

Writing history

Jonis Agee weaves the pioneer past into a new novel

BY ALDEN MUDGE

Jonis Agee didn't intend for her 10th book, *The River Wife*, to become her first historical novel. Instead, she set out to tell a more contemporary story of life in the heartland, as she had done in her 1993 novel *Strange Angels*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book, and in her highly praised short story collections *Acts of Love on Indigo Road* and *Bend This Heart*. But sometimes a book has intentions of its own.

"I was in despair often," Agee says of her efforts to keep the novel—recently named both a Book of the Month Club and a Literary Guild selection—on track. She spoke about the particular challenges of writing *The River Wife* during a call to her home in Omaha, Nebraska. Agee and her second husband, to whom the new novel is dedicated, moved there this year, returning to the city of her birth after years in Iowa, New York state, Los Angeles, the Twin Cities and Ann Arbor as an itinerant student/writer/academic. Agee now teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. "I'm one of those writers who have to be in a place that works for me," she says. "I love Ann Arbor, it's a truly great university, but I felt like I was in an upside-down Tupperware bowl there. I had to leave. I like places that are not peopled. I need that immensity of space and that ability to feel small so that other parts of life can expand against that openness."

But Agee's compositional struggles had less to do with place and space than with the novel's back story. In the background of the work-in-progress lingered an alluring tale, based on a true account, of a young girl pinned under a fallen rafter and abandoned by her family during the catastrophic 1811 New Madrid earthquake, an event of Katrina-like proportions that changed the course of the Mississippi, destroyed nearby towns and altered a way of life.

"I couldn't get rid of the idea of that girl," Agee recalls. "Sometimes before I'd go to sleep, I'd figure out ways to rescue her. That story stayed with me for a couple of years, and my agent and my editor kept asking why I didn't tell it. But I resisted that stretch into historical material because I thought I didn't know enough. Finally I decided I had to try, and once I did, it just began working. Then it became a matter of paring things down, because I ended up writing a 700-page novel. That's the way it is for me: once the door opens, things just come flooding."

From that flood of imagination emerged the character of Annie Lark Ducharme, whose ordeal and eventual rescue in the aftermath of

the earthquake is told in riveting detail in the opening chapter of *The River Wife*. Her rescuer and soon-to-be husband is a French fur trader named Jacques Ducharme. He is the magnetizing force of the novel, a soul-distorting mix of love and unbounded acquisitiveness that quickly transmutes him into a violent, rapacious river pirate and sets off an enduring contest of wills between Annie and himself, a conflict that reverberates through successive generations of Ducharme "river wives," through whose eyes we see and feel the action unfold, as recorded in the "family books" they keep.

The River Wife, with its familial conflicts, dark mysteries, regional history and evocative use of language, has the flavor and tone of a Southern gothic tale. This might be because Agee has always drawn inspiration from her "literary forebears" William Faulkner and James Agee, who is also a distant relative. But it is equally possible that she draws from an understanding arising from her own family history.

Agee's parents, she recounts, had a storied romance, meeting in third grade in a small Missouri town, falling in love despite the abiding hatred that existed between their two families and secretly marrying in high school, a fact their children learned only after their parents' deaths, which occurred within two days of each other.

"I grew up with a lot of family history, the way many Southerners do," she says. "You're told a lot of stories. There's a lot of gossip and there's always a little mystery involved: little entanglements adults won't explain, dropped sentences, suggestions. It isn't the sense of family that probably a lot of other

people have. In every generation there is somebody responsible for keeping the family books, continuing the research, keeping the story going. I think I ended up writing this novel, which is historical, because in some way I am always working my way back."

Agee illustrates and enlivens *The River Wife* with vivid sensory detail. To achieve that depth of detail, she did large amounts of research, traveling through the region often, then surrounding herself in her workspace with old photographs and artifacts—Civil War bullets, old handmade bottles dug from Mississippi River mud, pieces of stone, cotton gathered from the roadside during harvest near the site of New Madrid.

"Those tactile things kept me anchored to the work," she says. "I really wanted to enable my readers to bring their bodies to that place and time. I think one of my jobs as a writer is to preserve a time and a place like a historian. But a writer is also preserving more of the world than a historian. We're archivists not just of history, but of the physical and psychological and sociological world."

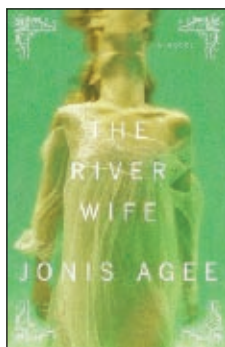
"I've always felt that our world is so endangered that I want to put as much of it in my books as is possible, so that we never lose it completely," Agee says. "I hope that if someone happens to read this book 50 years from now, they will be able to feel they are in the place and time, as we feel reading the novels and plays of other times." ♥

Alden Mudge is a juror for the California Book Awards.



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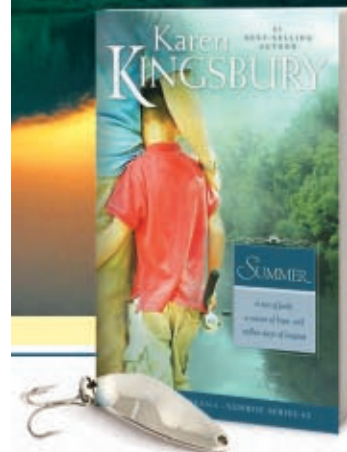
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