

SUN GOING DOWN

Q&A with author JACK TODD



Jack Todd
Photograph by Ron Levine
Sun Going Down, Touchstone

Author Questions:

1. Any sweeping novel about the American West is bound to be compared to *Lonesome Dove*. How do you feel about *Sun Going Down* being compared to McMurtry's epic novel?

Obviously, I'm gratified and a little embarrassed to find *Sun Going Down* compared with an American classic such as *Lonesome Dove*. At the same time, I should point out that they are very different books. Both are sweeping tales set partially or entirely in the Old West but apart from that, I think, the similarities really aren't there. I had read *Lonesome Dove* when it first came out years ago but didn't remember much about it. I have since re-read it and read *Comanche Moon* and I might have done some things differently if I had read these books while I was writing *Sun Going Down*, which was much more influenced by Mark Twain, Cormac McCarthy, and the Nebraska writer Mari Sandoz.

2. You've managed to tell the story of four generations of one family in under 400 pages, yet the novel doesn't feel rushed or hurried. How did you edit yourself and decide to move on to the next plot or storyline? Given the scope of the novel, did you outline the story prior to writing the book? Did your research or writing process evolve at all while working on *Sun Going Down*?

The greatest difficulty in writing this book was to get so much story between two covers. The first draft was 900 pages long in manuscript form; it was then cut by a third and then cut to half that length before some 120 pages were restored before the final version. I didn't really do an outline; I was following the story of the family as handed down in diaries and memoirs, so the outline was there from the beginning. In the original plan, however, the Mississippi and Big Sioux sections took up no more than a couple of chapters; it was when those sections expanded to their current form that I began to develop a very different and more ambitious version of the book. I knew that two things would be very difficult: the shift from generation to generation, when one set of characters die or move off-stage and are replaced by another; and the gradual shift from a largely male to a female perspective as Eb, Eli and Ezra are replaced as the central characters by Velma and Emaline. For the most part, I tried to trust the story as it was and let it unfold as I felt it needed to and hope that readers would come with me on the journey.

3. *Sun Going Down* is based on memoirs left by your own family, and the character of Velma is based upon your own grandmother, with the "Paint Girls" being your great aunts. Outside of your family's first-hand accounts, what other research did you do in order to craft this novel?

The early sections required much more research than later sections closer to our own time, but my method remained pretty much the same: I relied on family diaries and memoirs for the basic structure but read dozens of other histories and memoirs written by settlers and cowboys as well as some of the great literature from the period, then tried to let it all seep into the work. I also spent significant time at the Nebraska Historical Society and the Denver Public Library reading newspapers from Ainsworth, Sioux Falls, Denver, Sheridan, Scottsbluff and other cities mentioned in the book, going through public documents (I found the marriage certificate for Frank and Velma, for instance) and reading letters written by other settlers. I often do what I call "backfilling," working in more detail from my research during the rewrite phase. I write very quickly, sometimes 4,000 or 5,000 words in a day, but most of the chapters in this book have been reworked at least a half-dozen times and some as many as 40 or 50 times.

4. In conducting your research, did you come upon discrepancies or differences between the family memoirs and notes you received and what you may have found in historical reference books and materials?

I didn't find discrepancies between the memoirs and histories from outside the family so much as I found lively arguments within the family over certain issues, especially the race of the Cora character, based on the real-life Sophia Swift. When I was a boy, I was told that Sophia, my great-great grandmother, was Jewish. But when I had a Jewish roommate in university and he began telling me about "our" heritage, my mother decided to tell the truth. She said that her grandfather Squier Jones, the real-life model for Eli Paint, told people that his mother was Jewish to explain the dark color of his skin, because he would not have been accepted in business if people knew he was part Sioux. Squier's youngest son Lyle Jones, born in 1920, published a memoir before his death in 2007 in which he said that Sophia Swift was a descendant of the "Jewish" Swift Packing Co. family from Chicago. That Swift family, however, is old New England Anglo-Saxon, not Jewish and if Sophia was their heir, it's hard to explain why she was living in one-room cabins in South Dakota and harder still to explain why she knew Lakota and was willing to take her sons on a summer-long trip with a band of Sioux at a time when white women would never go traveling with the Sioux. Of her sons, Eb Jones (whose account of the trip to Devil's Lake is the source of much of this material was especially fluent in Lakota and his reaction to the Wounded Knee massacre was hardly typical of white opinion at the time. I've decided to accept my mother's version, which is that Sophia/Cora was part Sioux. One of my researchers suggested that I have a DNA test to settle it but I declined for two reasons: first, my father was part Cherokee, which might muddle the result. Second, I'd rather have the mystery and a good argument.

5. In researching the book and your family tree, did you come upon some people or incidents that were surprising to you or slightly unsavory? If so, did you work any of those elements into the book?

The librarian in Ainsworth said that Squier Jones was a bit like Tony Soprano. She came up with the story of the mysterious hanging which some people blamed on Squier; it has been worked into the Valley of the Shadow section.

6. Each of the six sections of the book is set on or near a different river. Why did you choose to utilize rivers as a plot device?

The rivers were a natural, organic device to link the disparate sections of the book. The early settlers were entirely dependent on the rivers for everything from irrigation to transport; John Milton Jones, the model for Eb Paint, did run a store boat on the Mississippi River and everything else flowed from there. The rivers flow through the story like the veins and arteries through our bodies and to me, 19th century North America was very much like a living organism - the land and the rivers are also like characters in this book.

7. You wrote in your author's note that you at first had set out in search of your own *Gravity's Rainbow*. How did you come to instead write a great narrative of the birth and growth of the American West? Do you think that *Sun Going Down* shares any similarities with Thomas Pynchon's novel?

I suppose that *Sun Going Down* and *Gravity's Rainbow* share at least the quality that they are both long and ambitious but I wouldn't claim anything else in common with Thomas Pynchon's novel. I do know that I did not become a writer until I realized that I could *not* be Thomas Pynchon or Ezra Pound or James Joyce, nor did I want to be. The writers you most admire are not necessarily the best models for young writers, because their very greatness can be discouraging.

8. Nature plays a central role in the novel, either being a harsh and bitter enemy or a boon companion to your characters, and it is portrayed in vivid detail. Do you have any first-hand experience with some of the difficult weather conditions described in the book?

As a 3-year-old, I was lost for a time behind a snowdrift in the blizzard of '49 in Nebraska. From that time until I left home to go to the University of Nebraska, I spent mornings, evenings and most of my free days from school working beside my father through blizzards, bitter cold, dust storms and searing summer heat. I also witnessed with the rest of my family the famous Scottsbluff tornado during the 1950s, a photo of which appeared in national magazines such as *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* as

part of an insurance advertisement for years after. My father took us to the top of Scotts Bluff when he saw the tornado coming and we watched it slash through the valley, an unforgettable and terrifying experience of the power of nature. I've helped to deliver a calf in -20 degree weather on Christmas Eve, towed cattle out of snowbanks and ridden through thunderstorms, all experiences that were difficult at the time but probably helpful when I began to write this book.

9. Though Eli and Ezra Paint provide much of the central thread to the novel, some of the strongest characters in the story are women, especially those who lead rough, hard lives, and work as hard as the men. As a man, how difficult or how easy was it to write such convincing female characters?

I think it was very hard to write convincing female characters, if indeed I have succeeded. I knew from the beginning that it would be difficult. But I had the personal example of my mother Maxine (Emaline in the fictional version) along with numerous stories of the courage of women in the Old West. Pioneer life was difficult for everyone but it was most difficult for the women; the more I read about them, the more I wanted to write a novel that would show at least part of what their lives were like.

10. Can you share with the reader a bit more about what became of your grandmother Velma, her sisters and their descendants?

Velma's story is pretty much in the book in its entirety, although she died in 1936, not 1933. In fact, I could never quite get comfortable with any other name so she remains Velma, although in life she was Velma Morgan. I spent many happy months in my youth staying on the farm run by her wonderful third husband, the gentle Swedish farmer Jim Lindquist, and I have kept his real name in tribute for his kindness to me. I knew Velma's sister Garnet (Ruby in *Sun Going Down*) well and was once banned from her ranch on Sheep Creek for insulting her cooking. Her memoir and another left by her daughter Alta were also central to the writing of this book. My middle name, Edwin, was taken from Garnet's son, killed on a destroyer in the Pacific in World War II. Velma's sisters Marguerite and Kate (their real names) were also regular visitors to our house, genteel women who led long, full lives. The last time I saw Kate I was 18 years old and my mother had been bragging about how her son was going to be a journalist or a writer as they rode in from the airport. I was out mowing the lawn when they arrived and I hollered at my mother: "Mom, I ain't got no guess for this lawnmower!" Her embarrassment knew no pounds. Kate's daughter Dorothy also provided much help with the writing of this book. Blind Daniel, their brother Dale Jones, really did teach generations of kids to swim at the swimming pool in Torrington, Wyoming, despite his limited vision. If you visit Torrington today, you'll see his name on the Dale Jones Municipal Pool. More of the fate of some of these characters and their descendants will be told in the novel I'm now writing, a sequel to *Sun Going Down*. It also seems strange to me that Eli/Squier's youngest son Lyle lived until 2007, and that I met Eli several times myself when I was very young. He used to come by the house once or twice a year in his big white Cadillac, but all I remember of his was his car and his big Stetson hat.

11. Are you working on another novel? If yes, then what is it about and where is it set? If *Sun Going Down* were to be turned into a movie or mini-series, would you be interested in writing the screenplay and helping with the casting?

Yes, I am working on the sequel, tentatively titled *Fire on the Water*, and it's proving to have at least as many challenges in the writing as *Sun Going Down*. *Fire on the Water* is set primarily between Velma's death in 1933 and Pearl Harbor in 1941, where her son (Bobby in *Sun Going Down*) was a machine-gunner on the battleship Tennessee. I don't think I would be interested in writing a screenplay; it is hard enough to write fiction.

12. As *Sun Going Down* is based on your own ancestors, do you feel that the entrepreneurial spirit is something that runs through your family? How has it been passed down to you? In what ways has it exhibited itself with your other living family members?

Unfortunately, none of the entrepreneurial spirit of John Milton Jones and his son Squier was passed down to my immediate family. We have no talent for business whatsoever, although one or two of us are pretty good with horses - but that comes from my father, who ironically was pretty much just like Frank Hughes.