

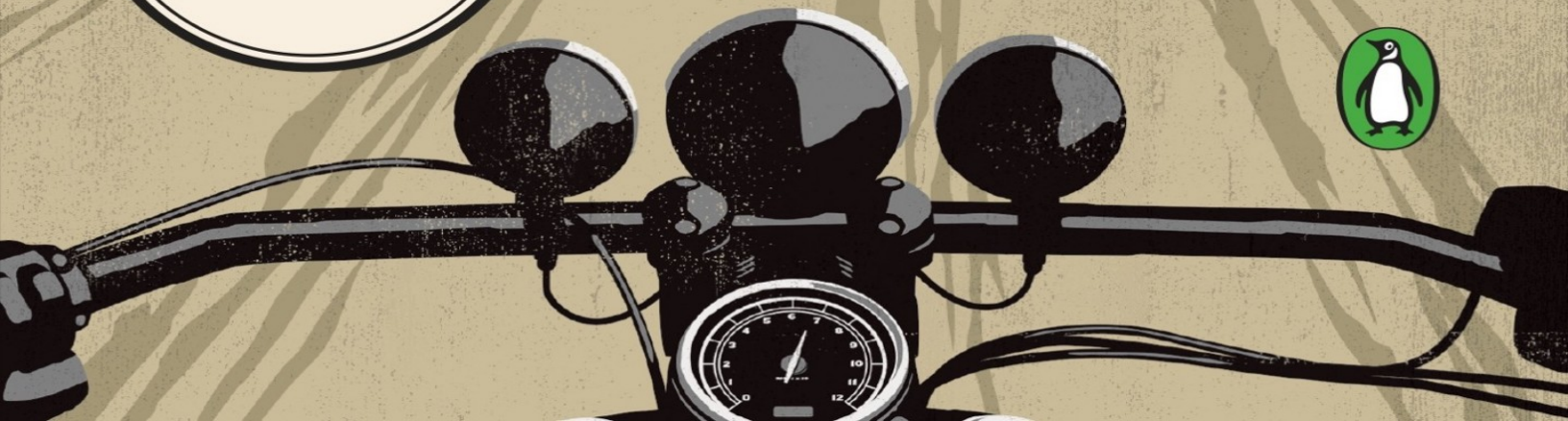
A **LONGMIRE** MYSTERY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

CRAIG JOHNSON

AUTHOR OF THE COLD DISH AND THE WESTERN STAR

AN OBVIOUS FACT



Praise for *An Obvious Fact* and the Longmire series

“A Walt Longmire novel is like going on a ride-along with an old friend, watching him ferret out the bad guys with wit and humanity (and more than a few bullets), while we swap stories and catch up on old times. . . . It’s *An Obvious Fact*—it’s good to have Walt back on the scene.”

—Mystery Scene

“The laconic modern-day cowboy Walt Longmire is a guy you’d like to have a Rainier beer with.”

—*The Oklahoman*

“[*An Obvious Fact* is] one of his best Longmire tales to date.”

—*Austin American-Statesman*

“Plenty of action, humor, and literary allusions drive the story to a bang-up conclusion. Johnson . . . never disappoints.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“It’s the scenery—and the big guy standing in front of the scenery—that keeps us coming back to Craig Johnson’s lean and leathery mysteries.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Like the greatest crime novelists, Johnson is a student of human nature. Walt Longmire is strong but fallible, a man whose devil-may-care stoicism masks a heightened sensitivity to the horrors he’s witnessed.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Johnson’s hero only gets better—both at solving cases and at hooking readers—with age.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Johnson’s trademarks [are] great characters, witty banter, serious sleuthing, and a love of Wyoming bigger than a stack of derelict cars.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Johnson’s pacing is tight and his dialogue snaps.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Stepping into Walt’s world is like slipping on a favorite pair of slippers, and it’s where those slippers lead that provides a thrill. Johnson pens a series that should become a ‘must’ read, so curl up, get comfortable, and enjoy the ride.”

—*The Denver Post*

A PENGUIN MYSTERY

AN OBVIOUS FACT

Craig Johnson is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Longmire mystery series, which has been adapted for television by Warner Bros. as the hit show *Longmire*, now on Netflix. He is the recipient of the Western Writers of America Spur Award for fiction, the Mountains and Plains Booksellers award for fiction, the *Nouvel Observateur* Prix du Roman Noir, and the Prix SNCF du Polar. His novella, *Spirit of Steamboat*, was the first One Book Wyoming selection. He lives in Ucross, Wyoming, population twenty-five.

By Craig Johnson

The Longmire Series

The Cold Dish

Death Without Company

Kindness Goes Unpunished

Another Man's Moccasins

The Dark Horse

Junkyard Dogs

Hell Is Empty

As the Crow Flies

A Serpent's Tooth

Any Other Name

Dry Bones

An Obvious Fact

Also by Craig Johnson

Spirit of Steamboat (A Novella)

Wait for Signs (Short Stories)

The Highwayman (A Novella)

Stand-Alone E-Stories

(Also available in Wait for Signs)

Christmas in Absaroka County (Four Stories)

Divorce Horse

Messenger

CRAIG JOHNSON



**AN
OBVIOUS
FACT**



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*For my brother, Greg,
who had his head run over once,
which explains a lot.*

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.”

Arthur Conan Doyle,
The Bascombe Valley Mystery

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was very young, my father, who was always tinkering with something, brought home a model 841 Indian Scout motorcycle in a half dozen peach baskets and set about rebuilding it with my mother, brother, and me in attendance, none of us ever questioning how the thing had become unassembled in the first place.

The Scout had an intriguing past—the U.S. Army had commissioned it during World War II for desert fighting, and, in response, Indian designed and built the 841—8 standing for the new motor and 41 for the year. In fact, the parts that Dad labored over looked as if they might've been shipped from Cairo during the war, but with the ubiquitous red paint giving the impression that this Scout had been decommissioned and sold out of the surplus warehouse in Springfield, Massachusetts.

My mother said it was painted that color to hide the blood.

For weeks my father assembled and reassembled the parts, cleaning Linkert carburetors with toothbrushes, rewinding copper wire on the generator, and trying to find spokes that would fit the even then antique motorcycle. Finally, after hours and hours of intensive labor, the Scout was finished, and the three of us stood on the porch steps out of the way of trajectory as my father attempted to kick it into internally combusted life.

My father, a man of considerable strength and vocabulary, began stomping the starter lever on the Indian and when it proved to be uncooperative cut loose with a streaming commentary not fit for polite society.

Operating a motorcycle of this particular vintage was a tricky proposition with a shift lever that sat alongside the gas tank and a shift pedal that required a heel-toe pattern, and a kick-starter, all of which were familiar to my father.

Kicking the living daylights out of the old motorcycle again, my father swore some more and redoubled his efforts. A couple of the things he might not have been aware of were two of the primary reasons the 841 had been turned down by the army—a quixotic clutch and a faulty gearbox.

He kicked again and then paused in action but not in word.

The other thing he might not have known was that the 841 motor was built for the rugged conditions of the wartime desert, where fuel was not plentiful and so designed to run on a low compression ratio of 5.1:1, something he might've considered if he had been aware before adding a high-octane booster into the gas tank.

Mounting another Herculean effort, he tried again, and the twin-cylinder, side valve engine roared to life as he stood there holding on to the handlebars and revving the throttle, his grease-stained face grinning for all it was worth. It was at that instant that the 841 Scout decided it was off to war and took my father with it. Bursting into full, high-octane throttle, it managed to engage its faulty gearbox and shot away with my dad barely holding on with one hand.

We watched as he made the corner of the house and then turned in a sharp left angle up a hillside populated with pine trees with trunks of varying thicknesses. He bounced off a few before the rear tire caught traction and flipped him over backward, the two of them entangled and tumbling back down the hill.

My mother was horrified.

My brother and I couldn't wait to try it.

Thus began a lifelong preoccupation with things that are fast—horses, cars, trains, women, and, yep, motorcycles.

• • •

I'd like to throw a two-fingered salute out to my riding partners for all their help in getting *An Obvious Fact* up on two wheels starting with super agent Gail "Gear-Grindin'" Hochman and her henchwoman, Marianne "Smooth Rollin'" Merola. The sidecar over at Viking Penguin couldn't be fuller with Kathryn "Chrome Queen" Court, Lindsey "Wall of Death" Schwoeri, Victoria "Skid Mark" Savanh, Brian "Hold My Beer I Want to Try Something" Tart, Olivia "T-Bone" Taussig, and Ben "Pedal to the Metal" Petrone.

I know a little Arthur Conan Doyle but not as much as my friend Leslie Klinger and was glad to loan Henry a copy of Klinger's *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Short Stories*. Thanks to Jamey Gilkey of Old Man G Performance and John Stainbrook for keeping me honest on the two-wheel thing. Thanks to my backup men, Michael Crutchley and Curt Wendelboe, for the motorcycle accident technology and the great K-9 stories. Thanks to Linda and Bob Prill and Dr. Frank Carlton for the lowdown on skeet and trap shooting—those ashtrays are elusive and need to be put on the nonendangered list.

Hey, if you haven't ever visited Devils Tower you need to head over that way, and a great place to hang your hat or grab a meal is in Hulett, one of my favorite towns in Wyoming. Thanks to Chef "Jersey Boy" Dean and the Ponderosa Grill & Cafe, which serves one of the finest cheesesteaks west of the Schuykill River, just ask Vic. Thanks to The Golf Club at Devils Tower, which really isn't the den of iniquity that I make it out to be. . . . And in Rapid City, SD, a shout out to Piesano's Pacchia for the great pizza and Ron's Cafe for the marvelous pancakes, which kept me going on this marathon, iron-butt ride.

Music is really important to me when I'm writing, and I want to thank Rickey Medlocke for providing the soundtrack and the friendship—you know you've made it when you get an email from Lynyrd Skynyrd. And by the way, I don't think you guys sound like a garage band.

Finally, there's the only one whose arms I want wrapped around me as I take on the hairpins of life, my wife, Judy "Vincent Black

Lightning” Johnson.

1

I tried to think how many times I'd kneeled down on asphalt to read the signs, but I knew this was the first time I'd done it in Hulett. Located in the northeast corner of the Wyoming Black Hills, the town is best known for being the home of Devils Tower.

I looked at the macadam blend, the stones shining in the mix that was still wet from the early morning rain, and sighed. With the advent of antilock brakes, it was hard enough to properly estimate the speed of a vehicle involved in a traffic accident, never mind in the rain.

“Do you see anything?”

I nudged my hat farther back on my head and turned to look at the large Indian leaning against the door of Lola, his Baltic blue '59 Thunderbird and my granddaughter's namesake. “How about you come over here and take a look for yourself.”

Henry Standing Bear didn't move and continued to study the large book in his hands. “I am on vacation.”

I was kneeling at the apex of a sweeping curve on state route 24 where the road veered off toward Matho Tipila, the Cheyenne name for the first United States National Monument, so declared by Teddy Roosevelt in 1906.

“There is traffic coming.”

I didn't hear anything, but that didn't mean he wasn't right, so I walked to the edge of the road and watched as a phalanx of motorcyclists came around the corner and descended toward us like a flock of disgruntled magpies.

They slowed—not for me, I wasn't in uniform—but because of the corpuscle-red Indian motorcycle with the modified KTM extended rear-axle dirt bike that roosted on the flatbed trailer behind the Thunderbird.

The leather-clad cyclists thumbed their horns and gave a collected thumbs-up to the Cheyenne Nation as he leaned there, looking as if he were negotiating a treaty, with his muscled arms folded over his chest, the first volume of Leslie S. Klinger's *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Short Stories* in one hand.

"You could have waved back."

He shook his head. "That would not fit with the tourist's stereotypical vision of the stoic, yet noble, savage."

I glanced at the book. "Is that mine?"

"Yes, I took it from your shelves. I did not think you would mind if I borrowed it."

I glanced back at Devils Tower crowding the horizon. The geologic area around the megalith is not of the same composition as the tower itself, and the belief is that about fifty to sixty million years ago, during the Paleogene period, an igneous intrusion forced its way up through the local sedimentary stone, some saying it was an ancient volcano, some saying it was a laccolith, an uncovered bulge that never made it to the surface. "You know how it got its name, right?"

"Yours or ours?"

I ignored him and started back toward the T-bird. "When Colonel Richard Irving Dodge led an expedition back in 1875, his interpreter got it wrong and referred to it as Bad God's Tower, which then became Devils Tower, without the apostrophe as per the geographic standard." I opened Lola's passenger door and eased in.

The Bear climbed into the driver's seat and studied me.

I reached back and stroked Dog's head. "You don't care."

"About what?"

"The apostrophe."

He hit the ignition on the big bird. “I care that a delegation of my people attempted to have the name restored to Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark, but your U.S. representative killed it. ‘The name change will harm the tourist trade and bring economic hardship to area communities.’”

I knew the man he was talking about, and I had to admit that his nasal imitation was spot on. “But as an expert, what’s your feeling on the apostrophe?”

He grunted and placed the book between us. “There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.” Pulling the vintage convertible into gear, he patted the book. “Sherlock Holmes.”

“Did you borrow all three volumes?”

He pulled onto the vacant road. “Yes.”

“Oh, brother.”

• • •

It took a while to drive the nine miles into Hulett—eighteen minutes to be exact—because thirty miles an hour was as fast as Henry Standing Bear was willing to drive Lola (the car), especially while towing Lucie (the motorcycle), and Rosalie (the dirt bike).

The Bear liked giving vehicles women’s names.

We skipped Hulett’s main street to avoid the fifty thousand or so motorcycles parked on both sides of the road. The town’s population of just around four hundred multiplies under the August sun as bikers from around the world arrive for the nearby Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, which pulls in close to a million bikers each year.

Held in the town of the same name just across the border in neighboring South Dakota, the rally lasts a week. On the Wednesday of that week, Hulett throws what they call the Ham ’N Jam, offering free music and a thousand pounds of pork, three hundred pounds of beans, and two hundred pounds of chips; they also celebrate something they call No Panties Wednesday, though

nothing in the official literature mentions the missing undergarments.

Our destination was the Ponderosa Café and Bar and the Rally in the Alley, which was handy because the gravel back street was the only place where there was a parking spot large enough for the car and the trailer. Henry eased the Thunderbird through the crowd and parked behind a tent set up to sell T-shirts, patches, do-rags, and other souvenirs.

“Today’s Monday, right?”

“All day.”

I glanced around at the hundreds of people milling about. “And the actual Ham ’N Jam doesn’t start until Wednesday?”

“My thought exactly.”

“Do you think you should put the top up?”

He shut his door and looked at the very blue sky. “Why? I do not think it is going to rain again this morning.”

I shrugged and glanced at Dog, the hundred-and-fifty-pound security system. “Stay. And don’t bite anybody.”

A woman in a provocative leather outfit, a lot of hair, and a multitude of rose tattoos paused as she passed us. “Is he mean?”

“Absolutely.” As I said this, he reached his bucket head over the side door and licked her shoulder with his wide tongue. “Well, almost absolutely.” She smiled a lopsided smile, which revealed a missing tooth, and continued on down the road. I looked at Dog. “Just so you know, you could get a disease.”

He didn’t seem to care and just sat there wagging at me.

Moving to the trailer, I watched as the Bear used a chamois cloth to remove what dust had collected on the Indian motorcycle.

“Why do people ride these contraptions, anyway?”

He checked the tie-down straps and stood. “Freedom.”

“Freedom to be an organ donor.” I glanced up and down the crowded alley. “T. E. Lawrence died on a motorcycle. You know what I make of that?”

“He should not have left Arabia?” Henry climbed over the railing and stood next to me. “Where are we supposed to meet him?”

“Here.” I looked around. “But I don’t see him.”

The Cheyenne Nation took a step and glanced down the alley, choked with bikers of every stripe, and plucked the *Annotated Sherlock* from the fender rail where he had left it. “Maybe he was called away.”

“The only police officer assigned to a fifty-thousand-biker rally?” I smiled. “Maybe.”

He carefully placed the book under his arm. “There is always the Hulett Police Department.” He glanced around. “If I were a police department, where would I be?”

“At 123 Hill Street, right off Main as 24 makes the turn going north.”

“Far?”

“Almost a block.”

He started off, intuitively in the correct direction. “The game is afoot.”

I shook my head and followed as we made our way, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells that are Ham ’N Jam. “Doesn’t smell too bad, but maybe it’s because I’m hungry.”

He nodded and smiled at two lithesome beauties in halter tops as they grinned at him.

“What happened to your Native stoicism?”

“Well, anything can be taken to excess.”

The crowd in front of Capt’n Ron’s Rodeo Bar on the corner was spilling onto the street in joyous celebration of the open container law, which allowed alcoholic beverages to be consumed in the open air during rally week. The party was in full swing, the sounds of the Allman Brothers’ “Statesboro Blues” drifting through the swinging saloon doors.

I looked back at the Bear. “Two of the Allman Brothers died on motorcycles—what do you make of that?”

“That if you are an Allman Brother you should not ride a motorcycle.”

I sidestepped a short, round individual who was wearing a Viking helmet and drinking from a red plastic cup, but Henry got cut