

From unpromising beginnings in a silent world, US author Henry Kisor now earns high praise for his travel books and crime fiction. By **JOHN MAKIN.**

Fashions in fiction may come and go, but, regardless, one genre has kept books moving from bookshop and library shelves for the best part of a hundred years. Crime, whodunits, mysteries, thrillers, call them what you will: if there's an odd body or two lying around and a quirky copper or private eye on the spot, with a masterful author to spin the web around the characters, then readers will want to be in there searching for clues, hypnotised into turning the pages swiftly to find the answers.

After a distinguished career in journalism, US writer Henry Kisor has become one such spinner of tales. In a series of crime novels, he has woven a cast of engaging characters, led by deputy sheriff Steve Martinez, onto the fictional canvas of Porcupine County, among the rugged forests and lakes on the south side of Lake Superior.

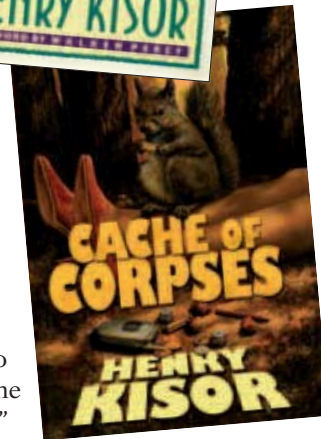
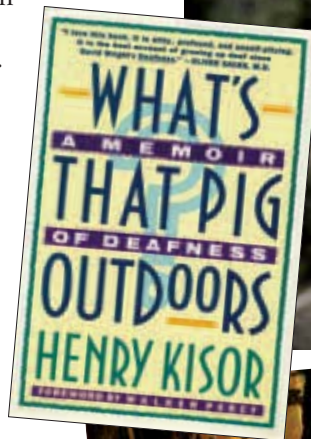
NATIVE AMERICAN

Steve's full name is Stephen Two Crow Martinez. He was born a Native American but grew up in a white community, never quite belonging. He wants to be part of the community but often senses he is "shut out", a fish out of water. A gentle sub-text sits between the lines: the author himself, deaf for most of his life, shares some of those feelings.

Henry's first book was no sort of murder mystery, but an absorbing autobiography. In *What's that pig outdoors?* Henry told the story of the initial 50 or so years of his life, from his birth in the early 1940s (the title of the book comes from a lipreading "mis-hear" when someone said "what's that big loud noise"). Towards the end of the war, in Florida, where his Father was stationed, Henry contracted a serious illness – maybe meningitis, maybe encephalitis, most likely both. Doctors fought and saved his life, but within days they were breaking the news to Henry's parents: "Your child is deaf".

So Henry's life since then has been lived in complete silence, but through the Rottweiler determination of his parents and teachers, wife and family, plus above all his own optimistic perseverance, he has been able to carve for himself a unique niche in the American literary landscape – and it is the story of this inspiring voyage that is told so vigorously (and often amusingly) in *That pig*.

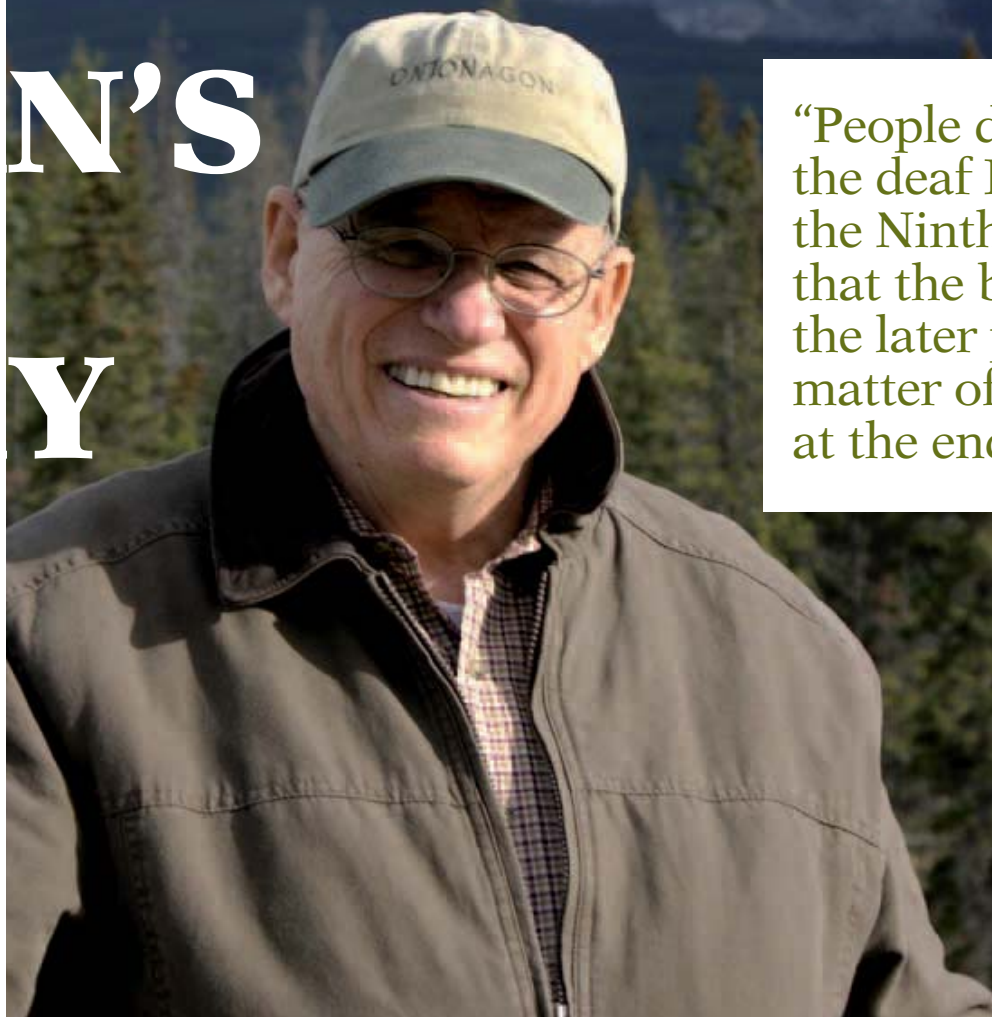
MICHIGAN MAN OF MYSTERY



It has not, of course, been an easy journey. From early on Henry started to lipread and thought that everyone else did so too – he became cross with people who didn't look at him when he was talking. His parents consulted all sorts of specialists but none could offer hope of Henry ever regaining his hearing. Nonetheless, there was a sort of miracle just around the corner. His parents saw an advertisement for the work of Doris Irene Mirrieles – "an itinerant bearer of hope whose passion and devotion deeply touched every child and parent she encountered".

Miss Mirrieles had been a tutor for a number of families with deaf children and had developed her own individual philosophy about them. She believed that deaf children could all grow up to fulfilled lives provided they could acquire the gift of language ("the whole gift, not a small part of it"). She argued that the "normal" educational regimes would not achieve this: "They taught deaf youngsters not the difficult arts of coping with a hearing world on its own terms, but only the primitive skills necessary for a sheltered, low-income existence." She saw that the key to a normal life for a deaf child required a mastery

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PHOTOS: DEBORAH ABBOTT

of three skills – lipreading, speech and reading, and believed that these skills were most likely to be acquired in a child’s own home rather than in the isolation of a special school.

So her aim was for deaf children to be taught to read from a very early age, and “not just in single words but in entire phrases and sentences with the full rhythm and content of spoken English, in the same way hearing children learned language. The difference was that deaf children would ‘hear’ with their eyes, not their ears – and would do so before they learned to speak”. Throughout she used tools from the three strands – pictorial, the written word and the spoken word, all intertwined with verbs and adjectives included to make complete sentences.

The detail of how this was achieved forms a rivetting core to the first part of Henry’s story. Miss Mirrieles provided the plan for how it was to be done, but the burden for the hours of “plan work” and “chart work” fell heavily on Henry’s parents and especially on his mother.

His reading and speaking vocabularies grew. Memories of his mother helping him to revive his forgotten speech are touching: “Mother would press her lips together, flare her nostrils, and engage her larynx – mmmmmmmmm – while holding my little hand first to her throat so that I could feel the vibrations there, then to her nose for the same reason. Mmmmmmmmm. Easy. Mustn’t let too

much air out of the nose, though...” Before long, Henry’s speech was “quite intelligible” and he was already a gifted lipreader. It was a start.

And why was the Mirrieles method not widely adopted? There are a number of reasons that Henry lists in the book, concluding, most tellingly, with: “She had earned no college degree and offered no mountains of research data to support her contentions. All she could offer was anecdotal evidence about the successful lives of a few deaf children.” Looking back now, Henry says: “Her methods depended on extraordinary parents spending extraordinary amounts of time teaching their children themselves and that was not viewed with approval by the US educational establishment.

“All the same, some of her principles were developed independently in the ‘whole language’ philosophy, teaching that children should experience the things they are learning to read about – for example, to visit a farm and learn about cows and milk before being taught the words.”

For Henry, the next phases of his life were surprisingly ordinary – baseball, football, boring school, great school, girls. There were (failed) experiments with hearing aids and long (and often tense) sessions with “experts” in case Henry had some residual hearing.

High school life was never straightforward. His slightly strange speech – and the clarity became impaired under

tension – led to some social difficulties especially with girls, and lipreading through lengthy lectures was an enormous strain. But his enduring talent began to emerge: he could write, and write better than most. His father had been a talented writer too, and Henry is certain that all the reading in his early years had given him a way with words. His English teacher suggested a journalism course and he grasped the chance – “the best decision I had made in my young life”. He became managing editor of the school’s paper and graduated 90th out of a class of 591.

Success and failure, heartache and happiness, ensued through his college years, in roughly equal helpings. But in the end a place at the distinguished Medill School of Journalism was offered and accepted and the course of his life was finally set.

From Medill he took a grounding in all the fine and dark arts and crafts of journalism, plus a growing conviction that the role most suitable for him was as a copyreader (what in the UK we call a sub-editor) rather than as a reporter, for whom a hearing disability would always be a problem.

He built his experience through a holiday job on a yachting magazine and in the following years graduated from the Wilmington *Evening Journal*, where he wrote his first literary column, to the copy desk of the Chicago *Daily News*. Eventually he would become its book editor and with the closure of the newspaper in 1978 he moved to the Chicago *Sun-Times* to do the same job there. In the end he was to work well over 30 years as a noted book editor and reviewer, a true doyen in the field, with numerous awards and a Pulitzer Prize nomination to his credit.

There was a price to be paid. “The road from the copy desk to the book editorship wasn’t without false turns and

bumpy passages,” writes Henry. Much as he wanted to work as a “normal” person, he had to rely heavily on colleagues and family when, for example, making the calls needed to set up contributors to review books; there was no email system in those days.

PREPARATION

To undertake full-scale interviews with major authors Henry relied on a combination of detailed preparation and concentrated lipreading, all backed with tape recordings which then had to be painstakingly transcribed to cross-check that his memory from lipreading what was said had been accurate. And the person best able to handle the transcription? His wife Debby.

But, over the years, he became more confident in himself and his status as a journalist. “No longer did I worry so much about how people felt about me; no longer did I bristle at their insistence on classifying me as deaf and second as a journalist. Let others believe what they chose. How I defined myself was more important. I was Henry Kisor, book editor and literary critic, husband and father, son and brother.”

That pig was published in 1990. In addition to the story of Henry’s life up to that date, it covers multiple facets of surviving in a silent world: his hearing cat, the early days of technology when a friend re-wired practically the whole of Henry’s apartment block just so that a lamp would flash when someone buzzed for him from the ground floor; deaf politics, and, movingly, his Morse-code courtship of wife-to-be Debby (“I’ll save an entire chapter of this book simply by writing that one thing led to another, and another, and another. Some things are too precious not to keep private.”).

The musings of Henry Kisor . . .

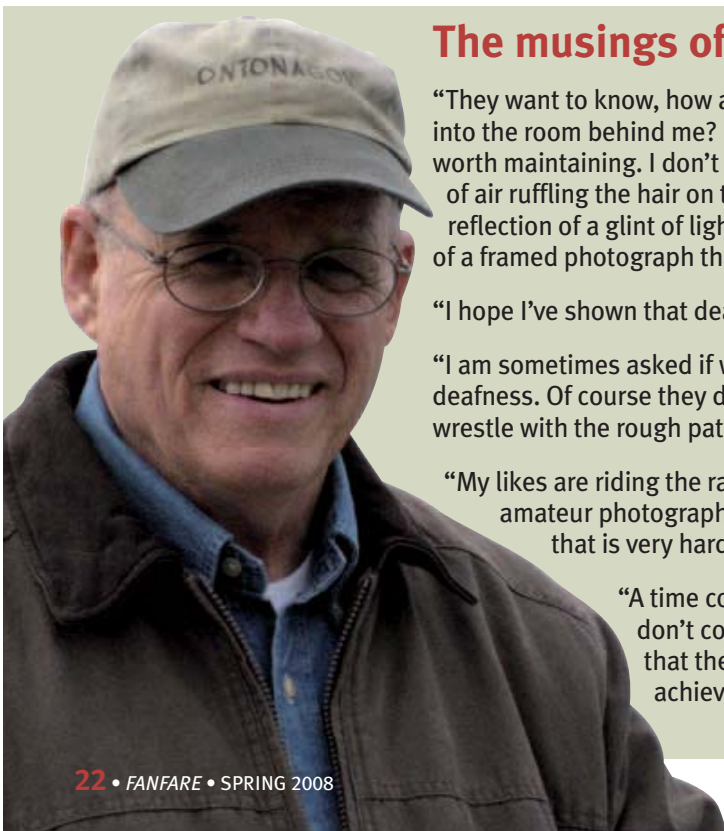
“They want to know, how am I so easily aware when someone walks quietly and unseen into the room behind me? I smile. Some secrets are worth keeping, some mysteries worth maintaining. I don’t tell them that perhaps it’s just the almost imperceptible puff of air ruffling the hair on the back of my neck as a caller opens the door. Or the slight reflection of a glint of light from my reading lamp on the moving doorknob in the glass of a framed photograph that hangs on the wall just above my desk.”

“I hope I’ve shown that deaf people can achieve a literary command of the language.”

“I am sometimes asked if writing these books helped me to come to terms with my deafness. Of course they did. Reliving experiences and emotions in print helps a writer wrestle with the rough patches of life.”

“My likes are riding the rails, trainspotting, playing with my grandchildren, flying, amateur photography, my wife and my dog. And, of course, reading. Not writing; that is very hard and brutal labour.”

“A time comes when you are defined by what you have done. People don’t consider that the deaf Beethoven wrote the Ninth Symphony or that the blind Milton wrote the later poems. It’s a matter of what you achieve at the end of the road.”



“She saw that the key to a normal life for a deaf child required a mastery of three skills – lipreading, speech and reading, and believed that these skills were most likely to be acquired in a child’s own home rather than in the isolation of a special school.”

On publication, his story was widely reviewed and well received: “A brilliant book” purred *The New York Times*. It was “praised beyond my most extravagant dreams” according to Henry, “primarily because it was on a subject ordinary readers found fresh and new.” The success impelled Henry forward.

Trains and planes had always held fascination for Henry and he took off with them in his next two books. The first told the story of the California Zephyr, “perhaps the nation’s most storied and colourful rail line”.

AMBITION

The next emerged as Henry fulfilled a lifelong ambition and learned to fly. Remarkably, across huge tracts of US airspace a radio is not a requirement, so deaf pilots are allowed to fly solo.

The book’s roots were the coast to coast flight in 1911 of a deaf pilot named Calbraith Perry Rodgers in a flimsy biplane. He made 69 landings on the way and crashed on several of them, and Henry set out to re-trace this trepidatious trip (without the crashes), albeit in the relative safety of a Cessna. Rodgers’ plane was named Vin Fiz after the grape drink made by his sponsor: Henry wryly capped this by calling the Cessna Gin Fizz and the book he wrote as a result is *Flight of the Gin Fizz*.

Since then Henry has gone on to publish his three mystery stories (*Season’s Revenge*, *A Venture into Murder* and now *Cache of Corpses*), all set in the fictional Porcupine County in Upper Michigan. The Kisors split their time between their home in Evanston, a leafy suburb of Chicago clinging to the shores of Lake Michigan, and a cabin that once belonged to Debby’s parents, hard by Lake Superior, right in the middle of his fictional Porcupine County.

The books that are emerging from this cabin in the backwoods will be gobbled up by his fans with increasing enthusiasm. In *Cache of Corpses* the prose flows as smoothly as Michigan’s fast-running rivers to keep the reader page-turning to see what dangers lie ahead. The twin plots (unravelling the mystery of the appearance of a series of dismembered corpses, and the election fight to be local sheriff) are peppered with all kinds of exotic ephemera – such as the fact that Indians rarely have to shave and seldom go bald – plus a detailed introduction to a technology version of a high-tech “game” sport which is a cross between orienteering and hunt the thimble.

Henry has now written an Epilogue to the original version of *That Pig*, bringing it up to date, and he hopes the

new edition will be published in the next year or so. In this additional chapter he welcomes the way that US legislation has improved the provision of facilities for the deaf, “and raised the national consciousness about the deaf in particular and people with disabilities in general”.

He discusses aspects of “deaf politics” (oralists v signers) at some length but returns in the end to the theme that has taken him from what could have been a life of blank nothingness to a pinnacle as an accomplished and admired writer. “Learning English skills – written, not necessarily spoken, although it is difficult to separate the two in the dynamics of language acquisition – ought to be stressed for all deaf children.

“English has become the standard business language of the globe, and those who do not use it with ease tend to be at a disadvantage. Those who can read and write clean and clear English very likely will have a further leg up on those who don’t.”

“Making connections” is one of Henry’s constant themes, and he revels in the additional connectivity that technology has brought to the deaf community. One of his first tasks each day is to update his “blog”, his internet diary which he began to promote his books but which he uses now as a daily way of sharing his thoughts, questions, comments, photographs and experiences with whoever is interested (find it via www.henrykisor.com/blog).

He writes: “Because deafness can be isolating, writing a blog enables me to communicate easily with the hearing world on its own terms, without having to struggle against barriers of fear and ignorance. As that great *New Yorker* cartoon of two pooches at a computer has it, ‘On the internet nobody knows you’re a dog’.”

His blog, like his books, are often about journeys, and there can be few better travelling companions writing today than Henry Kisor. In *Charlotte’s Web*, another great American stylist, E B White, has his pig Wilbur paying tribute to Charlotte the spider: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer.”

Those who get to know Henry Kisor and his work will surely feel that he, too, is both.

❖ *The up-dated version of “What’s that pig outdoors?” is in the pipeline for publication. The original edition, plus Henry’s other books, are all available in the UK via Amazon and similar websites. John Makin (makin@johnmakin.demon.co.uk) is a journalist and editor, married to “Fanfare” Editor Alicia Makin.*