



## Salmon River Kid

**Joseph Dorris**

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*The Idaho backcountry becomes another rich character in this tale developed with knowledge and skill.*

*Salmon River Kid* is Joseph Dorris's historical novel of a boy's growth into manhood as he mines for gold amid the dangers and the rugged, wild beauty of the Idaho Territory's Salmon River country.

The year is 1872, and fifteen-year-old Samuel Chambers and his father, Charles, have left their hardscrabble farm and loving family behind in Iowa, hoping to make their fortune mining for gold. The work of hard rock mining is backbreaking and relentless, and winter in the Idaho backcountry is brutal.

Struggling to survive, the father and son are disconsolate when their claim is jumped and their small cache of hard-earned gold is stolen. Yet Samuel, lured by the thrill of the hunt for gold and gifted with a sense for where rich veins might lie buried, finds himself increasingly drawn to the Idaho wilderness and its people.

There is also danger. Two men know that Samuel saw them murder their partner, and they want Samuel dead as well. Despite the conflict, Samuel finds love. He is torn between his responsibilities to his family and the girl of his dreams, the daughter of an Idaho rancher.

This epic tale has everything: strong, likable characters; vivid and colorful descriptions of people, places, and things; adventure, surprise, and danger; Herculean tasks undertaken and mastered; the tenderness of young love; the devotion of family members to each other; and, to top it all off, many reasons for laughter. Pacing varies appropriately from languid to brisk depending on the needs of the plot, which is well developed and comes to a satisfying conclusion.

Dorris explores the relationship of people to the land with such knowledge and skill that the Idaho backcountry becomes another character in his tale. He brings forth the precarious relationship between the area's settlers and the Native American tribes who consider the land their own, as well as the ethnic prejudice that white miners and settlers held against Chinese workers struggling to make their way.

The text is practically flawless, and it is enhanced by the inclusion of eloquent pen-and-ink drawings by the author. History, including the lamentable treatment of Native Americans by the United States government and the science of getting rock to yield its hidden gold, also plays its part in making this book rich and satisfying.

Though aimed at teen readers, Joseph Dorris's *Salmon River Kid* can also be enjoyed by adults, thanks to its well-researched insights into the lives of gold miners, ranchers, Native American tribes, and the other colorful characters who populated the nation's Western wilderness.

Above all, the story is memorable for its portrayal of Samuel, who, under the most difficult conditions, still works hard, respects others, and knows the value of friendship and love.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November 21, 2017)

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