



TOM REESE

Conrad Wesselhoeft '71 walks West Seattle's Alki Beach. His book "Adios, Nirvana" is largely set in West Seattle. An early interview he wangled with Scott O'Dell, revered author of "Island of the Blue Dolphins," changed his life.

Turning grief into fiction

by MARY ANN GWINN

CONRAD WESSELHOEFT '71 was a young journalist working at The New York Times when he met a man who changed the course of his life.

Wesselhoeft was a news assistant, mostly writing copy for the edition that covered the Times' Westchester suburbs. On a trip to the library in 1984, he learned that the great young adult writer Scott O'Dell lived in Westchester County. Wesselhoeft had read and loved O'Dell's Newbery Award-winning "Island of the Blue Dolphins," based on the true story of a young Native American woman who lived alone for 18 years on an island off the California coast, and he successfully pitched an interview to his editor.

As Wesselhoeft tells it, O'Dell, an

85-year-old man with long white hair and blue eyes, met him at the train station. After a seven-hour interview, the author "flipped the questions on me and said, 'what do you really want to do?'" Wesselhoeft remembers. "I said, I want to be like you, to write novels. He said, there is no school for this. If you want to do it, this is Friday, start on Monday."

Wesselhoeft said he couldn't do it; he was working 15 hours a day. O'Dell said, "Start with a notebook. Write, 'I want to write a book' on the first page, and on the second, 'I want the book to be about' once you develop a rhythm, once you get the details down, at some point a spark ignites and the story flames to life." He said, "Write every day, never miss a day, and persevere."

Wesselhoeft did persevere, and he filled a lot of notebooks before he published his

first young adult novel, 2010's "Adios, Nirvana." Along the way he worked at a series of writing jobs, married, became a father to three kids, and endured an unimaginable tragedy. After leaving Wesselhoeft and Seattle, his wife Lyn died violently in New Mexico in 2006.

Wesselhoeft had to grapple with the shock of her death and his own grief, as well as that of his children. That experience infuses both "Adios, Nirvana" and his second book, 2014's "Dirt Bikes, Drones and Other Ways to Fly," both published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Both books have won accolades: The German translation of "Adios, Nirvana" was a finalist for the German Youth Literary Prize. "Dirt Bikes" won a Reading the West Award from the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Associa-

tion in 2014 and made the Air & Space/Smithsonian's 2014 list of Best Aviation and Space-Themed Books for Young Readers. Booklist said of "Adios, Nirvana": "Peopled with the elderly and infirm, crazy parents, caring educators, and poignant teens trying desperately to overcome death's pull, it mixes real and fictional musicians and historical events to create a moving picture of struggling adolescents and the adults who reach out with helping hands."

Wesselhoeft lives in West Seattle with his partner, composer and musician Bronwyn Edwards, his standard poodle Django, and Charlee, Bronwyn's basset hound.

In "Adios, Nirvana," his neighborhood is a character in its own right, from the No. 22 local bus, to local hangout Easy Street Records, to a guest appearance by West Seattle's own Eddie Vedder, vocalist and guitarist for Pearl Jam.

He has two more books in the publishing pipeline. He answered questions about his writing and its intersection with life, including his years at Lakeside:

Q Tell us about your education after Lakeside.

A I went to Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I was only 17 and I wasn't ready for college – by the end of the year I had to stop.

I joined the Merchant Marine and worked on a tugboat. I did that for a number of months before I went back to school, to Lewis & Clark College in Portland, where I graduated. Later I went to Ohio State and got a master's in journalism.

Q When you started writing books, why did you choose the young adult genre?

A Scott O'Dell had this theory — I don't entirely agree with it, but he said, when you write for adults, you're really not changing their lives. But children and young adults are very hungry for direction. You can actually change lives with the work you do.

Q What is the hardest thing about writing for young adults?

A I thought it would be easier, but it's really harder. Young people have perfect pitch, they can detect lies. You really have to work at getting your language right,

your facts right. The characters have to be really credible.

Q "Adios, Nirvana" is about a teenage boy who loses his twin brother. It's a book about death, grief, and reconciliation. How did your own life story affect the narrative?

A After my wife died in 2006, we were thrown into this tremendously dark place as a family. On the surface we were able to smile

and speak to our friends, but each one of us at a molecular level was soaked in grief.

I just turned it into fiction ... I did an interview with BookBrowse a few years ago. I said, if you don't know how to deal with grief on your own, you can project it onto a character and maybe the character can do it for you. I was using fiction to help me through a dark time. On one level, I was just trying to entertain young adults, but at a deeper level, I was trying to get through it myself. Metaphor became medicine.

Q How did Lakeside shape you as a writer?

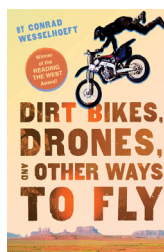
A I had this wonderful teacher, Bob Spock. He was the younger brother of Dr. Benjamin Spock (the child care expert).

When we would mess up he would quote Shakespeare — "You blocks, you stones, you worthless things you cruel men of Rome." He taught literature with real feeling. ... Right away he was talking about rhythm, and music, and cadence. ...

I only got into Lakeside because I agreed to take remedial reading. I was dyslexic.

I took reading from Fran Bassett. ... She had to break it all down, she had to teach me to read all over again. My handwriting was cuneiform in its mysteriousness. She had to re-teach me how to write. It was all done with respectful discretion in a way that would never embarrass the student.

That was all led by Bob Spock. ... Later they renamed it Language Training. I



“That’s what the book was about: the healing power of friends and family.”

would not have written any novels without it, I probably would have never gone to college.

Q You have written that you modeled the friends of Jonathan, the teenage protagonist of "Adios, Nirvana," on the posse of your son Kit, called "The Thicks" in the book. What did Kit make of that?

A My kids tell me they liked the book. ... I think Kit liked it; he is not going to come to me and say, I loved your book or hated the book, but he liked the attention ...

All those kids (Kit's friends)... I loved those guys. We were going through this terrible time, but we were all lifted by our friends. The boys that surrounded my son injected his life with so much friendship, so much fun, so much smack talk. That's what the book was about: the healing power of friends and family.

Q Writing can be a solitary occupation. How do you deal with that?

A I've been in the same writing critique group for 20 years. We meet once a month at Third Place Books in Lake Forest Park. We send out pages by email a week in advance, and we mark them up in comment mode. Then we sit down in person and do an oral critique. No one slams anyone ... Sometimes, if two people tell you something, you can lose your vision. You have to stay in charge, you can't let others take control.

Q What do you do for fun?

A I play ukulele and guitar. I learned a bit of guitar from Paul Allen. Kenneth, Paul's father, drove Paul and me over to Pullman to WSU for a campus visit. Paul, using an air guitar, showed me how to play "Lay Lady Lay." ■

More about Conrad: <http://conradwesselhoeft.com/> and Adiosnirvana.com