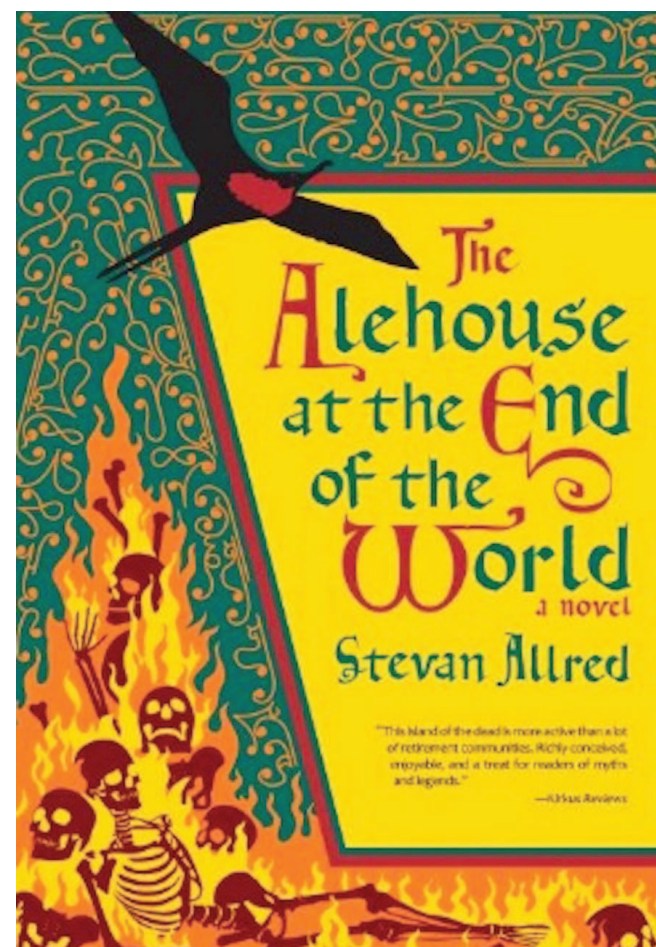
Will the fisherman be able to restore his lost love?

Is collusion at play in determining control of

the island?

With rapier wit, gleeful humor and inventive reimagining of storytelling traditions of yore, "The Alehouse at the End of the World" traffics in those quests that seem to be eternally human: love versus loss, right versus wrong, hope versus despair.

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.



Forest Avenue Press

The cover of Stevan Allred's novel 'The Alehouse at the End of the World.'

Crossword Answers

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