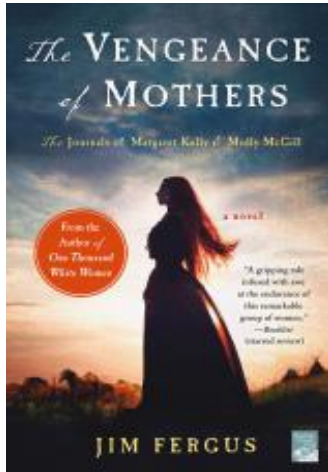


The Vengeance of Mothers: The Journals of Margaret Kelly & Molly McGill

by Jim Fergus



About the Book

9 March 1876

My name is Meggie Kelly and I take up this pencil with my twin sister, Susie. We have nothing left, less than nothing. The village of our People has been destroyed, all our possessions burned, our friends butchered by the soldiers, our baby daughters gone, frozen to death on an ungodly trek across these rocky mountains. Empty of human feeling, half-dead ourselves, all that remains of us intact are hearts turned to stone. We curse the U.S. government, we curse the Army, we curse the savagery of mankind, white and Indian alike. We curse God in his heaven. Do not underestimate the power of a mother's vengeance...

So begins the Journal of Margaret Kelly, a woman who participated in the U.S. government's "Brides for Indians" program in 1873, a program whose conceit was that the way to peace between the United States and the Cheyenne Nation was for One Thousand White Women to be given as brides in exchange for 300 horses. These "brides" were mostly fallen women; women in prison, prostitutes, the occasional adventurer, or those incarcerated in asylums. No one expected this program to work. And the brides themselves thought of it simply as a chance at freedom. But many of them fell in love with their Cheyenne spouses and had children with them...and became Cheyenne themselves.

THE VENGEANCE OF MOTHERS explores what happens to the bonds between wives and husbands, children and mothers, when society sees them as "unspeakable." What does it mean to be white, to be Cheyenne, and how far will these women go to avenge the ones they love? With vivid detail and keen emotional depth, Jim Fergus brings to light a time and place in American history and fills it with unforgettable characters who live and breathe with a passion we can relate to even today.

Discussion Guide

1. Like the story of May Dodd, this book is told through journal entries written by white women living among the Cheyenne and "discovered" by one of May's descendants. How did this structure affect your reading experience? Did the firsthand accounts make the women's experiences seem more relatable? Would you believe that these journals had been rediscovered and published?
2. What do you think about Gertie's allegiances? She has had some terrible experiences with the United States Army, and yet she continues to work for them, but the women still see her as trustworthy. Do you agree?
3. Were you surprised by the sudden return of Martha, and by the catatonic state she was in? What do you think helped her to begin recovering, and what do you predict her future might be like?
4. On page 62, Molly writes, "We are the innocents they once were, escaping dark pasts into uncertain futures, and in denying us that change, they would be turning their back on their own experience, denying themselves and their friends." Would the Kelly sisters be betraying their own experiences by sending the other women back? Did they make the correct choice not to?
5. Throughout the story, Christian Goodman frequently cites his religious upbringing and moral opposition to war as reasons why he will not fight, either for the US Army or the Cheyenne. Contrast his views with those of the Kelly sisters. Are any of them right or wrong? What about each of their lives leads them to hold these opinions?
6. Throughout the book, many of the women are determined to get vengeance for their murdered families and friends. Analyze the Kelly sisters' reaction to actually getting that vengeance by killing young soldiers. Does this satisfy them, and do you think they will continue in their quest for revenge?
7. Compare and contrast the experiences of the first group of women with those of the "greenhorns." Do you think that the second group of women sent to be brides had an advantage over the first because there were other white women to help them assimilate to Cheyenne culture? Why or why not?
8. Phemie names her band of women warriors the Strong-heart Society. What do you think is the significance of choosing that name?
9. Near the end of the book, Meggie says that women go through three stages of life: before they have children, motherhood, and after their child has died. What do you make of Molly's suggestion that there might be a fourth stage, a new chance at life? Do you think she will achieve that fourth stage?
10. How do you interpret the closing scene of the novel?

Author Bio

Jim Fergus is the author of ONE THOUSAND WHITE WOMEN, THE SPORTING ROAD, A HUNTER'S ROAD and WILD GIRL. His articles and essays have appeared in a wide variety of national magazines and newspapers, including *Newsweek*, *Newsday*, *The Paris Review*, *Esquire*, *Sports Afield* and *Field & Stream*. Fergus was born in Chicago and attended Colorado College. He worked as a teaching tennis professional before becoming a full-time freelance writer. He lives in southern Arizona.

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