

## A Conversation with Craig Johnson

---

What inspired you to write *The Longmire Defense*? What are some of the themes you enjoyed exploring?

There are writers who most outdoorsman read, and for westerners one of those is Elmer Keith, the world-renowned Montana cowboy, big game hunter, and firearm enthusiast. I first encountered Keith in my father's copious hunting and fishing library and then went on to read just about everything the man ever wrote.

I enjoyed his easy writing style and the fact that he didn't always stay on-topic, sometimes drifting into areas that might not seem to connect to the subject at hand but eventually did, one of those such stories staying stuck between the pages of my mind for most of my life.

The book is "*Hell, I Was There!*", Keith's life story, a hair-raising tale from his youth starting immediately after WWI when a state official is killed under questionable circumstances. Keith doesn't pull any punches in the story, telling it as it most likely happened, just short of naming names, relaying to us what took place at that elk camp in Montana all those years ago, stating plainly that the men who committed murder got away with it.

It was too bad Walt Longmire wasn't there.

So, in *The Longmire Defense*, he is. When his father tells him the story years later, and when the rifle that did the deed appears and turns out to belong to Lloyd, Walt's grandfather, it sets the good sheriff on an investigation very different in tone than any before.

Vic and Walt's relationship takes a complicated turn this time around. Can you talk about your approach to their character evolution over the course of the series?

When I first started writing the Longmire novels, there were a lot of folks who gave me advice about what I should and shouldn't do—such as, if you're going to have sexual tension between your characters you need to stretch it out over fifteen or sixteen years before you have something happen... And all I could think was, who would wait fifteen years for something to happen? So, I jumped right in in the third novel, *Kindness Goes Unpunished*, and had something happen.

I'm a firm believer that the characters in a series have to evolve and of course that includes the relationships. Things kind of take a big step in *The Longmire Defense*, but I think it's a natural evolution in a relationship that's been evolving over the last five years (for those unaware, the novels are written in a four-book-a-year pattern, meaning nineteen novels barely encompasses five years for Walt). I don't want to give away too much, but there are some pretty big changes in the character's lives.

A childhood friend of Walt's, Ruth One Heart, returns to Wyoming, bringing intrigue and secrets. What was Walt and Ruth's relationship like growing up? Why is she back in town now and in his life again?

I've always been intrigued by Walt's childhood. We get glimpses of it but usually in his interactions with adults, and I knew there had to be someone back there, a childhood friend

who must've informed his world views and attitudes about things. When somebody disappears from your life and reappears, there's always some serious baggage that they're carrying, and the question of why they've returned is paramount. There are a lot of complications in the relationship between Walt and Ruth, some of which even they aren't aware.

**Did this book require any special research? Did anything surprise you while researching and did you make discoveries along the way?**

A portion of this book happens back in 1948 when the initial crime takes place and that's always a challenge. That, along with the ballistic and financial aspects of the story took a lot of research, but I'm fortunate that, with the popularity of books and television show, I can reach out to people who can give me the answers. The fact that Weatherby, the makers of the rifle in question, moved from California to Sheridan, about thirty miles from my ranch, was truly handy . . .

**We learn that Walt's grandfather Lloyd Longmire has a checkered past and isn't the model of morality that Walt is. Can you talk about their family dynamic and history, and why you wanted to explore the differences between them here?**

The relationship between Walt and his grandfather goes back a long way through the books but really came to a head in a portion of *Dry Bones*, where Walt reveals Llyod's mantra that's haunted him for years—never let go. We're talking about two men who are remarkably similar but are from two very different time periods. Lloyd is a western empire builder and Walt is a contemporary sheriff, which is something very different.

Llyod has always been a looming shadow in Walt's life, a bigger than life individual in the community to which he'll always be compared. Lloyd is gone, but his reputation lives on through Walt, and Walt is going to have to find a way to come to terms with that.

**Walt is very protective of Tricia Knox, a sex worker who knows a lot of secrets. Why does he become so invested in her?**

I think that Walt says it best when he says there's no sliding scale of justice in his county. He's always been a detective for the disenfranchised, and Trisha Knox certainly embodies that. Little does Walt know that she'll be involved in the through-line of the investigation...

***The Longmire Defense* makes a return to classic Longmire, including the Wyoming setting. What sparked your return to Durant and the characters we love?**

Well, we never really left the high plains, but the last novel, *Hell And Back*, dealt with an interior landscape for Walt and was very revealing of his psyche. It was a different type of novel, but that's important. *The Longmire Defense* is different in its own right, and that's something I'll pursue with every book as long as I'm writing, but the landscape is very important to me in that it imposes something important in the novels, a tone that I don't want to escape.

***The Longmire Defense* is your 19th Walt Longmire novel. What keeps bringing you back to Walt and how do you keep him interesting?**

I think this novel is a clear indication of how I try to keep the series fresh, not only for the readers but for myself. I laugh sometimes when somebody says they didn't care for the last book

and then write them back to assure them that they needn't worry because the next one will be different – that the next one is always different. Walt is good company, and for me that's one of the big things—as long as he's there I'm going to feel good about the novel, and if I find a way to learn even more about him, then that's even better.

***Longmire* remains one of the most watched drama series on Netflix. How do you explain its staying power? Do you think Walt & Co will return to the big or little screen?**

Difficult to say. I think Warner Brothers and Netflix figured that *Longmire* would linger a few years and then ride off into the sunset, but here we are seven years after ceasing production and we're still one of the top-rated, original content shows on Netflix. I was talking to one of our actors who conveyed that one of the big deciding factors on the future of a streaming show is how many viewers re-watch and that *Longmire* is something of a phenomenon along those lines. People watch the show over and over . . . I'm thrilled people keep returning to the series, so we'll see what happens in the future.

**What do you have in mind for *Longmire* #20?**

*First Frost* is something of a departure, a cross between a period buddy book and a road trip. In a throw-back to 1963, Walt and Henry graduate from college and head off on a cross-country journey on the Mother Road, fabled Route 66 and induction into the Vietnam-era armed forces. Of course, things don't go as planned . . .