

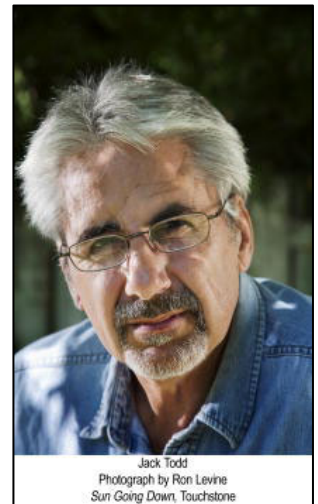
SUN GOING DOWN: A Novel by Jack Todd

Touchstone / Simon & Schuster

An essay by the author about the book's background

Twenty-five years ago, I received a thick package from my mother in Nebraska. Inside were two family memoirs: one was written by her great-uncle Eb Jones, the son of one of the first pioneers in South Dakota and a noted frontier character who was at various times a cowboy, a scout for the U.S.

Cavalry at the time of the Wounded Knee massacre and an adventurer who helped drive a herd of buffalo from Arizona to Wyoming. Eb had kept a diary for fifty years between 1885 and 1935 but his diaries were lost in a house fire; the memoir was his attempt to reconstruct the most important events in the diary. The other was a memoir left by my mother's Aunt Garnet, Eb's niece and the daughter of my great-grandfather Squier Jones, one of the rare men in the Old West who began with a 160-acre homestead and became a wealthy rancher. Together, the memoirs covered an astonishing period of American history from the California Gold Rush in 1849 through the Great Depression of the 1930s, encompassing the Civil War, the Indian wars, the settling of the High Plains and World War I.



In one way or another, members of our immediate family had taken part in many of the great events of that pivotal era. Eb's father John Milton Jones had walked to California during the gold rush and run a store boat on the Mississippi River in the decade prior to the siege of Vicksburg; Eb had witnessed the results of the massacre at Wounded Knee and he and Squier had survived the terrible winter of 1887 in Wyoming when some ranchers lost 90 per cent of their livestock. Garnet Jones Johnson had been a hard-riding cowgirl working for her father Squier and as a girl had taken part on long and difficult cattle drives from Ainsworth in the Nebraska sandhills to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

My mother (who spent a lifetime putting up with my semi-literate father while reading Chekhov, Balzac and Tolstoy in her rare quiet moments) thought the memoirs might serve as the basis for a novel. I disagreed. My literary heroes were Ezra Pound, James Joyce and Thomas Pynchon; I was in search of great and complex themes, the more obscure the better. I had no interest in a homespun narrative of life on the frontier, no matter how colorful. In pursuit of that towering fictional edifice, I shed fragmentary novels the way trees shed their leaves, scattering thousands of pages of unfinished works to the four winds. Along the way I also managed to lose the memoirs my mother had sent.

Another twenty years went by before my interest was piqued by a conversation with my sister, Linda Dittmar; with Linda's help I tracked down copies of the memoirs to replace those I had lost along with letters, notes and newspaper clippings provided by other family members. There it was: a grand, sweeping historical epic with a personal and heartbreaking narrative at its core. Not obscure, perhaps, but deceptively complex and difficult to render in prose. There was even, in certain events that took place along the Powder River in Wyoming, an opportunity to pay tribute to the westerns I had devoured in junior high school. It was only when I had exhausted the shelves of westerns in the Scottsbluff Public Library that I moved on to what is considered adult fiction, though much of it is more juvenile than those grand old tales of dashing cowboys and vulnerable cowgirls. At the heart of this story was a real-life cowgirl, my grandmother, Velma, and a real-life cowboy turned rancher, her father Squier Jones. The story of the implacable Squier and the star-crossed Velma drew me more

than anything else: With her sisters, Velma had taken part year after year in the arduous cattle drives that helped to make Squier a wealthy man - but when she crossed him, she found herself exiled from his ranch and left to raise her children alone, at times in the most difficult circumstances.

It was, once I thought about it, much more than a cowboys and Indians story. Eb and Squier had been raised by their mother (who was either part or entirely Lakota) to speak Lakota and to feel a sympathy for the First Peoples which was rare in that time. Eb became a scout for the U.S. cavalry in the period leading up to the Wounded Knee massacre, perhaps the most notorious of all the murderous encounters between the U.S. cavalry and the High Plains Indians. His account of that massacre, ungrammatical and confusing though it is, burned with rage. It is the one part of this novel where the memoir has made its way, more or less intact, into fiction.

In the spring of 2002 I began a novel based on the story of Squier Jones and his daughter Velma, wrote 100,000 words and tore it up. I started over, beginning this time with John Milton Jones (Eb Paint in the fictional version) on the Mississippi River, where he partnered on his store bo at with a freed black slave in the years leading up to the Civil War. Eb's one-page account of that adventure was the basis for Leaving the Mississippi, the first of the five sections of this novel, each set on a different river. I wanted to write a novel which would tell the story of that tumultuous period of history by concentrating on the particular. All the major events in this novel are based on truth, or at least that truth handed down in family lore either through the diaries and memoirs or through the stories my mother told because even in fiction there has to be truth and the truth here is in the lives of four generations of Americans over a period of nearly a century of headlong expansion from the Mississippi River to the High Plains.

When I look at the old family photos of the main characters of this novel, all of them strong and fascinating people, I can only hope that I have done them justice. In this case, "based on a true story" is entirely accurate. The truth of that story sometimes defies belief but it is true nonetheless. The High Plains were not settled without bloodshed, conflict, tragedy and sorrow; triumph for the white man meant disaster for the First Peoples and the ascendance of powerful men with the skill, imagination and implacable will to thrive in such a hostile setting often meant a commensurate degree of pain and suffering for those they loved most.

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