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From soldier to new author

Trent Reedy tells an Afghan girl's story in the young adult 'Words in the Dust.'

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Trent Reedy was an American soldier providing security for the reconstruction of Afghanistan when he saw her. The girl was 13, her cleft lip so deformed that her teeth stuck out straight from her mouth. Her upper lip was split in two. Her nose was distorted.

Shock was Reedy's reaction when he first saw the girl he came to know as Zulaikha -- a girl who became the inspiration for, and centerpiece of, his debut young adult novel, "Words in the Dust." Based on Reedy's real-life experience helping Zulaikha get corrective surgery, "Words in the Dust" is a striking and beautifully told story -- one that is unusual not only because it is by a first-time author, but also because it's told from Zulaikha's point of view.

It's difficult enough to write authentically about a foreign culture. It's even more difficult to write from the perspective of another gender. Yet Reedy, who was 26 when his contingent of the Iowa National Guard was deployed to a combat zone in the western province of Farah, felt compelled to write about her. "After her surgery, when she was leaving the base, I promised I would tell her story," said Reedy, who served 13 months in Afghanistan. "It was a mission I absolutely had to accomplish, no matter how long it took or how ridiculous it sounded that a white guy from Iowa would write it."

The story, as Reedy tells it, is an imagined filling-in of the blanks since cultural tradition prevented Reedy from meeting with Zulaikha for extended periods of time. That makes his fiction all the more surprising -- and rewarding as Reedy deftly taps into the emotional inner space of a girl whose entire life has been shaped by her deformity.

"Words in the Dust" begins with the neighbor boys relentlessly teasing Zulaikha on walks to the market. Her stepmother is oblivious to the bullying and sends Zulaikha to run errands and otherwise fills her days with chores. The oppressive patriarchy of the Taliban is woven into the fabric of her daily life, with little encouragement of the girl's interest in literacy or acknowledgment of Afghanistan's rich cultural past.

Zulaikha's father and extended family are benefiting financially from the military presence, but her parents are suspicious when U.S. soldiers approach to offer help in obtaining her surgery. It is gender politics and Afghan tradition that threaten her chances at a normal life -- a life that Reedy renders with an emotional clarity honed from observation and the cultural detail of first-hand experience.

Reedy had been in the military since leaving high school. He'd wanted to be a writer since the fourth grade but

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pursued that only after receiving inspiration from an unlikely source: "Bridge to Terabithia" author Katherine Paterson.

While he was in Afghanistan, Reedy's wife sent him the book, which was an important reminder of "hope and beauty and friendship," said Reedy, who had never heard of Paterson before reading the 1977 Newbery Medal-winning classic. "I needed that book. I needed that reminder that art is important."

He wrote Paterson a thank you note, and the two began a correspondence. "I don't generally hear from soldiers, and it was this absolutely incredible letter written in the wilds of Afghanistan," said Paterson from her Vermont home. She said that Reedy is now "like one of my children."

Reedy's book is dedicated to the 78-year-old Paterson, who also wrote the book's introduction.

"I was just so moved by the whole way he was able to get into the heart of this child and her pain and her disability and the longing to be a part of what her mother and grandmother were a part of: the beauty of the Afghan tradition, wanting to be able to read and go to school," Paterson said. "It's such a wonderful story. It became vivid to me in a way that news reports and watching television you don't get at all."

When Reedy returned from the war, Paterson helped him obtain a residency at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. It was there, just a year after he'd returned from his war-torn outpost, that he began writing the story of the girl he and his fellow soldiers had helped and her challenging family life, her encounters with the U.S. soldiers that led to her surgery and the effect of the U.S. military presence on her city. After rejections from 15 agents and five publishers, Reedy finally saw his first novel published early this month by Scholastic.

Many of the details in "Words in the Dust" are based on his personal experiences. The Afghan residence where he first stayed allowed him to "construct in my mind what her house would be like, where the livestock would be kept. Our barracks were a converted stable in the back of the house," he explained.

Before his deployment, Reedy blamed the Afghans for the Sept. 11 attacks. He was angry and wanted to maintain his distance from the native people, but his opinions changed with time.

"When it really began to turn around was when I was on guard duty in our house," he said in a phone interview from his home in Washington state. "Across the street, there were two really small children. The boy was pulling a box with a piece of yarn, and the girl was just pulling a piece of yarn. These were their toys. It was that day that I thought, 'They're not the enemy.' If anything, these people were more of a victim of Al Qaeda and the Taliban than I am."

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It wasn't long after that, when Reedy was sent to meet with village elders, that he came across Zulaikha, who was attempting to hide her deformity with a shawl.

"The Afghans I encountered were great people," said Reedy, now 32. "I owe my life to them many times over."

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