



Reading Group Gold

The Tale Of Halcyon Crane

Wendy Webb

A Conversation With Wendy Webb

Although you are making your fiction writing debut with *The Tale of Halcyon Crane*, you've worked as a journalist for more than twenty years. Was it difficult to make the switch from nonfiction to fiction? What were some of the challenges?

It was difficult at first. I didn't realize how different the two styles of writing actually are. One of the cardinal rules of fiction writing is "show, don't tell." But as a journalist, you "tell" a story, and as I'd been writing that way for so long, it was second nature to me. It took a while before I even understood the difference between showing and telling well enough to break that habit. Also, plotting and pacing a novel was a completely new experience for me because it's something you never have to do when writing a magazine article. The timing of when to let a bit more of the story unfold is an art unto itself. And consistency—you never even think about it as a journalist, but I found myself constantly going back to make sure Halcyon was wearing the same outfit she left the house in fifty pages earlier.

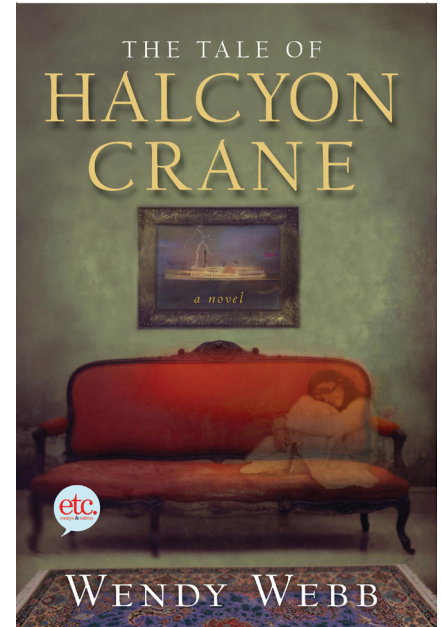
Loving, lively animals play a role in *The Tale of Halcyon Crane*— from the animals that Hallie's veterinarian grandfather cared for to the boisterous dogs Hallie inherits from her mother. Do you have pets?

We have a 130-pound giant Alaskan malamute named Tundra. Readers will notice Madlyn's dogs are also mals, Tundra and Tika. Tika was our husky-samoyed cross; she passed away about five years ago. I believe there's a special connection between people and their pets that fits very well with the magical realism I like to convey in my writing. Pets sense our fears and our sadness, and want only to help. There's something enormously comforting about that. I also love the unqualified joy my dog experiences in the moment— going for a walk, chewing on a bone, giving me a hero's welcome when I walk in the door after a long day.

The Great Lakes clearly occupy a special place in your heart. Have you spent a lot of time on or around the lakes?

I grew up in Minnesota and have a great love for Lake Superior, where I now live. It's a spiritual, mystical place filled with ancient lore and legend. Many local residents actually do have a vague sense that the lake itself is a living thing, which is how the native peoples in this area viewed it. Here's an example: A few years back, a man set out to swim across all the Great Lakes. But he couldn't make it across Superior despite many attempts. In the press, he had been "trash talking" the lake, saying its reputation for being dangerous was a myth. People here thought the lake simply wasn't letting him pass because of it. I think all of the Great Lakes hold that kind of fascination for residents and visitors.

Any special hobbies?



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I like to row and kayak on Lake Superior, and we've got a cabin in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness that separates Minnesota from Canada, where we spend a lot of time. It's a gorgeous area that offers the best of both worlds—unspoiled wilderness and beautiful lodges with great restaurants.

My friends joke that my two major vices are expensive wine and lots of new books, and I love nothing better than a morning of kayaking or rowing followed by an afternoon sitting with a glass of wine on the deck of my cabin overlooking our lake, reading a great book with my dog at my side. And it doesn't hurt if my son and husband are there, either.

Have you read any good spooky fiction lately?

I'm always reading. My favorite book in the genre that I read last year was *The Spiritualist* by Megan Chance. I read it in one day, sitting on the aforementioned deck of my cabin. It's absolutely fabulous. This year, one of my favorite books is *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters. It's deliciously creepy and I could not put it down. I highly recommend those two novels for people who want a little tingle up their spines.

The Tale of Halcyon Crane begins on the West Coast, north of Seattle. Do you have any personal connection with that area?

I lived in Bellingham, Washington, for a couple of years, and I absolutely love that area. It reminds me of Minnesota in a way. But of course, here on Lake Superior we don't have seals or whales. One of the things I loved best about living out there was that I could actually hear the barking of the seals from my house. It's a very relaxing sound. The San Juan Islands are hauntingly beautiful—maybe I'll set a novel there one day.

Your tale is filled with ghosts. Do you believe in them?

I must admit I do. I think this world is filled with things we can't see and don't quite understand. I dedicated the book to my brother, who died of a sudden heart attack a few years ago. Since he passed away, several of us in the family have had odd experiences we can't really explain. Here's just one: I was sweeping the wood floor in my bedroom shortly after my brother's funeral. After doing the entire room, I turned around and saw several pennies strewn on the floor . . . the floor I had just cleaned an instant earlier. It really happened, folks. I can't tell you how or why.

Wendy Webb On Writing *The Tale Of Halcyon Crane*

I come from a family of storytellers. Some of my earliest memories involve sitting at our kitchen table, listening to my parents and relatives tell stories—some of them hilarious, others tragic—about my family's past. These tales were filled with unforgettable characters and fantastic situations, and I know them all as well as I know my own name.

But as much as I loved hearing these stories, I've always wanted to spin tales of my own. In *Halcyon*, I found a woman whose background is the opposite of mine: I grew up hearing everything about my



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family; Halcyon knows nothing about her past. It isn't until she is in her thirties that Halcyon learns of her childhood abduction and sets out to find some answers. What happened all those years ago? Who was her mother? Who were her ancestors? And most important, who was she?

I wanted to include an element of magical realism in the story because I love the notion that something otherworldly can be right around the corner, waiting for you on any given Monday; that the world is filled with things we don't understand and many of us can't see, and that fairy tales, Grimm's especially, could really have happened. I love the goosebumps and tingles up my spine I get from shows like *Medium* and *The Ghost Whisperer* and books like *The Ghost Orchid* by Carol Goodman, and I wanted to write a story that would give people that same type of deliciously haunting, eerie feeling.

I decided to set the story on Mackinac Island because the Great Lakes hold a magic and mystery unlike anyplace else. Many people think the lakes are actually living things, with moods ranging from benevolent to murderous.

I fictionalized Mackinac's name—calling it Grand Manitou Island instead—so I could be free when writing about the specific places, happenings and people there, but readers who have been to Mackinac will recognize it right away. When you go there, you really feel like you've traveled back in time—I think it has to do with the fact that there is no motorized traffic and everyone gets around by horse-drawn carriage. It's a place filled with beautiful Victorian homes, grand hotels, great restaurants, fudge shops, wine bars . . . and a very creepy old cemetery. It seems to me that the whole island is teeming with spirits—if anyplace in the world is haunted, it's Mackinac Island.

There does happen to be a Grand Manitou Island in Lake Nipissing in Ontario, but it's not inhabited. I've since learned that this Grand Manitou Island also has a reputation for being haunted, interestingly enough.

What better place for a woman to go looking for the ghosts of her past?

Another reason I set the story on the Great Lakes was because I wanted to work in a real-life tragedy that occurred there: the worst storm in the history of the region, which happened in November of 1913. I came upon newspaper accounts of the storm when researching another story. They called it the Frozen Hurricane, and it destroyed harbors, piers, and shorelines, demolishing buildings, tearing up concrete streets, dumping feet of snow on land, and, most horrifyingly, sending nearly every ship on the Great Lakes that day to the bottom, all hands aboard. One of the newspaper accounts told of drowned sailors, frozen together, floating out of the fog and into shore. When I read that, I knew I had to include it somehow in my story.

Halcyon does eventually find the answers she seeks, and in doing so gains a greater awareness about who she really is. We're all on journeys of one sort or another—some of us to the past, looking for answers; some of us tentatively moving forward, unsure of what the future holds, and I very much hope *The Tale of Halcyon Crane* speaks to that journey.



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Discussion Questions

1. Hallie's father talks about seeing Madlyn at the nursing home the day before he died. Do you think he really saw her spirit, coming for him? Why or why not? Do you believe the veil between the living and the dead is lifted as a person passes from one life to the next?
2. Hallie has twice been sidelined by men she loved: her husband and her father both were different men than she knew them to be. How did their deception—nonmalicious though it was—affect her? Did she do the right thing by ultimately trusting Will?
3. Each child born of the spell from the Witch of Summer Glen has a special otherworldly ability or gift. With Hallie, her gift develops the longer she stays on the island. Do you think Hallie simply grew more aware of her innate talent, or did being on the island somehow change and enhance her abilities?
4. What is the significance of mirrors with respect to Hallie's ability to "see"?
5. Why couldn't Madlyn understand the danger the island posed to her young daughter Hallie? Was Madlyn a good mother?
6. Was Hallie's father justified in taking his child away from his wife and their home? Did you think he could have handled that situation differently—perhaps more openly and truthfully?
7. Mira befriends Hallie, but she also harbors a great secret that isn't revealed until the end of the book. Did you understand Mira's decision to keep the truth to herself for so long, given that she barely knew Hallie, or should she have revealed it sooner? What secrets would you keep from a friend?
8. Did you enjoy the way Hallie's "tale" is slowly revealed to her? Are there storytellers in your family who have kept family lore alive?
9. Forgiveness is one of the themes in this novel. Who most needed to be able to forgive? Who most needed to be forgiven?
10. Have you ever seen a ghost? Do you know anyone who has? What are some of the best ghost stories you know?