



Geoffrey Saign, author of *WhipEye*, an urban fantasy that offers lessons gained from his work in education and love of wildlife. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

Highland author's first novel supports importance of nature in children's lives

BY CATHERINE CONDON GUDIO

Geoffrey Saign's debut novel *WhipEye* began in his mind with the simple image of a boy walking into a pet store to talk to a parrot. It evolved into a 300-page action thriller featuring a 12-year-old female protagonist, her male friend and a 1,000-year-old parrot named Charlie.

Written for middle-grade readers and set in the present near Superior National Forest, *WhipEye* is the first of four books in the Highland Park resident's urban fantasy series, *WhipEye Chronicles*. Reeling from the death of her mother as she attempts to repair her relationship with her father, Samantha loves wildlife and finds solace in a wisecracking parrot. With the parrot, her friend Jake, and a supernatural staff called WhipEye, Samantha finds herself with just 24 hours to save two worlds.

Saign will sign copies of *WhipEye* (KiraKu Press, July 2014) at the Twin Cities Book Festival that runs from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, October 11, at the State Fairgrounds (visit raintaxi.com). The novel also is available at amazon.com.

Saign said *WhipEye* mixes fantasy and nature with love, loss and intuition—elements that factor heavily into the lives of children.

"The girl is grieving for her mother. The boy is missing his father. They have to learn how to deal with that," Saign said. "Through that process, the parrot helps them discover what intuition is, why they should be listening to and trusting themselves, and how to do that."

Saign, who grew up in West St. Paul, has spent his life swimming, snorkeling, hiking, exploring the woods and sailing as far away as Australia. That love of nature led him to write *Green Essentials: What You Need to Know About the Environment*, as well as educational children's books *The African Cats* and *The Great Apes*. He has already finished *Gorgon*, the second book in the *WhipEye Chronicles*, which will be published this spring, and is now at work on several young adult novels.

After earning an undergraduate degree in biology from the University of St. Thomas, Saign assisted in field research with hummingbirds and humpback whales. He also has spent over 20 years working in special education and teaching sailing, self-awareness, writing and other subjects to children and adults.

Saign wrote *WhipEye* over a steady five

years, relying on writing groups to maintain momentum. He likened the publishing industry today to "the wild, wild West, (where) anything and everything is going on now to get books published." In 2013, a small publisher picked up *WhipEye*, but after Saign learned he would earn a mere 4 cents per book, he opted for self-publishing.

Before the final book cover design was due, Saign's cover artist went missing in Poland. "I had to get a new artist, but he bumped up the color and brought it more alive," he said.

Despite ruthless editing with help from a California-based writer and English teacher, Saign managed to include more than 100 wildlife species into the book. Samantha and Jake encounter everything from a red kangaroo to rock hopper penguins.

"The main character is in love with wild animals" he said. "I want kids to notice how she sees things. She sees nature. She's listening to birds. She's hearing with her quiet. In nature, all those senses are

awake for kids. And they're not (with) technology.

"There are a lot of benefits from the Internet," Saign said. "At the same time, a lot of kids are so enthralled with technology that they're not going outside and seeing nature. Jacques Cousteau was afraid that everybody would see the mountains on the computer, but they wouldn't go visit them in person. I wanted kids to see this character who loves wild animals, and yet be wrapped up enough in the story to have that be the underpinning, so it's not a preachy thing."

The novel also encourages youngsters to trust their instincts. "I wanted that in there because kids are preached to so often about what they should be doing, what they should be following," he said. "That's not their journey. To find their path, they have to learn to listen to themselves. People can help to a point, but if you can't listen to yourself, you end up being a plumber when maybe you should be an artist."

So far, kids seem to love *WhipEye*. "The scariest reviews for me were on litpick.com," said Saign of the teen literature site. "They often trash books on that site, but they all rated it five stars. A couple of them said, 'It feels real. The kids feel real. I can relate to the characters.' For me, that was one of the greatest compliments I could get."

