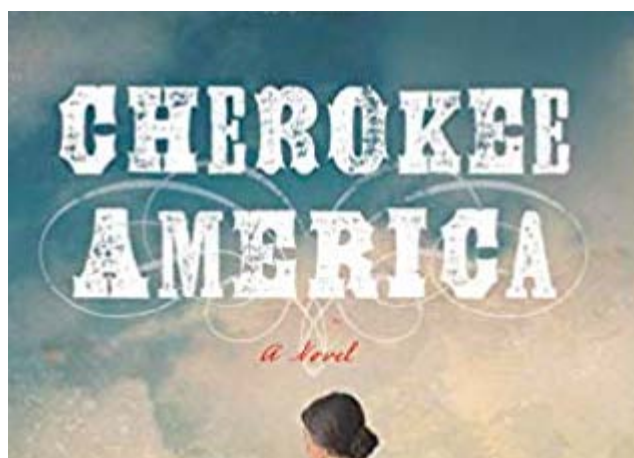


Saturday, April 6, 2019

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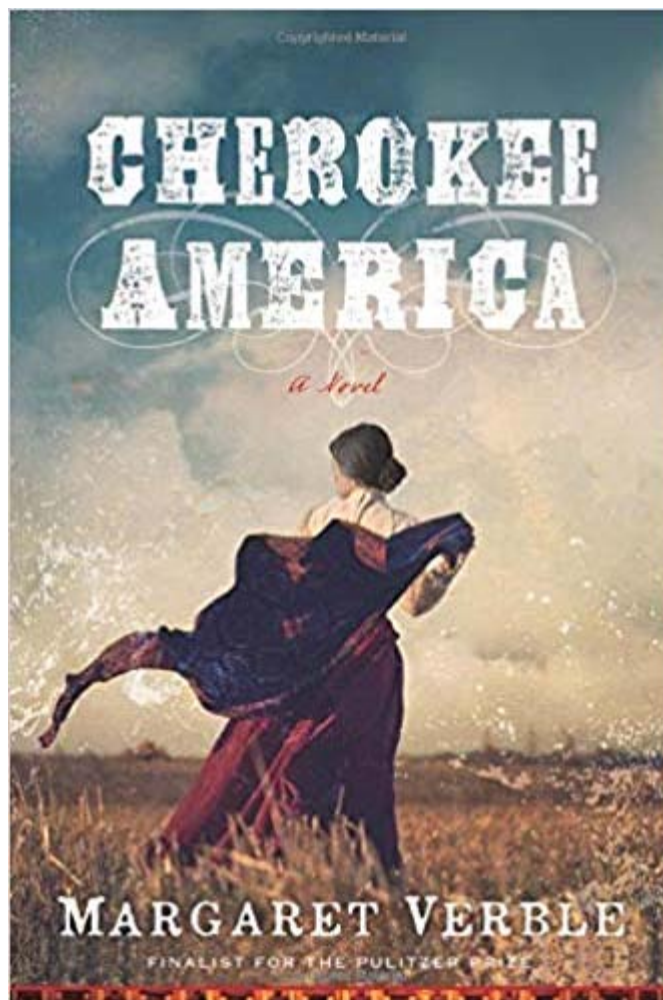


FICTION

The Whole Cherokee Nation

Margaret Verble's Great American Novel Tells the Story of Her People

Pulitzer Prize finalist Margaret Verble brings to life an entire world of people in her new novel *Cherokee America*, with her formidable heroine Check at the heart of the story. Verble fills her laconic, insightful book with plot: hidden gold, a child fallen down a well, murder, infidelity, romance, orphans, and unspeakable things done to a poor innocent saddle.



It begins in 1875 in post-Civil War America. Check's white Andrew husband is slowly, painfully dying. It's clearly a marriage of love, if also a strategic one. The women in Check's Cherokee family have often married wisely and white. This one paid off. Despite the genocide, crime, or, at best indifference faced by Native Americans of any tribe, Check's family flourishes. She has sons, servants, farmhands, extensive holdings and a notable voice in her community.

But with white people encroaching on Cherokee Territory and the U.S. government looking for an excuse to interfere in Indian affairs, Check knows any illusion of security is dangerous.

Cherokee Nation's first and longest section runs about 200 pages and ends with a funeral. It feels so complete and satisfying, I was almost sorry the book didn't end there. Part two involves the missing child and an unexpected murder. Part three shows the entire community coming together to see justice done and to make

sure the government stays as far away as possible.

Verble shows a remarkable ability to juggle so many characters and keep you aware of who they are—both to themselves and each other—at all times. She places people front and center, understanding the way they talk, the way they stand, what they say and what they don't say, the way they deal with a crisis, and what *limits* they face in dealing with a crisis.

You'll find this on most any page. In one memorable scene, a group of Cherokee and white people who fought on both sides of the U.S. Civil War search gingerly for a safe topic of conversation. The Cherokee's own internal struggles come into play as well, further complicating things. Finally they settle, with relief, on discussing the violent ways of the Osage Indians.

It's a drolly funny moment, just like the scene where two brothers sort of discuss sex, with one afraid to admit he's done so little and the other trying to hide the fact he's done so much.

Later, everyone in Cherokee Territory understands a murder committed using a hammer as a weapon means the crime was almost certainly done by a white man. But a few pages later, U.S. marshals repeat this same fact as "proof" it must be a Cherokee. We know with a smile they've been spoon-fed this lie by the community for reasons of their own. In this sly novel, Verble weaves in humor and wisdom so subtly you feel wittier and smarter yourself for appreciating it .

Verble, an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation, has set both of her novels in the area around her family's historic holdings in Oklahoma. The Pulitzer finalist *Maud's Line* took place in the 1920s. The events in *Cherokee America* occur some 50 years before that. It's thrilling to think that Verble might plot her next novel 100 years earlier than this or perhaps 50 years later than *Maud's Line*, in the 1970s.

Will she create an epic story of the Cherokee people novel by novel, August Wilson-style? God knows she's off to a terrific start. Whatever Verble does next, this is a great American novel, with the irony and respect that title implies fully intended and well-earned. They say history is written by the victors, but maybe in the long run history will be won by the best writers. We can only hope.

(Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, Feb. 19)

Tags: Cherokee America, Margaret Verble

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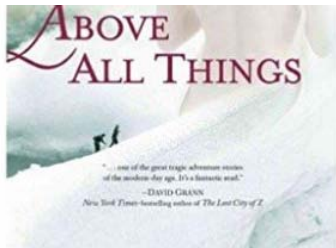
I'd Rather Kiss a Wookiee →

Michael Giltz



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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