

Press Release



The Woman Who Knew Gandhi

by Keith Heller

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"A pleasant tale of small lives intersecting with the great." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"Heller explores the fragile bonds between marriage partners, friends, parents and their children, and breathes realistic life into Gandhi and his improbable paramour." — *Publishers Weekly*

About the Book

"To my room I went quaking, trembling, and with beating heart, like a quarry escaped from its pursuer . . . I recall this as the first occasion on which a woman, other than my wife, moved me to lust." — from *Gandhi: An Autobiography*

Picture a young Mohandas Gandhi, not yet a leader revered by millions, on his first encounter with a British woman in a rooming house in Victorian England. What would have happened if, instead of running away out of fear at the emotions kindled by the encounter, the two had struck up a flirtation, and then a friendship, that stretched across the decades and two continents? From that brief aside in Gandhi's autobiography, Keith Heller has imagined a fascinating story of love, friendship, and marriage in his beautiful and intriguing novel *The Woman Who Knew Gandhi*, which Houghton Mifflin will publish as a Mariner Original paperback in January.

After nearly sixty years of correspondence, kept secret even from her husband, Samuel, Martha Houghton mourns the end of her friendship when the great teacher is assassinated in 1948. Soon after, though, she receives a letter from Gandhi's dying son, who has found her letters and wishes to meet her.

Word of Martha's secret life soon spreads throughout her small English village, and the true

story is distorted by gossip and hearsay. The commotion causes a media frenzy and a crisis in Martha's relationship with Samuel, who decamps to the country hovel of his eccentric brother. When Martha decides to travel to India to comfort her old friend's son, the Houghtons are forced to reassess their marriage and the history of their life together. Ultimately, they discover the surprises — both welcome and unpleasant — that can exist in even the longest relationship.

Set in rural postwar England and bustling Bombay, *The Woman Who Knew Gandhi* is a colorful imagining of the private life behind a public face and the "what-ifs" of the road not taken.

About the Author

Born in Minnesota, KEITH HELLER has written four previous novels and taught English in Japan, Spain, and Argentina. His fiction, which has also been published in numerous literary journals, has been nominated for the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and he was a finalist for the Katherine Anne Porter Prize for fiction. He lives in California.

A Conversation with Keith Heller About *The Woman Who Knew Gandhi*

Q) What first started you thinking about the story behind this novel?

A) Some years ago, I happened to be reading George Orwell's essay "Reflections on Gandhi," from which I took the epigraph for my book. In that essay, Orwell referred to a moment of temptation that Gandhi had undergone in a Portsmouth boarding house during his first visit to England as a young man.

Such a tantalizing hint would be enough to start any writer working, but as I traced it back to its original source in Gandhi's *Autobiography*, I discovered that the experience had been far more disturbing to Gandhi than we would have expected from the usual public image we have of him. But we have to remember that this happened to him when he was only twenty-one, on his first trip out of India, and emotionally untethered from his arranged marriage eight years earlier. The possibility of his being attracted to a young Englishwoman was simply too much to resist.

The problem that had presented itself, however, was that Gandhi visited England only five times. I was forced to focus less on him and more on the woman he had left behind, on her own life and her marriage to and family with another man. The relationship with Gandhi thus became one of widely separated, secret visits and surreptitious correspondence over the course of fifty or more years. Yet I soon realized that this was what I wanted to do anyway: write about the reality of a commonplace couple's long-term marriage and the impact on it of the wife's hidden friend.

The working title of the book was once "Great Souls", after Gandhi's "Mahatma" honorific, but cast in the plural to reflect the truly *great souls* of Martha and Samuel Houghton. I believe now that the final title encapsulates the story even better, for it stresses the woman,

her knowing, and her relationship with a man whom all others on earth only thought they understood.

Q) The book is set in a real village in England called Hedge End. Why did you choose this setting instead of, for instance, London or an American town closer to your own background?

A) At the time that I was writing the novel, I met an Englishman named John Oxley, who was filling in at the college where my wife also works. We soon became friends, and I learned that he was living in Hedge End, a small village in southwest England. He used to tell me stories about the place and gave me a pair of books about its history. Around the same period, I was reading a few of the novels from the English "village genre," specifically Penelope Fitzgerald and Beryl Bainbridge. These put me in the mood for the kind of small-town universe that I've always admired so much in R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi* and William Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha County*.

I wanted to set up a contrast between Gandhi's more exotic background and far-flung travels and Martha's stay-at-home commonness. In this way, she would be naturally attracted to his greater worldliness and, even against her better will, contrast it with her husband's more mundane life. Villages are wonderful examples of communities that are in essence one contiguous family, and of a rooted anonymity in the world at large that can be recognized by all readers. That to me is also the role of the writer in society — to work in as small and as invisible a manner as possible, in order for the characters and circumstances of other people to shine all the more brightly. It is vitally important for novelists to write about not only what they individually know, but also what they can learn, about other people, places, and times. Otherwise, their work becomes more a reflection of themselves than what it should be, a reflection of lives and experiences other than their own.

Q) The main characters in this novel have enjoyed a long and largely successful marriage. What first drew you to want to write a study of such a relationship?

A) My wife, Felisa, and I have been married for twenty-nine years. I think that, especially in contemporary American society, we don't pay enough attention to the trials and triumphs of marriages that survive for an extended length of time, as we also fail to honor those who have lived into their seventies, eighties, or longer. Traditional cultures tend to cherish the wisdom of their elders more than we do and regard long-term marriages more as models to be emulated than as exceptions to the rule. All the emotional, familial, and sexual complications of any couple who have been married for decades had, I thought, been insufficiently demonstrated in most of the contemporary novels that seem to focus primarily on the young, the drug-addled, and the spoiled. I have been in countless bookstores and libraries and seen many men and women in their later years looking for any book that would speak more directly to them and their lives. And, because marriage is such a universal situation, I believed that a story about the latter part of a long relationship could be as interesting for those looking forward to their lives as for those looking back on them.

Martha and Samuel Houghton are of the age of anyone's grandparents, and their lives have been as distinct as the place and period in which they lived. But their struggles with time and with each other, and now with a broken trust between them, are typical of the vicissitudes of the vast majority of the readers who will encounter the book.

Q) You seem to prefer writing historical novels instead of contemporary ones, even though some of the historical periods that you treat are no further back than the mid-twentieth century. What is it about the past that inspires you so much?

A) I usually try to focus on common people in the past because, in my own small way, I want to help their unrecorded voices to be heard. I often use the example of Samuel Johnson. By this time, we must know almost as much about him as we need to, but what about the butcher who carried his side of beef, the boys who ran his copy off to the printer, and the men and women who wiped up the coffeehouse table after one of his lofty conversations? Millions of faceless, normal, yet very individual people have always interacted with the famous and the wealthy throughout history, but their stories are only seldom told.

This is the real reason that I left Gandhi so far offstage in the novel that its narrative doesn't even begin until after his assassination. I wanted to focus more on the effect that he had on people instead of on nations, and the memories of him that remained in the minds of people who knew him or were related to him instead of the artificial copies that we have always seen in newsreels and later movies. In this way, I hoped to humanize the past and its participants by bringing back to life not only those who lived at that time, but some of those who might have lived then as well. It is so easy — perhaps too easy — for someone to write about his or her own time or place. Instead, I try to set myself a new challenge with each new novel, so that every day I can exercise my imagination through research, fantasizing, and revision. I think I'm fortunate, in that I have the entirety of recorded history to draw upon and therefore will never run out of ideas or situations for the next book. I immodestly imagine that Gandhi himself would not have been opposed to my methods, since he was always so much more intent on the history of his country and the world than on what he considered to be his own small place in it. His desire to "reduce himself to zero" is, in the end, not so different from Joyce's ideal of the detached writer.