

One Thousand White Women
The Journals of May Dodd
by Jim Fergus

About the Book

One Thousand White Women is the story of May Dodd and a colorful assembly of pioneer women who, under the auspices of the U.S. government, travel to the western prairies in 1875 to intermarry among the Cheyenne Indians. The covert and controversial “Brides for Indians” program, launched by the administration of Ulysses S. Grant, is intended to help assimilate the Indians into the white man’s world. Toward that end May and her friends embark upon the adventure of their lifetime. Jim Fergus has so vividly depicted the American West that it is as if these diaries are a capsule in time.

Praise for the Book

“Jim Fergus’s *One Thousand White Women* is a splendid, fresh, and engaging novel. Strikingly original.”

— **Jim Harrison, author of *Legends of the Fall***

“A most impressive novel that melds the physical world to the spiritual. *One Thousand White Women* is engaging, entertaining, well-written, and well-told. It will be widely read for a long time, as will the rest of Jim Fergus’s work.”

— **Rick Bass, author of *Where the Sea Used to Be***

“Jim Fergus knows his country in a way that’s evocative of Dee Brown and all the other great writers of the American West and its native peoples. But *One Thousand White Women* is more than a chronicle of the Old West. It’s a superb tale of sorrow, suspense, exultation, and triumph that leaves the reader waiting to turn the page and wonderfully wrung out at the end.”

— **Winston Groom, author of *Forrest Gump***

“Jim Fergus so skillfully envelopes us in the heart and mind and skin of his main character, May Dodd, that we weep when she mourns, we shake our fist at anyone who tries to sway her course, and our hearts pound when she is in danger.”

— **Colorado Springs Gazette**

“An impressive historical . . . terse, convincing, and affecting.”

— **Kirkus Review**

Courtesy of St. Martin’s Griffin

About the Author

Jim Fergus

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Personal Information: Male; married.

Addresses: Home: Colorado and Florida. Agent: c/o St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010.

Career: Author and freelance writer. Field editor for *Sports Afield* and columnist for *alloutdoors.com*.

WORKS

- *A Hunter's Road: A Journey with Gun and Dog Across the American Uplands*, Henry Holt (New York City), 1992.
- *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd*, St. Martin's Press (New York City), 1998.
- *The Sporting Road: Travels Across America in an Airstream Trailer, with Fly Rod, Shotgun, and a Yellow Lab Named Sweetzer*, St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Contributor to *Field Guide: Dog First Aid Emergency Care for the Hunting, Working, and Outdoor Dog*, Wilderness Adventures Press, 1994; *A Breed Apart: A Tribute to the Hunting Dogs That Own Our Souls: An Original Anthology*, Countrysport Press, 1995; *Pheasant Tales: Original Stories About America's Favorite Game Bird*, edited by Doug Truax, Countrysport Press, 1995; and to publications, including *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, *Fly Fisherman*, and *Outside*.

Media Adaptations: *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd* was optioned for a television movie by Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).

Sidelights

Jim Fergus, a freelance writer and outdoorsman, left his home in Colorado in September, 1990, and began a trip east to New England, south to Florida, and west toward home, crossing all the states in between and following the bird-hunting seasons of each location as he went. Fergus and his dog, Sweetzer, traveled seventeen thousand miles hunting twenty-one species of game birds, camping, and joining up with other hunters and their dogs along the way. *A Hunter's Road: A Journey with Gun and Dog Across the American Uplands* is Fergus's account of his five-month trip. John Haines wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that it is "an odd sort of trek, boyish and enthusiastic, contemplative, reminiscent, and revealing of character. The writing at its best has an attractive honesty and immediacy." Fergus begins each chapter with a quote relating to hunting or conservation. He offers recipes for cooking the game birds, including roasting them over an open fire. Haines found the best chapters to be Fergus's portraits of people, including those of artist Russell Chatham of Montana and Blackfoot Indian Joe Kipp. *Booklist* reviewer Alice Joyce called *A Hunter's Road* "an engrossing account infused with love of

the wilderness.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called it “a fine travel-and-adventure tale, both for hunters and readers who enjoy the outdoors.”

Fergus introduces his novel, *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd*, by saying that in 1854, Cheyenne Chief Little Wolf requested one thousand white women from the U.S. Army to be brides for his young men. The book is a fictional account of a “Brides for Indians” treaty reached between President Ulysses S. Grant and the Cheyenne, as told by one May Dodd. The women are recruited from prisons and mental hospitals and offered pardons to spend two years with the Cheyenne, bear their children, and then have the freedom to leave, alone. May, who was committed to an asylum by her father as punishment for falling in love with someone beneath her class, willingly volunteers, feeling life with the Indians would have to be better than life in a mental hospital. On the trip west with the other brides, May finds herself attracted to both a U.S. Army captain and a Cheyenne chief. “By painting symmetrical portraits of White and Indian brutality, Fergus skillfully renders May’s choice moot,” wrote a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, who said May and the other brides become “the most noble characters in this imaginative tale.” *Library Journal* reviewer Shirley E. Havens said the journal reveals May’s “strength, courage, and sense of humor.” *Booklist* reviewer Grace Fill felt that in addressing religious, political, and community issues, Fergus “writes with tremendous insight and sensitivity,” and said he “is gifted in his ability to portray the perceptions and emotions of women.”

In *The Sporting Road: Travels Across America in an Airstream Trailer, with Fly Rod, Shotgun, and a Yellow Lab Named Sweetzer*, Fergus’s essays span six years of bird hunting and fishing across the United States. John Rowen wrote in *Booklist* that Fergus’s remarks about the problems being faced by farms and rural communities “bring a touch of social consciousness to the easygoing, personable memoir.” Fergus talks about the people he and Sweetzer have met along the way. He notes that the conservation movement was initiated by hunters such as President Theodore Roosevelt and that hunting poses a minimal threat to animal populations in comparison to that of chemical farming, overgrazing, and development. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote that “perhaps befitting a sportsman, Fergus has a spare writing style and uses only what he needs. The result is a light and enjoyable collection of tales.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, September 15, 1992, p. 115; March 1, 1998, p. 1092.
- *Library Journal*, August, 1992, p. 108; January, 1999, p. 204.
- *New York Times Book Review*, August 15, 1993, p. 16.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 13, 1992, p. 40; March 2, 1998, p. 59; August 23, 1999, p. 30.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2001

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Author Interview

Q: You were a nonfiction writer for most of your career — primarily about hunting and fishing. What inspired you to write fiction?

Jim Fergus: To clarify the first part of that question: I got sort of typecast as a “hook & bullet” writer later in my journalism career, but I actually started out doing general interest journalism — essays, literary and celebrity profiles, interviews, environmental writing, etc.

From the very beginning, from the time I was about twelve years old, I had always intended to become a novelist. All my role models were fiction writers, and after I got out of college I wrote a bunch of short stories and shipped them off to the magazines, certain that I was going to get discovered. And I wrote an unpublished (and unpublishable) novel. It did not take long for me to figure out that I wasn’t going to be able to make a living doing this, and so I became a teaching tennis pro, which was the only other thing I knew how to do.

I worked in that profession for a full decade, during which time I wrote yet another unpublishable novel. Finally at age thirty, I had put together a little stake, about \$8,000, which in those days still seemed like a lot of money. I retired from tennis and started freelance writing full-time. Of course, the Catch-22 of that business is that in order to make even a modest living at it you have to work all the time; when you’re not working on an assignment you’re trying to drum up new assignments. It’s a very hand-to-mouth existence, not unlike being an itinerant farm laborer, and simply did not allow me any free time for fiction writing. So that old childhood dream was relegated very much to the back burner.

Suddenly I found myself in my mid-forties and it occurred to me that I wasn’t any closer to being a novelist than I had been in my twenties. I came upon the idea for *One Thousand White Women* while researching what I thought was going to be a nonfiction book about the Northern Cheyenne Indians. An old friend of mine who had some money loaned me enough to take a year away from journalism and write the novel.

Q: You seem to have a great deal of familiarity with the landscapes as well as the cultures you write about. What kind of research have you done for your novels?

JF: Well, I always start with the landscape, and the research there is simply a kind of accrual of experience in a place. I need to have a certain familial sense of the land in order to situate a novel in it. In the case of *One Thousand White Women*, I had traveled extensively in the northern Great Plains in the course of my magazine work, and I really knew and loved that country.

With *The Wild Girl* I was less familiar with the landscape of southern Arizona and northern Mexico. But I had recently moved to the Southwest and had already spent enough time down there to know that I would come to love that country, too. The northern Sierra Madre mountains are incredibly rugged and spectacular, and I made several trips down there, traveling through the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. I took a horse pack trip up into the mountains with a Mormon outfitter out of Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, just to get the lay of the land. And in order to be able to write the scene in which the wild girl is captured, I also went on a mountain lion hunt on muleback with a rancher who hunts lions with a pack of hound dogs.

Because of my background in journalism, I tend to be very hands-on that way; I really need to see and experience these things before I can write about them. As to the cultural research, I felt a tremendous responsibility to know as much as I possibly could about the respective cultures and histories of the Northern Cheyennes and the Apaches in order to be able to write as truly and accurately as I could about them. For me the research takes as long as the actual writing of the novel.

Q: Some of your most memorable characters are female — May Dodd in *One Thousand White Women*; the wild girl and Margaret in *The Wild Girl*. Do you enjoy writing from a female perspective? What kind of challenges does it present you as a writer?

JF: Yes, I do enjoy writing from the female perspective. As a male writer, I find that it takes you completely outside of yourself, offering a kind of clean canvas, a completely fresh point of view free of your own ego, opinions, and prejudices. It's quite liberating in that way.

I've never been particularly interested in writing fiction about myself or in having myself as the protagonist of my novels, and I find that any time a male writer writes from a male perspective, the author's own point of view inevitably bleeds through the character — which is not necessarily a bad thing, either. The challenge, of course, in writing from the perspective of the opposite sex is to try to do so credibly.

Q: When Westerns first became popular, Native Americans were frequently portrayed as savage villains. Then the tide turned and Native Americans were often depicted as noble and victimized. You depict Native American cultures with a great deal of texture and complexity. The Cheyenne in *One Thousand White Women*, for instance, are being decimated by the U.S. government, but they also commit terrible acts of violence against other tribes. Do you think about the politics of the way Native Americans have been treated when you write, or do you try to put that aside and just tell the story? Do you set out to make a point in your novels?

JF: One of the things I've heard from Native Americans who have read my novels is that they appreciate the fact that I try to avoid portraying them as one or the other of those one-dimensional stereotypes — either as the villain or the noble savage. Of course, the truth is that they're human beings like the rest of us, capable of tremendous savagery as well as great beauty and spirituality.

The revisionist notion of Native American history has it that all the tribes were living together in harmony, each in its own inviolable region, until the evil white man came along to steal their land and disrupt their perfect way of life. But the reality is that long before we showed up, these native tribes were, with some exceptions, warrior societies who had fought each other for centuries.

As always in nature, the stronger had pushed the weaker out; they had enslaved each other and committed terrible atrocities. This is not to forgive or excuse our treatment of Native Americans, which remains one of the most shameful chapters in our nation's history.

As to the politics of this, it's hard to write about the subject, even fictionally, without touching on it, but I certainly don't set out to write political manifestos or polemics. My main goal as a novelist is simply to tell a good tale, and if readers also find a point in my novels, that's fine, too.

Q: You write a great deal about morals. For instance, in *One Thousand White Women* May Dodd is judged an immoral woman, the Cheyenne are judged as immoral savages. In *The Wild Girl*, Billy Flowers is depicted as having a very clear moral code, for better or worse, in great contrast with those around him. What is it about morality that fascinates you?

JF: I'm interested in the sort of quicksilver, subjective nature of morality, the idea that virtually every culture, every religion, and even each era, has its own rather specific set of rules for it. And I also find fascinating the nearly desperate need that human beings have to impose their own particular version of morality upon others, to the point that we're willing to slaughter each other in the name of our own moral codes.

At the same time, we have a tremendous capacity to rationalize our own behavior as moral, no matter how despicable it might be. What is more grotesque, for instance, than the killing of babies and children? And yet every nation does it under the banner of morality.

Q: What do you most enjoy about writing novels? What do you find the most difficult?

JF: The first part of that question I'm going to answer with a quote from Gustave Flaubert that I have thumbtacked on the wall beside my writing desk:

"It is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horse, the leaves, the wind, the words that my people uttered, even the red sun that made them almost close their love-drowned eyes."

How could I say it any better than that? What I find most difficult is creating that universe.

Q: What do you read when you're not writing? Who are your favorite authors?

JF: Like many novelists, I'm unable to read fiction when I'm writing it, as we're so easily influenced by other voices. And because I'm almost always writing I'm afraid I've gotten way behind on my reading, particularly of contemporary fiction.

While I was writing *The Wild Girl*, I actually reread *Anna Karenina*, because I was pretty sure that I wouldn't start writing in Tolstoy's voice. And I was struck once again by what an enormous novel that is (and I don't mean just in terms of page length, though it is a doorstopper). What a truly omniscient performance; the characters of all ages, sexes, classes, professions are all such individuals, so vivid and perfectly rendered, such complete and "real" human beings. I was humbled and stunned all over again by Tolstoy's greatness.

Right now I'm in the middle of writing a new novel, and I recently decided to reread Flaubert's (whom I also revere) *Madame Bovary*. I also love Knut Hamsun. And in terms of living authors, who's greater than Gabriel García Márquez? Although I don't dare read him when I'm writing. My other favorites are too numerous to mention.

Q: Can you recommend some books for fans of your novels who would like to get even more perspective and historical background on the time period, cultures, and events that you depict in your novels?

JF: Partly for that purpose, I've included extensive bibliographies at the end of both novels. But if I had to recommend just one book to provide historical background about the Indian wars in both the Great Plains and the Southwest, it would have to be Captain John G. Bourke's *On the Border with Crook*. Bourke was General George Crook's aide-de-camp and a fine amateur ethnographer in his own right. He participated in almost all of the important events and military campaigns against both the Cheyennes and the Apaches. It's an absolutely fascinating true account of that era.

Courtesy of www.readinggroupgold.com

Discussion Questions

1. The Cheyenne are often referred to as “savages,” even by the women who voluntarily travel to live among them. During this time period, what is it that makes the Cheyenne savage, and the white “civilized”? Are there ways in which you would judge the Cheyenne in the novel more civilized than the whites? Are there ways in which you consider them less civilized?
2. Were you surprised that Little Wolf, the Cheyenne chief, was so aware and seemingly resigned to the fact that his culture was doomed? How does this differ from our attitudes and assumptions as U.S. citizens?
3. Did you admire May Dodd’s rebelliousness? Did you find it shocking that she would leave her children behind? Do you consider her a sympathetic character?
4. Did you find it believable that the U.S. government might undertake a covert project such as the “Brides for Indians” program? Do you think the author had more modern history in mind when he developed this idea?
5. Were you surprised by elements of the Cheyenne culture as depicted here?
6. Do you think that the Cheyenne culture was respectful of women? Consider what might seem contradictory elements — for example, it is a matrilineal society, and yet warriors could have multiple wives.
7. Compare what the Cheyenne culture valued in women compared with what white culture at the time valued in women. Contrast Captain Bourke’s fiancé, Miss Lydia Bradley, with May Dodd. In what ways, do May and Lydia represent different types of women? In what ways have cultural expectations of women changed since this time period, and in what ways have they remained the same?
8. Did you find it believable that the white women embraced the Cheyenne culture, and willingly married with them?
9. Compare your concept of romantic love, and married love, with the relationship that develops between May and Little Wolf.
10. Were you surprised by the violence among tribes as depicted here? Did it contrast with your understanding of Native American cultures? What similarities were there between the violence among tribes, and the violence between whites and Native Americans?

11. While depicting the slaughter of Native American culture, Jim Fergus also portrays the imminent decimation of the natural landscape. Consider both tragedies. Were they equally inevitable? Are they equally irreversible?

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