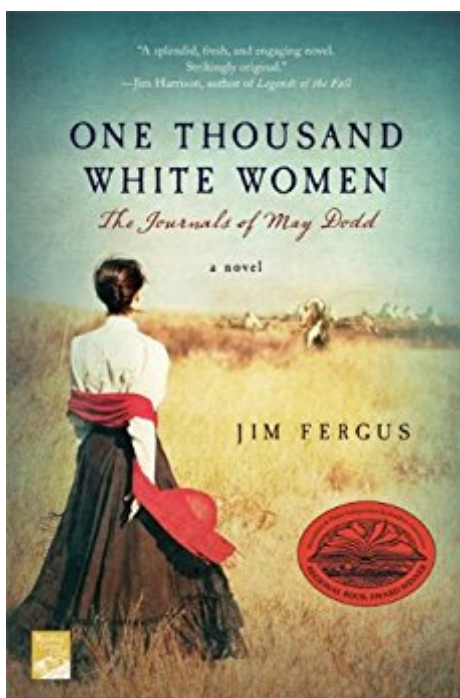


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One Thousand White Women: The Journals Of May Dodd



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I bought this book at the suggestion of a friend. I've read many historical and fictional books about the Old West and settlers, and many other about Native Americans (I am Cherokee). I realize this was a fictional journal before I started reading, and thought the concept was interesting - a sort of mail-order bride goes to live among the Cheyenne as a cultural ambassador. I did enjoy the descriptions of the prairie, daily life among the Cheyenne, and the sisterhood that formed among the other brides and the main character. What I didn't enjoy was the stereotypes of the characters. The

women were all ethnic clichés: the large, lumbering Swiss woman; the African warrior princess; the haughty, racist Southern belle; the lesbian muleskinner; the redheaded, Irish criminal twins; etc. The main character, May Dodd, was tall, beautiful, smart, determined, strong, unflappable, supportive, a natural leader, and basically unbelievably perfect. She has a brief fling with a handsome, influential Army officer, then marries the chief of the village. The one character I really did like and find believable was the Catholic priest who lived in the village. She and her fellow brides run roughshod over the village, breaking cultural taboos and even beating and shaming their men in public. From what I know of Native American culture, the older wives ran the tipi and the younger ones were meek and obedient. The men were not likely to tolerate a disobedient wife, especially one who barges into their sweat lodge and refuses to leave. I was also distracted by the difficult-to-read font used for the non-English words and the accents of the non-American brides. The Swiss lady says "I vill go der yah You kom vid me!" Sometimes the curly font made it almost impossible to detect what was being said. I thought the end of the book was a little rushed too. I wanted to know more about Wren, May's daughter, and about the years on the reservation. I will say that I'm glad the author didn't give us a romance novel happy ending. I was so afraid May was going to run away with the Army officer and live happily ever after. What happened was tragic but more true to our Pioneer history. Overall it wasn't horrible, and I'm glad I read it, but I can't honestly recommend it to anyone who loves books with deep, complex characters or who want their historical fiction to be somewhat realistic. If you want a quick read in the vein of a romance novel, this isn't a bad one.

This book was just SO very wonderful. It is sort of an alternate history...a 'what if'... Fact, a Cheyenne chief in 1854, requested that the U.S. present the tribe with 1000 white women to be brides. Since Cheyenne children belong to the mother's tribe, this would enable children of the Cheyenne to become part of the White Man's world. The conference when this idea was present fell apart and NO wives were sent. But what if? Women in that time in had little way to be independent Without a husband or family to support them... not much of a life. What if the proposal was secretly accepted and the gov't asked, secretly, for volunteers? Now the story with characters so real, so rich, begins. The main character, May Dodd, was one of the volunteers and kept a journal. She volunteered to escape life in an insane asylum...as did others. Many women were sent to asylums for reasons hard... nearly impossible... to believe today. Others were widows, former slaves, prisoners, adventure seekers, poor. Each one became totally, real to me - and I could not help but love each of them. I am stunned by Jim Fergus' ability to create so many women, each so very different from each other, each so complete and detailed. Without effort, I came to know each of the

women. Then, on their travels, I saw the country in the 1860s and met soldiers, women passing as men, good and bad people, and saw the casual shooting of the 'endless' buffalo and other animals. Finally, they and I met the Cheyenne. I learned how they lived. Their lifestyle was described with rich detail - not as a 'noble savage' picture or as 'evil savage' - but as a complete way of life. With the women, I was able to grow in understanding - sometimes approval - sometimes anger. Fergus tells the story of the wives, the husbands, love, sex, religion, danger, and politics. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills - land that the Cheyenne and other tribes had been promised would belong to them forever - changes everything. Despite Jim Fergus making it clear that "One Thousand White Women" is a work of fiction - but the characters - they will become 100% real to you. They certainly did to me.

This book was written with the humor and excitement and anticipation every great novel needs. It succeeds on two other levels as well, though. Firstly, it describes Cheyenne society and customs, the western world, and American life in the 1870's - all in fascinating detail. The other way is different. You know, modern society had forced people into an independent, individualized life, and a lot of people have been casualties of that. In this book, the author, Fergus, managed to describe life as a disenfranchised person sees it. As someone who has been hurt and abandoned by everyone, including those closest to him or her - abandoned by society, friends, and family so that the person must live in isolation or slavery or that person must completely run away and start all over again. Each of the white women had experienced that abandonment and pain. The author described a way of getting out of that world by running away and joining a completely alien world - the Cheyenne nation - and being accepted completely by them.

Jim Fergus did a great job in making this story really come alive. As I was reading this book, I could picture the characters and the scenery through his writing. The story line of people being placed in asylums in that time period seemed very scary but true. His variety and development of the characters was wonderful. I was particularly fascinated by the Black Hills since I had just returned from visiting that part of the country and it was very fresh in my mind. The interaction between the Indians and the whites, showing their likes and differences, kept the reader's interest. Jim Fergus also did a wonderful job bringing the beginning of the story full circle to the end of the book. Make sure you read the author's note at the end which I found fascinating.

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