

An Interview with Harriet Cannon

Q. How did your life experience and career as psychotherapist influence your writing of “Exiled South”?

A. I have lived and worked in large urban cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, Seattle and Santiago, Chile and in smaller rural communities in Missouri, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Washington State. My wanderlust carried me to diverse places, climates and surely colored my world perspective. Add in my training in systemic family therapy and the world becomes a smorgasbord of connected people and places. And, with my childhood experience in an extended family of storytellers, a story about identity and belonging comes naturally.

Q. Why are you interested in dual time- line format?

A. In today’s diverse United States culture, the tools to research where we come from and with whom we want to identify come easily. But, centuries ago, illiteracy was the norm. People from Great Britain and Europe who landed on the American continents, rarely had contact with their homeland and enslaved people had no contact at all. For the educated White minority, mail delivery was inconsistent at best. For example, the loss of those who came to America long ago, and never heard the voices of loved ones again, is reflected in poignant ballads still sung today. In “Exiled South”, I wanted to create a story of not only how grief can last for generations but also how unexpected discoveries can heal. Present day Lizbeth Gordon experiences loss and betrayal but life a challenging international journey ultimately brings her peace.

Q. Do you think the current Black Lives Matter movement may affect how people experience “Exiled South”?

A. “Exiled South” was in the editing process when George Floyd was murdered, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations began. Beta readers of various ethnicities and backgrounds read and opined on sections of the novel that addressed racism. Most reviewers said they appreciated the novel showed racism is a complex problem that should not be oversimplified. That said, I am aware, going forward, readers will respond to a present day White southern woman’s reckoning with family antebellum slaveholding and White and Black present day racism depends on the individual’s life stage and experience in the wider world.

Q. You’ve said you consider “Exiled South” to be an anti-war story.

A. I do. Not with political statements but philosophically. My novel reflects on the complexity of war and its consequences. I know from my clinical experience as a psychotherapist, civilians are especially vulnerable to trauma even after a war’s end. The victors often vilify citizens as a group along with the vanquished military men and women. In Exiled South, I strove to portray shades of grey, hard decisions and consequences at war’s end that affect the losing side’s citizenry. In my novel, Robert Gordon, a decent, thoughtful citizen, doesn’t believe in slaveholding. He is conflicted about participating in the Civil War but under pressure, he becomes a blockade runner loyal to his home state of South Carolina and desperate to help his

family in Charleston during the siege. In 1865, Robert's declared a traitor to the United States and can never return home.

Q. What was your Civil War era research strategy?

A. During several research focused trips to South Carolina, I returned to favorite atmospheric places, sought out experts in libraries and museums, bought maps, and took loads of pictures to plaster the walls of my home office in Washington State. But the internet was invaluable in hunting down obscure books like "Hoo Doo Medicine: Gullah Herbal Remedies" and "The Confederate Housewife", dozens of civil war diaries and collections of stories. This treasure trove was the basis for Laurette Gordon's character and lifestyle; how nineteenth century women lived, war substitutions for basics like sugar and coffee and medicines they used. I also had a few fun surprises. For example, during my internet research, I stumbled on "Girls of the Sixties", a series of interviews with elderly civil war survivors published in Columbia, South Carolina in 1917. By chance, one of the interviewees turned out to be an ancestor of mine!

Q. Part of "Exiled South" takes place in Glasgow Scotland and Nassau in the Bahama Islands.

A. Right. I knew Great Britain declared it's neutrality at the start of the American Civil War but until I began researching shipbuilding industry in Glasgow, I did not appreciate the depth of labor unrest in Scotland or the extent to which, in 1860, factory jobs were dependent upon a steady supply of raw cotton. At that time, the abolitionist movement was active, in England and Scotland, but the British government considered the United States Government ambassadors a passel of naïve upstarts. The complexity of Scottish/British dueling political and social class views and the cutting edge steel and steam shipbuilding industry in the mid nineteenth century were an irresistible setting for Robert Gordon's character.

Q. How did you find out about the Confederados?

A. When we lived in South America years ago, I visited Brazil and discovered the Confederado story. I had no idea Dom Pedro, the forward-thinking King of Brazil in the mid nineteenth century admired democracy and North American farming expertise. He offered a win-win relationship for thousands of former Confederates. Free land for their knowledge and technology. The multiethnic descents of Confederados still value their heritage and have an annual festival. Confederado history is both largely unknown in the United States and compelling. I couldn't resist giving it a significant part in "Exiled South".

Q. Now that Exiled South is out in the world, do you have another novel in the works?

A. I do. All I'm ready to reveal at this time is my next novel will be a mystery set in the 1960's to 1990's in the United States and Chile.

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