

An interview with Lauren Small

*What brought you to write Choke Creek?*

I grew up in Colorado, where the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, one of the worst atrocities of the Indian Wars, took place. I was educated in Denver schools, but never heard a word about Sand Creek or, for that matter, about the pivotal role Colorado played in the removal of Native Americans from the West. When I became an adult, I became curious about the history of the place I grew up in and decided to read about it. I was horrified to learn about Sand Creek, but even more outraged that the massacre had been so thoroughly hidden. I decided to write about that.

*What happened at Sand Creek?*

It's a complicated history, and it's worth looking into in more detail—there have been several good books written on the topic, such as Stan Hoig's *The Sand Creek Massacre*. Basically a mixed group of federal troops and volunteers, under the command of Colonel John Chivington, massacred a peaceful band of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians camped in southeastern Colorado on the banks of the Big Sandy Creek. Over 160 Indians died that day, mostly women and children. Afterwards the soldiers looted the Indians' property and desecrated their bodies in ways that were both shameful and gruesome.

*Why was the massacre never talked about?*

Well, it was, but that was the problem! Chivington claimed Sand Creek was a justifiable battle, and most people in Denver agreed. Two of the soldiers under his command, however, were horrified by what they had seen, and wrote letters about it. As a result, the army launched an investigation, but the perpetrators were never punished. To this day some people still claim Sand Creek wasn't a massacre.

*What was the biggest challenge you faced when you wrote Choke Creek?*

There were so many! A few writers—such as the Native American poet Simon Ortiz—have pointed out similarities between the Indian Wars and the Vietnam War, and I wanted to write about that. I decided to set the book in the late 1960's and created two families that trace their roots to what I decided to call "Choke Creek." Evie Glauber is descended from the newspaperman who reported on the massacre and Eason Swale, the boy she loves, is the great-grandson of one of the cavalrymen who protested the incident. Eason goes to Vietnam, and when he comes home a deserter, the story takes off.

*You wrote Choke Creek from many different points of view, using not only Evie and Eason but also their fathers and even, at the end, Evie's grandmother.*

Yes. That was also a difficult choice to make. I tried writing the book solely from Evie's point of view, but there were so many important things she had no way of knowing

about—such as Eason's experiences in Vietnam. I expanded to the other characters in order to capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the story I wanted to tell.

*Writing from the point of view of a soldier in Vietnam must have been difficult for you.*

It most certainly was! I had a lot of trepidation following Eason to war; I grew up during the Vietnam era so have a lot of memories about that, but all of them were stateside. I ended up doing a lot of research, reading novels, journalism, medical accounts, histories, and autobiographies about the war. Tim O'Brien's books were particularly helpful to me—he is, I think, one of the best writers on Vietnam that we have. There have been so many powerful movies made about the war, too. What interested me most, of course, was the way the Indian Wars influenced the conduct of the soldiers. They called particularly dangerous areas, for example, "Indian country," and even had Indian names for weaponry, such as Cheyenne and Apache helicopters.

*Is that why the game of cowboys and Indians is such an important theme in the book?*

There was a time when every little boy aspired to be Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett, when John Wayne and Gary Cooper were heroes. Boys were given cowboy hats, boots, and cap guns as gifts; children everywhere played games of cowboys and Indians. No one, needless to say, ever wanted to be the Indian in these encounters, and in the end the Indians always lost—that is to say, they were killed. As a child, the games seemed perfectly innocent to me, but now, when I think about them, I am horrified. What would we think, for example, if the Germans had won the Second World War, and generations of German children grew up playing games of Nazis and Jews? This kind of game playing is clearly a powerful cultural phenomenon. I'm still not sure I understand it completely, but I did my best to portray it in my book.

*John Dufresne has called place in Choke Creek "a character in fact, suffused with narrative, with memory and imagination, with a history." What does setting mean to you?*

In my mind stories always arise from particular settings. One of the most profound things we can all do—and need to do—is understand the place we come from. That means digging deep, like an archaeologist, looking at hidden layers of history. In fiction, landscape grounds a story, makes it feel real, and makes it come alive. When a writer evokes a place well, we feel it through our senses: the way the soil smells and looks; the way the wind sounds. Stories derive their uniqueness and their power from specific landscapes, and from specific time periods, too.

*Early in the book, Evie sees a ghost walking in the creek behind her house. What role does the supernatural play in Choke Creek?*

Introducing a ghost into my story was a difficult choice to make. I don't particularly care for ghost stories, although I'm a great admirer of writers like Haruki Murakami who use supernatural elements in their works in surprising, insightful, and very satisfying ways.

The idea for the ghost grew out of the Sand Creek massacre site. People who have visited it have reported hearing the voices of the victims wailing in the wind. I've been to the site twice and have never had this experience, but it resonated with me. I decided to give it to Evie, and from there the idea of a ghost naturally grew.

*Were there any books you read or any particular authors who inspired you as you wrote Choke Creek?*

I have been an avid reader ever since I was a child, and in many ways I feel as if all the books I have read contributed to the writing of *Choke Creek*. It was like having a deep well I could reach into time after time to draw inspiration. But there were several books that I kept close at hand and that I found myself looking at again and again. One was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and the other was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both of these books are simply written and yet extraordinarily compelling. And they take on challenging questions of tolerance and social justice, which interest me as well.

*Why did you publish this book on your own?*

The publishing world is in a state of flux nowadays, and many writers are struggling to find outlets for their work. The self-publishing industry is growing rapidly—almost one-third of the books that came out in 2007 were published that way. I tried to get commercial backing for my book but was told it didn't fit any established markets. I didn't know how great my book was—writers can never judge their own work—but I did believe I had written a story that deserved to be told. I decided to bring it out on my own.

*You've been taking Choke Creek to schools.*

*Choke Creek* is the kind of book adults can read and enjoy, but I am especially excited about bringing the book to teens. The book teaches important lessons about history in a way that is, I hope, both entertaining and exciting. I can't imagine anything more satisfying than giving a book to young adults at a time when it just might change their lives. It's my greatest pleasure to meet with students who have read my book and hear what they have to say about it.

*What do you think is the lesson of Choke Creek—or of Sand Creek, for that matter?*

When we meet Evie at the beginning of the book, she's an indifferent student. She hates school and dreads one day taking over her family's newspaper. All she wants to do is ride horses. By the end of the book, her attitude changes. History, she discovers, isn't a dry and dull topic. It's multi-faceted, rich and complex, full of stories waiting to be told. I hope *Choke Creek* will encourage people to look into the history of the place they came from. And I hope that they'll look into all sides of the story.

*What are you working on now?*

I'm writing a novel loosely based on my family's history. My great-grandmother, a Romanian Jew, married at fourteen and came to this country soon after. She was illiterate and could barely speak English, but managed to raise four children who went on to become quite successful. It's the typical American immigrant story in many ways, but with some interesting twists along the way.

*Sounds like you're still interested in exploring history, and the place you came from.*

Absolutely. I've been reading about Romanian Jewish communities in the mid-nineteenth century. It's a fascinating place, and hopefully I'll be able to craft out of it a story that's fascinating to my readers, too.