

# Environmentalism meets intrigue

Victoria writer Stephen Legault tackles green issues without sacrificing good storytelling, strong characters

**The Darkening Archipelago**  
By Stephen Legault; Newest Press; 328 pages; \$19.95

**STEVE CAREY**  
Special to the Times Colonist

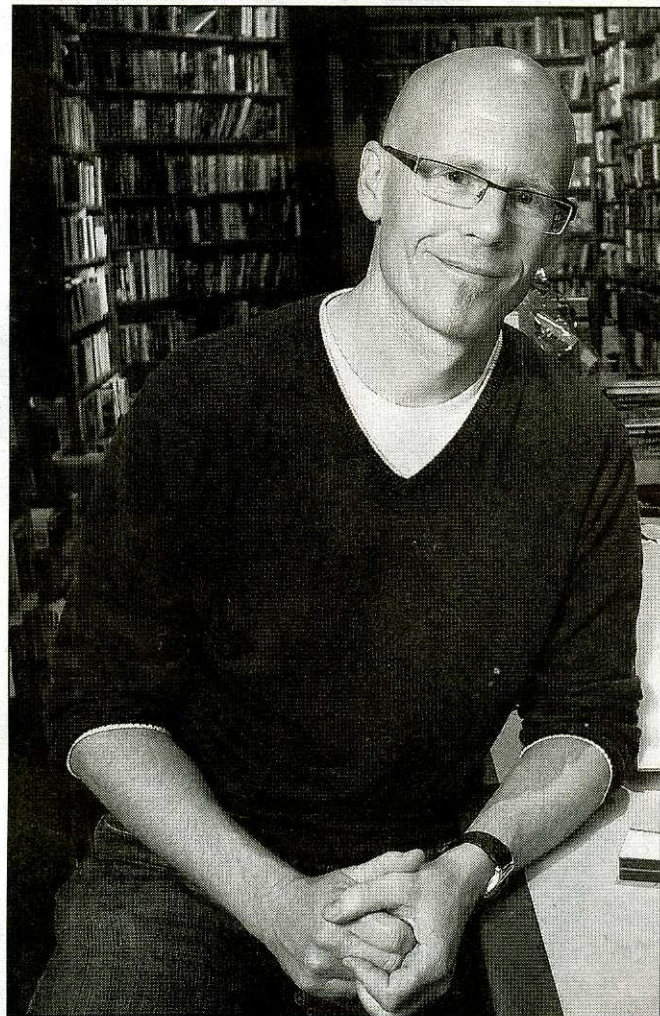
When you hear the term “environmental mystery novel,” you might think the central character has shells in his hair and investigates cases involving missing stash-boxes. The Cole Blackwater books by Victoria’s Stephen Legault tackle environmental issues without falling prey to the hippie-dippy, and have more in common with hard-boiled detective fiction than with a Xeroxed leaflet on a sit-in.

In the first book, *The Cardinal Divide*, main character Cole Blackwater works with a group of kitchen-table anti-mining activists to try to save Alberta’s Cardinal Divide, a foothill ridge that juts from the eastern slopes of Jasper National Park and separates the rivers and streams that flow to the Arctic from those that feed Hudson’s Bay.

Blackwater falls into a web of murder and intrigue, together with his old flame, newspaper reporter Nancy Webber. Though it starts slow, it makes for an exciting read.

Blackwater, a Vancouver-based environmental consultant and a bar-room pugilist (divorced, disgraced from the big-time in Ottawa, and trying to be a good dad) returns in Legault’s second novel, *The Darkening Archipelago*. When we last left him, Blackwater’s business was struggling, but he’d solved a murder (and been shot at in the process). He went back to his family ranch in Alberta to recuperate, and had some revelations about his father’s mysterious death.

This time, Blackwater travels to a small, mostly native fishing community off Vancouver Island to investigate the disappear-



DEBRA BRASH, TIMES COLONIST

**In *The Darkening Archipelago*, the second in his Cole Blackwater environmental mystery series, Victoria writer Stephen Legault delves into salmon fishing and murder on Vancouver Island.**

ance of an old friend and client, a wild salmon activist named Archie Ravenwing. Unknown to Blackwater, Ravenwing is dead, murdered for sticking his nose into salmon farming one too many times, and Blackwater might be next.

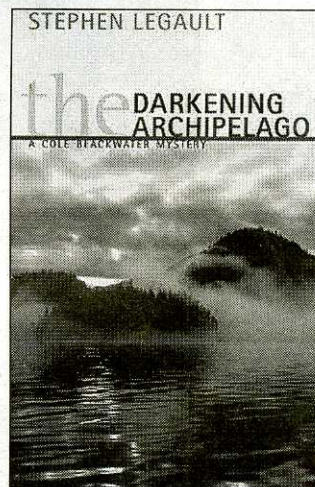
In contrast to *The Cardinal Divide*, *Archipelago* moves at a faster pace, and tells the story from a number of viewpoints: reporter Webber investigates Blackwater’s father’s death in an attempt to better understand her troubled on-again off-again beau; Ravenwing, with the help of a salmon researcher (who seems to be modelled after science superhero Alexandra Mor-

ton), digs into the relationship between sea lice and salmon farming; and Blackwater attempts to find out what happened to his old friend, and to keep his friends and himself alive.

Blackwater makes for good company. He’s gruff and troubled, but there’s a dedication to the way he pursues causes and works through his problems that differentiates him from the typical chip-on-shoulder hero.

The story also features a CSI-like-drama element, that shows off the time Legault spent researching police procedures as part of writing the book.

Legault has grown as a



writer since the first Blackwater book (which was shortlisted for the Canadian Rockies Award at the Banff Mountain Book Festival). His characters seem to spend more time investigating murders than instigating environmental activism, but his stories reveal true human conflict and emotion, and portray characters with varied opinions about current issues, such as development in small communities, or how a town with no economy might look at salmon farming as an opportunity.

Major and minor characters experience change throughout the book, though some just pop in and out of the story, more suited to a fast-paced television series than a novel.

Legault has no shortage of characters or ideas. He’s got a third Blackwater book in the works, *The Lucky Strike Manifesto*, which takes place in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side, but no publication date yet.

If you’re a fan of mystery novels, and want a unique take on environmental and social issues facing Canadians today, the Blackwater mysteries are well worth the read.

*Stephen Legault will be part of a panel discussion on crime writing at the Greater Victoria Public Library during National Crime Writing Day, May 15, at 3 p.m., in the main branch boardroom, 735 Broughton St.*

Steve Carey writes the environment column, Reduce, Reuse, Rethink, in Monitor.