

Reader, who's a writer, comes back

Survival.

We survive earthquakes, floods, blizzards, droughts, black-outs, blight.

We also must survive man-made disasters...kidnappings, burglaries, violence, alienation, corruption, divorce.

Author Dennis Reader was thinking about such things those cold months in Illinois as he wrote "Coming Back Alive": the survival of a teen-age girl named Bridget and her childhood friend Dylan from the agonies of family disasters — divorce and death.

"The reviewers so far have been very friendly," says Reader, remembered by his 1957 WHS classmates for his thesbian talents. Now at age 42, he's retired quietly from academia and has returned to the Santa Cruz mountains to write. Reviewers are commenting on Reader's sensitivity to nature, commenting on his descriptions of the natural world, noting a "sense of joy" in passages about the wilderness, joy of the author in the re-creation.

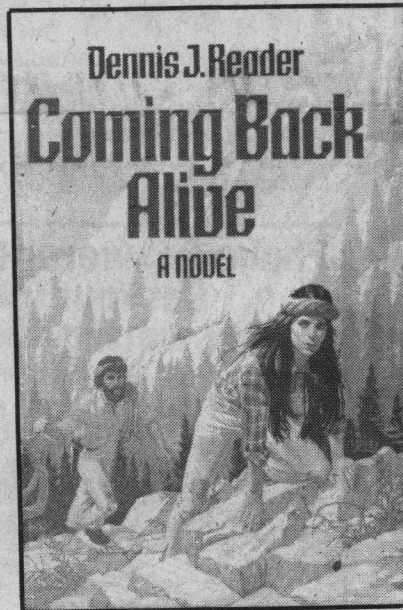
"You ask what part I enjoyed writing the most? That was it. Many of the little touches are accurate; I lived them myself — how the animals behave in the natural state, or as prey. Being stuck in Illinois on

cold winter nights had its role in bringing back memories."

It's a "young adult" novel, a deceiving classification when you consider that "Catcher in the Rye" also falls in this category. Its theme and writing will entice readers of many ages, especially next year when it comes out as an Avon paperback. The current Random House hardback sells for \$8.95 in local bookstores.

"Coming Back Alive" explores heavy territory: Bridget's reactions to the death of her parents; Dylan's, to his parents' divorce; their flight to the mountains; and their survival there. Its themes are many: the metropolitan jungle; materialism; preparedness; an intellectual boy-girl relationship; and, based on the last California Indian, Ishi, man in nature. The Trinity Wilderness he describes is really the Marble Mountains he has packed in. "But I would like fewer people to go there, I guess, so I disguised them a little. And the word Trinity has nice ambiguities. Writers make use of such things."

Having a young, very bright woman as protagonist in his first full-length novel proved interesting to Reader, whose doctoral work was done at UC-San Diego, on Walt Whitman. His own daughters, Nicole



and Erica, who attend Salsipuedes School, are too young for him to have gleaned teen-girl thoughts from them; the other woman in his life, his wife, the former Karen Theriot, has been a university librarian, although his parents still live nearby, in the Green Valley hills. His son Joel is just four.

The Readers "invested wisely" during his 10 years as faculty and editor for literary journals at

Western Illinois University in Macomb, making this early retirement possible, he said one sunny afternoon, looking out to the bay from the hilltop home he is building himself.

Carving his niche out in the wilderness has been Reader's pattern, from boyhood escapades in the Valencia woods far behind his dad's Aptos apple ranch. "I did the whole bit — the hunting, yes with guns or bows, the trapping with snares and all. Thoreau said something to the effect that hunting takes men into the woods, but when you grow older, you should give up that sort of thing. Now I just hunt with these," he patted binoculars on the desk in his lofty view-surrounded study. His collection of old typewriters nestles among an impressive library. Titles by Nabokov and Herman Melville stand out, writers he in which he can "recognize genius."

"I wish they wouldn't assign 'Moby Dick' in high school," he mused. "Melville's a poet," he chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" is a deep study of modern philosophy; he remains on the cutting edge of thought."

Interest in theater took him to Fresno State, and he was writing poetry long before the switch to literature, with his master's degree from San Francisco State, a stint with the Army and Monterey Peninsula College tossed in. His teaching has ranged from elementary level (during student years) at Lafayette, hence the Oakland hills setting for Bridget and Dylan's city roots. His short stories have appeared in "high tone" literary journals, including "The

Surfer Man" in the Virginia Quarterly Review. His academic books have included "The Vision of this Land" about Illinois poets Vachel Lindsey, Carl Sandberg and Edgar Lee Masters.

"Nature as the last refuge has been a theme in American literature, in its beginnings and through the Western movement, even in stories like 'Huck Finn,'" he mused. "But the real survival is in confronting the real world. Anything else is an illusion. Self reliance must be learned on a day-by-day level, the providing for yourself."

The reader is kept on edge about the love relationship between Bridget and Dylan, who at one point says, "Loving is hazardous to your health." Explains the author: "Their stay in the wilderness is not gratuitous, from shallow behavior."

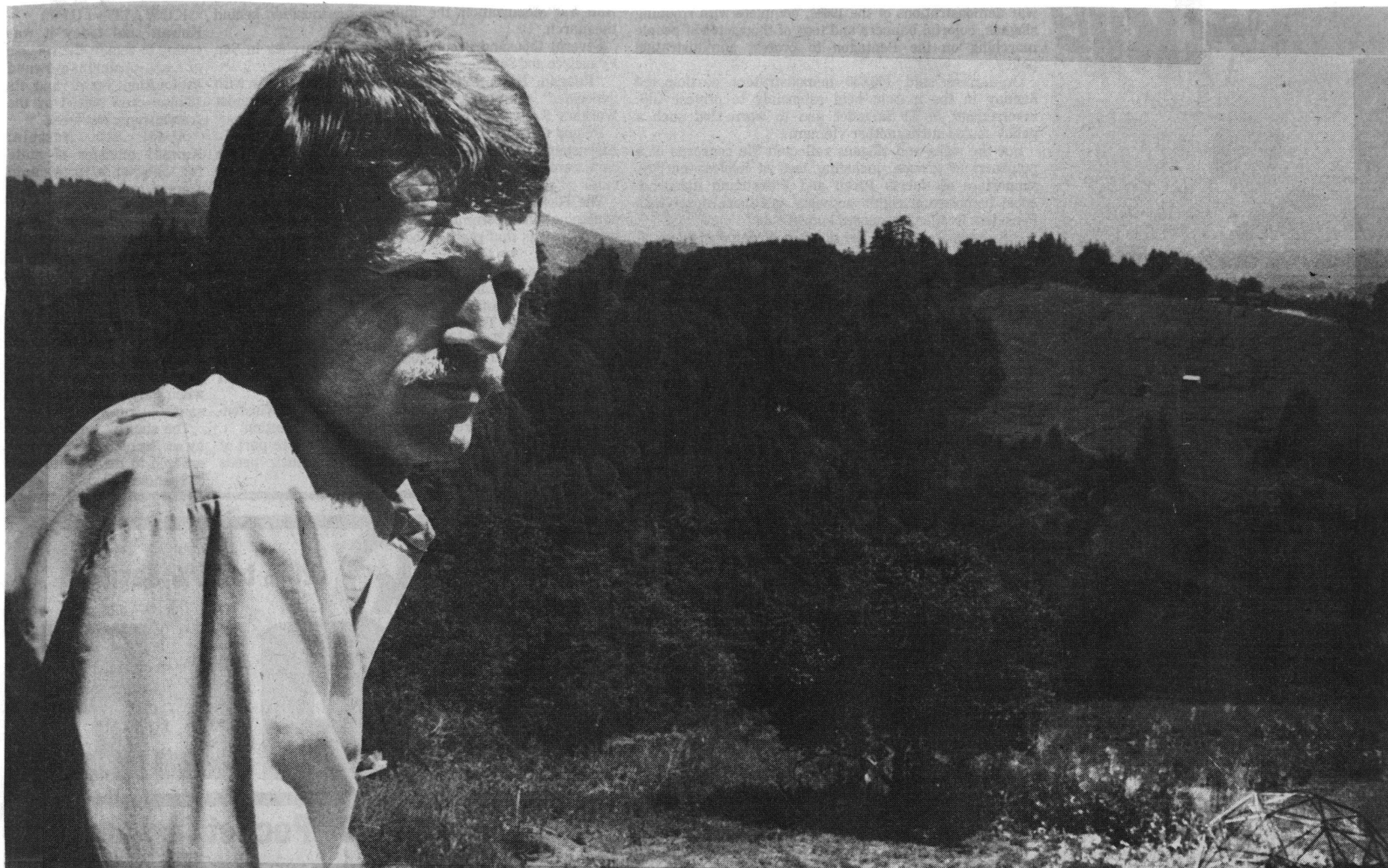
Rather, the color and excitement intensifies when the two well-educated, beautiful youth revert almost to an Indian state. "I almost called the book 'The Last of the White Indians,' but someone in the PR department asked me to change it because of watchdog minority groups," says Reader, hastily adding "but the publisher has always given me my way. I decided on the change."

Now he's begun a second novel, set in a "highly recognizable" local setting in the Pajaro Valley. When will it be out? "Times are tough in the publishing world — but the publishers are encouraging me." And as long as the sun's out, he adds, he'll be out feeding his chickens and building a new addition to the house, having survived his first year of coming back, very much alive with ideas.

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REFERENCE



Mount Madonna foothills are home now for author Dennis Reader.

Photo by Sam Vestal