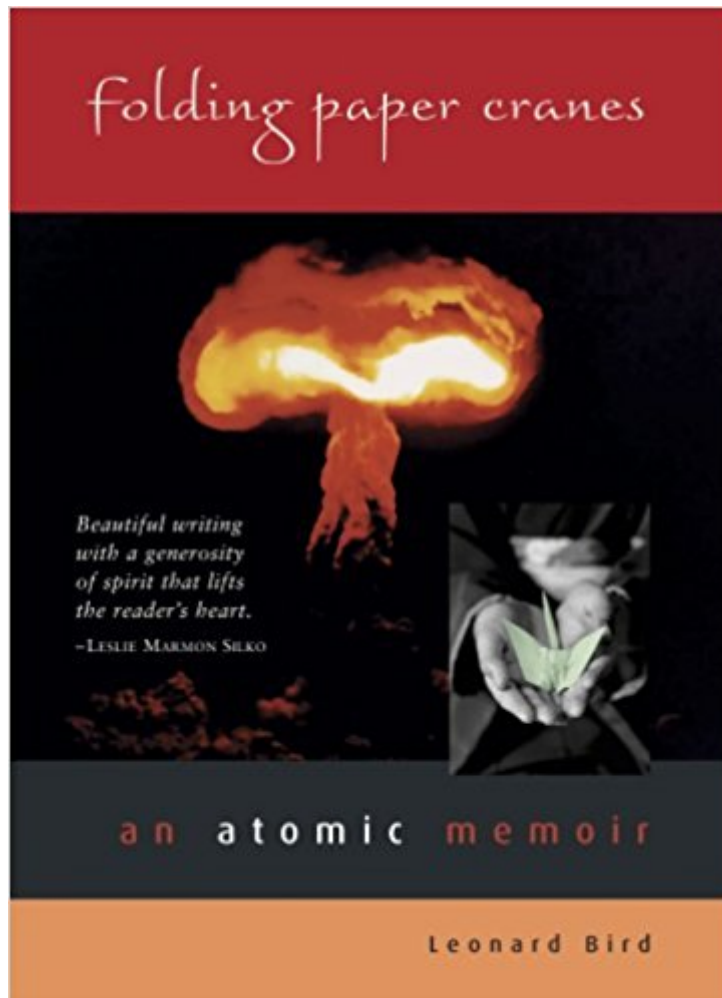




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Folding Paper Cranes: An Atomic Memoir



Synopsis

Between 1951 and 1962 the Atomic Energy Commission triggered some one hundred atmospheric detonations of nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site. U.S. military troops who participated in these tests were exposed to high doses of radiation. Among them was a young Marine named Leonard Bird. In *Folding Paper Cranes* Bird juxtaposes his devastating experience of those atomic exercises with three visits over his lifetime—one in the 1950s before his Nevada assignment, one in 1981, and one in the early 1990s—to the International Park for World Peace in Hiroshima. Among the monuments to tragedy and hope in Hiroshima's Peace Park stands a statue of Sadako Sasaki holding a crane in her outstretched arms. Sadako was two years old when the atomic bomb was dropped on her city; she was diagnosed with leukemia ten years later. According to popular Japanese belief, folding a thousand paper cranes brings good fortune. Sadako spent the last months of her young life folding hundreds of paper cranes. She folded 644 before she died. As he journeys from the Geiger counters, radioactive dust, and mushroom clouds of the Nevada desert to the bronze and ivory memorials for the dead in Japan, Bird—himself a survivor of radiation-induced cancer—seeks to make peace with his past and with a future shadowed by nuclear proliferation. His paper cranes are the poetry and prose of this haunting memoir.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Bird was an 18-year-old marine in 1954 when he first visited Hiroshima and the International Park for World Peace. Three years later, he crouched in a small trench dug into Yucca Flat, as Shot Hood, "the largest, dirtiest, and most controversial device ever exploded over North

America," was detonated. As he so chillingly describes, a voice over the loudspeaker commanded, "Stand up and face ground zero! Watch the fireball!" Bird and company stood, the mushroom cloud rose to 40,000 feet, and the men, unwitting guinea pigs in a diabolical experiment, were showered with radioactive dust. His body and soul forever etched by this horror, Bird, who contracted a form of bone-blood cancer, felt compelled to return to Hiroshima and its peace park. With humility and empathy, he reflects on how the survivors have "memorialized and transcended their nuclear apocalypse" by creating a "culture of peace." At once direct and poetic, always candid and compelling, Bird speaks to everyone curious about our tragic atomic legacy and the future of nuclear weapons. With his unique perspective and gift for powerful expression, Bird has crafted the perfect book for marking the sixtieth anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Donna Seaman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Bird's deeply moving and compelling memoir takes an important place in a body of work bearing witness to generations of the terrible reality of nuclear testing and the use of nuclear weapons." — Mary Dickson, director of creative services at KUED Channel 7 and author of the essays "Downwinders All" and "Living and Dying with Fallout" — "With a lovely combination of prose and poetry, Leonard Bird bears witness to the terrible nuclear crimes committed by the United States government against innocent citizens in the name of national security." . . . Bird gives us a deeply personal view . . . always with beautiful writing and with a generosity of spirit that lifts the reader's heart." — Leslie Marmon Silko, author of *Almanac of the Dead* and *Ceremony*

I didn't know of this part of Red's history, or his illness and death until the Celebration of Life for him in 2011. Seeing all the paper cranes there and reading *Folding Paper Cranes* helped inspire me to begin making paper cranes and finally delivering 2000 to the Children's Peace Memorial in Hiroshima. This book was both an inspiration for the trip and also a very personal guide to the various monuments in the Peace Park while actually visiting it. (To those who may be going to Hiroshima, the Green Hotel is still open but the Sweden Bakery wasn't found.) A copy of *Folding Paper Cranes* was donated to the library at the Peace Museum and another copy was left in 2016 at a temple in Kyushu. Red's book is a powerful and inspiring testimony of one man's wrestling with his own memories, and the humanity's struggles with issues of war and peace, hope and despair. Rest in Peace, Red!

An amazingly articulate and thoughtful memoir from a critical period in our history as a nation and as

a world. A particularly poignant and incisive read in our currently so unsettled times in 2017.

This is a very poetically written book about the author's experiences with United States atomic bomb testing and his coming to peace with the dropping of the bomb on Japan.

I had the honor of knowing Red both as a poet and a teacher. His students loved him. I know because he invited me to speak to his classes several times at Ft. Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. His poetry was a Western Colorado lifeline when I first came to the region 40 years ago. He was an inspiring teacher and a beautiful soul. And after several years I'm just re-reading this important book -- one I think every American ought to read. It's short, a simple memoir. But its lessons are deep and powerful. My grandmother was born an orphan, left on a tavern doorstep, and raised in Nagasaki, we think. She died when I was one but she held me in her arms. Somehow I feel this deep connection to our atomic legacy. Like Red, I didn't quite get it, until I read his memoir and realized how deeply my life has been linked to the atomic age. And how peace isn't just a vague dream, but a hope we need to keep alive in our minds and hearts. Especially as Americans.

This memoir chronicles the author's experience as a test subject for one of the hundreds of US Government nuclear bomb trials which took place in the desert of Nevada, and the aftermath of its effects on the author both physically and psychologically. As a young soldier, Bird was ordered to crouch in a trench with his squad a mere 4,000 yards from the detonation of the largest nuclear bomb explosion in North America, wearing only a WWII gas mask for protection. The memoir is framed by the author's three trips to Hiroshima which ultimately aid in his attempt to come to terms with both the terror and hope he shares with the victims and survivors of nuclear war in Hiroshima. His account brings to life the horror of Hiroshima that is only understood abstractly by many Americans. Additionally, it is very informative about the hundreds of nuclear explosions the government sponsors in our own country for the purpose of experimentation and the devastating effects of radiation disease caused by radioactive fallout. *Folding Paper Cranes: An Atomic Memoir*, is frank, sensitive, and searingly honest. It is sprinkled with poetry and though poignant with despair, ultimately brings a message of peace and hope.

A short, profound book chronicling a young man's misfortune at the hands of the U.S. government's atomic testing, his resultant cancer and subsequently his life-long awakening from despair to the hope that is living. Mr. Bird's command of and feel for language make the pages fly by. I understand

Mr. Bird is a poet, also; it shows in the beauty of his composition style and the poetry of his sentiments. I believe "Folding Paper Cranes" a hopeful message would be helpful to anyone going through whatever despair they may find debilitating, be it as dramatic as cancer from an atomic bomb or a depression from an unknown source. In that sense, I believe "Folding Paper Cranes" is an important work.

This incredible book feels like an intimate recollection between you and the author. The descriptive prose will shake you to your foundation as Mr. Bird describes with amazing clarity his encounters with nuclear horror. Although small in stature (its only 150 pages) it walks tall and you will emerge from the experience changed. I have had the pleasure of traveling and spending time with Red and amazingly I knew nothing of this book. When it was given to me I sat and read it instantly. The tears flowed down my cheeks as I read it cover to cover. I hope it will inspire you to think about our nuclear legacy, act to eliminate nuclear warheads from planet earth, and fold some paper cranes for good luck.

"Folding Paper Cranes" is almost guaranteed to arouse anger and depression in the reader. However, it is also a book of hope and inspiration. Leonard Bird's book moved me to tears at times, a deeply affecting read. It is maddening that our Federal government chose to put men such as Bird at such great risk, using them as laboratory rats. The hope that resides in this engaging little book is how the Japanese people rose out of the nuclear ash and their dedication to peace. When you read of Bird's encounter with Mr. Tanaka and little Meiko and her family make sure the tissue box is nearby. Leonard Bird knows redemption. He has met it face-to-face, redemption with flesh on it.

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