

Q & A on Deep Creek

What is Deep Creek?

Deep Creek lies in Hells Canyon, on a remote mountain stretch of the Snake River, between Oregon and Idaho. In May 1887, a gang of outlaws ambushed and slaughtered over thirty Chinese gold miners there. The hacked-up bodies floated downstream for weeks. A local judge tried to bring the killers to justice, but after a sham trial in Oregon, all went free.

Why didn't the jury convict?

They were all white ranchers or friends of the accused. To them the Chinese were heathens, loyal only to their alien ways. The same attitudes prevailed in Idaho, where local boosters wanted statehood—and no bad publicity. The Chinese deaths are one of the worst genocidal mass murders in U.S. history, yet for over a century, the story was buried, forgotten, denied. But why? *Deep Creek* is our tale of what might have been.

How did you find the story?

Will learned about this American tragedy while on a *National Geographic* assignment in 1981. For years he compiled historical research, but the record was fragmented, the coverups entrenched. Eventually, he decided that some true stories are best told as fiction: in this case, a novel about crime and justice.

How do you work as collaborators?

Our favorite analogy is tennis; it's a continuous exchange. Together we compile research and lay out back stories and plot outlines. Will writes a first draft, which Anne expands, refines, cuts, and improves. Back to Will for editing and polishing. Back to Anne for more of the same. We spent four years on a dozen drafts, using a spare, suggestive style to tell a rich, dense story.

What kind of novel is it?

We borrow from many literary traditions. *Deep Creek* is historical fiction; it's also a romance, a thriller, a police procedural, a social novel and yes, a Western. But not a conventional one: the book is set in the Pacific Northwest in the years around 1890, at the very end of frontier days. The towns have telegraph and telephones, imported wines and same-day World Series scores.

What's your storytelling method?

Realism laced with strangeness. Our initial motive was to reclaim the dead Chinese from obscurity. But our trio of investigators awoke other themes and echoes: Joe Vincent, the small-town judge, is a middle-aged Yankee grown bitter over his life. Lee Loi, the ambitious young mining-company agent, is a Yale graduate, no longer sure of home. Their river guide, Grace Sundown, is *métis*, mixed French and Indian, a woman haunted by too many secrets. All three are cultural half-breeds, repeating the long American struggle between native and stranger.

How do you balance fact and imagination?

A few solid dates and documents do survive about the massacre at Deep Creek, and these we use as landmarks, weaving the story around them. We don't make a simple distinction between history and fantasy. At the heart of our book lies the conviction that humans constantly seek to transcend their limits. Because the miners die horribly, their ghosts cannot rest. To gather evidence against the killers, Joe Vincent impersonates an old prospector, a dangerous masquerade of real pretending. To escape death, Grace and Loi enter other states of being. Even Dr. Stanton, solid man of science, understands how Grace can bring home aspen leaves from a treeless canyon. Hells Canyon is a very strange place.

Why call yourselves Dana Hand?

Under our own names, we've written eighteen nonfiction books on American literature, history, and public issues. But Howarth & Matthews sounds like a law firm. We needed a short, unisex pen name. "Dana Hand" comes from both sides of our families.

Are you doing another novel?

Yes, the working title is *Lion Rock*. It's set in Tanzania, on the northern safari route. It's another intelligent thriller, full of violence, pursuit, and much brooding about East Africa, where mankind arose and the last great wilderness clings to survival. The Chinese will be along as well, but cast in new roles.

Where can we learn more about Dana Hand and Deep Creek?

At our web site, please: www.dana-hand.com