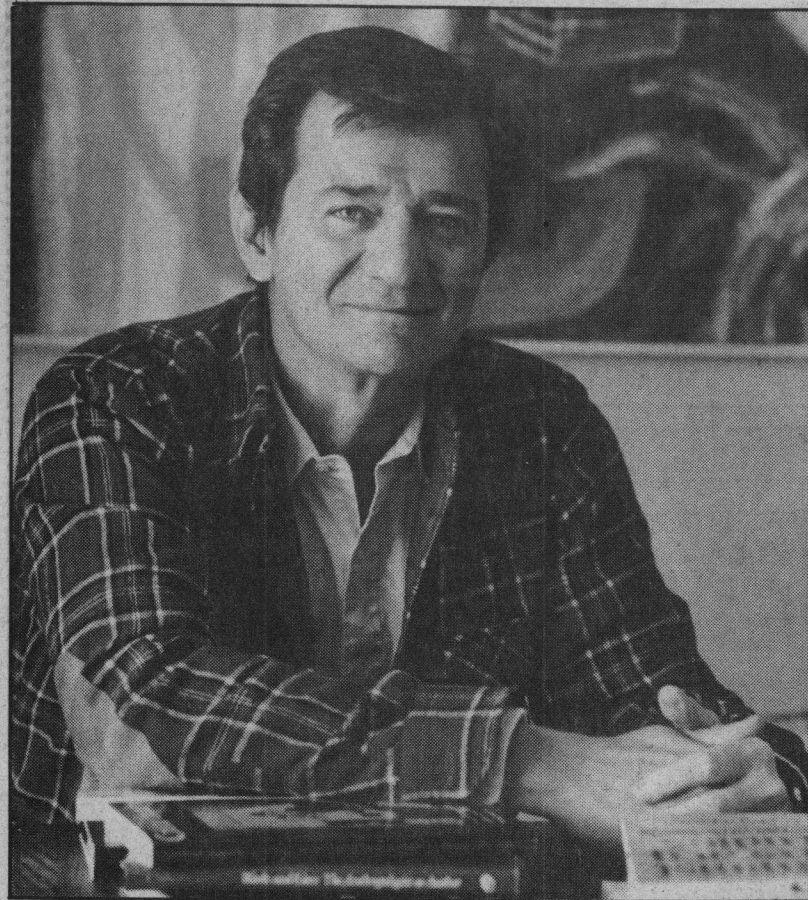


Education

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

China through American Indian eyes UCSC professor wins American Book Award for novel

By JAMIE S. CACKLER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A UC Santa Cruz professor's playful, imaginative novel fusing the folklores and cultures of the communist Chinese and Native Americans has won the 1988 American Book Award.

The novel sprang from the real-life adventures of Gerald Vizenor, now professor of literature and American studies at UCSC.

Griever: An American Monkey King in China isn't exactly autobiographical. Vizenor describes it as a fantastic, day-dream reaction to his own experiences as an exchange-program university teacher in China a few years ago.

"The great liberation of imaginative writing is that you're not held back by the facts," Vizenor says of his tale of social sabotage in a

foreign land.

In the book, "I could do things that I couldn't do in real life, because they would have put me in jail," he says.

Dressed casually in slacks and shirtsleeves, and tan from the West Coast springtime sun, Vizenor looks more like the Marlboro man than the tweed-jacketed vision of a literature professor. His doubt about the constraints of bureaucracy and convention was the philosophy behind his novel of liberation. It was also the reason he escaped from his native northeastern U.S. to join the human patchwork of Santa Cruz, he says.

A mixed-blood member of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe, Vizenor observed the social problems of China through the lens of his Native American culture.

Vizenor imagined the reaction those social problems would have evoked from a mythical character that is part of both Chinese and Native American thought.

Something like the "bogey man"

of WASP imagination, but without the malice. Native American lore features a spiritual character called "the trickster," Vizenor says. In Chinese folklore, a similar character is known as "the Monkey King," or "the mind monkey."

The trickster can be an individual, or an aspect of anyone's personality, apparently.

Through puns, practical jokes, booby traps and mind games, the trickster shows people their true nature, inspires imagination and humor, and leads people to examine their values and actions.

Our hero, Griever de Hocus, confronts the culture and the bureaucracy of China, taking on all sorts of problems, small and large — from liberating chickens in the marketplace, to stopping an execution caravan. He does things that cause "terrible embarrassment," but the Chinese recognize this Native American Trickster as a mind monkey — an entity they can understand.

Vizenor says the story vacillates between the real and the fantastic, the believable and the incredible. Just when the tale verges on dreamscape, Vizenor says, he brings the story back to an earthly or historical frame of reference — mentioning, for example, an event such as the fatal Soviet attack on Korea Air Line flight 007, which occurred during Vizenor's stay in China.

A smile passes across Vizenor's face as he recalls his childhood, and the trickster stories passed down to him by his grandmother and a favorite great uncle. Vizenor's family included many excellent storytellers, he says, although those two relatives in particular were masters of telling the trickster tales and of living the trickster philosophies of humor and tenderness in the face of adversity and regular human experiences.

It was the trickster in his great uncle that led the man to keep giving

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Gerald Vizenor's sojourn in China sparked novel

GRIEVER/ 'It was the trickster in me'

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away his modest homes to poorer families, Vizenor says. And it was the trickster in his grandmother who preserved her good humor after she was widowed and forced to seek a living in the big city, off the reservation.

Vizenor says the trickster spirit also surfaced inside him when he was living in China, dealing with constraints of censored education. His Chinese students, who were headed for prestigious jobs in the government, would censor their own classroom discussion when Vizenor tried to bring up banned topics. The students knew well that the government sent "monitors" into each classroom, fake students assigned to report if discussion and thinking veered off the government-approved path.

Vizenor says he could usually pick out the monitors in each classroom, who would sit silently. He knew they didn't really study the work, "so I would purposely call on them to answer questions about the work in classroom discussions.

"It was the the trickster in me," Vizenor says.

Griever has attracted critical praise. And while *artistes* aren't supposed to care about the notices, Vizenor admits he was thrilled by the attention of one Anthony C. Yu, who wrote a review for the Los Angeles Times.

Yu is "the scholar" on the Chi-

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nese mind monkey lore, Vizenor says. Yu translated to English the entire four-volume set of "Journey to the West," the anthology of the ancient Monkey King stories, the written record of oral Chinese stories handed down through countless generations.

Yu praised Vizenor's connection of the two trickster characters and clever recollections of typical Chinese life.

"If someone had told me he was going to review my book, I would have been very nervous about it until it came out," Vizenor says.

The American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation is *Griever's* second honor in its brief six months of existence.

The book was published in November as the winner of the national Fiction Collective's annual contest. The first printing was small, but it's going into its second printing already, and may be available soon on the West Coast.