

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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CULTURE CORNER

‘Lean on Pete’ rethinks the Western

Both as a novelist and lyricist, Willy Vlautin writes best about horses, the desert, and poor people struggling to survive on the edges of modern society.

In his 2010 novel “Lean on Pete,” Vlautin is able to dabble in all three themes — a lucrative trifecta for fans of the Portland-based creative.

This month, a movie based on the novel opened across the country to solid reviews. Directed by Andrew Haigh, it was filmed partly in the southeastern Oregon towns of Burns and Hines. It stars Charlie Plummer in a deeply affecting performance, alongside admirable supporting efforts from Steve Buscemi and Chloë Sevigny.

The movie’s plot follows Charley, a teenage boy who endures a difficult home life with a loving but limited father. Charley falls into a summer job at a Portland horse track where he finds responsibility, friendship and plenty of new problems. The quarterhorse “Lean on Pete” isn’t that way, however, and when the manure hits the proverbial fan, both boy and horse head off on an eastward adventure that becomes a battle for survival.

It’s a hard, sparse, beautiful film — something that lovers of the Eastern Oregon landscape and culture will find



Courtesy photo

In “Lean on Pete,” Charlie Plummer portrays Charley, a teen who escapes city street life for a harrowing journey across Eastern Oregon with a racehorse.

plenty in common with.

There are plenty of scenes of Charley and Pete wandering through endless southeast Oregon sagebrush, but not triumphantly and confidently like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. Plummer is hunched, parched and on foot, and “Pete” trails halfheartedly behind. Charley says the “horse ain’t for riding,” a decidedly non-cowboy frame of mind and turn of phrase.

But far from being an anti-Western, “Lean on Pete” updates the genre with the fears that stoke today’s American imagination. The enemy of the modern

American misfit is no longer Indians or grizzly bears — it’s poverty, violence and drugs. No longer are our cowboys flattening out their bedroll for a clear night under the stars, those without a roof overhead are instead crawling into sleeping bags under highway overpasses or vacant lots.

Vlautin has spent his career rethinking and rebuilding literature of the American West, stripping away the mythical grit to remind us of the look and smell of real dirt. It’s not pretty, and parts of “Lean on Pete” are ugly enough to make you look away. It’s

only out of a deep desire for something to break right for Charley that the audience can remain engaged.

It is Plummer’s acting that makes the character and film so compelling. If his career continues to catapult toward stardom, his turn in “Lean on Pete” will be remembered as one of the vehicles that sent him to the stratosphere. It’s no small feat to come across so vulnerable yet so brave, so young yet so mature.

The film does have its limitations. A novel is a better medium for fleshing out the character of Pete, allowing the relationship between boy and horse to blossom and develop. That doesn’t quite connect on screen, and Buscemi and Sevigny come and go too quickly to make the necessary impact to push the plot into motion.

But Vlautin’s love and respect for the high desert comes shining through, something many Eastern Oregonians already know well. Vlautin’s band “Richmond Fontaine” has been a staple of the last few Pendleton Round-Up after-parties, and he often stops in town when driving between Portland and the rural, empty places where he likes to escape. There’s more than a little Charley in him.

The film premiered in Harney County on May 11, though as of now it is not scheduled to appear at cinemas in Wildhorse, Hermiston, Walla Walla or Tri-Cities. It is still being shown in Portland and other major American markets, as well as abroad.



TIM TRAINOR
Comment

OTHER VIEWS

American renaissance is underway

People who read this column know my political ideology: I’m a Whig. If progressives generally believe in expanding government to enhance equality, and libertarians try to reduce government to expand freedom, Whigs seek to use limited but energetic government to enhance social mobility.

Back in the 19th century, during their heyday, Whigs promoted infrastructure projects, public education, public-private investments and character-building programs to create dynamic, capitalist communities in which poor boys and girls could rise and succeed.

Whigs admired people and places that are enterprising, emotionally balanced and spiritually ardent. They had a great historic run — inspired by Alexander Hamilton, led by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, embodied most brilliantly in the minds of Abraham Lincoln and the early Theodore Roosevelt.

And then the Whig tendency disappeared from American life.

There’s a promising effort called the Modern Whig Party trying to revive the movement, but until last week I was under the impression that there were basically only 24 of us left.

And then I read James and Deborah Fallows’ book, “Our Towns.” Now I realize that Whigs are the most important political force in America today. It’s just that the people who are Whigs don’t call themselves Whigs and they are all on the local level.

Over the past five years, the Fallowses piloted their own small plane to dozens of cities, from Eastport, Maine, to Redlands, California. They found that as the national political climate has deteriorated, small cities have revived. As the national scene has polarized, people in local communities are working effectively to get things done.

Their book is a group portrait of 42 of these success stories. To anybody with a Whig mindset, the tales have a familiar ring.

Most of the cities tell a redemption story about themselves. They had a booming industry; it collapsed; now they are rebuilding with new industries and new wealth.

Many of the cities began their recovery with infrastructure projects that revived the downtown core. In Greenville, South Carolina, an ugly highway bridge was removed and replaced with a gorgeous walk along the Reedy River, which is now home to parks and cafes. In Fresno, California, the misbegotten pedestrian mall that crushed downtown development was bulldozed, and now there are human-size streets that encourage visits and activity.

A second common thread for these cities was that they were often led by business leaders who were both entrepreneurial and civically minded. In these places if you become successful, it is expected that you will become



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

active in town life.

Mike Gallo went to San Bernardino, California, as a junior officer in the Air Force. He left to work for a company pioneering new missile technology. Then he helped found an aerospace technology company. When the firm succeeded, he set up an education nonprofit called Technical Employment Training. Then he ran for the school board and became its chairman.

Third, these places tend to have strong vocational schools and community colleges, teaching modern workplace skills in partnership with local businesses. Raj Shaunak and his family went to Columbus, Mississippi, and founded a manufacturing firm. After they sold it, Shaunak went to work at East Mississippi Community College, where students learn on real versions or scaled-down models of the same machines that operate at the local manufacturing plants.

Fourth, these places tend to have a lot of social capital and entrepreneurial civic institutions. In Allentown, Pennsylvania, a couple needed a foam pit for their new gymnastics center. So the local Mack Trucks factory donated leftover padding used in the airplane seats it manufactured, it delivered the padding in a fleet of trucks and 200 town volunteers showed up with electric kitchen knives to carve it into pieces.

In many of the cities the local library serves as an all-purpose community center. In Bend, Oregon, the library has a few dozen local partnerships — AARP volunteers help people do their taxes in the library; Goodwill workers teach résumé writing. In Charleston, West Virginia, and Columbus, Ohio, the libraries zero in on programs for infants to 3-year-olds, so children enter school ready to learn.

Finally, the cities have strong civic stories and clear narratives about where they’ve been, where they are going and what makes them distinctive. The mayors in these places almost never have national ambitions. This is their town, and this is their highest office.

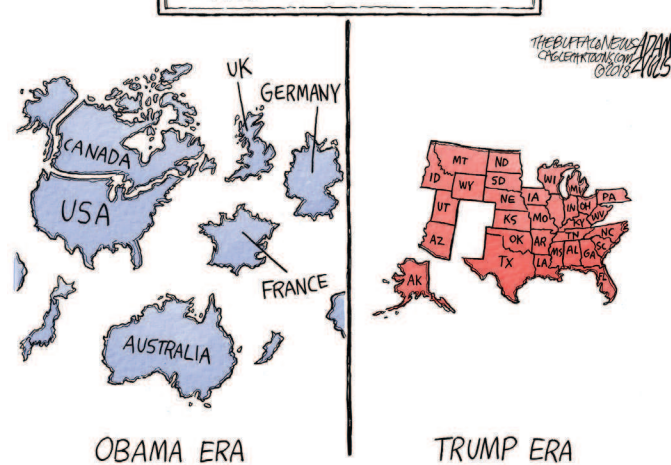
Today, in this era of local renaissance and national apocalypse, I hear people wondering if maybe America can be like Italy — dysfunctional on the national level but with strong localities and a lovely lifestyle.

I don’t think so. Local improvement can go only so far when national politics is a meat grinder. The good news is the solutions to our civic problems already exist; it’s just that, as the Fallowses write, these stories are lonely and disconnected.

We just need to take these civic programs and this governing philosophy and nationalize them. We need to transform these local stories into a coherent national story and a bottom-up coalition, which will look a lot like a 21st-century descendant of the 19th-century Whigs.

David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in 2003.

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OTHER VIEWS

Remember teachers when voting

Ventura (Calif.) County Star

Tuesday was National Teacher Day, part of Teacher Appreciation Week, but the tone this year is more consequential than boxes of candy or #ThankATeacher posts on social media.

Across the nation — from Arizona to West Virginia — teachers are holding rallies, walking out, even going on strike. They are fighting back after years of low pay and education budget cuts, and successfully turning the tide in some areas.

Many teachers work long hours yet earn modest salaries for all they do in guiding our children to become productive members of society. We should be thanking them every day and especially this week, but we also can be doing more.

Teachers deserve our political support as they rally against underfunded programs, stagnant pay, rising student loan debt and constant criticism from pundits who have never been in a classroom. As we cast votes in primary elections and again in November, we should hold candidates accountable for their support of education, or lack thereof.

Meanwhile, teachers earn about 30 percent less than other college graduates, the Learning Policy Institute says. Those earning a master’s degree in education had an average of \$50,879 in student loan debt, a 2014 study found. The starting salary for a public-school teacher in America averaged \$38,617 in 2016-17, according to the National Education Association.

With at least 17 percent of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years, it’s no surprise that we have a teacher shortage. The Learning Policy Institute surveyed 25 school districts in California and found 80 percent had a shortage of qualified teachers last fall.

So yes, give your child’s teacher some appreciation this week.

Just don’t forget in November to vote for candidates who will give teachers the resources they need to educate our nation — and to feel fulfilled doing it.

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