

Q & A with Tatjana Soli on

The Removes

Why are you drawn to the historical novel? The Western?

I am drawn to certain ideas, and sometimes these ideas seem to be embodied best in a particular time and setting in the past. I was struck in the writings of Richard Slotkin by his idea that the mythology of the frontier could be used as a way of “imagining and speaking truth.” He writes about the dark undercurrents of American culture through violence, both on the land and its people. This didn’t start with today’s headlines — there’s a long history that led us to the place we are today.

As far as writing a Western, it is a genre almost entirely dominated with male characters, and so it really appealed to me to focus on the female experience. It was important to me to not have the false ethical clarity usually associated with Westerns. All of the characters in the book are in a state of contradiction with themselves in a way not usually associated with the genre.

So how did you come to the story?

I was reading about the 7th Cavalry during the Vietnam War, and there was an aside that it had started in 1866 at Fort Riley, Kansas, commanded by none other than the infamous G. A. Custer. Custer became a kind of cipher for me to understand the

mentality of manifest destiny at the time, the nation's justification of expansion and conquest. We think of him now as a glory-hunter, an Indian killer, but at the time he was a national hero. I wanted to reconcile the cognitive dissonance of those two sides of his image. Of course the more I read, the more complex and flawed I found the man compared to our stereotyped images, the cartoonish versions in most portrayals.

What hooked me, though, was mention of his wife, Libbie, and their twelve-year marriage where she followed him into the field during the Civil War, and lived on military posts on the frontier during the Indian Wars. As I read about the two of them the time period became more and more compelling, and that was when I stumbled on the captivity narratives, when the whole project took shape. Although captivity narratives did exist previously in England, North American narratives had an ideological purpose. They were used to get public opinion on the side of stigmatizing the "other" culture, in this case making a case for removing Native Americans to reservations. Mine starts at that point and then continues on.

What interested me was history from a ground level viewpoint — one filled with unimaginable crime, cultural genocide, violence, and racism — from angles that we aren't used to seeing, namely, women's. One viewpoint from that of a white, privileged woman, who had been taught to be afraid of it all, and one from a captive, who has been forced into a foreign culture through an act of violence.

The setting in this book is distinct. Can you talk about that?

I always view setting as another character, and it is especially true in Westerns in terms of the characters' interactions with their environment. The sheer distances and the time it took to cover them were daunting. There is no such comparable experience to be had in the world today in terms of isolation. As a country we have nostalgia for the cowboy period of the Old West, and I wanted to offer a kind of hyper-realism in its place.

Can you talk about the violence in the book?

Yes, part of the mythology of the land was the freedom it offered. Yet it was a dangerous freedom. Violence was routine, and I felt it was necessary to include it in graphic specificity because this weighed on the minds of the characters and colored their actions. It was real and everyday, banal and terrifying all at the same time.

Can you explain the meaning of the title?

I took the idea of numbered removes for chapter headings from the *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. I felt its meaning was mysterious and never explicitly told, and this was perfect for the state of mind that all the characters go through in the course of the book. Each has the props that we all depend on taken from them — family, faith, culture, the myriad comforts of

civilization that make us who we are. So through time, they become this hybrid thing, one foot in each place, and that is a very modern dilemma.

This book is dissimilar to your previous ones. How do you go about picking subject matter?

Part of the joy of being a writer is letting one's imagination roam widely. I write about what obsesses me, but of course I can only write about it from my own point of view. The similarities in my books usually center around the problem of violence, the clash of cultures, which occurs during the big movements of history, and the innocents that get hurt in the process, so those are the common elements.

Last question: What's next?

I have one hundred pages of a novel I wrote last summer during a break. I haven't looked at the pages since then, but I'm preparing to read and hopefully fall in love with that story again. It's contemporary and takes place during the Iraq war. That's all I'll say for now. War is tending to be a recurrent theme in my work. I hadn't really thought why until I recently read an essay of William James that helped me to understand the reason: "War... is a great revealer of what men and women are able to do and bear." I think that's a subject I will never get to the end of.