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Poetry *in the* Bones

Allen Morris Jones weaves a lyrical mystery in his new novel

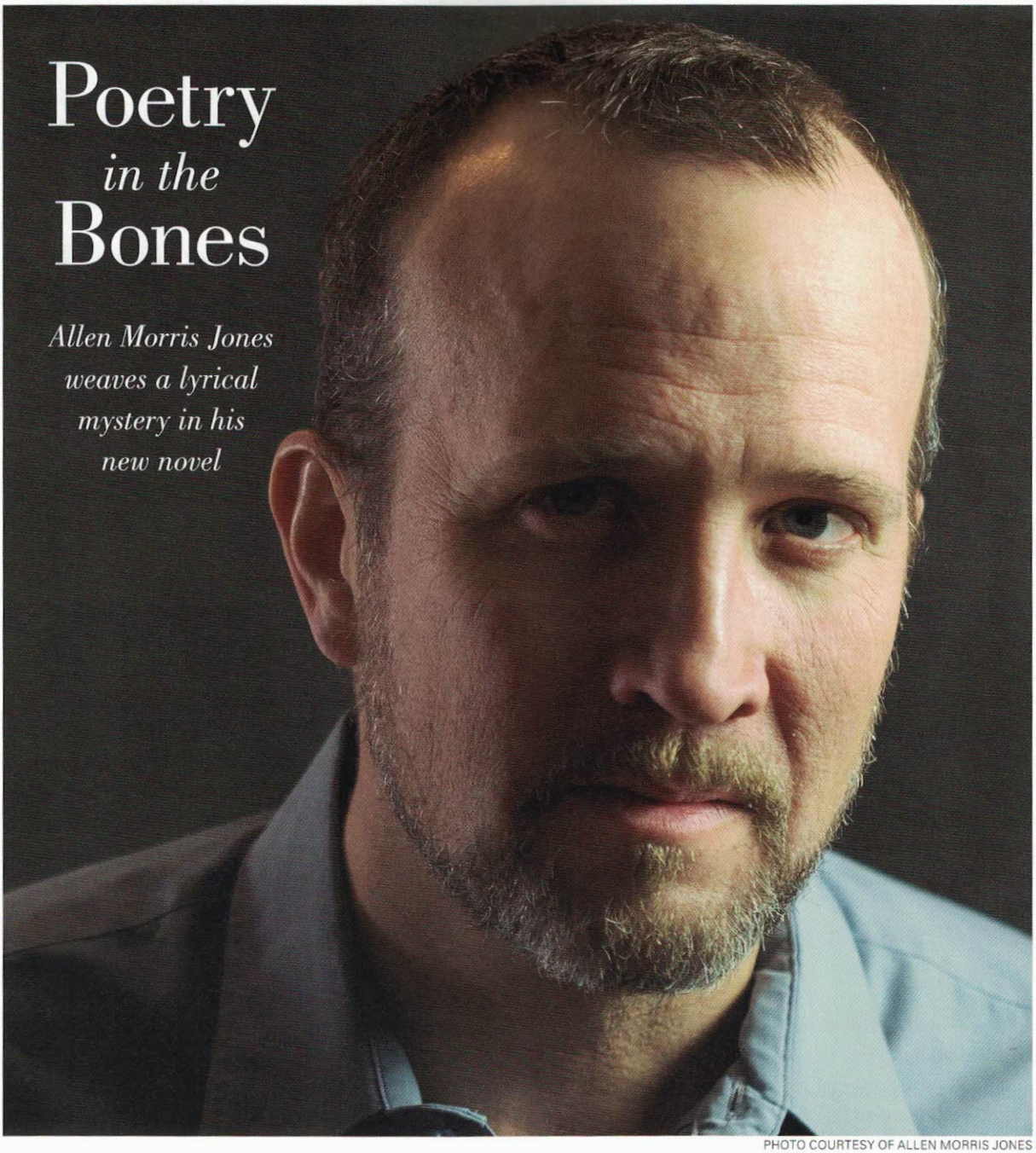


PHOTO COURTESY OF ALLEN MORRIS JONES

AN INTERVIEW BY KRIS KING

An author, editor, and publisher, Allen Morris Jones is a jack of all literary trades and master of many. His latest novel adds poetry to his list of accomplishments. Both *A Bloom of Bones*' narrative and protagonist, a Missouri River Breaks rancher and poet, have one foot in the past and one in the future. The novel layers a character-driven study of community and family with an old mystery, a new romance, and interludes of poetry. Its harsh realism is balanced by a meditative resiliency. "I've found my consolation in the Breaks, the ten

thousand shades of blue in the sky, tree bark the color of dried blood, the squabbling of birds, the rotation of stars; poetry," the novel's hero muses. "Who we are is where we are. The stars cross and align and the days pass." While the pace is a leisurely and measured ode to rural Montana, the tension of the story is insistent enough to keep this reader up late into the night.

Jones is the author of a previous novel, a nonfiction book about the ethics and philosophy of hunting, numerous articles, essays, short stories, and poems, and he co-edited, with William Kittredge, *The Best of Montana's Short Fiction*.

He is also the owner of Bangtail Press and the editor-in-chief of the *Big Sky Journal*. Jones lives in Bozeman with his wife and young son.

Montana Quarterly: What do you want people to know going into *A Bloom of Bones*?

Allen Morris Jones: It's meant to entertain, but linger.

MQ: What was the genesis of this novel?

AMJ: I wrote the opening scene—a guy gets buried by a father and son in the Breaks—and it stuck with me. I couldn't let it go. Who are these people? Who had they just killed? Did he deserve it? From there, I hoped to create a compelling fiction. An artful exploration of character and place that kept the reader up at night, aching to find out what happens. I wanted to marry the tricks of genre with the aesthetics of what some might call the literary novel.

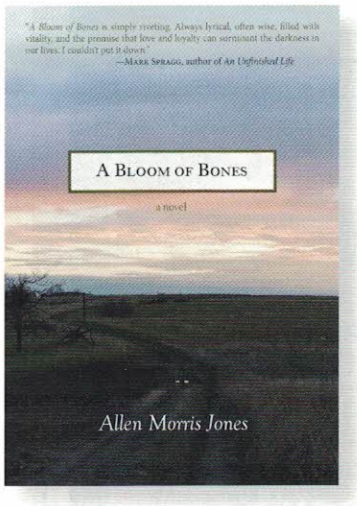
MQ: Why make the protagonist of *A Bloom of Bones* a poet?

AMJ: My original idea was that the poetry within the novel, ostensibly written by the protagonist, would provide another window into his psyche, into where he came from and what kept him going. We live surrounded by artificial violence. Movies and television. In a typical day, we'll see at least half a dozen gunfights and fistfights and murders. Then we'll go to the fridge for another Coke. But violence has repercussions. It's easy to forget how disruptive it can be. One of the themes of *A Bloom of Bones* is the way violence can echo down throughout a life. The poetry Eli Singer writes is an aspect of this echo.

MQ: What perspective did you draw on with *A Bloom of Bones* to write more complex and realistic female protagonists than many male writers do?

A BLOOM OF BONES

By Allen Morris Jones | Ig Publishing, softcover, 234 pages, $16.95



AMJ: My characters always exist in a specific power relationship to one another. Within every interaction, even if it's only a few lines of dialogue, one character has a measure of advantage over the other; or a character wants something from another one; or a character resents something about the other. These power relationships are meant to inform the characters in such a way that they feel real, both to us and to each another. I didn't make any sort of specific decisions with regard to Chloe that were reflective of gender (although I did decide not to write her story in first person—that would have felt presumptuous). I just gave her the same considerations that I give every other character. In the context of the world I'm creating, what does she want from the people around her? What are her aspirations? Frustrations? Fears? Anxieties? What makes her grateful? What pisses her off? The author needs to know those answers, even if they don't specifically figure into the story.

MQ: A Bloom of Bones is rich with evocative descriptions and quips. Do you collect these turns of phrase, or do they arise from your characters?

AMJ: A bit of both. I keep four essential Word docs on my computer: "Vocabulary," "Quotes," "Trivia," and "Journal." In "Vocabulary" I make note of words that were previously unfamiliar to me. I added *sprezzatura* a few days ago. It's an Italian word that apparently means studied nonchalance. Perfect performance without apparent effort. Great word, right? And then there's my journal, which is really more of a repository for story ideas, self-pity, and pithy opening lines. I would be embarrassed for anyone else to read it. But occasionally there's something worthwhile. Some decent turns of phrase that end up making their way into published work.

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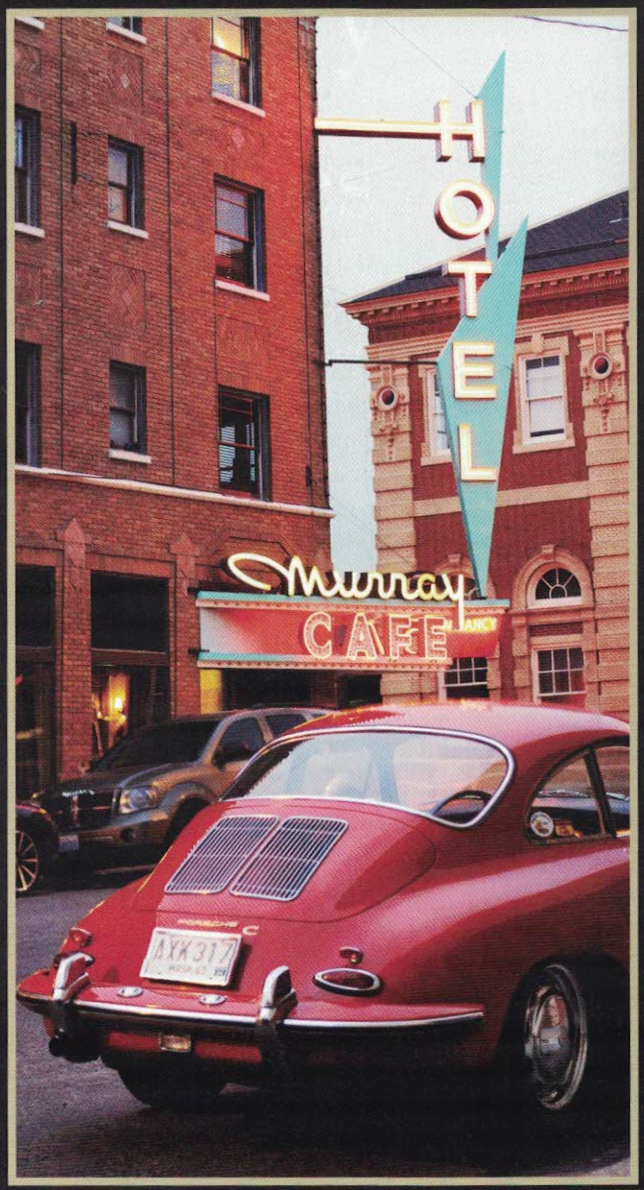

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"I wake up in a lot of hotels, so I'm fiercely loyal to the ones I love."

— ANTHONY BOURDAIN, CHEF AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR, WHO LISTS THE MURRAY AMONG HIS 10 FAVORITES

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MQ: What motivated you to revive Bangtail Press?

AMJ: Looking back on it now, Bangtail was a natural progression. I'd worked as a book editor for years, and was familiar with most of the stages of book production. I was also a frustrated designer. When I realized that eBooks and print-on-demand technology were at a place where they would allow for an affordable entry into publishing, I felt like it was something I needed to do.

MQ: What was your experience of editing *The Best of Montana's Short Fiction* with William Kittredge?

AMJ: One of the great privileges of my career. Bill is the best among us.

MQ: How is the writing process different for novels like *A Bloom of Bones*, and your essays, poems, and nonfiction like *A Quiet Place of Violence*?

AMJ: Nonfiction is typically easier for me than fiction. Nonfiction is a job. I sit down and go to work. Fiction is harder, in part because I feel the obligations of the form. Does the world really need another novel? Fiction only justifies itself, in my opinion, by its excellence.

Not to say that what I'm writing hits the mark, but I need to be able to at least aspire toward something unusual or exceptional.

MQ: What draws you to editing; anthologies, for clients with Manuscript Medics, and for magazines like *Big Sky Journal*?

AMJ: When a talented writer comes to you with a project that's clearly been the object of his or her labor and talent and affection, and entrusts it to your care, and when you are able to add something to it, to make suggestions that are received warmly, or rejected but with consideration … when you can collaborate in this way, the satisfactions are nearly as great as when you see your own work published.

MQ: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

AMJ: Everybody has a different path. But certainly, you need to have a reservoir from which to write. Learn something that will inform your work. Observe perpetually, as Henry James said. Read voraciously, and with a pen in your hand. Mark up your favorite novels. Do your best to parse through the emotional reaction you had to a particular piece of writing. What was it about this scene, or shift in perspective, or change in tense, that made you puddle up? Try to produce that same effect in your own work. Write a book that you would like to read.