

BOOK SIGNING SET FOR 'FALLEN SNOW'

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WINCHESTER — From the opening lines of “The Fallen Snow,” readers will know Joshua Hunter is searching for something.

Even before the novel’s protagonist went off to fight in World War I, the 19-year-old small town boy always longed to find a place where he belonged, said author John Kelley of Washington, D.C.

With the war over, he is back in his hometown, the fictional logging town of Hadley, Va. He is reeling from the traumas of war and the knowledge that he can’t remember certain events from that time, Kelley said.

“Through the course of the novel, he is trying to figure out where his life is going forward, but you are also looking back at what happened in France during the war,” he said.

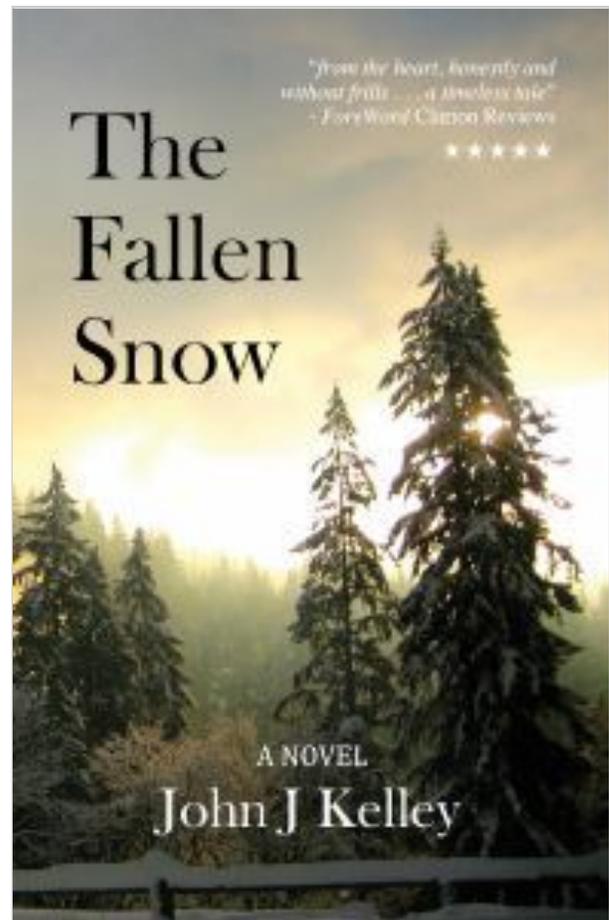
Kelley will sign copies of his first book from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at the Winchester Book Gallery, 185 N. Loudoun St. The cost of the book is \$15.95.

The novel is about the way people get through rough times in the lowest ebb of their lives with the support of the people they know and love, Kelley said.

The war is still weighing heavily on Joshua even as he tries to reconnect with the life back home he once knew, so the story is told in two timelines, the author said.



John Kelley



Through those two timelines, the reader meets a variety of supporting characters, such as his parents, who are caught in a web of fear and regret, and two young women who have both experienced their own loss, he said.

But the novel is not a love story in the traditional sense, he said. Although it is not the main focus of the story, the reader slowly comes to understand that Joshua, who is homosexual, fell in love with one of his fellow soldiers.

“In my mind, it is a coming of age story of Joshua and that is just one aspect of him,” Kelley said. “While his homosexuality is certainly part of the story, there is a lot going on.”

Kelley came up with the core of the novel almost 30 years ago, before he came out as gay, but Joshua is not based on himself, he said. However, one of the reasons the story has stuck with him so long is he wondered what his life as a gay man “would have been like if I had been born at a different time.”

Kelley served in the U.S. Air Force from 1988 to 1993 and got out in part because the military was instituting its “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

“What I expected was I might be Ok for awhile, but if I ever wanted to have a relationship and build a life, it probably was going to become an issue over time,” he said.

After Kelley had the book published in December 2012, ForeWord Reviews, a literary journal, named “The Fallen Snow” a finalist in two categories for their 2012 Book of the Year Awards — General Fiction and Gay and Lesbian Fiction.

“That meant a lot to me because it meant two sets of reviewers, evaluating the book separately, felt the book had merit in both genres,” he said. “Because to me the novel has always been at its heart simply a human story about people making their way through a difficult time.”

Still, the issue of homosexuality and the military is a very relevant topic today, and Kelley handles it in a way that is both evocative and aware of the timeframe, said Susan Coll, a novelist and one of Kelley’s mentors.

She taught a class he took at The Writer’s Center in Bethesda, Md. and was impressed with his work, which was part of this novel, said Coll, events and programs director at Politics and Prose, an independent book store in Washington, D.C.

“I think he is a very talented writer. He has known this story he wanted to tell from the start,” she said. “He has worked very hard to polish and hone the language.”

She was also impressed with his “strong sense of place” and ability to bring a place or a scene to life.

One of Kelley's favorite aspects of writing the novel was mixing fiction with fact as he researched the war and life in Virginia after it ended. He also liked scouting locations where the book could be set, settling on western Augusta County and into Highland County as inspiration for the fictional town of Hadley.

"I was trying to find a location where there would have still been traces of old growth forests, but it was being encroached upon by logging companies when this would have been set," he said.

His love of that process and writing the novel is part of the reason Kelley said he decided to self-publish last year. He didn't want to spend a great deal of time trying to find an editor or publisher before he could move on to something new.

After leaving the military, he has held a variety of civilian positions, including project manager for a financial services company and working in real estate.

Since 2008, Kelley has been a full-time writer. He and his partner, Jim Anderson, live in Washington, D.C.

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