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The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham

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A Q&A with Author Philip Chavanne discussing his new book, [The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham](#), which is featured in the July/August issue of Alaska.

Texas-based rancher/author Philip Chavanne got the idea for his debut fiction novel, *The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham* (Xulon Press, Sept. 2013)—which is based mainly in Alaska, but covers the breadth of five continents—from the true stories he had collected after seven years of traveling around the world himself. The resulting 619-page tome is a testament to both the Alaska landscape and its people: a rite of passage, an adventure saga, and a redemption tale wrapped into one.

—As told to Dave Costello

This is a big story. How long did this book take to complete?

All told, 12 years.



How did this story happen? What is the story behind the story?

For seven years after college I traveled the world and wrote short stories about those experiences. In the end, I had about 50 stories that I wanted to publish in a collection. So one day I laid out all of the stories on a table. My plan was to spend the afternoon trying to determine which ones I would send to a publisher. But the stories were spread out so wide across this big table that I couldn't see them all at once, so I grabbed a step ladder and climbed up to the 3rd step and looked down at my stories. And then something happened. I could see all of my stories in one place for the first time. I began to realize that there was a common thread through all of them— themes and characters, and maybe, just maybe, I could build a plot that would connect them. So I hopped down and moved one of my stories to 1st position (prologue) then I hopped back on the ladder. Then I picked the stories that would fit into Act 1—shuffled them around and hopped back on the ladder. I spent the long hours of the afternoon shuffling those stories back and forth — discarding some and moving others until I had 33 stories picked out that seemed to fit together, as a skeleton for what would someday be *The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham*. I remember waking up the next morning to sore calves from all of the steps I climbed the previous afternoon.

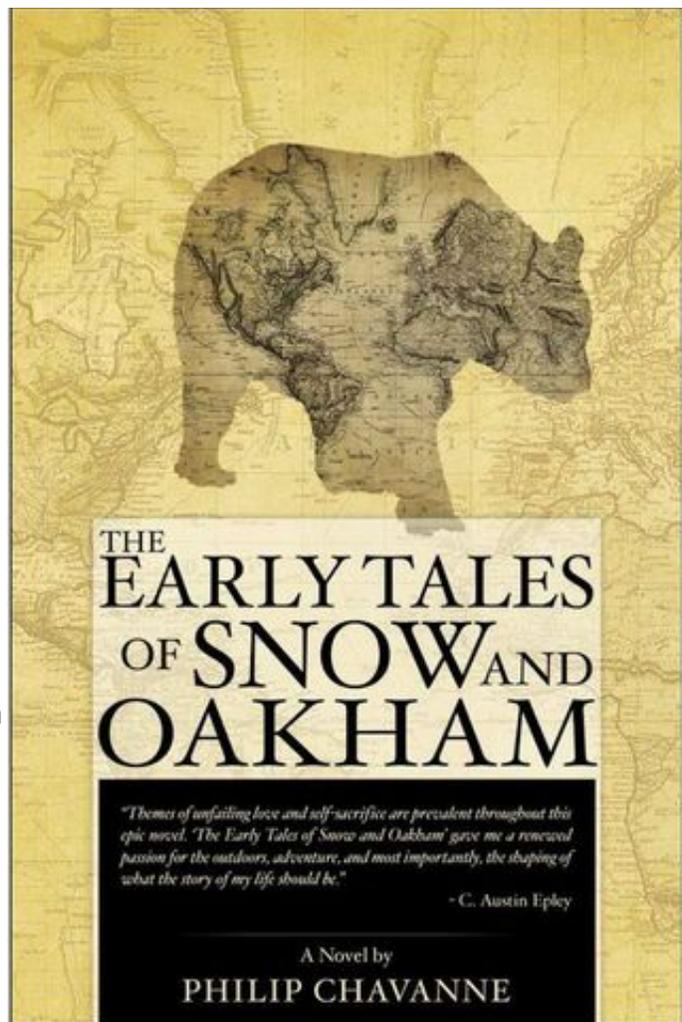
What first brought you to Alaska?

Throughout my youth Alaska was the looming frontier that I had to see. The promise of a splendid, unsympathetic wilderness was ultimately what brought me there. It always seemed like the last wild corner of the world, a place that man had, for the most part, left alone. And those lofty expectations that filled my dreams were quickly met with an even loftier reality. Alaska was so vast and pregnant

with possibilities that everything I had known before seemed minor. I found that my old dreams had been small. So it was in those forests and along those streams where my real love for travel was born. I woke up in Alaska. Once I'd seen it I had to see the rest of the world.

What role does Alaska—its landscape and its people— play in the story?

I'd say first that the landscape played a vital role. An essential role. My hope all along was to write an adventure story that was both completely possible in every scene, and yet wild, dream-like, and enormous in its scope. I spent years trying to determine how to do that in the real world, and I eventually concluded that if it weren't for the Alaska landscape such a story wouldn't have been possible. The landscape is in many ways a character in itself. Just like the adventure that the two orphan brothers are taking throughout the book, the landscape is dangerous, unpredictable, filled with surprises and discoveries, and yet pure and unadulterated at its core. Just as Alaska was when she introduced herself to me.



In regards to her people: there are numerous characters in the book taken directly from those I encountered in my time in Alaska. Some of them play significant roles in the story, and some are even well known in their home state. So I'm tickled when readers can accurately identify them. But the biggest impact that the citizens of Alaska had on the book was in their collective characteristics. This is a coming of age novel with themes of freedom, independence, adventure, personal responsibility, and rugged individualism. It would be impossible to deny that the people of Alaska played a huge role in shaping those themes in the book.

How is this book different from your everyday action adventure novel?

For years I asked myself one question: How do I create a big yet believable adventure story that happens in the real world, to real people? One you could connect with. I connect with Bilbo and Frodo Baggins because they feel unequal to the task at hand. Their challenges are daunting and their adventure is enormous. I connect to Newt from Lonesome Dove in the same way. He's never been out of Lonesome Dove - he is scared to death to make a mistake. People connect with characters through their insecurities. The difference with this story is that this adventure is set in modern times, in the real world. Not Middle earth and not the old west. This isn't a spy novel. These people are you and me. For the most part these are everyday people thrust into extraordinary situations. My mission was to put 3 people I admire and connect with through an arduous story of hardship and redemption. I wanted to see if I could make men out of them by the end of the story.

Any other projects in the works?

I'm currently working on the sequel to The Early Tales of Snow and Oakham tentatively entitled, "The Trail of Seven Trees". Jack and Henry will continue their adventures across the world, but their orphanage home in Alaska will still play a pivotal role.

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