

THICKWOOD

A Novel

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University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a novel-length work of historical fiction entitled *Thickwood*. The novel can be situated within the context of great/interior plains literature, given its substantial focus on the Thickwood Hills, the northern remnant of the Missouri Coteau. This transition zone between the plains and the mixed boreal forest is an area of geographical and cultural tension. Within this drainage system of the Saskatchewan Rivers, Europeans traded for food and furs with First Nations and Métis peoples, leading to the signing of Treaty 6 and the formation of First Nations Reserves. In *Thickwood* characters travel across the rugged landscape but also travel into their interior landscape to struggle with questions about belonging and place. During formative years of development, certain landscapes become places of significant attachment, laden with emotional connection and sentiment. This historical work, set in Saskatchewan in 1950, takes place during intense changes after World War Two. Many rural communities without power, good roads, and even telephone services struggled to keep up with post-war development. The cooperative movement, encouraged by Premier Tommy Douglas, was a means for rural people to pool resources to improve their communities. Beef prices were climbing to an all-time high, increasing demand for pastureland. Using close third-person point of view, the novel follows a young female character skilled in ranching, horses, and the sport of baseball. Willomena Swift struggles to find a future for herself after returning from two seasons pitching in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. The lease to her family ranch is about to end and her father sells the remaining land to the growing community pasture. After a rogue stallion kills Willo's purebred foal, she begins a quest to control the stallion and avoid its villainous owner, who is also the pasture committee chairman. Willo uses wit and skill to survive the perils of the landscape and gains confidence to confront Nesteroff about taking over her home as the new pasture headquarters after her father's death. The novel *Thickwood* explores personal connections to rugged homeland, spirited horses, and love.

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My peers in the MFA in Writing program provided thoughtful feedback.

I also thank the Royal PFRA's last pasture manager, Cliff Willick, for his stories about working for the Royal Community Pasture. Cliff acquired permission for my husband and me to pack our horses into the rough country of the pasture. We helped drive cattle, mucked around bogs, found winding trails, discovered beaver dams, camped on an old homestead site, and retreated from an intense thunderstorm.

Alex and Jean Budan shared memories about growing up in the D'Amour community, close to the Royal PFRA. Alex was an early pasture rider and shared stories about fires, old wells, and treating cattle single-handed.

Becky Wiebe grew up on the Rudy/Rosedale PFRA. She acknowledged the male-dominated world of the PFRA pasture, shared memories of characters, and recalled some women who recently rode for the PFRA.

Olive Epp shared extensive stories about her Doukhobor upbringing, including food preparation, name changing, and interactions with her cousins in British Columbia.

Dana Nordin inspired the concept of a one-woman pack trip as an affirmation of physical and personal strength.

My Visible Ink Writing Group provided encouragement and two members, Rita Bouvier and Andrea Ledding, helped me explore First Nations and Métis perspectives.

Last but not least, I acknowledge my horses, in particular, Blitz, my one-eyed packhorse, an equine saint.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My thesis is a novel-length work of historical fiction entitled *Thickwood*. The novel can be situated within the context of great/interior plains, given its substantial focus on the Thickwood Hills, the northern remnant of the Missouri Coteau.

This transitional landscape is where the open prairie contends with the encroaching aspen parkland and mixed boreal forest. An irregular escarpment, known as the Missouri Coteau, stretches along the length of Western Saskatchewan. Northwest of Saskatoon, the Thickwood Hills ascend to an elevation of one thousand feet. This area is riddled with boulders, depressions and gravel hills left by the last retreating glacier, called the Wisconsin Glacier. The land is rough and rugged and not amenable to cultivation. The meadows, bogs, creeks, beaver dams, lakes, forests, hills, rocks and scrub brush are the homeland of Cree and Métis peoples. The Thickwood Hills roll into the historic Royal and Meeting Lake Federal Community Pastures.

Much has been written about the Saskatchewan borderland, the area surrounding the Cypress Hills and the American border. Non-fiction works beginning with Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* and continuing to recent writing such as Candace Savage's *A Geography of Blood*, and Trevor Herriot's *Grass, Sky and Song* focus on the hills and grasslands of the south. In fiction, Guy Vanderhaeghe's historical trilogy (1996, 2002, 2011) and Allan Safarik's *Swedes' Ferry* (2013) are set in the southern lands of Saskatchewan crossing the border to Montana and North Dakota. In contrast, *Thickwood* shines a lens on the historic area in the watershed of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers. The Saskatchewan River system was the travel route of early fur traders and explorers so the region is rich with history and a variety of cultural settlements in the land of the First Nations. Merle Massie in her book *Forest Prairie Edge* (2014) explores the transition zone, or ecotone, between the two solitudes of Saskatchewan – forest and prairie. She challenges the singular prairie perspective of Saskatchewan by taking a viewpoint from this edge in order to “shake up” the way we tell Canada's story (Massie 262).

Thickwood is a novel of the land. In exploring place and landscape, I became increasingly aware of how important landscape is to me as a writer. Pamela Banting in the introduction to her anthology *Fresh Tracks* (1998) shares the idea of path-making both on the exterior landscape and on our interior landscape. In *Thickwood* the characters move across the landscape and interact emotionally with each other. In particular, readers follow the main character as she explores her emotional landscape. With respect to our emotional connection with the land, Don Gayton in *Landscapes of the Interior* (1996) introduces the term “primal landscape” to describe the place where we spend our formative years. My formative years were spent in the parkland region of central Alberta, much like the land of the Thickwood Hills. Similarly, my main character, Willo, has a profound connection to the land – her primal landscape. The opening chapter in *Thickwood* is based on one of my earliest childhood memories and provides a dramatic entry into the novel. Willo then takes a horse pack trip, almost like a

vision quest, for several days into the lease land to experience solitude, address challenges, and consider her future.

My novel, set in 1950, explores a particular region of Saskatchewan during a time period of political and social change. During the late 1940s, Tommy Douglas was premier and his government provided incentives for cooperative efforts in the province. The University of Saskatchewan was a world leader in the development of nuclear medicine. During World War Two, women were called to step into jobs and activities left vacant by men. Following the austerity of the war years, life bloomed again.

After the war, men returned to the cities and farms carrying the trauma of battle. On the prairies most veterans had access to a land grant program to buy a small farm. First Nations and Métis veterans were denied equal benefits and returned to the paternalism of the Indian Act and the scrutiny of Indian agents. Even though First Nations men and women had served their country as equals, they returned to a way of life unchanged since before the war. Indian Agents still governed travel off reserve. First Nations and Métis veterans did not receive fair compensation and veteran's benefits.

During the late 1940s many rural communities were without power and telephone. Mechanization was replacing horsepower. Rural people worked together to improve roads and services as well as form agriculture cooperatives. Progress could not happen fast enough. Cattle prices rose to an all-time high in 1950, increasing the demand for more grazing land.

In 1943, during World War Two, P.K. Wrigley recruited women to play in his All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). Men from the American Major League had gone to war, leaving expensive baseball stadiums empty. Twenty-five of the sixty-three Canadian women were recruited from Saskatchewan. Wrigley had a friend in Regina who was an astute scout for the league. Saskatchewan women loved baseball and were skilled players. By 1948 overhand pitching was introduced to the women's league and more pitchers were required. In the AAGPBL women were expected to play baseball like a man but look like a woman.

The cowboy culture and life, the rugged landscape, the hardship of rural living in 1950, the changing roles of women, and the post-war boom, all provide a rich bed of history for a western literary novel. Research also revealed language that expresses the character of the times. Terms about baseball, taken from videos and stories from the AAGPBL website, also provide rich historical vocabulary. References to motor vehicles, buildings, current events and the language of cattle, horses and the pasture transmit authenticity.

I am particularly interested in the history and tradition of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA). I've dramatized the formation of a fictional PFRA pasture in this novel. In 1935, during the dust bowl years, the government realized a program was needed to save massive amounts of drifting topsoil. The PRFA was formed in order to secure water supplies and reseed cultivated land back into grass. Grassland was reclaimed and in the process resident farmers were bought out and resettled onto more productive farms. Due to drought, some homesteads had been abandoned, while others provided a meagre livelihood. Sometimes people proved to be attached to their farmsteads, so securing large tracts of adjacent land was a slow and

complicated process. After World War Two, during the second wave of community pasture formation, the government developed a process following district initiatives. Over the years, the PFRA pastures created a unique fellowship of managers and riders steeped in the tradition of rangeland management and horse culture.

In April 2012, the Federal Government announced it was divesting its interest in the PFRA, passing on management of the lands to the provincial governments. An outcry arose. Not only were dedicated employees losing their jobs but also concerns arose regarding the fate of research and management of the grasslands with protected species of wildlife. Trevor Herriot blogged and wrote about the issues. Citizens voiced their concerns about the over two million acres of land and its future. The government responded. Pasture patrons, if they wanted to sustain their pasture's operation, were given the option to apply for funding to develop a business plan. First Nations communities could apply for land as a way to help settle land claims. Rural Municipalities had interest in blocks of land that the Federal Government promised to return when the time came. Each pasture had a unique cluster of land titles with a different process to address transition. Saskatchewan is the largest stakeholder, once holding sixty-two federal pastures. These pastures are in addition to over fifty provincial pastures.

In addition to exploring a specific landscape of Saskatchewan at a particular time, I am particularly interested in western stories with a female protagonist. Jane Tompkins, in her book *West of Everything*, explores characteristics of the traditional western genre. Classic westerns include Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) and works by Louis L'Amour. Having sold over 120 million copies of his books, L'Amour is the best-known and most prolific western writer of all time. Tompkins describes the typical male protagonist as a stoic man of few words, doing the important work of the western frontier. He suffers pain, avoids death, kills, and identifies with the landscape, and will not be ruled by women and their concerns. First Nations peoples are fringe characters and horses are essentially props.

Tompkins explains in chapter four that the traditional western genre cannot exist without horses, but in most western novels and films, with a few exceptions, they are paid little attention. She also states that horses are absolutely necessary, even have a lively presence, but in the end are a means of transportation. Tompkins explores how the classic western is the antithesis of female domesticity and order; it refutes Christianity, social order, emotional expression, and the use of language. Despite all this, Tompkins also expresses how compelling it is to follow a hero, fighting against all odds, braving the elements and the enemy to overcome death and live out an individual code of honour.

I am interested in how westerns have evolved from their earlier stereotypes. Literary westerns now explore the role of unsavoury heroes, as in Patrick deWitt's *The Sisters Brothers*. New territory is explored as writers have feminized the literary western using a strong female protagonist. The well-known Canadian author from British Columbia, George Bowering, challenges American notions of the western in his Canadian novel *Caprice* (1987). The protagonist is a six-foot redhead French-Canadian female poet who packs a bullwhip, not a six-shooter. Set in 1890, *Caprice* is on a mission

to avenge the pointless death of her brother, shot by a shady American drifter over a bottle of whiskey. She's in love with a baseball player who teaches in a residential school. Bowering uses two First Nations characters to provide commentary and an alternative point of view. The book has the look of a western but it claims a Canadian style; cowboys don't pull out guns (as they would south of the medicine line) and stage coaches don't get robbed (an attempt is comical in its lack of success). The hero is a female (who has consensual sex) and the law prevails. The story is told from multiple points of view and is steeped in British Columbian history and landscape.

Gil Adamson, in her novel *The Outlander* (2007) set in 1903, features a female protagonist who killed her husband. She flees from his vengeful brothers through the mountainous Crowsnest Pass of British Columbia. While Mary struggles to survive she also battles postpartum psychosis. Adams is compared to Cormac McCarthy and Guy Vanderhaeghe, whose writings also fall within the literary western tradition.

Canadian Natalee Caple wrote a historical novel *In Calamity's Wake* (2013), about an abandoned daughter, Miete, searching for her estranged mother, Calamity Jane. Miete travels to Deadwood and meets characters who share their perspective of the woman behind the legend. A first-person account by Miete is alternated with a third-person, almost mythological account of Martha, also known as Calamity Jane.

Recent films like *Homesman*, starring Hilary Swank playing a female lead character, feature a female perspective in a harsh western landscape. The new CBC drama *Strange Empire* also features several strong female characters surviving western settlement in bleak times by challenging their male counterparts. These examples reflect a renewed interest in the western genre from a female perspective.

My novel bears some resemblance to *Hearts of Horses* (2008) written by Molly Gloss, from Oregon. She writes about a large-boned young woman hired in 1917 by a rancher to train horses. Martha, the protagonist, travels from one farm to another, meeting the local settlers while training their horses. She eventually falls in love despite her desire to remain an independent horse trainer.

The novel *Hearts of Horses* shares similarities with *Thickwood*. Both are literary westerns that move beyond genre stereotypes. Gloss's novel features a capable woman who uses her own gentle methods to train horses. The men have gone off to war, giving Martha an opportunity to do work she loves. She travels across the landscape on a circle ride and experiences challenges and disasters as she meets different people. The reader grows to appreciate the horses as characters, since Martha has a great concern for the individual horses she rides. She wants to retain her independence, but falls in love, requesting a non-traditional marriage in which her husband takes responsibility for cooking. The novel is written using third-person point of view and is descriptive of time and place. The story also reflects the social tensions between German and English settlers during World War One.

I spent some time considering point of view in my novel. *Thickwood* is written in the third-person. While the novel features a female protagonist, I wanted freedom to explore more than the first-person point of view. Largely the work is in close third-person, but other points of view are explored. James Wood writes that the free indirect style allows the world to be seen through the character's eyes as well as the author's eyes

(Wood 11). Using this style allowed me to have an economy of words; I wanted to avoid the use of the words “she thought.”

Thickwood headlines a capable young woman, empowered and haunted by her baseball experiences. She has a dream to raise horses on her family ranch, but this will not happen, not in a way she understands or expects. *Thickwood* explores what it must have been like for a woman in a particular time and setting who has a dream in conflict with expectations for women at the time. Willomena Swift, a twenty-two year old steeped in ranch life, has an uncanny instinct with horses. The story is interspersed with flashbacks to Willo’s experience pitching for the Rockford Peaches. Willo’s skills at roping and playing ball with the boys developed her strong pitching arm and attracted the attention of a baseball scout. Her experience as an athlete in the United States opens her eyes to a larger world and develops her confidence to handle horses and work with men.

Willo left her second season playing baseball in Rockford, Illinois, and returned to the ranch to assist her father, who received cancer treatment from the Betatron at the University Hospital. Willo discovers her foal killed by a rogue stallion belonging to Nesteroff, a local farmer. She captures the stallion and contemplates shooting him but the stallion escapes. The formation of a local community pasture takes over the lease of Willo’s family ranch. Over several days Willo travels into the pasture with her beloved horses in order to distribute salt blocks — a practice still in use today. During her pack trip Willo experiences a series of conflicts and adventures that challenge all her skills including recapturing the stallion.

Like all historical fiction, extensive research was required. I used web research but I also explored the archives of the University of Saskatchewan and the Saskatoon Public Library. I used the web archives of *The Farm and Ranch* paper. I researched the PFRA, ranching, First Nations, hospital care, baseball, and other subjects. I also searched homestead maps and other information related to the PFRA, ranching, and the Thickwood Hills.

My cognate class, Narrative Inquiry, provided a model for gathering field text. I listened carefully for the stories behind the words. Narrative Inquiry encourages the researcher to listen for the hard stories and the secret stories along with the public stories. I interviewed my husband’s cousin several times and we worshipped Sunday morning at the Saskatoon Doukhobor Prayer Home. Her stories of name changing and about her radical cousins in British Columbia provided insight into the varied experience of being Doukhobor.

I had conversations with past and present employees of the Royal PFRA Community pasture. When talking with the pasture riders, I found Myrna L. Lamontagne’s history book, *D’Amour, An Era of Change (1983)*, most useful. She listed pasture managers and riders. A web search produced current names and phone numbers. I called Alex Budan, a rider who worked for the Royal pasture in the early 1960s, and met him and his wife Jean for coffee. Jean grew up in the middle of the Royal Pasture before it was formed. Alex rode for the Royal Pasture in the early 1960s. They know the land and shared many stories.

I also called Cliff Willick, the last Royal PFRA Pasture manager. I explained to Cliff

that I was in the MFA program, writing a book about a PFRA pasture and that I was experienced with riding in the backcountry. My husband and I had raised cattle and used the services of the Dundurn PFRA. Thankfully, Cliff secured permission for my husband and me to take a horse pack-trip into the pasture.

While I was familiar with back-country horse packing, and had ridden in the Prince Albert National Park and the Nisbet Provincial Forest, I wanted to experience first-hand the land I was writing about. It was just as I imagined. We rode through bogs, across fragrant meadows, amongst black spruce and trembling aspen, and encountered herds of cattle. We helped a Cree PFRA rider move errant cattle back into their proper pasture. We camped on an old homestead, still with rhubarb growing, and returned back to the headquarters just in time before an intense thunderstorm. This trip provided additional story material that included the hazards of falling in old wells and forest fires. My experience packing and riding in remote and rough landscapes helped me write with authority about the landscape and experience with horses.

Cliff grew up on the PFRA pasture that his father managed. Cliff's mother took a pack-train of horses into the pasture during roundup in order to feed the men. The Royal Pasture closed in the fall of 2014. Cliff and his wife, Elaine, supported their two children, accomplished ropers, in rodeo competitions. Their son and daughter both worked in the pasture. Cliff said his daughter was as tough as any man. Cliff has been retained as the manager by the local pasture association.

General history of the pastures and how they were formed was available in literature and archives. However, I could not locate any memoirs written by pasture employees. Maybe working for the Federal Government silenced them. Maybe the long hours meant little time for reflection and writing. However, I found Cliff and Elaine Willick and Alex and Jean Budan willing to talk about their memories and experiences — enough to provide a glimpse into the rugged life in a mixed boreal-forest pasture.

Sometimes during research actual events superseded my imagination. For example, I did not imagine a horse and rider falling into an abandoned well, but there was more than one incident of this in the early days of the pasture. While we were visiting, biologists were tracking wildlife in the area. They found a white bear passing their trail camera.

The characters in *Thickwood* live in traditional lands. The town and district of Onward is fictitious, but the Thickwood Hills are real and embraced by Treaty No. 6. The land around the Thickwood Hills, close to the river system, was prime hunting and trapping land explored by Europeans. The Thickwood Hills are mentioned in written record as early as 1772 when the early explorer Matthew Cocking wintered in them (Friesen 50). Since then there have been tragedies and injustices to First Nations people. Land promised in Treaty 6 was taken back and handed over to European settlers. The histories of the Muskeg Lake and Lucky Man First Nation are diverse. Circumstances meant the founding families from these two reserves experienced disparity during the signing of Treaty 6. Despite oppression and hardship, Muskeg Lake has a proud tradition of soldiering and honours many veterans.

Thickwood attempts to address First Nation and Métis issues in a sensitive manner. Characters of the time would have referred to their neighbours as “Indians” rather than

the more culturally sensitive references used today. First Nations and Métis people have a long-standing relationship with horses and so European ranchers on the Canadian plains would often enlist their expertise (Baillargeon and Topper 6). I looked for exceptions as well as the limits on First Nations Peoples in 1950.

Maria Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (2010) provided insight into the dialect of the Métis people in order to accurately portray the language of Maurice Lafond. I also requested feedback from Métis writers Andrea Ledding and Rita Bouvier. An inclusive perspective invites an updated view of characters, animals, and landscape in the western genre. Horses are characters that communicate to Willo and form a partnership with her. This sensitivity means that Willo is deeply aware of her natural environment. This novel could be described as a western that goes beyond invisible horses. When characters pay attention to their horses they may also pay attention to marginalized people and the environment.

Thickwood belongs in the company of literary traditions described in the *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (2004) edited by David Wishart. This literature is rooted in the vast plains of North America that stretch from the Rocky Mountains to the Missouri River and from the Rio Grande to the coniferous forests of Canada. As literature from this region moves forward it will acknowledge ambiguous heroics, an environmental consciousness, First Nations Peoples, multiculturalism, and the land.

Thickwood is a blend of lyrical language and descriptive detail where intense emotions often guide the main character through a close relationship with nature. The more lyrical moments generally pertain to descriptions of land and wildlife. The language of realism describes daily work carried out by ranchers and landowners. Told in simple language, ordinary events take on an extraordinary reality as the main character travels through the wilderness surviving disasters and challenges. On occasion birds or insects express the emotional state of the characters. An owl clutches prey, a crow calls from a tree, moths flutter in the light and horseflies bite, expressing the character's vulnerability, disorientation or frustration. When the character notices the vegetation, flowers and berries, and fresh smells, often serenity or some level of satisfaction and connection is expressed. In my novel, power and freedom, as well as fear, are reflected in Willo's relationship with horses.

Horses have the capacity to carry their riders far and fast, but they are also dangerous. Many years ago I witnessed a stallion attack a man. On the other hand, often people have romanticized notions about horses. They are beautiful, but many people have died in horse accidents or from horse attacks. Likewise horses have died when in contact with brutal or well-meaning people. In *Thickwood* a stallion kills a foal and a horse dies in a beaver pond.

The main character, Willo, is sexually assaulted and verbally harassed by dominant men. She stretches the limits of expectations for her sex by playing baseball and handling animals. Eventually, Willo must shoot the stallion. The growing movement of the PFRA marches on despite Willo's sentiment and desire for her home to remain intact. Everyday objects, events and the environment are described with a life-like quality. Willo bakes in the kitchen with her Baba and she tames horses and ropes calves.

Thickwood is set against the backdrop of the Thickwood Hills. The subject matter is

western, resplendent with horses, guns, conflict, and adventure. The main character struggles against the villainous Nesteroff, against beaver dams, abandoned wells, fire, and a rogue stallion. Fire revives the land. People suffer from war trauma. Steers are castrated, foals born, horses shipped to feed the hungry. Bears, wolves, and ravens feed on carcasses. Death is no stranger; Willo's foal is killed and her father dies tragically. She remembers parallel experiences in baseball, where she was victorious but also victimized. *Thickwood* is tragic with elements of romance and realism. Some characters provide comedic moments, ready to criticize conventions and lighten the mood.

The horse — the stallion in particular — is a symbol of male power. Willo's relationship with men is explored through her relationship with horses. Horses are often considered erotic; their rhythmic, sweating, beautiful movement induces such feeling. Willo rides at night, almost naked, as the legendary Lady Godiva, and is assaulted by a man who thinks he has a right since she has exposed herself. Willo must tame the wild stallion in order to escape a fire. In the end she must kill the stallion that dealt Nesteroff a fatal blow.

There are ironies and paradoxes in the story. Willo loves horses profoundly, but she kills one. She does not see herself as a traditional wife, yet in the end with her father dead, she realizes she can't do the job alone. Clint woos her, but he is a less-than-perfect suitor. Willo's parents love her, but they have different dreams for her. They are caught in the disparity between the conveniences of city life and lagging modern services to rural areas in 1950. In the end Willo loses her land, but when faced with the prospect of Nesteroff moving into her home as the new pasture manager, she gains courage to confront him.

Thickwood is about the edge, to use Merle Massie's image. The novel is set in a landscape between prairie and forest, in the post-war period of shifting male and female roles, where rural development lagged behind urban amenities, and where progress threatened attachments to home. It explores the landscape and history of the northern edge of western plains literature.

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Near Clavet, Saskatchewan
September, 2015

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DEDICATION

To Alfred Epp, my life partner and riding partner, whose sense of adventure and encouragement helped animate this story.