



One Thousand White Women: the Journals of May Dodd

by Jim Fergus

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin; 1st edition

(February 15, 1999)

ISBN-13: 978-0312199432

**1999 Fiction of the Year Award from the Mountains and
Plains Booksellers Association**

Summary

One Thousand White Women begins with May Dodd's journey west into the unknown. A government program, in which women are brought west as brides for the Cheyenne, is her vehicle. What follows is the story of May's adventures: her marriage to Little Wolf, chief of the Cheyenne nation, and her conflict of being caught between two worlds, loving two men, living two lives. Jim Fergus has so vividly depicted the American West that it is as if these diaries are a capsule in time.

In Brief

Based on actual historical events, *One Thousand White Women* is the poignant story of May Dodd's journey west. Committed to an insane asylum by her blueblood family for an affair with a man beneath her station, May finds that her only hope of freedom is to participate in a secret government program whereby women from the "civilized" world become the brides of Cheyenne warriors. She soon falls in love with John Bourke, a gallant young army captain, even though she is married to the great chief Little Wolf. Caught between two worlds and two men, Dodd is forced to make tough decisions that will change her life forever.

Reviews

"Jim Fergus so skillfully envelopes us in the heart and mind and skin of his main character...that we weep when she mourns...and our hearts pound when she is in danger."

—**Colorado Springs Gazette**

Long, brisk, charming first novel about an 1875 treaty between Ulysses S. Grant and Little Wolf, chief of the Cheyenne nation, by the sports reporter and author of the memoir *A Hunter's Road* (1992). Little Wolf comes to Washington and suggests to President Grant that peace between the Whites and Cheyenne could be established if the Cheyenne were given white women as wives, and that the tribe would agree to raise the children from such unions. The thought of miscegenation naturally enough astounds Grant, but he sees a certain wisdom in trading 1,000 white women for 1,000 horses, and he secretly approves the Brides For Indians treaty. He recruits women from jails, penitentiaries, debtors' prisons, and mental institutions—offering full pardons or unconditional release. May Dodd, born to wealth in Chicago in 1850, had left home in her teens and become the mistress of her father's grain-elevator foreman. Her outraged father had her kidnaped, imprisoning her in a monstrous lunatic asylum. When Grant's offer arrives, she leaps at it and soon finds herself traveling west with hundreds of white and black would-be brides. All are indentured to the Cheyenne for two years, must produce children, and then will have the option of leaving. May, who keeps the journal we read, marries Little Wolf and lives in a crowded tipi with his two other wives, their children, and an old crone who enforces the rules. Reading about life among the Cheyenne is spellbinding, especially when the women show up the braves at arm-wrestling, foot-racing, bow-shooting, and gambling. Liquor raises its evil head, as it will, and reduces the braves to savagery. But the women recover, go out on the winter kill with their husbands, and accompany them to a trading post where they drive hard bargains and stop the usual cheating of the braves. Eventually, when the cavalry attacks the Cheyenne, mistakenly thinking they're Crazy Horse's Sioux, May is killed. An impressive historical, terse, convincing, and affecting.

Kirkus Review

"Fergus is gifted in his ability to portray the perceptions and emotions of women. He writes with tremendous insight and sensitivity...This book is artistically rendered with meticulous attention to details that bring to life the daily concerns of a group of hardy souls at a pivotal time in U.S. history." —**Booklist**

Biography

<http://www.jimfergus.com>

Jim Fergus (born 1950) is an American author. He has a degree in English from Colorado College, and has worked as a tennis teacher and full-time freelance writer. His first novel was *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd*,^[1] which won the 1999 Fiction of the Year Award from the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association and sold over 250,000 copies in the United States. The French translation was on the French bestseller list for 57 weeks and has sold over 400,000 copies in that country.



Jim Fergus is a longtime correspondent for *Outside Magazine* and a contributing editor for *Sports Afield*. His work has appeared in dozens of national magazines and newspapers, and he is the author of the nonfiction book, *A Hunter's Road*. He lives in northern Colorado.

(From the author's website)

Jim Fergus was born in Chicago on March 23, 1950. He attended high school in Massachusetts and graduated as an English major from Colorado College in 1971. He has traveled extensively and lived over the years in Colorado, Florida, the French West Indies, Idaho, France, and Arizona. For ten years he worked as a teaching tennis professional in Colorado and Florida, and in 1980 moved to the tiny town of Rand, Colorado (pop. 13), to begin his career as a full-time freelance writer. He was a contributing editor of *Rocky Mountain Magazine*, as well as a correspondent of *Outside magazine*. His articles, essays, interviews and profiles have appeared in a wide variety of national magazines and newspapers, including *Newsweek*, *Newsday*, *The Denver Post*, the *Dallas-Times Herald*, *Harrowsmith Country Life*, *The Paris Review*, *MD Magazine*, *Savvy*, *Texas Monthly*, *Esquire*, *Fly Fisherman*, *Outdoor Life*, *Sports Afield*, and *Field & Stream*. His first book, a travel/sporting memoir titled, *A Hunter's Road*, was published by Henry Holt in 1992. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jonathan Kirsch called *A Hunter's Road*, "An absorbing, and even enchanting book."

Fergus' first novel, *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd* was published by St. Martin's Press in 1998. The novel won the 1999 Fiction of the Year Award from the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association, and has become a favorite selection of reading groups across the country. It has since sold over 250,000 copies in the United States. An

international bestseller, *One Thousand White Women* (Milles Femmes Blanches) was also on the French bestseller list for 57 weeks and has sold well over 400,000 copies in that country.

In 1999, Jim Fergus published a collection of outdoor articles and essays, titled *The Sporting Road*. And in the spring of 2005, his second novel, *The Wild Girl: The Notebooks of Ned Giles* was published by Hyperion Press. An historical fiction set in the 1930's in Chicago, Arizona, and the Sierra Madre of Mexico, *The Wild Girl* has also been embraced by reading groups all across the United States. Winston Groom, author of *Forrest Gump* called it, "an exhilarating and suspenseful tale that makes the heart soar."

Jim Fergus is currently working on a new novel, a family historical fiction involving his French mother and grandmother, and spanning the first two-thirds of the 20th century. He lives presently in southern Arizona.

Bibliography

A hunter's road : a journey with gun and dog across the American upland (non-fiction, 1992)

One Thousand White Women: the journals of May Dodd (novel, 1998)

The sporting road : travels across America in an airstream trailer, with fly rod, shotgun, and a yellow lab named Sweetzer (non-fiction, 1999)

The Wild Girl: the Notebooks of Ned Giles, 1932 (novel, 2005)

Interview with the Author by Classic Bookshop.com

The following interview took place on Saturday, May 2, 1998, at Classic Bookshop 310 South County Road, Palm Beach, FL USA.

Author Jim Fergus autographed his book, "One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd" (St. Martin's Press) Saturday at Classic Bookshop in Palm Beach, where he announced the book has been optioned by CBS for a television movie.

The book is Fergus' debut novel based partially on fact blended with his wonderful imagination to tell a tale of a remarkable group of women who embarked on an adventure into the land of the Cheyenne in 1854.

"The women move out west to become the brides of Cheyenne warriors," Fergus said. "It is based on a true event. In 1854 a group of Cheyenne chiefs requested of the white authorities one thousand white women as brides for their young warriors. The Cheyenne were a society in that any child born automatically belonged to the mother's rather than the father's tribe. As early as 1854 the Cheyenne saw that their life as they knew it as free people was going to be soon swallowed by the whites. They saw this as the perfect way to assimilate themselves into white culture. All of their offsprings, from their way of thinking, would automatically be white people."

But, the peace conference where the Cheyenne made their proposal fell apart and the women were not actually sent to mate with the Cheyenne.

"But in my book they do," Fergus said.

Fergus was researching a non-fiction book about the Cheyenne for a biography of Little Wolf, chief of the Cheyenne nation, when he learned about the request for the women. He knew he could expound on the subject and turn it into a novel about what could have happened if the chiefs had not been refused.

"I wasn't sure just what I was going to do with the information at first," he said. "I thought it was going to be a non-fiction book. Then I thought it was going to be a collection of three novellas. My agent decided to drop the other two and turn this one into a novel. I was very intrigued by this, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I got to thinking what if it really did happen."

Fergus is a longtime correspondent for Outside magazine and a contributing editor of Sports Afield. His work has appeared in numerous national publications and he is the author of the non-fiction book, "A Hunter's Road."

While researching for "One Thousand White Women," Fergus lived in a 1972 Airstream trailer with his yellow lab, Sweetzer, following the trail of the Cheyenne through Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota and Montana. The trailer was filled with books about the Indians and for many months he lived and breathed the Cheyenne.

I wanted to get a sense of the land," he said. "I've always loved the Great Plains and have spent a lot of time traveling around them. In most cases the native prairie has been radically

altered by modern agriculture, but in most cases you still get a feeling of the vastness and intrinsic drama of the country. It's still a very spiritual place, and by immersing myself in Indian themes as I traveled, I began to imagine what it was like to have lived there a hundred and fifty years ago."

Fergus revolves his story around May Dodd, a woman from a wealthy and prominent Chicago family who dared to fall in love with a man below her station and was committed to an insane asylum. She volunteers for the Brides for Indians program to gain her release.

"In those days it was possible for husbands, or families, to commit women to asylums under almost any pretense," he said. "For instance if a woman displayed symptoms of what is now commonly known as PMS, she might be locked up for the rest of her life."

May joins a colorful set of characters as she treks across the wild west.

Discussion Questions from Reading Group Gold, courtesy of St. Martin's Press:

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?

12. How were women expected to behave and what could they expect to happen to them if they didn't "toe the line" and has that changed really?

by susanbeamon (see profile) 09/16/09

13. is it hope, fear or disbelief that keeps oppressed groups from fighting back?

what is the effect of westernization on the world today? how do we view those who fight it?

Questions from Reading Group Guides.com

1. One Thousand White Women was written by a man, but in a woman's point of view. Did you find this convincing?
2. In 1875, rebellious or unorthodox women were sometimes considered "hysterical" or insane. Is this still true in some circumstances today?
3. Does May Dodd remind you of a modern-day woman?
4. What would be today's equivalent of traveling west to an unknown part of the country with a group of strangers?
5. Did you feel the Native Americans were accurately portrayed in the novel?
6. If the "Brides for Indians" program were actually put into effect in 1875, do you feel it would have been effective?
7. What circumstances would prompt you to undergo a journey like the one May Dodd took?
8. Do you consider One Thousand White Women a tragic story? If so, why? If not, why not?
9. Of the supporting female characters, who did you find the most likeable?
10. Were any of May Dodd's actions unsympathetic? Would you find it difficult to leave your children behind in order to escape a horrendous situation?

From the Novelist Database

How plausible are the women's reasons for volunteering for the Brides for Indians program?

First of all, the Brides for Indians program itself stretches the imagination. The taboo against miscegenation would have made it unthinkable, even if there had been compelling political reasons to accept the Cheyenne proposal of trading women for horses. And there weren't compelling political reasons. President Ulysses S. Grant was a notorious drinker, and indeed, in

the story he is drunk when Little Wolf appears at the White House to make the proposal. Perhaps that's the best explanation of why the U.S. government might embark on such an unlikely experiment instead of resorting immediately to the kinds of force it exerts on the tribes to move them at the end of the story.

If you accept the idea that the government would initiate such a secret program, for whatever reasons, there is still the question why any woman would volunteer. As improbable as the program sounds in the twenty-first century, in the nineteenth century, it would have been even more so. The women were being asked to offer their very bodies, and to bear children whom they would ostensibly leave behind with the Cheyenne if they chose to end their contract with the government after the mandatory two years of service. They would have to leave civilization as they knew it behind and live out in the open, in a strange culture they regarded as savage or even bestial. They would have to marry outside their own race, a radical notion at the time. Who would volunteer, under such circumstances?

The novel proposes a few plausible reasons to volunteer. First off, it seems very likely that prison inmates would seize any chance at freedom (although it perhaps makes less sense that they wouldn't sneak away at the first opportunity rather than fulfilling their two year contract). They were promised a clean slate after two years, so perhaps that serves as a reason con artists like the Kelly twins would choose to stay their two-year term. Inmates of mental institutions would also agree to nearly anything to earn their release, particularly under the wretched conditions of abuse May describes in her Chicago asylum. Their participation is made somewhat less plausible by the fact family consent had to be given, but perhaps we are to believe most papers were forged, as May's were.

Other reasons for joining the program are harder to accept. Martha enrolls because she is plain and hopes to find true love. Gretchen seems to believe it is her only chance at a home and family as well. Are we to believe that there were no men who would consider marrying these two, or the other "unmarriageable" women in the program? And then to believe that they imagine a happy ending for themselves as squaws living in tipis? People do desperate things in hopes of finding happiness and love, but it is difficult to believe these women would not simply move across country to some frontier area where women were scarce and try their luck that way first. Gretchen had made one attempt at marrying as a mail-order bride, but given the obvious difficulties of the Brides for Indians program and the life the participants would have to lead, it's hard to imagine that she wouldn't try again before committing herself to such a radical course of action as marrying a Cheyenne.

How is the place of women in the Cheyenne tribe different from what the women experienced in their own culture?

In many ways, the chores assigned to women are less appealing than the more exciting and/or prestigious ones given to men ("it occurs to me that perhaps our cultures are not so different after all: the women do all the real work while the men do all the talking," May observes wryly [p. 88]). It is possible to challenge those roles and still remain a part of tribal life, however, which is very different from the way many of the women were cast out of white society for their various infractions.

May's attempts to assert her rights and opinions are met with more grace among the Cheyenne than in Chicago. Phemie is the trailblazer for all the women, as the first to refuse to perform women's work. She insists she is a hunter and warrior, and once she has demonstrated her skills, the Cheyenne appreciate what she is able to do and think nothing more about it (p. 95). Similarly, once Helen Flight's great talent for painting is discovered, the tribe finds a way to use those abilities for the good of the community, and the traditional women's role that Helen would otherwise have had was set aside without the least complaint. The key to acceptance seems to be demonstrating abilities in other areas, and whenever a woman can do that, she can set a new course for herself.

What aspects of Cheyenne culture does May find superior to her own? Why?

May is put off, especially when she first encounters life in a Cheyenne tribe, by the strangeness of the language and customs, and the difficulty of living far from the conveniences of life as she knew it in an American city. Despite this, she comes to appreciate certain aspects of Cheyenne culture as equal or even superior to her own culture.

May is particularly struck by the sense of community among the Cheyenne. May also lauds the generosity of the people towards each other when she describes her husband Little Wolf's responsibility for the tribe's poor. And while women's opinions are not welcome in certain ceremonial gatherings and during certain meetings (much to May's annoyance), she finds that Little Wolf does listen to her, and "while he hardly agrees with my views on all subjects, he nevertheless listens to them with great respect. Perhaps our own society might learn something from the savages about relations between sexes" (p. 176).

Dirty Gertie may express it best when she says of her own days living with the Cheyenne that "It was like livin' in a damn fairy tale." But, she continues: "Like I say, where the fairy tale comes to an end real fast is when you bump against the white man's world again" (p. 163). May's own fairy tale will bump into that white man's world and disintegrate in the same bloody way that Gertie's did

Further Reading:

Deborah Larsen, *The White* (2002). This historical novel is based on the life of Mary Jemison, who was captured by a Shawnee raiding party in 1758 and then adopted into a Seneca tribe. As Mary tells her story, she meditations in almost poetic language on the meaning of home and civilization.

Molly Gloss, *Wild Life* (2000). Equal parts fantasy and frontier adventure, *Wild Life* is Charlotte Bridger Drummond's journal, describing the chain of events that lead a woman of 1905 first to join the search for a lost child in a dense forest in the Pacific Northwest and then to live as member of a family of mountain giants.

Jeffrey Lent, *Lost Nation* (2002). Even northern New Hampshire had its wild spots in 1838, the year Mr. Blood and Sally, a 16-year-old prostitute Blood won in a card game, arrive at Indian Stream. Dark and bloody, *Lost Nation* memorializes both a nation's loss of innocence and its self-destructive impulses, while never losing sight of compassion and will to survive.

Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (1997). National Book Award-winner Frazier's *Cold Mountain* is aptly named, for Confederate deserter Inman is surrounded by a landscape as vivid as any character in the novel as he walks the long way home to the land and woman he left behind to fight in the Civil War. Ada's experiences as she waits for Inman's return add another dimension to this story about survival, love, and loss.