

Playing Custer

Gerald Duff

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With historical insight and the voices of numerous imagined personalities, Little Bighorn's cultural legacy comes to light.

With multiple players, diverse voices, and characters living over a century apart, Gerald Duff brings life to Custer's last stand and the twenty-first century reenactors who relive it every summer. From Native Americans to former slaves to Custer's own wife, Duff considers the broad spectrum of experience and ideology that came to a head on the Greasy Grass, as it was known to the Indians, aka Little Bighorn. This novel is rife with historical detail, rich characterization, and a sense of the grand impact a single day in history can have.

The author of many books of fiction, two books of poetry, and four books of nonfiction, Duff centers his plot around June 25, 1876, when Custer and his Seventh Cavalry sought to eradicate the Indians and met with a crushing defeat. These events and the tensions surrounding them inform the relationship between reenactors Waymon Needler, a chubby home-ec teacher, and Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine, an Alabama-Coushatta techie from East Texas. As the two travel to the reenactment, Sylestine retreats into his "Indian" persona, speaking little and mistrusting his white companion. Meanwhile, Needler prepares to play a lesser officer while dreaming of becoming Custer.

The book splits into at least a dozen different voices: Custer's, his wife's, his brother's, Monahsetah (the Indian woman he takes as a spoil of battle), his subordinate officers from Ireland and Germany, his Indian scouts, Sitting Bull, Chief Gall and his daughter, an ambitious journalist, and more, as well as the contemporary voices. Through these speakers, readers enter into the tensions of that time and place. In addition to the historical insight and the imagined personalities, Duff walks in the footsteps of Twain, with his understanding of the complexity and hypocrisy of military action, and side by side with Tony Horwitz (*Confederates in the Attic*), with his revelations about reenacting and the Civil War, adding new chapters to both.

For students of history as well as lovers of the novel, Duff delivers, piecing together historical record with the tenets of fiction—quick pacing, deft characterization, vivid scenes.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (Fall 2015)

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