
Ms. Terry Gamble

The Water Dancers
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What inspired you to write *The Water Dancers*? Do you have a personal connection to the story?

My family has long had ties to a region of Northern Michigan that became a favorite summer destination in the 19th century. Fascinated by the seasonal metamorphosis and the different denizens of the area, I wrote a story in 1992 in which I described boats being towed from their moorings to winter storage across a green autumn lake after their summer owners had left. A year later, in what was to become the seed of *The Water Dancers*, I wrote a scene about a young Odawa woman standing in the urine-warm water of a boggy, inland lake. Eventually, this woman grew into the character of Rachel Winnapee whose experience with the March family illustrates the contradictions found in many summer communities where the wealthy exert their seasonal claim on a place that, for the rest of the year, belongs to the townspeople. In the original iteration of the book, the story was told in the voice of a girl whose mother was part Odawa and whose father was the son of the butcher. In subsequent drafts, this mother, who became Rachel, bears a child by her employer's son. The daughter who narrated the story disappeared altogether — one of the perils of being a fictional character that exists at the whim of a writer!

Why did you decide to give your book its extended time-frame, from 1942-1970?

As a child of the 60s and 70s myself, I was intrigued by how my parents' experiences during WWII contrasted with those of my generation during Vietnam. Wars, like geological upheavals, are huge catalysts for change. The post-war affluence generated in the 50s made way for a new generation that questioned the legitimacy of the American presence in Southeast Asia. If WWII had been a social and economic leveler in my parents' generation, my generation was rapidly reassessing its social and political orthodoxies on every level. American class attitudes — so entrenched since the 19th century — seemed glaringly irrelevant, even in the context (or perhaps especially in the context) of a place as determinedly immutable as Beck's Point and its equivalents elsewhere. Thus one could argue that Ben Winnapee, in 1970, will have access to more opportunities than the class-restricted Woody March of the 1940's.

Rachel and Woody's love for each other crosses lines of race, class, and culture. Which of those separating lines seems most inflexible to you? Would their relationship have a better chance today?

"Class" is a somewhat fungible concept in American society; one could say that the quintessential spirit of The American Dream subverts the very notion. Although "rich people" are still spoken of as a separate, discreet group, the reality is that anyone can become a rich person, just as any rich person can become impoverished. WWII uprooted young Americans from the lethargy of the Great Depression and sent them to fight side by side, bringing them home in a wave of prosperity not seen since the 1920's. America had a new sense of itself and, in the wake of this reassessment, subtle fissures cracked the established culture of American life. Were it not for his war experience, a character such as Woody March may never have questioned the inevitability of the life to which he was born. Had he not been wounded and traumatized, his eyes may not have been opened to the possibility of someone like Rachel Winnapee. His dilemma may seem quaintly anachronistic in today's world where multi-culturalism — at least where I live in San Francisco — has become the norm. Even so, I would have to say that the obstacles presented by disparities in class (as defined by socio-economics), race and culture still exist today, albeit with different manifestations than those of the 40's and even the 70's.

What is your sense of the vitality of Native American culture today? Are things any better now than during the period in which your novel takes place?

Although I have written about a Native American character in *The Water Dancers*, I am not Native American and am not qualified to speak to this issue other than giving my impression. That being said, my sense is that native culture that has enjoyed a renaissance over the last twenty or so years. Many universities have Native American study programs. Students are again learning the languages. Native American ritual, dance, and crafts are celebrated and appreciated by the numerous powwows and galleries. And many tribes have benefited financially from the casino windfall. Although gambling creates a number of cultural and social challenges, these profits have provided educational, healthcare, and land acquisition opportunities to the tribes. Nevertheless, many problems that have been endemic have not been obviated. A doctor friend of mine who works on a reservation in New Mexico points out that issues associated with long-entrenched poverty — alcoholism, cancer, depression, diabetes — will not go away over night.

What books and authors dealing with some of the themes of *The Water Dancers* would you recommend to your readers?

I still consider Edith Wharton, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Theodore Dreiser to be some of the best writers on class and society. Although *Age of Innocence* is my favorite, Wharton's less known *Summer* deals with a similar theme of a girl "compromised" by someone from a different class. And Dreiser's *American Tragedy* pulls the reader into one of the more dire extrapolations of unwanted pregnancy. The old theme of poor girl/rich man appears over and over again, with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* coming to mind. The history of the tribes of Northern Michigan is wonderfully explored in an old favorite, *The Loon Feather* by Ilona Fuller. Along the theme of wars' impact on the people who fight them, I would recommend Fitzgerald (again), Hemingway, Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance* and *The Winds of War*, and anything Tim O'Brien writes on Vietnam, particularly *The Things They Carried*.