

Milpitas author revisits past to share universal message in his latest book

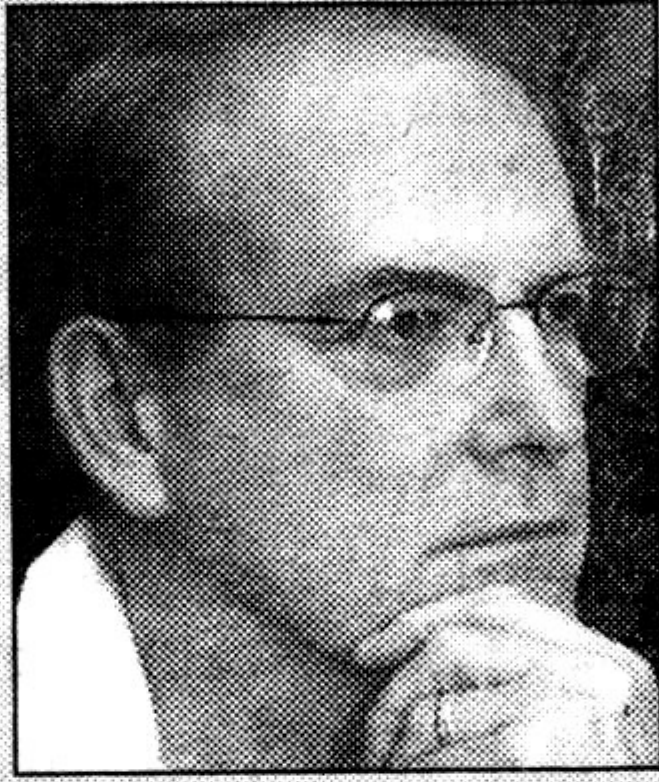
'He Flew Too High'
addresses real-life divides

BY SHANNON BARRY

Ken Yoder Reed's second work, "He Flew Too High," is a story that centers around redemption. The parallel between the novel and his own life, he explains, is no coincidence. At its core, both are about healing broken people and relationships.

The novel follows its main character, Saul MacNamara, through a journey as he makes a series of devastating decisions. And although the piece may be fiction, Reed had to take a trip down memory lane in order to bring his story about a Mennonite family to life.

Reed's varied career experience includes military alternative service as an English teacher in Japan; stints as an investigative reporter, family columnist and playwright; and owner of an international recruiting company that finds managers for U.S. high-tech firms growing their businesses in greater China and Korea.



Ken Yoder Reed

But before he was traveling the world, Reed was a Lebanon County, Pa. teen in the late 1960s. His grandparents on both sides — one set Amish, the other Old Order Mennonite — drove horse and buggy teams. Growing up, he never read any stories detailing these vastly different lifestyles.

For that reason "it was the story I always wanted to tell," Reed said. But he wasn't enabled to do so until he uprooted from his childhood home on a southeastern Pennsylvania farm to California many years later.

"I think that often it's when you're away from a place or person that you love that it's easiest to write about them," Reed said. "You have a bit of objectivity."

In 2004, the Milpitas resident revisited the draft he had first written 20 years ago. The main focus of the story was inspired by a "traumatic event" that happened when he was in his early 20s. A few pastors were unhappy with the Mennonite Conference, so they decided to begin a religious community of their own. Doing this created tension between community and family members who were splitting during the issue.

"It's a period that I know very well," he recalled. "It's very emotional feel for me."

The 20-year process of writing "He Flew Too High" allowed Reed to not only live

out such past experiences but also "exercise demons" that came from the events.

He credits the creative process for helping him through a difficult period in his life.

"You can conquer anything when you write," he said. "It was a thrill. To me when I'm writing, I'm alive. I wrote and wrote and wrote."

Writing may have come easy for Reed, but he was presented with another challenge. He found that because he was an up and coming author, most publishing companies didn't want to take a chance on his story.

"They only like to publish authors who they know will produce a blockbuster or have a guaranteed sales of 50,000," he explained.

This leaves little room, he said, for a lesser-known writer to produce a non-formulaic book among the guaranteed Dan Brown bestsellers that are hitting bookshelves. After a final analysis, Reed decided to self-publish "He Flew Too High" through Winepress publishing in May.

"Many people have gotten frustrated with the publishing industry and (have) done what I did," he said.

Of course, because the inspiration for his novel came from such a personal place, there was one reader's opinion in particular he was most "afraid" of — his mother.

Reed said that his fear began when she mentioned her mixed feelings about him writing about experiences that came from their family background. So when she read the book and liked it, he was pleased. Last week, Reed breathed an even deeper sigh of relief when she bought another copy of the book to give to one of her friends.

One of the most interesting things, he said, is how people of different generations are responding to his book. One of his aunts said she didn't like the book because "it makes the Mennonites look stupid." She cited specifically the strict rules the characters are following within their society.

Reed reacted by saying these lifestyles aren't far off from real-life experiences. Although it was a healing process for himself, he said there was also a practical and universal reason for him to write the story.

"My grandfather used to say, 'Splits are not ever about issues, but personalities,'" Reed said. "If (events) are stupid, we should look at it again so we don't go through it again. I find that if you don't look at it and talk about, you will do it again. ... People are continuing to fracture over, often, very small things."

Reed is holding a book-signing event for his latest work at the Milpitas Public Library, 160 N. Main St., on July 23 from 7 to 9 p.m. Those who are interested can purchase a copy of the book during the event or online at www.winepressbooks.com.

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