

History & Fiction

Three citizen-readers in Oregon have all asked the same question: why do you fictionalize the lives and personalities of people who really lived? Wouldn't that be offensive to their survivors? The focus is invariably on Joe Vincent and his marriage to Libby Leland.

We answer such questions about historical fiction by gently emphasizing that the genre is fiction, not literal history. As we point out in our Afterword, some documents do survive concerning the Deep Creek killings, and we tried to make the story conform to them, scattered, ambiguous and conflicting though they may be. Every excerpt from the *Lewiston Teller* is real, as Joe's letter to the Chinese consul (July 19, 1887) is authentic; but to build a narrative, we adapt elements of the story to frame those documents in imaginative ways, using fact as a departure point for informed speculation, imagination, and even fantasy.

We made every effort to track down the life of J. K. Vincent, only to find considerable gaps. We did find a genealogy of JK's family line, tracing back to Huguenots on the Isle of Jersey, in the 1600s, and we used US Census figures for 1820-1910 to trace his residences, and the names of people living there, but we never discovered his picture, his burying place, or what became of many of his descendants.

Of course, we aren't writing a biography of one J. K. Vincent, but a novel about an imagined figure we call Joe, inspired by Judge Vincent but not identical to him by any means. Our man is 56; the real JK was 65 when he went upriver. We wanted him younger, to make his relation with Grace more credible. Once you change such elements, you're no longer writing history, about which descendants might indeed take offense, though we certainly worked very hard to make the "look and feel" of 1887-92 in Idaho and Oregon as exact as possible.

Several documents suggested to us that JK's married life was, in fact, complex. He wed Elizabeth (we are careful to call her, instead, "Elisabeth" or Libby) Leland when she was 5 months pregnant; two of their younger children had shotgun marriages in early adolescence, causing JK to post a notice in the *Lewiston Teller* refusing liability for his son's debts. Joe's matrimonial troubles in our story may strike readers as "modern," but we found many accounts of adultery, illegitimacy, scandal, and divorce occurring in the region at that time (a wider useful study of this topic is Hendrik Hartog, *Man And Wife In America*).

But fiction also has its powerful internal laws and necessities. The real Vincents had ten children; our fictional couple has four, some corresponding with actual offspring, some not. The Joe-Grace romance is important to us, and we were careful to give it a long story arc. Joe's 1865 decision to spurn Grace and marry Libby is an error for which he pays again and again. At first he tries to atone through buying Grace's education. He writes to her steadily until 1876, when Libby finds the letters, and for a second time he renounces Grace, just as Little Big Horn and the Nez Perce War occur to fuel more white racism, and theft of Native lands, in the region. When an embittered Grace turns up as a river guide in 1887, Joe has a third chance to redeem himself, and that means seeking

justice, and finally renouncing Libby and all the bad karma that followed from marrying her. (These plot elements come to the surface slowly, as Carolyn See's admirable review in the *Washington Post* says, "in a way that closely resembles real life.")

If Joe had simply "run away" with Grace, that would make him unattractive to readers. He would be a liar, a two-timer, and a coward to boot: this man is our hero, out to seek justice? So we made a partial case for him by portraying Libby as a character whose psyche is quite similar to that of Blue Evans, the arch-villain. They even look alike, and it's hinted that they may be cooperating to destroy Nell as well as Joe's reputation in town. We read many books about psychopaths; the depth of their evil is hard to believe, unless you have to cope with one. (See the conversation on the bluffs between Joe and Dr. Stanton.) So our Libby has almost nothing to do with the "real" Mrs. Leland, whose life story was almost impossible to trace.

Now back to history and documents: The *Teller* often taunts JK's activities as marshal or judge, suggesting that Alonzo Leland didn't care for his son-in-law. And once the trial in Oregon was over, JK immediately left Lewiston, a town where he had been a principal citizen, for a quarter-century. It seemed reasonable to us to infer that the town was hostile to him.

In a historical fiction, everything is both real and imagined. Was a marriage exactly so? Were the ghosts in Hells Canyon real? Were the killers, or the townspeople, or the trial? Our story is "what might have been," as we say in the Afterword, and our motive is to ask readers to see the past in a new way, and to ask themselves two pivotal questions: Why are people so cruel to each other? And do you think this could happen again?