



## The Idaho Book Award

by Larry Burke

**E**ARLY NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLERS AND INADVERTENT AUTHORS like diarists Lewis and Clark and the Oregon Trail immigrants were among the first to describe what is now Idaho. Since then, printing presses have churned out thousands of books about Idaho as writers continued to serve their deeply ingrained need to explain the natural and human landscape that surrounds us.

With the exception of an occasional commercial success, for several decades even the most stellar of those Idaho-centric books suffered in obscurity. But that changed in 1985, when the Idaho Library Association (ILA) began recognizing Idaho's best book with the annual Idaho Book Award. One winner and a handful of honorable mentions are now recognized each year for their contributions to Idaho's body of literature.

Twenty-three books—there was no award in 1992—can claim the title of Idaho Book Award winner. They are a mix of genres and subjects, covering the gamut from Idaho politics to folklife and architecture. Some had enough status to merit reviews in the *New York Times* or other national publications, while others received only a brief mention in local papers. But all passed muster from an ILA committee of learned librarians who read, critique and select the award winners.

Anyone, including members of the selection committee, can nominate a book for the award. To qualify for consideration, a book must pass a simple test: it must be set in Idaho or have significant Idaho content. Books don't have to be written or published in Idaho and authors don't have to be Idaho residents. Three of the last five winning writers, for example, came from other states. And only two of the last ten winners were printed in-state.

This year a statewide panel of eight librarians will read and evaluate the entries.

As always, their goal is to acknowledge excellence among authors who write about Idaho topics, says current selection committee chair Jim Jatkevicius. “Not all of these authors get the recognition they deserve, so they are glad to receive this accolade,” says Jatkevicius, an adult services librarian at the Boise Public Library.

“If there is one group a writer wants to impress, it is librarians,” says Stanley, Idaho, author John Rember, who was “deeply honored” when his book *Traplines* won the 2003 award. “It is an affirmation we appreciate. Not many of us make a lot of money with our writing; an award like this makes you realize that money isn't the main thing.”

Keith Petersen, the only two-time award-winner for *This Crested Hill* in 1987 and *River of Life, Channel of Death* in 1995, says his medals are hanging on the wall of his home office. “I am honored because an impressive list of books has won. Idaho tends to be defensive of its literary history and I don't think we need to be. This award is an affirmation of books that you should have on your shelf,” says Petersen, who is now Idaho's state historian.

There has been no shortage of qualified entries in recent years. The list has reached almost 20, but usually the competition is among about a dozen books.

Judges are looking for books that are well written and well researched. They must have “vitality and are involving for the reader,” explains Jatkevicius. By the time the judging is complete, one or two titles usually emerge as “conspicuous favorites,” he adds. The winner receives the award at the ILA's annual banquet in October, which this year will be held in Burley.

The competition isn't broken into categories, so all genres—fiction, non-fiction, children's literature or poetry written in a given year compete against each other. “We let every title go head-to-head. It would dilute the competition if we had categories. The biggest issue is that it isn't fair to children's books. There have been some very good children's books in the competition, but they have a hard time competing with other genres,” says Jatkevicius. Fiction hasn't fared well either. No novel or collection of short stories has won.

The Idaho Book Award was the brainchild of Moscow-Latah County Library director Gloria Gehrman, who at a May 1982 ILA meeting suggested the award as a way to provide needed recognition to authors and at the same time give Idaho libraries a public relations boost. A committee was formed to draft selection procedures and criteria for the award.

“There was not much to honor adult books at the time ... we needed to encourage more authors because the number of books published about Idaho seemed a little skimpy,” says Gehrman, who took a job at Seattle's King County Library in 1988 and has since retired to Eugene, Oregon. “I've lost touch over the years... I am very pleased to know the award has survived.”

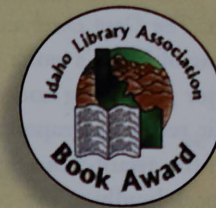
Gehrman's idea became reality when the first Idaho Book Award, *Mining Town: the Photographic Record of T.N. Barnard and Nellie Stockbridge from the Coeur d'Alenes* by Ivar Nelson and Patricia Hart, was presented at the 1985 meeting. The award-winning authors received a custom-cast silver medallion crafted by Pocatello silversmith Jan Smith, who continued to produce medallions for the winners until she retired in 1999. In addition to the winner, the ILA also decided in 1985 to issue honorable mention awards to books that didn't win but still merited recognition.

The ILA has dutifully named an Idaho Book Award winner every year but one—1992, when the committee felt none of the books met previous standards and to name a winner would “compromise the integrity of the Idaho Book Award itself,” according to a selection committee memo.

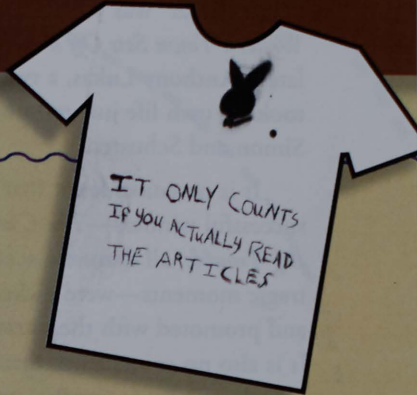
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### Idaho Book Award Winners Trivia Contest

1. Who is the subject of the only biography?
2. Who is the author of the only book of poems?
3. Which three books are set in northern Idaho's mining district?
4. How many authors were/are Idaho newspaper reporters and who are they?
5. What is the topic of the only anthology to receive an award?
6. Which book was selected for the Idaho State University Reading Project?
7. Which book was selected for the First Year Read program at Boise State University?
8. Name the two books about Idaho Native Americans and what tribes do they represent?
9. Two books focus on architecture. What are their titles?
10. Which author has won the award twice and what is his current title?



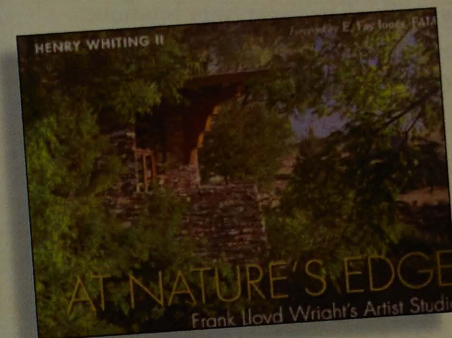
T-shirt by Isaac Gunther



### Idaho Book Award, 2007

*At Nature's Edge: Frank Lloyd Wright's Artist Studio* by Henry Whiting II, University of Utah Press

Perched high on a cliff above the Snake River near Bliss, Frank Lloyd Wright's artist studio designed for Idaho landscape painter Archie Boyd Teater and Patricia Teater in 1952 is a sophisticated, complex work of art. The structure was intended to foster the creative life. Located on one of the most spectacular natural sites Wright ever worked with, the studio at Teater's Knoll is a premier example of organic architecture at its best, where the fundamental integration with nature blurs the



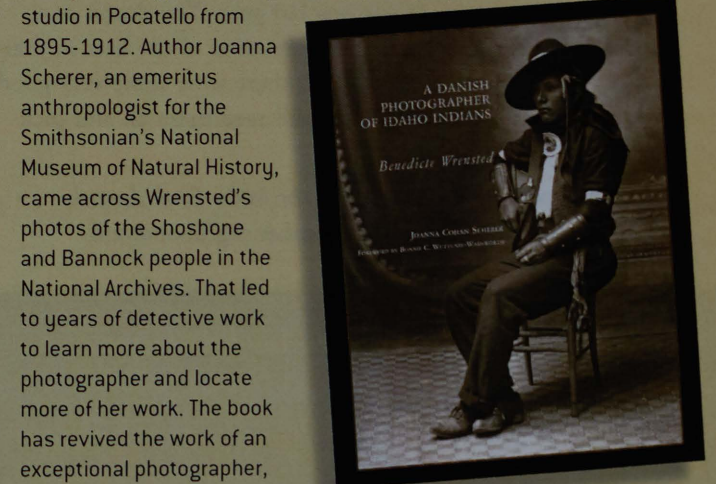
meeting of building and nature. Teater's Knoll is now the home and studio of writer Henry Whiting and sculptor Lynn Fawcett Whiting. In *At Nature's Edge*, Whiting chronicles the design and history of the studio and the restorations that were necessary to preserve it after years of neglect. The book is vividly illustrated with contemporary color photographs, historical black and white images, and Frank Lloyd Wright's original drawings.

Excerpted from a review by William Allin Storrer, adjunct professor of architecture at the University of Texas, Austin.

### Idaho Book Award, 2006

*A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians: Benedicte Wrensted* by Joanna Cohan Scherer, University of Oklahoma Press

*A Danish Photographer* is the culmination of more than ten years of research into the photography of Benedicte Wrensted, a Danish immigrant who operated a photographic studio in Pocatello from 1895-1912. Author Joanna Scherer, an emeritus anthropologist for the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, came across Wrensted's photos of the Shoshone and Bannock people in the National Archives. That led to years of detective work to learn more about the photographer and locate more of her work. The book has revived the work of an exceptional photographer, while also highlighting the role of women as photographic recorders of the American West. Scherer also has contributed to the knowledge of the Indian people of eastern Idaho and their relationships to their Euro-American neighbors.

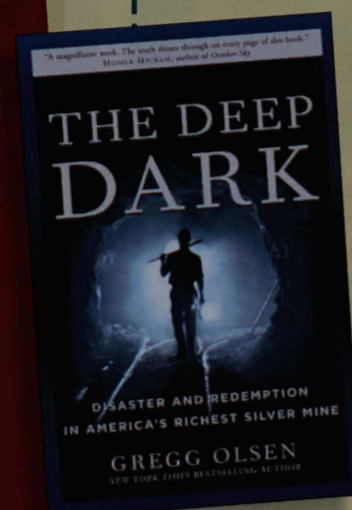


Excerpted from a review by Alison K. Brown in the fall, 2007 issue of *Museum Anthropology Review*.

### Idaho Book Award, 2005

*The Deep Dark: Disaster and Redemption in the America's Richest Silver Mine* by Gregg Olson, Crown Publishers

On May 2, 1972, fire broke out in Kellogg's Sunshine Mine. The cause and location, among the maze of shafts and tunnels more than a mile deep and long, were unknown. Eighty-one escaped, but another week passed before it was known that ninety-three others had been trapped. In all, seventy-seven women were widowed and more than 200 children lost their fathers. To this day, the cause of “the worst disaster in Idaho history” is unclear. In his seventh book, true crime writer and 20-year investigative reporter Gregg Olson tells a vividly detailed, heartbreaking tale about a dark, alien place, the people who loved working there and a town that has never been the same. Olson's thoroughly-researched portrait of what went wrong is all



the more chilling because it's yet another instance of the bottom line taking precedence over safety. The mine closed in 2001.

Excerpted from a review by Irene Wanner in the *Seattle Times*.

Put all twenty-three of the Idaho Book Award winners on a shelf and there would be a very eclectic mix, from nonfiction exposés to sentimental memoirs, historical photo collections and political analysis. Three of the winners are set in the Kellogg-Wallace mining district. Three deal with water issues and another seven focus on historical topics. One is a collection of poetry and one is a biography. By far the biggest "blockbuster" was 1997's *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America* by the late J. Anthony Lukas, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who took his own life just months prior to the book's release by Simon and Schuster.

It is no coincidence that three of the most commercially successful winners—*The Cyanide Canary*, *The Deep Dark* and *Big Trouble*, all dramatic accounts of some of Idaho's worst tragic moments—were picked up by major publishing houses and promoted with their arsenal of public relations weapons. It is also no coincidence that the most of the award-winning titles have a more regional genesis and speak loudly to the value of university and local presses, which are more willing to print works intended for smaller niche markets. The last two winners, *At Nature's Edge* and *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians*, were published respectively by the University of Utah and University of Oklahoma presses. Other winners over the years have come from presses at the University of Nebraska, Washington, Idaho, and Utah as well as Washington State and Boise State University. Still others came from boutique publishers such as Confluence Press, Sasquatch Books, Ridenbaugh Press, Black Canyon Communications or Magic Valley Publishers.

For writers like Rember, those small presses are essential as the larger publishing houses turn more and more commercial. "Right now publishing is in terrible trouble. The big publishers are looking for blockbusters, which doesn't leave much for the rest of us. Small presses read for content rather than whether or not the book will be a bestseller. If not for Limberlost and Confluence [small presses in Boise and Lewiston] I wouldn't be a writer now," he says.

But those presses are an endangered species, says author and historian Petersen, who calls the demise of the University of Idaho Press a few years ago a "travesty." Niche publishers are suffering from the recession, and some may not survive, he cautions. "The last bastion of small presses is university presses. Once they are gone, I am convinced we will never get them back."

That doesn't seem to have an effect on the Idaho Book Award entries—yet. The quantity and quality of the books has improved in the six years he has been involved with the award, says Jatkevicius. Under his direction, the Boise Public Library maintains a website, [www.farrit.com](http://www.farrit.com), that tracks new titles published in or about Idaho. He recorded more than thirty books that were released last year. The dozen or so contenders for the 2008 award are some of the best in years, he adds. "The field is very deep; there were some very good books published last year. We will read them all and pick what we think is the best."

For more information about the Idaho Book Award:  
<http://www.idaholibraries.org/bookaward>

### New Idaho Center for the Book Director

STEPHANIE BACON, Associate Professor of Art (Graphic Design) at Boise State University, will assume the directorship of the Idaho Center for the Book in July, 2009. Bacon, a graduate of the University of Chicago and Brooklyn College, recently completed a permanent public art project at the Boise Public Library! at Collister on commission from the Boise City Department of Arts and History. Bacon is profiled at [www.boisestate.edu/art/faculty/bacon/bacon.htm](http://www.boisestate.edu/art/faculty/bacon/bacon.htm). The retiring founding director of ICB is assuming new duties with Boise State University Publications, a new consortium of publishers and publications at the university.

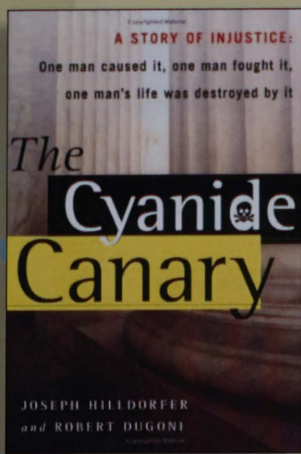


Photo: Boise Public Library! at Collister

### Idaho Book Award, 2004

*The Cyanide Canary* by Joseph Hilldorfer and Robert Dugoni, Simon & Schuster

*The Cyanide Canary* is the riveting true story of a horrific crime — of a brave young man left for dead, an unscrupulous business mogul, and the relentless EPA investigator who fought to overcome injustice.



On a crisp summer morning in Soda Springs, 20-year-old Scott Dominguez went to work for Allan Elias, the owner of Evergreen Resources, an enterprise Dominguez thought was in the business of producing fertilizer from mining waste. By eleven o'clock that morning Dominguez was fighting for his life, pulled unconscious from a cyanide-laced storage tank and not expected to live through the night. In Seattle, Special Agent Joseph Hilldorfer of the Environmental Protection Agency was given the job of finding out what happened

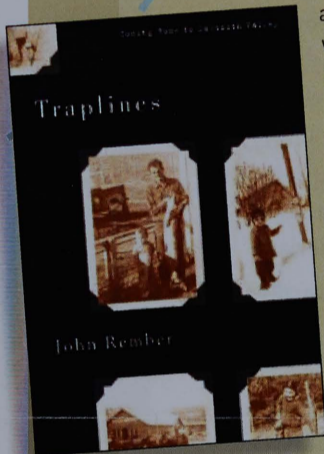
to Dominguez and why. The book tells a gripping story of how an environmental crime was prosecuted. What began as a struggle for justice for one young man became a fight by the EPA for its very ability to enforce the nation's environmental laws and to bring environmental polluters to justice. Co-author Robert Dugoni, born in Pocatello, is a writer from the Seattle area. He practiced as a civil litigator for seventeen years before he began writing full time. *The Cyanide Canary* was honored as a *Washington Post* 2004 Best Book of the Year.

Excerpted from the book.

### Idaho Book Award, 2003

*Traplins: Coming Home to Sawtooth Valley* by John Rember, Pantheon Books

John Rember is one of those folks who was here "when it was good." *Traplins* is a craftily written memoir of a vanished time and place. Rember was born in Sun Valley in 1951. Like many western states, Idaho in the '50s was an amalgam of an agricultural economy and a tourist one. Sun Valley had skiing and sheep drives through town and celebrities such as Ernest Hemingway wandering into local barrooms. Nearby Stanley — where Rember grew up — had a winter population of 36, and a summer count of twenty times that number. Today, he laments that the true ranch life is gone, and the region is dominated by "a population of caretakers." The author's roots in Idaho go back generations, and he vividly recounts the lives of an extended family. His father was an expert trapper, an old school westerner who could literally support a family thanks to his deep knowledge of the natural world. *Traplins* consist of



stops at carefully planned sites designed to yield the harvest of an animal valuable for itself. And always an animal — such as a beaver, a fox, a coyote or a bobcat — smart enough not to get caught unless the trapper has expertise. Rember's *Traplins* works the line, though the take gets thinner. Change and adapt or get swept out of the way by unforgiving economic forces. But there are the memories; revel in them. Never forget what a wonderful time it was.

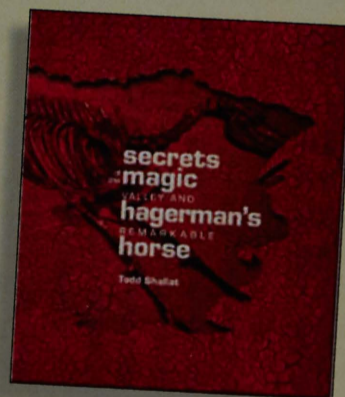
Excerpted from a review by Bill Croke in *The American Spectator*.

### Idaho Book Award, 2002

*The Secrets of the Magic Valley and Hagerman's Remarkable Horse*, edited by Todd Shallat, Black Canyon Communications

The Magic Valley is just a little over 10,000 square miles in area. "Stretching from Burley to Bliss, from the Sawtooths to Jackpot, the valley takes its name from a staircase of water projects that reclaimed as if by magic the fertile crescent of the Snake River Plain." As water is the basis for the Magic Valley's name, it is water and its uses that have framed the history of the place and its people. The book edited by Todd Shallat, the director of Boise State's Public History Program, takes us on a journey through that history, sparking our imaginations with views of the natural world that is, and the natural world that was. Every photograph or drawing is accompanied by absorbing information; each chapter deftly weaves the past with the present, a fabric of bright skeins of geology, anthropology, and sociology. Another book edited by Shallat, *Snake: The Plain and Its People*, received an ILA Honorable Mention in 1994.

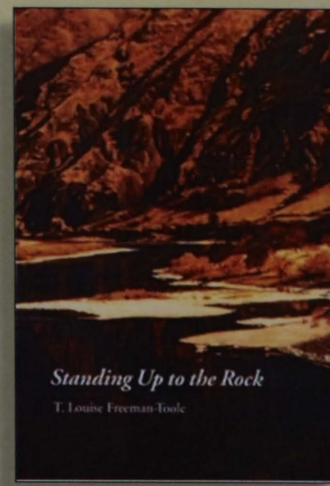
Excerpted from a memo by ILA reviewer Kathy Watson, Marshall Public Library, Pocatello.



### Idaho Book Award, 2001

*Standing Up to the Rock* by T. Louise Freeman-Toole, University of Nebraska Press

There is a ranch that runs for several miles along the last free-flowing stretch of the Snake River. A beautiful but harsh environment, the area is also in the middle of two equally harsh controversies: one over the breaching of the dams on the lower Snake and the other concerning new land management plans in Hells Canyon. T. Louise Freeman-Toole, a sixth-generation Californian, moves to a small Idaho town, little suspecting how profoundly she will be affected by her new life and surroundings. Freelance writer Freeman-Toole takes us along as she and her son round up cattle, fix fences, hike, kayak, meet bears, elk, and sturgeon, and encounter rural traditions and



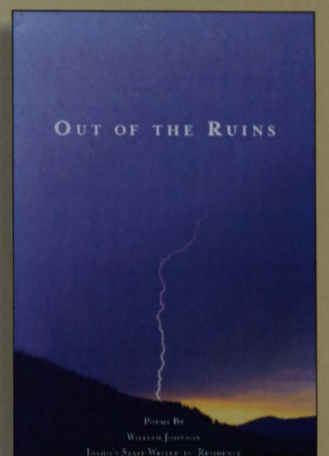
values that force her to reexamine her own views on environmentalism, the treatment of animals, property rights, child rearing, and death. Freeman-Toole is an able guide to the fraught territory where old ways and new realities, fierce loyalties and political passions, and memory and longing uneasily meet. *Standing Up to the Rock* was chosen Book of the Year by the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association.

Excerpted from the publisher's review.

### Idaho Book Award, 2000

*Out of the Ruins* by William Johnson, Confluence Press

Bill Johnson's poems recreate his world in the Pacific Northwest where wild rivers, steelhead, moose, and lightning are common sights. Whether beholding the Northern Lights, painting the trim on his house, or staring into a high meadow where the dark shape of a bear "lumbers through patches of late melting snow," Johnson pledges his allegiance to the indescribable joy we find in creation. He uses even the most homely objects in his poems — a worn out pair of work boots, a collapsed barn — to embody the past and unite it with the present. By doing so he leads us out of the ruins along the path to love and redemption. Johnson, a retired Lewis-Clark State College professor, served as Idaho's Writer-in-Residence from 1998-2001.



Excerpted from the book.

1999 *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* by Mark Fiege, University of Washington Press

1998 *One Winter in the Wilderness* by Pat Cary Peek, University of Idaho Press

1997 *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America* by J. Anthony Lukas, Simon & Schuster

1996 *Nez Perce Women in Transition, 1877-1990* by Caroline James, University of Idaho Press

1995 *River of Life, Channel of Death: Fish and Dams on the Lower Snake* by Keith C. Petersen, Confluence Press

1994 *Sources of the River: Tracking David Thompson Across Western North America* by Jack Nisbet, David Thompson, Sasquatch Books

1993 *A Flood Cannot Happen Here: The Story of Lower Goose Creek Reservoir, Oakley Idaho, 1984* by Kathleen Hedberg, Magic Valley Publishers

1992 No award given

1991 *Building Idaho: An Architectural History* by Jennifer Eastman Attebery, University of Idaho Press

1990 *Conversations: A Companion Book to Idaho Public Television's "Proceeding on through a Beautiful Country, a History of Idaho"* by Susan M. Stacy, Idaho Educational Public Broadcasting Foundation

1989 *Tiger on the Road: The Life of Vardis Fisher* by Tim Woodward, Caxton Printers

1988 *Paradox Politics: People and Power in Idaho* by Randy Stapilus, Ridenbaugh Press

1987 *This Crested Hill: An Illustrated History of the University of Idaho* by Keith C. Petersen, University of Idaho Press

1986 *The Literature of Idaho: An Anthology* selected and edited by James H. Maguire, Hemingway Western Studies Center, Boise State University

1985 *Idaho Folklife: Homesteads to Headstones* by Louie W. Attebery, Brian Attebery, University of Utah Press and Idaho State Historical Society

1984 *Mining Town: The Photographic Record of T.N. Barnard and Nellie Stockbridge from the Coeur d'Alenes* by Patricia Hart and Ivar Nelson, University of Washington Press and Idaho State Historical Society

### ANSWERS

1. Author Vardis Fisher
2. William Johnson, recently retired from Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston
3. *Big Trouble, The Deep Dark and Mining Town: The Photographic Record...*
4. Two. Tim Woodward, who wrote *Vardis Fisher* and Randy Stapilus, who wrote *Paradox Politics*
5. Idaho literature by recently retired Boise State English professor James Maguire
6. *The Cyanide Canary* by Joseph Hilldorfer and Robert Dugoni in 2006-07
7. *The Deep Dark* by Grege Olsen in 2007
8. *Nez Perce Women in Transition, 1877-1990* (Nez Perce) and *A Danish Photographer of Idaho Indians* (Shoshone and Bannock)
9. *At Nature's Edge: Frank Lloyd Wright's Artist Studio and Building Idaho: An Architectural History*
10. Keith Petersen, Idaho State Historian



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