



One Thousand White Women by Jim Fergus

Discussion Questions

(taken from www.readinggroupguides.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?

Author Biography

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.

Author Interview

(taken from www.jimfergus.com)

Q: You were a nonfiction writer for most of your career -- primarily about hunting and fishing. What inspired you to write fiction?

A: To clarify the first part of that question: I got sort of typecast as a "hook & bullet" writer later in my journalism career, but I actually started out doing general interest journalism-essays, literary and celebrity profiles, interviews, environmental writing, etc.

From the very beginning, from the time I was about twelve years old, I had always intended to become a novelist. All my role models were fiction writers, and after I got out of college I wrote a bunch of short stories and shipped them off to the magazines, certain that I was going to get discovered. And I wrote an unpublished (and unpublishable) novel. It did not take long for me to figure out that I wasn't going to be able to make a living doing this, and so I became a teaching tennis pro, which was the only other thing I knew how to do.

I worked in that profession for a full decade during which time I wrote yet another unpublishable novel. Finally at age thirty, I had put together a little stake, about \$8000 dollars, which in those days still seemed like a lot of money. I retired from tennis and started freelance writing full-time. Of course, the Catch-22 of that business is that in order to make even a modest living at it you have to work all the time; when you're not working on an assignment you're trying to drum up new assignments. It's a very hand-to-mouth existence, not unlike being an itinerant farm laborer, and simply did not allow me any free time for fiction writing. So that old childhood dream was relegated very much to the back burner.

Suddenly I found myself in my mid-40's and it occurred to me that I wasn't any closer to being a novelist than I had been in my 20's. I came upon the idea for *1000WW* while researching what I thought was going to be a non-fiction book about the Northern Cheyenne Indians. An old friend of mine who had some money loaned me enough to take a year away from journalism and write the novel.

Q: You seem to have a great deal of familiarity with the landscapes as well as the cultures you write about. What kind of research have you done for your novels?

A: Well, I always start with the landscape, and the research there is simply a kind of accrual of experience in a place. I need to have a certain familial sense of the land in order to situate a novel in it. In the case of *1000ww*, I had traveled extensively in the northern Great Plains in the course of my magazine work, and I really knew and loved that country.

With *The Wild Girl* I was less familiar with the landscape of southern Arizona and northern Mexico. But I had recently moved to the southwest and had already spent enough time down there to know that I would come to love that country, too. The northern Sierra Madre mountains are incredibly rugged and spectacular, and I made several trips down there, traveling through the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. I took a horse pack trip up into the mountains with a Mormon outfitter out of Colonia Juarez,

Chihuahua, just to get the lay of the land. And in order to be able to write the scene in which the wild girl is captured, I also went on a mountain lion hunt on muleback with a rancher who hunts lions with a pack of hound dogs.

Because of my background in journalism, I tend to be very hands-on that way; I really need to see and experience these things before I can write about them. As to the cultural research, I felt a tremendous responsibility to know as much as I possibly could about the respective cultures and histories of the Northern Cheyennes and the Apaches in order to be able to write as truly and accurately as I could about them. For me the research takes as long as the actual writing of the novel.

Q: Some of your most memorable characters are female--May Dodd in 1,000WW; the wild girl and Margaret in THE WILD GIRL. Do you enjoy writing from a female perspective? What kind of challenges does it present you as a writer?

A: Yes, I do enjoy writing from the female perspective. As a male writer, I find that it takes you completely outside of yourself, offering a kind of clean canvas, a completely fresh point of view free of your own ego, opinions and prejudices. It's quite liberating in that way.

I've never been particularly interested in writing fiction about myself or in having myself as the protagonist of my novels, and I find that any time a male writer writes from a male perspective, the author's own point of view inevitably bleeds through the character-which is not necessarily a bad thing, either. The challenge, of course, in writing from the perspective of the opposite sex is to try to do so credibly.

Q: When westerns first became popular, Native Americans were frequently portrayed as savage villains. Then the tide turned and Native Americans were often depicted as noble and victimized. You depict Native American cultures with a great deal of texture and complexity. The Cheyenne in 1,000WW for instance are being decimated by the US government, but they also commit terrible acts of violence against other tribes.

Do you think about the politics of the way Native Americans have been treated when you write, or do you try to put that aside and just tell the story? Do you set out to make a point in your novels?

A: One of the things I've heard from Native Americans who have read my novels is that they appreciate the fact that I try to avoid portraying them as one or the other of those one-dimensional stereotypes-either as the villain, or the noble savage. Of course, the truth is that they're human beings like the rest of us, capable of tremendous savagery as well as great beauty and spirituality.

The revisionist notion of Native American history has it that all the tribes were living together in harmony, each in its own inviolable region, until the evil white man came along to steal their land and disrupt their perfect way of life. But the reality is that long before we showed up, these native tribes were, with some exceptions, warrior societies who had fought each other for centuries.

As always in nature, the stronger had pushed the weaker out; they had enslaved each other and committed terrible atrocities. Which is not to forgive, or excuse, our treatment of Native Americans.

As to the politics of this, it's hard to write about the subject, even fictionally, without touching on it, but I certainly don't set out to write political manifestos or polemics. My main goal as a novelist is simply to tell a good tale, and if readers also find a point in my novels, that's fine, too.

Q: You write a great deal about morals. For instance, in 1,000WW May Dodd is judged an immoral woman, the Cheyenne are judged as immoral savages. In THE WILD GIRL, Billy Flowers is depicted as have a very clear moral code, for better or worse, in great contrast with those around him. What is it about morality that fascinates you?

A: I'm interested in the sort of quicksilver, subjective nature of morality, the idea that virtually every

culture, every religion, and even each era, has its own rather specific set of rules for it. And I also find fascinating the nearly desperate need that human beings have to impose their own particular version of morality upon others, to the point that we're willing to slaughter each other in the name of our own moral codes.

At the same time, we have a tremendous capacity to rationalize our own behavior as moral, no matter how despicable it might be. What is more grotesque, for instance, than the killing of babies and children? And yet every nation does it under the banner of morality.

Q: What do you most enjoy about writing novels? What do you find the most difficult?

A: The first part of that question I'm going to answer with a quote from Gustave Flaubert that I have thumb-tacked on the wall beside my writing desk:

"It is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, as man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horse, the leaves, the wind, the words that my people uttered, even the red sun that made them almost close their love-drowned eyes."

How could I say it any better than that? What I find most difficult is creating that universe.

Q: What do you read when you're not writing? Who are your favorite authors?

A: Like many novelists, I'm unable to read fiction when I'm writing it, as we're so easily influenced by other voices. And because I'm almost always writing I'm afraid I've gotten way behind on my reading, particularly of contemporary fiction.

While I was writing *The Wild Girl*, I actually re-read *Anna Karenina*, because I was pretty sure that I wouldn't start writing in Tolstoy's voice. And I was struck once again by what an enormous novel that is (and I don't mean just in terms of page length though it is a doorstopper). What a truly omniscient performance; the characters of all ages, sexes, classes, professions are all such individuals, so vivid and perfectly rendered, such complete and "real" human beings. I was humbled and stunned all over again by Tolstoy's greatness.

Right now I'm in the middle of writing a new novel, and I recently decided to re-read Flaubert's (whom I also revere) *Madame Bovary*. I also love Knut Hamsun. And in terms of living authors, who's greater than Gabriel Garcia-Marquez? Although I don't dare read him when I'm writing. My other favorites are too numerous to mention.

Q: Can you recommend some books for fans of your novels who would like to get even more perspective and historical background on the time period, cultures, and events that you depict in your novels?

A: Partly for that purpose, I've included extensive bibliographies at the end of both novels. But if I had to recommend just one book to provide historical background about the Indian wars in both the Great Plains and the southwest, it would have to be Captain John G. Bourke's, *On the Border with Crook*. Bourke was General George Crook's aide-de-camp and a fine amateur ethnographer in his own right. He participated in almost all of the important events and military campaigns, against both the Cheyennes and the Apaches. It's an absolutely fascinating true account of that era.