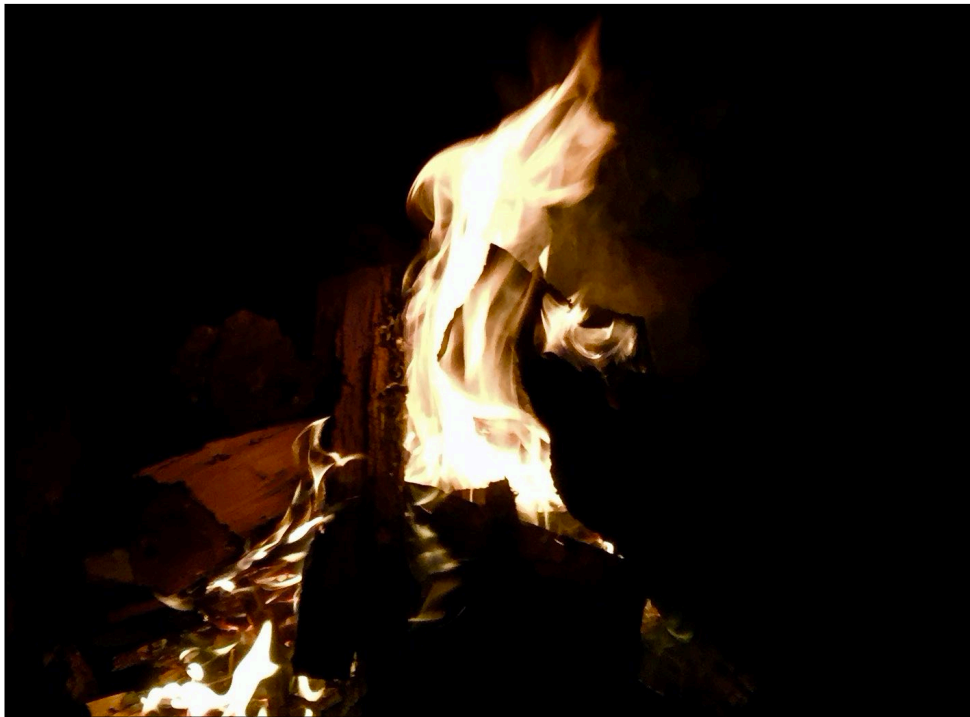
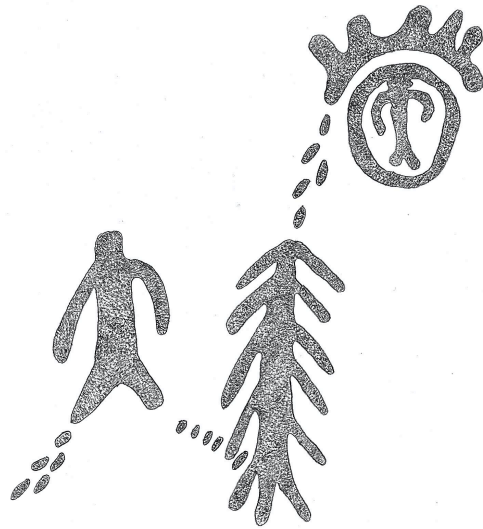
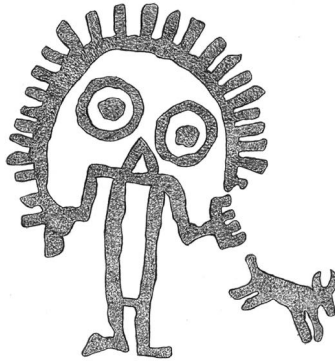


Remembering Fire

Thomas Doty



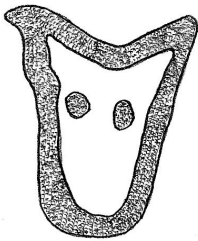
Remembering Fire



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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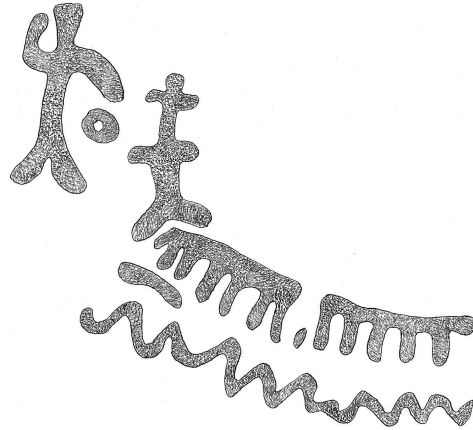
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Sunset. Coyote and I stand on the footbridge that spans the Illinois River canyon just below the falls. The last colors from the setting sun are the same shades of orange and red as in the coals of a fire about to go out. The colors settle onto ridgetops charred by last summer's Biscuit Fire and find their way into the spray of the falls before fading into twilight.



I am lost in my thoughts. As a youth I visited the McCaleb cabin and listened to the locals tell stories of the river and the mountains. The McCalebs came here to mine in the 1920s. They lived along the river long enough for the floor in their cabin to start sloping, and for their garden to swell into the rocky hillside. Though they were miles from the nearest paved road, they watched the culture walk through its changes ... in the ways folks dressed, in the songs they sang, dreams and stories shared as generations paused at the cabin on their wilderness journeys from somewhere to somewhere else.

I swam the blue-green river, camped on the sandy beaches, dreamed stories under the stars. I met interesting folks in the backcountry as I walked the mountain paths. Once, I chatted with a man who told me the native name for this place. Years later, I remember his words....

“Dalsalsan is the Old Time name for this spot on the river where the waterfall called Tiwikh thunders day and night. We used to come here to gamble and play shinny ball, and to buy salmon. Now those days are gone.”

Coyote raises his head to listen. Recognizing that I am talking to myself somewhere inside a story, Coyote shrugs off the words and scampers across the bridge.

“Like smoke from a dying fire,” I whisper, cringing at my own cliché. I tug myself back into silence. As I swim in my mind and saunter through the years, stories surface, faint at first, slowly bubbling into view as I float through the narrative of each memory.

Much has changed. The McCalebs are long gone. Their cabin burned in last summer's fire. The mountain slopes are a patchwork of charred trees and green forests. But the river still runs blue-green, the trail toward the falls cuts distinctly through the burn, and there are still a few folks wandering in the woods who remember the stories.

I shake myself free of my past and follow Coyote across the bridge. As we walk upriver toward the falls, twilight settles into night.

Coyote stops in his tracks and sniffs the air.

"I smell smoke. I thought you said the Biscuit Fire was out."

"It's been out for months."

We walk to where Fall Creek tumbles out of the mountains and into the river. We see an old man sitting in the orange and yellow glow of a small campfire. His fire sends out just enough light to show the black soil and scorched trunks of trees where last summer's fire blazed down this slope toward the river, burning most everything along the way. The old man's campfire shows his face, lined with wrinkles and creases, like a series of mountain ridges stripped of their trees. A plump brown dog raises his head as Coyote and I approach. A gesture from the old man sends the dog stretching onto his side and back into his dreams.

"That's Elder," says the old man. "He's mostly stretched out in some spot of sunshine or by the fire. But don't be deceived, he's fast when he wants to be, and as wise as a wolf."

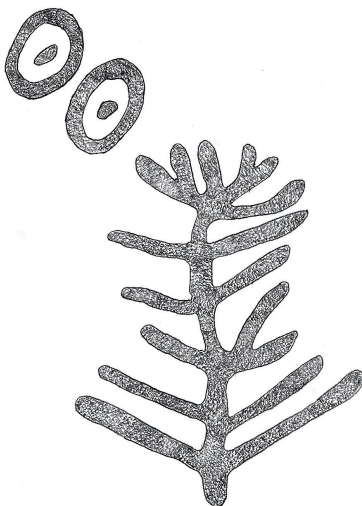
"Well," says Coyote. "He doesn't look it."

"Behave yourself," I say.

"No mind," says the old man. "Have a sit if you want. Seems like we've been here forever."

We cozy up to the fire. Though we hear the old man talking, we are distracted by shadows lurking in the black area of the burn, just beyond the circle of light cast by the campfire.

Coyote suspects they are shadows of trees and bushes twisted into strange shapes by the wildfire. But I imagine spirits from other times have come to share this ancient and familiar setting of campfire and stories. Perhaps they are trees who have burned, or people who have sat along this creek



since time out of mind, or animals who came with them, some trotting alongside, some as myth characters in the stories they told. Or perhaps they are spirits of more recent visitors, miners or backpackers or yellow-shirted firefighters climbing up and down the steep mountain slopes. They crowd toward the edge of the light as if they still want to be part of the story of this place.

As Coyote and I become more accustomed to the shadows, the old man's speech becomes clear. His words mingle with the smoke from the fire, drifting up and down the creek, spreading into the canyon and mixing with the spray of the falls. He speaks as if he has recently walked through the myths and experienced them first-hand.

"A while back I was telling some young fellow that the old Indian name for this place is Dalsalsan. That's what we called this place on the river near the falls. We used to come here to gamble and trade. But that's all done with. Everything seems gone from here but the stories themselves. They survive. Like the ancient ones who haunt the places they call home, or mist that hangs around the falls, stories linger here. They haven't gone away."

Coyote and I trade glances, each wondering if this is the same man I met years before or just another storyteller in a long line of tellers, using the same words to keep the same stories alive, century after century. Either way, we love stories. We settle into being listeners, and the old man tells his tale....

Before there was fire in these trees, before cedars became Indian matches for making fires at home, there was the fire of the sun. Some say that this campfire and the sun come from the same spark. This is also true for the pale fire of the moon and flashes of lightning. There are as many fires in the sky as down here on the ground. I saw one myself last summer.

As shadows deepen into evening, a thunderstorm blows in. Ringtail, Raccoon's cousin, dances round and round his fire in the clouds, beating his drum into thunder, the sparks of his fire flashing into lightning. We watch each bolt burn through the sky and strike the earth. The night blazes bright as a summer day at noon.

We gather in the village outside our houses and call our dogs. We pinch those dogs. We pinch and we pinch, and the dogs yelp and bark. Then the long, high howls, climbing the sky. Soon many dogs howl and bark, their noses to the clouds, and they are nearly as loud as Ringtail's drumming.

Storm clouds drop low to the earth. Ringtail, scared of the dogs, drops his drum and runs and hides in his house. The rain comes and puts out his fire. And we dance all night in the rain.

Coyote chides the old man with a typical trickster wisecrack.

“You talk like you were there in the old story. Fat chance. And isn’t all that pinching some form of animal abuse? I’d never let some old geezer goose me!”

To Coyote’s surprise, Elder responds. He opens one eye as he turns over to warm his other side. He speaks in a deep voice.

“Well, my poochy friend, it isn’t cruel pinching. It’s just a dramatic gesture for a role we play in the story. We dogs play lots of leading roles, and in most of them, we protect our friends. Lassie didn’t leap out of nowhere, you know. We’ve been around humans a long time.”

“What I know is that you haven’t been around as long as I have! I was here before the beginning of the beginning. I was....”

“Maybe so,” says Elder. “But you don’t need to yap so much about it. Unlike others we might speak of, we dogs don’t waste eternity wandering aimlessly by ourselves and causing trouble, and another eternity shouting our self-defined successes at anyone who appears to be listening, even if they don’t want to hear about it. We choose our words carefully. We are great friends to everyone and have a dignified lineage. At special times, we howl to remind ourselves that we are descended from wolves, the most royal dogs of all time. In those long ago days, dogs and wolves were not so different. Our howls are deep, with meaning, not just some little coyote squeak. And in the myths, we are never portrayed as fools.”

“Who are you calling a fool? And want to talk roots? Believe me, there are plenty of reservation dogs who look just like me!”

“Excuse me for saying so,” says Elder, “but they act like you, too.”

“You don’t know nothing. I’m the only intelligent critter of mythic fame around here!”

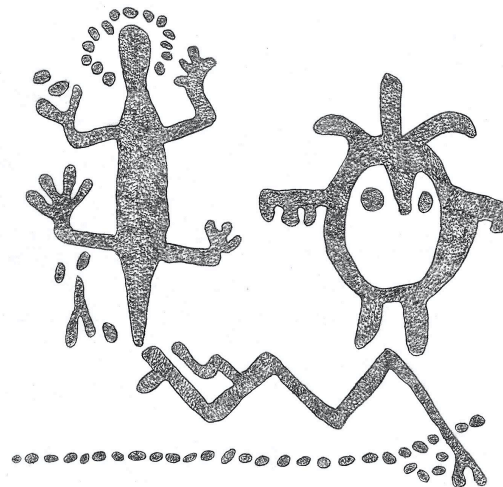
“That’s not entirely true,” says the old man. “Now settle down and I’ll tell you another story.”



A gesture from me quiets Coyote and everyone scoots closer to the fire to listen, except Elder who is already as close as he can get. He stretches, smirks at Coyote and closes his eyes. The old man tells another story....

Back in the Old Time, after the great flood had put out all of the fires, nothing could be cooked. We tried everything. We put our food out in the sun, but it spoiled. We soaked it in the hot springs but it got soggy. Coyote tried cooking meat in his armpits, but he was the only one who liked how it tasted. Finally, we gathered together and decided to send Owl to the top of Mount Shasta to have a look at the world and see if he could spot any trace of fire. That mountain is always puffing smoke. Fire had to be nearby.

Owl took a feather blanket with him and flew toward the mountain. Lizard watched him go. He could see far and he told us how Owl was getting on. A long while went by and Owl didn't come back. We thought he was dead. But Lizard said, "Quiet now, I can still see him."



At last Owl stood on the summit of Mount Shasta. He was tired and sweaty, but he looked all around. He looked twice to the west and saw smoke coming from Fire Woman's house. He flew back to our village and said, "There is fire down there."

Next morning, we all got ready and went off west toward where Owl had seen the smoke. Everyone had a cedar-bark torch, and Dog had some dry tinder and punk hidden in his ear. We traveled all day and late in the evening we arrived at Fire Woman's house. We asked to be allowed to warm our hands, and she invited us in.

Fire Woman's fire was crackling and blazing. Sparks jumped all around. Dog held his ear to the fire, caught a few sparks, and lit the tinder and punk. We all thrust our torches into the fire, and ran!

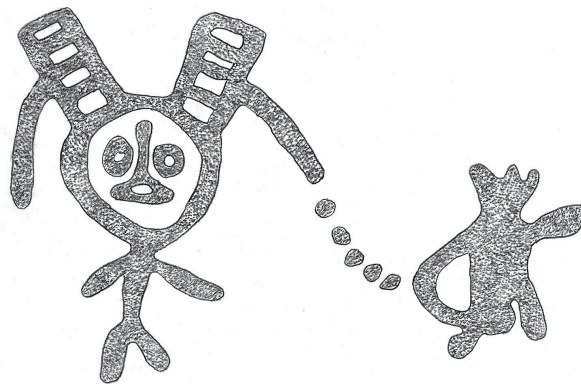
Fire Woman was angry and she tried to hit us as we ran past her. We were a long line of runners now, critters and people, and everyone carried a flaming torch. We ran and we ran.

Back at her house, Fire Woman's fire began to die down. She sang a song and danced. She did a ceremony. She shouted, "Let the rain come." Bluejay heard her and screeched, "Qas!" and heavy rain poured down on us.

Coyote's torch went out first. Then another torch and another, even my own. Dog held his head to one side to keep the rain out of his ear.

We ran as fast as we could. By the time we got back to our village, all the torches had gone out. The fires were gone except for that little bit that was burning inside Dog's ear

We were sad. No one had seen Dog bend his ear to the fire and we thought fire was gone from us forever.



Dog started laughing. He danced round and round, howling, "I am sweating! I am sweating!"

That made Coyote angry. "Hit him! Knock him out! He laughs at us!"

Dog said to me, "Look in my ear."

When I lifted Dog's ear, I saw smoke, and then fire. I took the tinder and punk and made a larger fire in my house. Everyone came and gathered around the fire. We cooked a feast that tasted better than anything Coyote had ever made. And afterwards, we went outside and danced in the rain.

From that day on, Dog was our friend. We share our fire with him. He's part of our hearth.

“Hmpff,” grumbles Coyote. “I’m not so fond of that story. I’ll tell you how things really happened. I ought to know. I was there.”

Coyote tosses a log on the fire and it blazes. He clears his throat with a few barks and yowls, waves his long arms with motions that imitate gestures and struts into the firelight like an actor who has forgotten his art and thinks only about how good he looks on stage.

Now Coyote tells his version of an Old Time story....

In the old days, I was lean and mean, and no one messed with me. I was the dog of all dogs. That’s how I was in the old days and that’s how I am now.

Though I was the most perfect pooch of all Mythtime, the world was flawed. There was no fire. I had no fire nor did anyone else. There was this tubby guy who called himself Fire Keeper. He kept the fire stashed in his lair way off east. He kept it all to himself. He was a dumpy round fellow with a silly face that shone. Years later we would call him the sun, or some such thing.

Fatso Fire Keeper kept a close watch on his fire. Each day, he traveled across the sky, spreading light across the world, watching for people who might be on their way to steal his fire. Or at least those foolish enough to get caught.

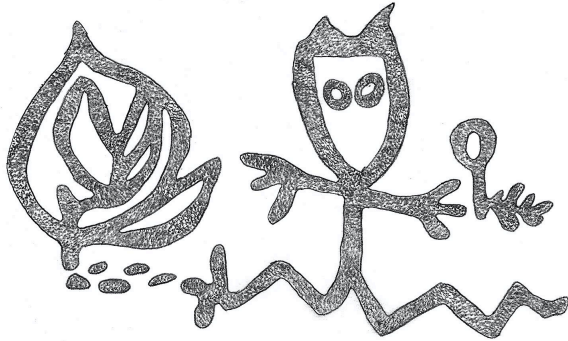
After traveling all day, he arrived at the ocean. He turned around, leaving a big splash of color over the waves, and went back to his home. Fire Keeper tunneled underground so no one would see him. When he got home, he snored by his fire for a couple of hours, then went on his rounds again.

Now back in those days I was not only the best looking dog around but also the richest. I even had a little house at the beach. I thought it would be a good idea for me to have fire. I was tired of eating raw gophers and rabbits, and I absolutely hated raw mussels and clams. And without fire, the nights were long and cold.

So I went wandering up and down the coast, looking for fire. I asked lots of people about it, but those humans didn’t seem to know much. Finally Seagull told me all about Fire Keeper, a mighty man who lived over the mountains, far away to the east. Seagull told me that if I tried to whack this guy, I would lose for sure and probably get scorched pretty badly. If I wanted to get fire, I would have to trick him. Now that’s the kind of talk that gets my dogs barking!

I packed my things and went walking east with a couple of buddies, Beaver and Fire Tongs. I led the way — I had the most courage — and we traveled over the mountains to Fire Keeper’s lair.

It was nighttime when we got there. Fire Tongs and I went inside —I told Beaver to wait outside by the door — and there was the chubby old man sitting foolishly by his fire, fast asleep.



I said, “Are you alive or are you dead? We came here to gamble!”

Fire Keeper jumped up with a start, rubbed his pudgy eyes and said, “All right. Let’s play the guessing game. We can bet dentalia shells.”

“Sure, friend. We’ll play until one of us falls asleep. The first one to doze loses. And the winner takes all the bets.”

“Deal,” said Fire Keeper.

So we played and we played and we played, alternately singing and guessing. I could have won every game, of course, but I let Fire Keeper take a few bets, just to keep him interested.

Ten moons traveled the sky. Fire Keeper was nervous. He hadn’t been able to make his rounds. It was pitch dark the entire time we played. Thousands of my fans and admirers waiting back at my beach house were wondering what was going on. It was cold. The ocean was starting to freeze, and people shivered under their blankets.

At last, Fire Keeper’s head nodded a little. I jumped up, “I have won! I have won!”

Fire Keeper’s head jerked up. “Wait a minute!” he shouted. “I wasn’t all the way asleep. No fair!”

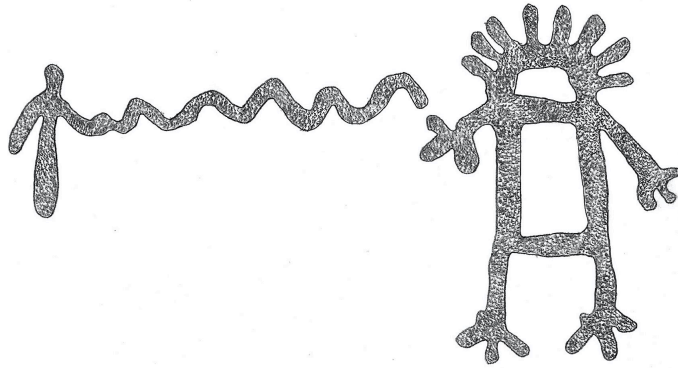
But Fire Tongs was good at grabbing things. He had already seized the fire and ran out the door. He tossed the fire to Beaver who ran lickety-split toward the coast. Fire Keeper ran after him, but Beaver tossed the fire into a cedar tree, and disappeared.

Fire Keeper raced across the sky, lighting the world day after day, looking for the fire. He was so angry he melted the ice.

I gathered the people together and told them, “Keep fire hidden in this cedar until this fellow cools down a bit. Then when you need some, take a cedar drill and make just what you need. Just be careful which way that paunchy Fire Keeper might be looking.”

Now I spend many days eating cooked gophers and rabbits. I am a hero among the lesser people. Never one to sit on my laurels, every so often I go traveling up the coast and down the coast, and all along the rivers, looking for more good deeds to do in the world.

There you have it. That's how it really happened.



“Well,” says the old man. “That’s a genuine bit of storytelling. You portray yourself just as you see yourself.”

“Coyote is a great believer in truth,” I say. “Especially his own.”

Coyote tosses another log on the fire, struts into the light and applauds himself while taking a series of lengthy bows. He howls in delight as he exits into the darkness, beyond the light of the fire.

Elder opens his eyes, rolls them and turns over onto his other side. As the fire burns down, shadows come closer.

The old man speaks slowly, with a quiet voice.

“I remember the first big fire that burned through here like it happened yesterday. I was downriver, near the coast. The fire came out of nowhere and traveled across the sky. It came straight to the water. There were logs in the river and they caught fire. I traveled upriver. There was more fire. The whole world was burning. Everywhere, the fire dropped out of the sky. Anywhere that had not burned, the fire settled there and flared up.

“I went back downriver and joined others on the beach. We put everything we had into canoes, our children, our elders, plenty of food.... We paddled into the ocean. We anchored the canoes offshore and waited.

“It got dark. For ten days we watched the fire from the darkness out on the sea. We saw Horse come to the shore. He had no food. All the grass had burned. Deer and Elk came to the

water. Their feet were scorched. They walked along the sandy beach. It was soft on their feet. But as they walked, more fire came out of the sky and their fur exploded. We watched Grizzly Bear burn, and Wildcat. Wolf tried to get to an island. So did Cougar. They burned as they swam.

“We could not explain what made the fire come that way. Maybe it was to purify the earth. Or perhaps to remind us of powers beyond what we know. Or maybe both. For whatever reason, this is the story as it has been told around fires in the winter lodges. This is what I remember. Here it ends.”

Sunrise. Shadows slip into the depths of the forest. In the first light of morning, the old man’s campfire burns to coals. Coyote stands quietly behind me. He had returned in time to hear the old man’s last story. Elder sits near the fire, eyes wide open. He also heard the story.

I whisper a “thank you” to the old man for sharing his fire and for the night of storytelling. The old man nods.

In the silence of the morning, Coyote and I walk back along the river, through the burned area toward the footbridge.

Morning sunlight makes colors brilliant ... the green of new grass growing up through the scorched earth, the blue-green of the river flowing as it always has, the white spray of the falls. From the top of a cedar spared by the fire, Bluejay sings, “Qas! Qas!” His song drifts into the canyon and echoes up and down the river.

“Yes,” I’m thinking. “The stories are still here.”

As we walk across the bridge, Coyote says, “I like the name.”

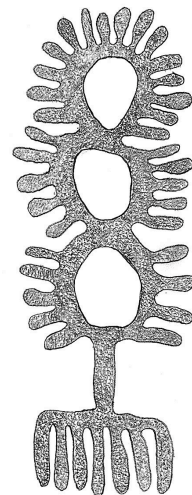
“What name is that?”

“Biscuit. It’s a good name for a fire. Makes me think of breakfast.”

“Well,” I say. “I suppose we might find you some raw fish in the river.”

“No way!” shouts Coyote. “Cooked breakfast is what I had in mind. You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” I say. “Nothing new about that idea. Let’s get going.”



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Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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