

Beyond the court

Journalist pens book about Montana's champion underdog basketball team

"Brothers on Three" contains the typical elements of a sports-themed coming-of-age story: underdog high school athletes who, despite adversity, win the basketball championship.

But if you're expecting a conventional narrative arc to this nonfiction story, you're in for a surprise. The championship game happens on page 43 of this 300-plus-page book. And author Abe Strep wasn't even there to witness it.

Strep is a sports and nature writer who grew up in New York, but has spent the last several years roving around America's western interior, sniffing out stories and writing for the likes of Harper's Bazaar and The New Yorker.

At the time of the Arlee Warriors' 2016-2017 state championship season, Strep was living in Montana. After seeing an article in the Missoula newspaper about one of the juniors on the winning team, a kid who had amassed some amazing statistics and who lived on the Flathead Reservation, Strep decided to pitch his own version of the story to The New York Times Magazine.

"I knew nothing," Strep confesses now, but his editor back in New York didn't know that. He got the assignment.

It was only after he began interviewing people that he began to comprehend the magnitude of the story he was uncovering.

The little town of Arlee is located within the reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation. Most of the kids on the Arlee High basketball team had Native American ancestry, as did

their coach. But due to blood quantum rules, not all were enrolled members of the tribes.

This affected access to certain privileges — everything from property ownership on reservation land to tuition-fee waivers at Montana's public universities. But the reality was that whether enrolled or not, the teammates were identified by their Native American roots, and even their coach called the team's hard-charging style of play, "rez ball."

Once Strep completed his article, he recognized there was more story to be told. He stuck around Arlee for another two years, viewing films of the games he'd missed that first championship year and getting to know the present-day basketball team along with their families, coaches, school administrators and the competition.

The Arlee Warriors made it to the state finals for an exceptional three years in a row.

At the same time, on a reservation that had been beset with the tragedy of suicide clusters, the team became as widely known for their successful suicide prevention campaign as for their roundball prowess.

Yet for all the excellence those young men displayed on the court, and for all the work they invested in their academics and their community, Strep points out that Montana's top colleges did not come calling.

"Brothers on Three" is a complex weave of sports, cultural practices, generational trauma and embedded injustice. It's ambitious in scope and sometimes uneven in execution.

But long after you put the book down, the stories of those young athletes will be seared into your memory.

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 barbaralmcm@gmail.com

BROTHERS ON THREE

A TRUE STORY of FAMILY, RESISTANCE, and HOPE on a RESERVATION in MONTANA

ABE STREP



This week's book

'Brothers on Three' by Abe Strep

Celadon Books — 336 pp — hardback \$23.49; kindle \$14.99

'Brothers on Three' is about a basketball team in Montana's Flathead Reservation.

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