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CITYWIDE BOOK CLUB

MARCH 7 - APRIL 4 | 2009

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THE SHADOW CATCHER

A Novel

Marianne Wiggins

Author of John Diller and Evidence of Things Unseen

A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR —
Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, The Christian Science Monitor,
The Atlantic Journal-Centurion, The Berkshire (MA) Eagle,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Publishers Weekly.

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A Simon & Schuster paperback. Available at libraries and bookstores.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“I write on a visual canvas, seeing a scene in my thoughts before translating it into words.”

Marianne Wiggins [Interview with Pamela J. Johnson, USC College News, July 2006]

Marianne Wiggins was born in 1947 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. To her and Mary Wiggins, John was a grocer and preacher at a Protestant Church founded by her father. Rigidly conservative, John committed suicide while Marianne was still young, leaving her with her mother Mary, the daughter of Greek Orthodox immigrants. In 1963, at the age of 17, Wiggins left home, got married, and gave birth to daughter Lara.

In 1973, Marianne Wiggins divorced her husband and moved with Lara to Martha's Vineyard and started her writing career. Her earliest works – novels Babe, Plent South, Separate Check, and the short story collection HereWeLive inLove – explore themes of feminism and single motherhood. In the early 1980s, Wiggins moved to London, where she would live for the next sixteen years. It was there that she met and married fellow author Salman Rushdie. On Valentine’s Day, 1989, barely more than a year into their marriage, Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a death sentence against Rushdie for blasphemy of the Islamic faith in his book, The Satanic Verses. The Satanic Verses, forcing the couple into hiding. That same year, Wiggins experienced her largest acclaim to date for her novel, John Dollar, which won her the Whiting Award and the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for fiction.

Wiggins separated from Rushdie and divorced him in 1993. Focusing on her own work, she published the novels Enclave Eden (1995) and Almost Heaven (1999). In 2005, her novel Evidence of Things Unseen was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

In 2000, Marianne Wiggins moved to Los Angeles, where her daughter had become an accomplished photographer. Wiggins, too, shared a passion for taking pictures and channeled that interest into a novel built around the famous photographer, Edward S. Curtis, known to the Native Americans whose images he captured as “The Shadow Catcher.” In addition to her continued writing, Marianne Wiggins teaches in the English department at the University of Southern California.

ABOUT EDWARD S. CURTIS

“Almost I want to understand, before you read the book I’ve written, before you even spend another day entertaining the idea that Edward Curtis was a saint, or a poet, or a hero, is that his life was long. His life was...complicated.”

Marianne Wiggins [The Shadow Catcher]

Photographer Edward S. Curtis, known as the “Shadow Catcher,” created a defining moment in American publishing history with his North American Indian collection of more than 40,000 images and ethnographic information on eighty American Indian tribal groups. He spent thirty years photographing American Indian tribes west of the Mississippi, ranging from the Mexican border to the Arctic. Born near White Haven, Wisconsin in 1868, Curtis exhibited an intense interest in photography from an early age, constructing a camera and processing prints by the time his formal education ended with the sixth grade. He married and had four children after his family moved to Seattle. Following a chance meeting in 1898 on Mt. Ranier with a group of mountaineers, including experts in the area of mountaineering, history, and early photographic technology, Curtis launched his North American Indian project.

Despite continued financial hardships during the thirty years it took to publish the twenty-volume North American Indian, Curtis was able to employ technicians, scholars, and researchers to assist with collecting intricate details of past and present Native American cultures. His dedication to recording as much detail as possible is evident; his work includes descriptions of dwellings, food, clothing, basketry, costumes, games, and mythology. The final volume was published in 1930. Edward S. Curtis died in Los Angeles in 1952 at the age of 84.

THE SHADOW CATCHER

“Reading this book is like swimming in a braided river.”

Marianne Wiggins [The Oxford Companion to the Photograph]

In the Shadow Catcher, Marianne Wiggins combines fact with fiction, past with present, and words with images in the unconventional telling of two compelling stories, set nearly a century apart, yet seamlessly intertwined. In one narrative, a writer named Marianne Wiggins has written a novel, also titled The Shadow Catcher, about the photographer Edward S. Curtis, who came to fame through his attempts to photograph Native American people before they vanished from the American landscape. Rushdie’s story turns when a woman is called to the deliverance of her father, a man she knows died when she was a child. In the other historic narrative, we follow the story of Clara Phillips as she journeys across America and into the life of Curtis, the enigmatic photographer she would marry. For years, Marianne Wiggins toyed with the idea of writing a novel about Edward S. Curtis. She wrote and rewrote several large chunks of her work, but struggled to find the interior tension that would sustain the work. Finally, two revelations pointed out the direction she was seeking the truth, and not the illusion, of Curtis’ life and work, and in correlation with her own complicated history.

In researching the legendary photographer, Wiggins discovered that the reality of Edward S. Curtis was often not what it seemed. While his mission was to capture an image of truth before it vanished into history, Curtis saw nothing wrong with dressing a Navajo as a Sioux or removing a modern artifact that might betray whatever historic “truth” he was trying to convey. Curtis was an absent husband and father, and Wiggins came to realize how closely this absence paralleled the emptiness left behind when her own father committed suicide. Threading elements of her own life into the novel, Wiggins was able to weave its two disparate storylines into a single haunting portrait of family history and personal loss.

READ-ALIKES

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

In this multi-layered family saga, Margaret Atwood explores themes of loss and regret in the story of the Chase sisters, Iris and Laura. The book begins with Laura’s suicide in 1947 and takes complex and unexpected turns with the posthumous publication of Laura’s novel, The Blind Assassin, reprinted in its entirety here as a novel-within-a-novel.

The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank by Eileen Feldman

Another creative reimagining of real people’s lives, Feldman’s novel plays “what if?” with the life of Peter van Pels, the teen-boy who shared a hiding place with Anne Frank. The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank considers what might have become of Peter had he escaped the Nazis and lived to see the end of World War II. The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank gives weight to the story of the young Girl who had vanished from the American landscape. Wiggins’ story takes a turn when a woman is called to the deliverance of her father, a man she knows died when she was a child. In the other historic narrative, we follow the story of Clara Phillips as she journeys across America and into the life of Curtis, the enigmatic photographer she would marry. For years, Marianne Wiggins toyed with the idea of writing a novel about Edward S. Curtis. She wrote and rewrote several large chunks of her work, but struggled to find the interior tension that would sustain the work. Finally, two revelations pointed out the direction she was seeking the truth, and not the illusion, of Curtis’ life and work, and in correlation with her own complicated history.

The Oxford Companion to the Photograph

This reference book is for the general reader and includes terms and technologies, historical context, and biographies, including an entry on Edward S. Curtis.

Shadow Catcher: The Life and Work of Edward S. Curtis

By Laurie Kuehler

An accessible and insightful biography that delves into the professional and personal life of Edward S. Curtis and his impact on photography and Native American history.


A comprehensive site that includes photographs taken by Curtis and a presentation about Curtis’ life and achievements.

The Last Summer of the World by Emily Mitchell

Mitchell fictionalizes the life of another famed photographer, Edward Steichen, tracking the artist’s work and dissolving home life against the backdrop of World War I. Like Marianne Wiggins, Mitchell’s story begins in the world of a single woman and her quest to capture a portrait of her subject’s world.

The Emigrants by W.G. Sebald

A compelling novel by a past Citywide Reads author features a protagonist named after the writer and intricately interweaves the story of four Jewish émigrés. Despite continued financial hardships during the thirty years it took to publish the twenty-volume North American Indian, Curtis was able to employ technicians, scholars, and researchers to assist with collecting intricate details of past and present Native American cultures. His dedication to recording as much detail as possible is evident; his work includes descriptions of dwellings, food, clothing, basketry, costumes, games, and mythology. The final volume was published in 1930. Edward S. Curtis died in Los Angeles in 1952 at the age of 84.

RESOURCES

Encyclopedia of North American Indians

Edited by D.L. Beichhold

A multi-volume set with colored photos that is arranged alphabetically and includes entries on different tribes, subjects such as beadwork, and people such as Edward S. Curtis.

The Oxford Companion to the Photograph

Edited by Nuam Rosenthal

This comprehensive site that includes photographs taken by Curtis and a presentation about Curtis’ life and achievements.

SHADOW CATCHER: THE LIFE AND WORK OF EDWARD S. CURTIS

The Emergence of the North American Indian

A comprehensive site that includes photographs taken by Curtis and a presentation about Curtis’ life and achievements.

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award04/exhibits/curtinhome.html

Marianne Wiggins’ website, published by her publisher Simon and Schuster. This site includes a video of the author and also contains clips of interviews and articles by Marianne Wiggins about the book and her writing.

www.simonsays.com

For additional book discussions and programs.

THANKS TO THE FRIENDS OF THE SANTA MONICA PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE PRINTING OF THIS RESOURCE GUIDE.
SPECIAL CITYWIDE READS EVENTS

An Afternoon with Marianne Wiggins
Saturday, March 21 at 2 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
The award-winning author of The Shadow Catcher presents a reading and discussion, followed by a book signing.

Los Angeles as Literature
Sunday, March 22 at 2 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
David Ulin, from the Los Angeles Times, moderates this panel discussion with local authors. Panelists will discuss Los Angeles’ various incarnations in literature, in both a contemporary and historical context. Learn about CITYWIDE READS author Marianne Wiggins’ place in the canon of fiction about Los Angeles.

In the Land of the War Canoes Movie Screening
Tuesday, March 24 at 7 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
In 1914, Edward S. Curtis released a longer version of this documentary feature film on the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island under the name, “In the Land of the Headhunters.” This incomplete version was rediscovered and rescued in 1973. It is now regarded as the oldest existing American documentary feature film and was selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. Silent film, with soundtrack of original Kwakiutl music recorded in 1972.

City TV Call-In Show
Wednesday, March 25 at 7 pm | Tune in to Channel 16
A live, moderated discussion of The Shadow Catcher.

Introducing Edward S. Curtis
Saturday, March 28 at 3 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
Edward S. Curtis expert and scholar Bruce Kapson presents a historical overview on the life of Curtis and the significance of his work in the history of photography. Vintage examples of Curtis’ work will be available for viewing after the presentation. (www.brucekapson.com)

Evidence of Things Unseen Book Discussion
Thursday, April 2 at 7 pm | Main Library, Community Room
Published in 2003, this other novel by Marianne Wiggins was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Set between the World Wars, it follows a family as their lives are affected by science and the atomic age.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Do you prefer the contemporary or historical narrative? Do you think the stories fit together cohesively?
2. Do the photographs, both by Edward S. Curtis and from the author's family, add to the story for you? Do you like mixing the art of photography with the art of the novel?
3. What types of myths does Wiggins explore?
4. How would the novel have been different if the story was told by Edward and not Clara?
5. What did the character Asahel add to the story? What does Colonel Edwards, Jr. add to the story?
6. Do you think Wiggins took too much liberty with the life of Edward S. Curtis?
7. Do you feel that the author captured contemporary Los Angeles life?
8. How does the novel reflect contradictions?
9. How would you characterize the ending of the novel?
10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?

Trained volunteer facilitators lead these free public book discussions. No registration is required.

Sat, March 7 at 2 pm | Main Library, Multipurpose Room*
Mon, March 9 at 2 pm | Emeritus College, 1227 2nd St., Room 407
Sat, March 14 at 10:30 am | Café Bolivar, 1341 Ocean Park Blvd
Tue, March 17 at 7 pm | Barnes & Noble, 1301 3rd Street Promenade
Wed, March 18 at 7 pm | Montana Avenue Branch Library, 1004 Montana Ave.*
Sat, March 21 at 11 am | Fairview Branch Library, 210 Ocean Park Blvd.*
Thu, March 26 at 2 pm | Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 829 Wilshire Blvd.
Sat, March 28 at 11 am | California Heritage Museum Lawn, 2612 Main St.
Sat, April 4 at 11 am | Main Library, Multipurpose Room*

*City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Administration 310-458-8626 (TDD 310-458-8649) at least 3 working days (Monday-Friday) in advance.

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