



## A soldier's story, and a girl's

Novel based on Afghan's surgery

By Bob Minzesheimer

Before he was an soldier in Afghanistan, Trent Reedy was an English teacher in Riverside, Iowa, who dreamed of becoming a writer. But it wasn't until he went to war that he found a story to tell.

Reedy's young-adult novel, *Words in the Dust* (Scholastic, \$17.99, ages 9 and up), is loosely based on a real-life Afghan girl, named Zulaikha, who was disfigured by a cleft palate.

In 2005, Reedy's Army unit chipped in \$400 to pay for the 13-year-old girl's flight to a base where an Army doctor had volunteered to do corrective surgery.

A fictional Zulaikha — taunted as "donkeyface" by the boys in her village — narrates Reedy's novel with a girl's view of the war and the aftermath of the Taliban's oppressive patriarchy.

Reedy, 32, says that the girl he met in Afghanistan inspired his novel but that most of it is fiction.

"She didn't speak English, and even if she did, it would have been inappropriate in Afghan society for me, as someone who's not related to her, to have spent time with her," he says. Nor has he had any contact with her since.

But he says he'll never forget her smile after her surgery, and how "she no longer covered her face with her shawl and her hand. I knew I needed to write about Afghanistan and to try to tell her story, or my speculation on what her story would be like, if she could write it herself."

After he returned home, he embarked on a self-taught course in Afghan culture and literature.

His reviews have been good. The *Los Angeles Times* called *Words in the Dust* "a striking and beautifully told story." *Booklist* says its "extensive detail about Afghani customs gives the story the feel of a docu-novel."

Reedy, whose Iowa National Guard unit was activated in 2004, says he went to war with memories of 9/11, "hoping to hunt down and kill terrorists."

Despite "some scary moments," Reedy never fired a shot. His unit was assigned to

provide security for reconstruction teams building schools and roads.

And he says he came to see that most Afghans "were not the enemy, but as much victims of al-Qaeda and the Taliban as we were."

He also found another inspiration in Afghanistan. Knowing that her husband liked stories about young people, Amanda Reedy sent him a copy of Katherine Paterson's 1977 Newbery Medal-winning novel, *Bridge to Terabithia*, about two lonely children who invent a magical forest kingdom. (The screenplay for Disney's 2007 movie is by David Paterson, the author's son.)

After *Terabithia* reminded Reedy "there was still hope and beauty in the world," he wrote a fan letter to Katherine Paterson, who says it was "the first letter I ever received from a soldier on active duty."

They exchanged a half dozen letters. When Reedy's tour of duty ended, Paterson helped get him into a writing program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, where he worked on the first drafts of his novel.

Paterson wrote the introduction, which says Reedy "has given me an Afghan friend for whom I care so deeply I cannot read a news report without wondering how what has occurred is affecting her life."