

Sprawling ambitions in 'Small World'

Multigenerational epic unfolds after a fateful train ride

"Small" may be in its title, but at nearly 500 pages, Jonathan Evison's latest novel is a zealously plotted, multigenerational tale of American heartbreak and perseverance.

Over the course of his writing career, Evison has developed a reputation for his fine crafting of characters that we might pass on the street, but who carry worlds of hope and heartache. Mike Muñoz in "Lawn Boy," Ben Benjamin in "The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving," and Harriet Chance in "This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance" come to life in the pages of those books. Those were big-hearted stories about modest lives. This is where Evison's gift of writing lies.

Earlier in his career, Evison wrote another novel, "West of Here," that attempted a larger scope. In that book, he toggled between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 21st to examine how people grapple with the legacies created by their ancestors. There were multiple characters, plot lines and ambitions. While some reviewers called "West of

Here" satisfying and an electrifying epic, this reviewer wasn't sold on it. I regret to say that "Small World" has more in common with "West of Here" than it does with "Lawn Boy."

Evison's newest volume features a vast array of players past and present. Some of his 19th century characters rely on thin stereotypes that might be reminders of those old TV Westerns. Chinese immigrant Wu Chen, who determines that selling groceries in San Francisco is a better bet than mining for gold in the Shasta Cascades, is one of them. The orphaned Irish twins, determined Nora and her mute brother Finn, are two more.

Evison includes the plight of an orphaned Miwok teen in California and a Black man who escaped slavery and has found tenuous freedom in Illinois. For the first 100 pages of this book, the introductions of these traumatized lives present a mashup of social dysfunction.

Yet for all of the troubles these five con-

This week's book

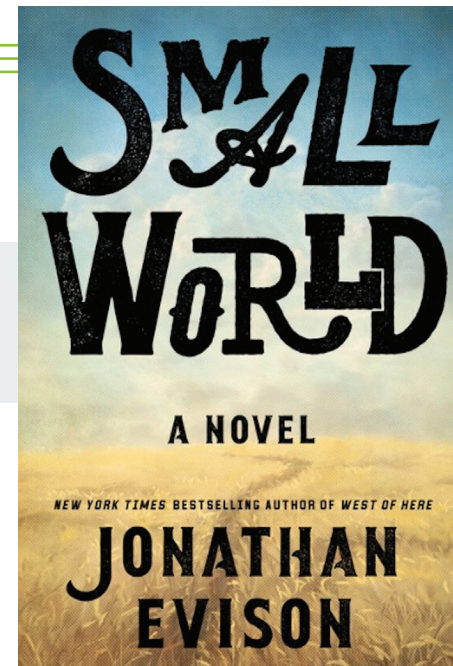
'Small World' by Jonathan Evison

Dutton - 480 pp — \$28

front, four will manage to have children, and their contemporary descendants will face various challenges in their own time. These are sprinkled throughout the story in chronological mayhem. And frankly, the tests they face in 2019, which is when this story wraps up, seem almost quaint when compared to events of the past two years — a global pandemic, the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, and the U.S. Capitol insurrection, just to name a few.

Evison plays with the conceit that generations of restless Americans have dealt with an "incessant, unanswerable, unconquerable call..." That's a pretty grandiose notion that echoes manifest destiny tropes.

But is it really true? What I will concede is that eventually this aggravating soap opera becomes addictive, and I was compelled to



read it through to the tear-jerking end. But before that, when a train wreck throws together all of the 21st century characters, I had to suppress a smirk. The author got that right, perhaps more than he knew.

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.

Coastal Living



LOWER COLUMBIA BOWL

NOW OPEN

826 Marine Dr. Astoria
503-325-3321

Discover More!



DiscoverOurCoast.com



LOWER COLUMBIA BOWL

SAFE, SANITIZED, READY TO ROLL

Bowling is Back!

\$1 OFF WEDNESDAYS

Take \$1 off:

- Shoe rental
- Every Game
- Fountain Sodas
- Adult Beverages

ADVERTISE YOUR BUSINESS HERE!

Call us at
503-325-3211
to learn more