

telling tales

Huntington native authors series of successful murder mystery novels

By **ANGELA HENDERSON-BENTLEY**
The Herald-Dispatch

For most young people, graduating college means searching for a job to begin their careers.

But when Huntington native Craig Johnson graduated from Marshall University in the early 1980s, he grabbed his backpack and hitchhiked west. That fateful decision has led to a successful career he never imagined as the author of a series of successful murder mystery novels.

"It's a dream come true. To be able to sit down and write and have it affect people. It doesn't seem real," Johnson said. "I'm getting away with murder, no pun intended."

Johnson has written seven novels featuring Sheriff Walt Longmire, the longtime sheriff of Absaroka County, Wyo. Absaroka County is inspired by Ucross, Wyo., a town of 25 people where Johnson now makes his home.

"It's a rural type of storyline," Johnson said. His lead character, Sheriff Longmire, possesses what Johnson calls the hallmark of western law enforcement—dogged determination. "He's not going to give up. He's a detective for the disenfranchised. He takes cases no one else would care about."

Johnson's latest Longmire novel,

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Courtesy of Catherine Henriette

Huntington native Craig Johnson has written seven novels featuring Sheriff Walt Longmire, the longtime sheriff of the fictional Absaroka County, Wyo. A possible television show based on the title character is also in development with A&E.

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Craig Johnson, author of seven novels

Author

■ Continued from 4C

"Hell Is Empty," recently hit No. 24 on the "New York Times" bestseller list. "I really didn't imagine they'd be as popular as they are," Johnson said. "It's a little bit of a surprise."

That writing has become a career for him is also a bit of a surprise to Johnson since being an author wasn't something to which he ever aspired.

"When I went to Huntington East High School, I didn't really have a literary career. I was interested in girls and motorcycles," he said. "It took me a while to come around."

Johnson credits his West Virginia roots with helping him craft his stories.

"I come from a long line of storytellers. I was just the first one to write them down," he said. "The Appalachian storytelling ability is second to none. It's one of the things I carried with me."

"I have a wonderful opportunity to create this fictional world," he added. "A lot of that is due to those storytellers sitting on their porches. It was a valuable education."

Johnson said it's fun for his family — the majority of whom still live in the Huntington area — to be able to catch up with him through his books. But soon his family may have a new way to catch up with him, a primetime television show. In May, A&E announced it was developing a pilot based on Johnson's

novels called "Longmire." Johnson has been involved with the pilot every step of the way.

"It's kind of surreal. I'm only a seven book author from a small town," Johnson said. "I'm still trying to get over being stunned by it. It's kind of like having a houseplant for seven or eight years and one day you wake up and it's talking to you."

The pilot was just sent to the network, so there hasn't been any word on whether it will become a series. But Johnson said he'll be okay either way.

"I was writing books before they found me and I'll be writing books until they get rid of me," he said. "My writing is the one thing I have control over. It's where my heart is. But the pilot has been a wonderful experience."

Johnson has plans for more Longmire novels, but he also has some other works in mind for the future.

"I wouldn't be surprised if I did a West Virginia novel," he said.

And as for his friends and family in Huntington, he said they should read his novels carefully.

"Keep an eye out," Johnson said. "There are tons of characters I've drawn from people from my life."

"I had a wonderful upbringing and wonderful schooling," he said. "I kind of owe the place. So I try to squeeze as many of those people as I can in my work."