

Rocklin professor lands major book award

Gary Noy's 'Sierra Stories' nets national Next Generation prize

Scott Thomas Anderson, Placer Herald, 5-12-16

From the time he was a child, the legacy of pursuing gold shaped the path of Gary Noy's life. The lengths men went to for gold, the existences women had near gold, the catastrophes inflicted on cultures because of gold, were all murky, half-concealed stories that provided the emerging historian with endless fascination.

Now the gold is coming back to Noy, literally, in the form of a gleaming medal for a national book award.

Noy grew up in Grass Valley surrounded by shadows of the Gold Rush and all of mountain-tearing mayhem that followed while industrial barons grabbed for glitter in the soil. His father and grandfather both labored at the Empire Mine on the edge of town, and his parents had their first date on the famous site while the mine was still in operation. One might say that the quest for gold was virtually in Noy's DNA. But so too was the region's fading stories of exiled travail, as Noy's mother was forced to immigrate to California during the devastation of Dust Bowl. She would later tell Noy that, for her, Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" wasn't a novel or motion picture — it was a documentary of her childhood.

Noy's interest in immigrants lost in a new land was fed by the stone remnants and Victorian architecture from Grass Valley to Nevada City. When he was young he'd often walk by an obscure alley called Kate Hayes Street. Once Noy developed into a professional historian, he set about combing through archives to discover the full narrative of who Kate Hayes really was. The chronicle that surfaced was that of a brilliant songbird of the mining camps, one who'd fled her famine-ravaged home of Cork, Ireland in 1851 to be an entertainer in America. Hayes's life makes up the first vignette in Noy's book, "Sierra Stories: Tales of dreamers, schemers, bigots and rouges," which just won the top regional nonfiction honor in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

The path to Noy's recent recognition is directly tied to Rocklin. Noy has been a history instructor at Sierra College since 1987, and throughout his tenure he's made it a point to research and collect tantalizing, sometimes bizarre, true stories from California's mining era. A decade ago, Noy helped form the Sierra College Press, which remains the only full-service university book publisher at a junior college in the U.S. In 1999, the Sierra College Press partnered with the Berkeley publishing house Heyday Books to release "The Illuminated Landscape: A Sierra Nevada Anthology," which Noy co-wrote with Rick Heide. Heyday Books was so impressed by its first collaboration with Sierra College Press that it asked Noy to work on another joint project — a collection of the backwoods historic memories he'd been researching for decades.

"In terms of history, I've always gravitated toward the West, and especially the Sierra foothills," Noy said. "The genesis of the book was to look for the unusual things, delving into the lives of people like Kate Haze, the tales people might know part of, but not the whole story."

Noy spent years compiling his longtime research projects and adding pieces that — while sometimes strange and wildly entertaining — could still be historically verified through primary sources and strict academic rigor. He soon found that one of the biggest challenges would be publishing a book with archival photographs that were fresh to the general public.

“I think the most interesting part was trying to get images that supported the stories,” Noy observed. “It involved a lot of going to the California State Library and even contacting the Smithsonian Institute. But we ended up with some images that had never been published before. It was amazing.”

“Sierra Stories: Tales of dreamers, schemers, bigots and rouges” was released in 2014 to a warm response around Northern California. But the reception was about to get better when the Next Generation Indie Book Awards selected “Sierra Stories” as its 2016 Regional Non-Fiction winner. For the Sierra College Press, it means a book it’s published has been honored in the same category as tomes from publishers like the White House Historical Society, Yale University Press and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Joe Medeiros, editor-in-chief of Sierra College Press, told the Placer Herald his entire team is proud of the achievement.

“It’s pretty exciting for us,” Medeiros acknowledged. “Gary has really matured as an author ... He just kept pushing these great stories from the Sierra out, and polishing them up on the writing end, until we had a way to elevate some very interesting histories that occurred in our own mountain range.”

Medeiros added, “I think his book covers a broad spectrum of people: It’s not just the tales of white men who were around. It studies the lives of real women, Native Americans, the Chinese and other groups. For Sierra College Press, it’s a great flag to fly.”

Noy is currently hard at work on his latest book, “Gold Rush Stories: 49 tales of seekers, scoundrels, loss and luck,” which is due out next spring in a joint project from Sierra College Press and Heyday Books. Noy, a Loomis resident, was taken totally by surprise by the revelation his last book was given such a prestigious award.

“I had no idea that Heyday had submitted it,” Noy said. “I was unaware it was even being considered. But, when you look at some of the other winners, it’s certainly an honor to be included in that group ... In terms of Sierra College Press, we’ve now heard from other junior colleges from as far away as Florida who’d like to reproduce what the Press has done. To have played a role in creating the Press, and to see the overall success it’s had, for me it’s a real point of pride.”