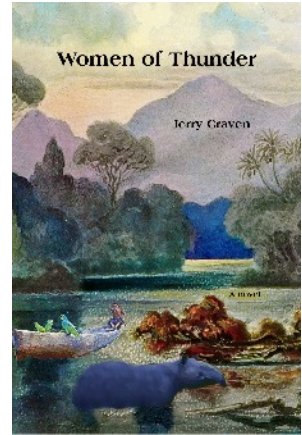


Women of Thunder

Comments from the Author



Rosa Rojas, a Venezuelan folk healer and trained nurse, is startled at the return of Thomas Seal after 18 years. She agrees to go with him on a trip similar to one they had taken as children down a river that flows through a dangerous jungle. Throughout, the story shifts between Rosa's voice and Tom's, divulging traumas they have suffered: the deaths of Rosa's family members, the horrors Tom experienced in Vietnam. They take minimal provisions, hire a driver, go to a river jungle in the interior of

Venezuela, and push off in a canoe as night comes on. At first the trip seems to allow them to return to the innocence of their childhood.

The novel is an adventure story and an unusual kind of love story. Read it to meet memorable characters; read it for its basic tale, its plot. It is also a literary novel, an awarding-winning novel that deals with important and fundamental human issues.

One of the readers who assessed the manuscript for TCU Press wrote an astute series of observations about the manuscript. With permission of the press I have included some of those comments here. Unfortunately this reader asked to remain anonymous, so I do not know the identity of the person who read the novel as a literary work, looking at much more than character and plot. I have included the two of the TCU Press questions that the reader addressed. —Jerry Craven

A Professional Editor's Assessment of *Women of Thunder*

1. What is the aim and scope of this manuscript? How well does it succeed? Is the thought original?

Women of Thunder is a novel. The aim and scope of this fiction, beyond the telling of a story of which author has included a single page synopsis, tests and toys with all that is novel, and much that is not novel, in the literature of the past 90 years, in literary portrayal of people, events, the passage of time, psychology, the sub- and unconscious, the visible, the invisible, the fleshly and the spiritual in the value of guilt and suffering in the discovery of meaning. Also, there is the implicit consideration of these ideas in the light

and shadows of multiculturalism and imperialism Yes, whew. There is the ironic and somewhat hallucinogenic overlay and play of “native” or naïve and folk/illiterate/oral (yet somehow closer to the source) versions of spiritual reality upon or against colonial or literary versions. Some of the literary versions of reality are scenes in and of themselves hallucinogen-induced. Evil men speak wisdom. There is always the undertow of old, new, and non-religious ways of perceiving good, evil, innocence and guilt. These ways are not being tested as paths to spiritual opening. They are used as paths to the novel’s opening, whose jungle message is “All roads lead to ruin, or ruins.” And after that, what? Where? A witch shows a crazed lover his face in her mirror; she “hands it to him” and when he looks, he sees his past and shoots her, and she, as other shot women in the book, fall into the jaws of piranhas. Then he shoots himself. One Englishwoman with a cracked skull lies in the dust of a batcave, impossibly this one’s mother, that one’s mother the characters suddenly “know.” There is evidence without truth, a poet with a death wish, truth without evidence. A huge snake gets the head of the missionary between its jaws. Someone hearing of it says, defending the snake: He won’t die, the snake can’t swallow him, it was probably an accident. The decades are decayed. Entropy is on the increase and the death rate, human or otherwise, remains at 100%.

Whose story is it, to tell and to believe? How does how we believe—as well as what—change over time? How true is memory? How true is received truth? How unreliable is observed truth? Much of the real action and movement occur in individual and then simultaneous dreams about these things, like amazing operatic duets.

Plotting turns on the asking of questions, at crucial and at slack moments, questions offered by the characters themselves, whose asking reminds us that questions don’t always get answered except with more questions, or “stories” interrupting the story. What is truth? Pilate’s jest shows up also, but he is the only one who washes his hands of it. The characters seek what endures, what cannot be naturally decayed, yet consider Truth to be a matter of opinion. One of the points the novel *seems* to make is that relevance and truth—when we seek our own or seek to make our own redemption—offer themselves chimerically, a matter of opinion. “Believe what you want,” says Maybre, the murdering snake-bit missionary of doom. As in *Alice in Wonderland*, “We are all crazy here” could be the motto for planet Earth, and certainly

Venezuela, especially along this novel's river. Here it is very important to point out that the operative word is "seems." "What does it mean? What does it mean?" one character asks, throughout the journey. An echo comes, all along, "What do you think it means?"

Writers elsewhere have pointed out that to know what something is requires us to know also what it is not. *Women of Thunder* might be considered an eccentric, even post-modern metafictional narrative, in that the author seems to know where the center is; that is, he is well aware there is a *there* there and he chooses to play with it, not ignore it; the game is his game, and we readers are his toys as well. Ex-centric, on the other hand, means reader and author may or may not know what or where the center is, but either way, the narration seeks NOT to honor it. It is disrespectful of conventions, traditions, rebellious in intent, outside, out caste, and cast out. Also, cast away. *Women of Thunder* is *not* ex-centric; at times it offers fan dance college survey glimpses of metafictional bedlam and chaos, but without convincing us or losing us; we know where we are, even if the lovers and fools in the story don't: through it all, there is the river, along which the story chapters shimmer like so many charms on a bracelet or scales on a snake. Basically, it is the story of a do-over journey and a pilgrimage. A shell-shocked soldier drags his white man's burdens back to his childhood home in South America, to relive a childhood journey and lay his burdens down. All the characters are wandering along that same river, but each bearing his or her own bundle. Most of the time they paddle the same canoe, with or against the flow. Or is this a similar canoe to one they used to paddle, or lost, or had stolen, or borrowed or were given...? And the river may have changed course... Never the same river twice, as they say. Seems to be true of canoes, and witches, and wives. Things recur. Things drop from sight. Things drop—or get pelted—from trees, howler monkeyshines and territorial malice angrily served up like the apple trees in Oz having at the travelers heading off toward the Emerald Kingdom. There is—yes—a character named Oz. There is a half-blind shaman whose fearful cotton eye can see and heal, but who is defeated in a face-off by Tom's recitation of "The Jabberwock" with contrapuntal backup support by cued natives cluelessly wailing doo-wop. Tom repents later and gives the shaman his "Irishman's glass eye," relinquishing it with, "I've had this eye a long time." Mirrors reflect. Spiders come out when someone shakes the webs. Sometimes they bite. "I shall die, I shall die," Rosa grieves, when bitten. Tom says, "No you won't." She says, like some pouty

Hemingway babe in arms, bucking up, with a dainty sniff: “It hurts though. I shall hurt.” Was that funny? I laughed. We know from the very first chapter, we ain’t in Kansas any more.

Is it original in thinking? In development? In effect? Is the scholarship sound? Normally I would leave all these questions for another section for my response, or call them not applicable, but here, I must say even though this is fiction, they apply. The author has done much homework and much thinking. Has read widely and wildly and has considered. He knows and we know a novel is both what and how. Cool, he has Rosa remembering the “time of cholera.” The author has achieved a surface, and a depth, to which traditional and simple labels will not adhere. He dares us to make one stick: magical realism or a send-up of it, along with much else in contemporary culture/film. Magic realism it is *like*, but it is not. What is it, then and oh what does it mean? What do you think it means... etc. The game never wearies him or us.

Throughout the book, the author uses “real” details of scene and remembered scenes and virtual reality of altered states with hyper-focus and clarity as a gift to the reader struggling in the haze and maze of the characters’ mental morass and regretful miasma. Ceremonies of healing move from special acts to the simple daily things we do to survive; in short, the ordinary. In liturgical language, the time between miracles is called “ordinary time.”

That those ordinary and extraordinary details, especially the natural ones from the remarkable world they travel through, are noticed and reported by very bewildered people makes it even tastier. We sift every bit of evidence we get. We test the spirits. When we pay attention, the gates of beauty open.

There is clarity, beauty, profundity. And then there are lines seemingly intentionally badder than the worst of bad Hemingway contest losers... or Saturday Night Live “news” announcers tripping on bennies and LSD: “The eel took my baby.” And “When we make love, may I call you Don?” And “Allen should not have urinated on Catrina, even if he meant well,” and the witch’s daughter asking, “Are you the man to join me, even for a short forever?” Somehow—about which more later—it succeeds. Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban critic, calls the fictional destination and intention—such as where this novel has led its reader—as coming to a “limit state”

(*estado limite*), where I—the reader—can realize “all levels of reality and mystery,” I can make a willing suspension bridge to beyond the wild blue yonder.

Having said that, may I point out that the reader’s actual conversation with the book—I mean the way it argues against our expectations, and offers us what it has to offer, through and despite its “how”—comes much closer to what I call “surrealism” than and processing, psychological PTSD/psychiatric work and visions and messenger dreams as well as disorientations and drug-induced uncertainties and reflections and fragmentations and duplicities which are the workings of and the expression of the subconscious and unconscious. The “realism” and details serve as a foil for these “inner” states. Reader is expected to slog through all this jungle with his or her own moral compass, which at times is as wilted and unreliable as the watches in Dali’s “Persistence of Memory.”

For me, the question raised in the reader isn’t about authorial pranks, or even intentions. The question isn’t querulous, either. I simply ask myself, as regards the author’s “success”—Is there something real about the reality, is there something mysterious about the mystery? To some extent it is up to the reader, not the author, to let go of conventional expectations of exposition, to accept the author’s daring, or dare. This book is a “pack of cards” as Lewis Carroll would put it. A fabrication, yes, and we are made excellently aware we are looking at a made thing, an artifice, but there is conviction in it, a species of sincerity, and pleasure in and from the author’s making and yes, even delight and entertainment for the reader. Not how? but “and how!” Explanations and definitions fail. Words fail. “If you can explain it, then it’s not magic realism,” says Luis Leal. Nor is it Leal’s *marvelous real*, to narrow the choices. Just accept it: it has magical realism’s duality—the natural and the spiritual in equal sway. But it achieves a sort of magical surrealism. Chagall’s lovers swooning on their backs through the night sky over the village. How well does this author’s risk-taking succeed? One of the pleasures comes in the dreams. An example: when Tom takes the machete to the thorn tree on the cliff, what he cuts down is the one growing from Rosa’s own back in her dream. Her relief is something we feel. His perplexity is also something we share. I call that success. magic realism, because of the active cerebral functioning

2. Is the manuscript well written, well organized?

A journey is pretty easy to organize. A round trip uses the same maps and legends there and back. Expect nothing, accept everything, make the most of your chances. It isn't too long. And its last page, its last lines seem to come astonishingly suddenly. Like dreaming on a long bus trip, the sudden stop, the squeal of the door thrown open, we wake, startled back and stumbling into somewhere we've known all along but are seeing for the very first time. Very nice the way the "end" is presented. Masterly. Restrained. Two final questions, the book's same questions asking and answering each other like birds deep in the jungle. The words are there, and then their meaning comes, playful and profound, opening the future. We make the meaning. The last lines fall on a page with a lot of white space after. Upon that emptiness beyond text, this reader's mind paused for a summit view, astonished at the panorama, as though the rope of bats from the underworld has skeined out into the twilight sky, the tapir women trapped in the mountain have thundered away free at last, and there is peace in the valley.