



Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

One Thousand White Women: the journals of May Dodd

by Jim Fergus (St. Martin's Press, 1998)

Target Audience: Adult and young adult readers who enjoy American historical fiction with a mature moral focus.

Synopsis: The author, Jim Fergus, follows a large group of white women into unchartered New World territory who are to be exchanged with the Cheyenne for one thousand horses. The goal is to create a generation of a combined race so that the two may live forevermore in harmony and peace. The plot is loosely based upon a true event.

Author Biography: (1)

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 to 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. He presently resides in southern Arizona.

This, Fergus' first novel, won the 1999 Fiction of the Year Award from the Mountains & Plains Booksellers Association, and has become a popular selection of reading groups everywhere. 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 fifty-seven weeks and has sold well over 400,000 copies in that country. It may be interesting to note that considerably more copies have been sold in France than in the United States.

Reviews:

Publishers Weekly

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

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."

Questions for Discussion:

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 as 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 United States 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 US 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 fiancée, Miss Lydia Bradley, with May Dodd. In what way 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?

(1) Excerpted from Jim Fergus' online website, www.jimfergus.com.

(2) Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2002

**Compiled by Benita L. Auge, Cornwall Public Library - March 2009
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**