

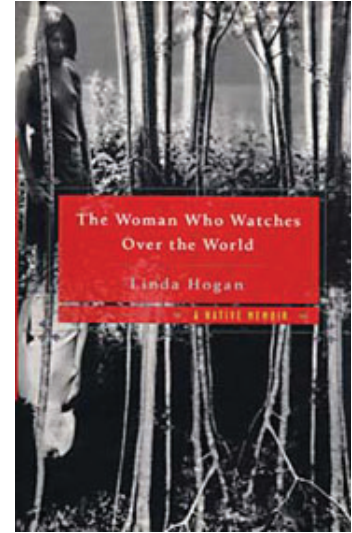


The Woman Who Watches Over the World by Linda Hogan

Linda Hogan is one of the most influential writers in contemporary American Indian literature. She is an award winning writer whose work includes poetry, essays, and fiction. Her books of poetry include: *Calling Myself Home* (1978), *Daughters, I Love You* (1981), *Eclipse* (1983), *Seeing Through the Sun* (1985), *That Horse* (1985), *Savings* (1988), *Book of Medicines* (1993), and *Dwellings* (1995). Her first novel, *Mean Spirit* (1990), was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. Her latest offering is *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (2001).

Hogan was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1947, to a Chickasaw father and a neurotic, non-Indian mother. Her father was a sergeant in the United States Army, stationed for a time in Germany. Although Hogan lived many places throughout her childhood, she considers Oklahoma her [ancestral] home. She has a Masters degree in English and Creative Writing, has taught at the University of Colorado, and has been the recipient of prestigious grants and awards.

Hogan begins her memoir telling us the story of a clay woman she fell in love with in a museum gift shop. The figure of the woman was spiritually connected to the earth, and was also made with clay from the earth. She had the figure shipped to her home, but it arrived broken. Despite Hogan's efforts to fix the clay woman, it remained fragmented and unwhole. At first Hogan was disappointed, but then she thought, "Yes, the woman who watches over us is as broken as the land, as hurt as the flesh people. She is a true representation of the world she flies above. Something between us and the earth is broken" (18). Thus begins the lessons in Hogan's book, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*.



Publisher: W.W. Norton
& Co. , 2001



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In telling her life story, Hogan focuses on relationships. Her relationship with her mother was depressing and neglectful. “I see that my life was shaped by a poverty of the heart, the lack of present love, which left me open to love from other places, because I was a child untouched by my mother’s hands, a child so disturbed as to have almost no language. I say this now, looking back, knowing full well that my mother cooked for us and did all that was considered her duty, yet could not love” (43-44).

Because of Hogan’s lack of nurturing love, she became involved at age 12 with Robert, a man almost twice her age. Although they shared a great love that Hogan thought of as a marriage, she felt there were two sides to this relationship: it was love and it was also wrong. “Away from school I was already a woman in many ways, cooking, ironing, not only with a woman’s jobs and duties, but also in my union with a man” (37). “I felt as if I was a child responsible for the life of an adult man” (48). Leaving Robert behind when she left Germany for the United States, Hogan had a great feeling of relief, of being alive and unbound.

Hogan goes on to describe the adoption of her two daughters. Her younger daughter, Jeanette, had a fierce-eyed anger. “She was a tiny five-year-old girl with a stubborn streak, but a hint of sweetness. She was a wisp of a child with thick long black hair falling down her back, as if all her bodily energy had grown into hair instead of bone and flesh, for she was malnourished and weighed only twenty-four pounds, and was silent. Her teeth had all decayed and were capped with aluminum. Under her eyes were dark circles, a trait I later learned to recognize in many abused children, as if they never sleep, are always vigilant” (68-69).

Her older daughter, Marie, “was a ten-year-old girl filled with silent rage and horrible pain, one who looked through things and people, not at them. Later, when her story began to unfold, her entry into here, into this home, was insignificant for her; she was already broken and wounded beyond what could be repaired. She was already a child who’d lost her core. She had no conscience, no reference point outside herself, and was violent” (69).



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Hogan felt the strong power of love could heal almost anything. What she didn't realize was that to such an unconnected child, love and human closeness are the greatest threat of all. Those who were to have loved Marie, her biological parents, had hurt her beyond repair. In Hogan's assessment, the abuse and abandonment and darkness of Marie's life left her utterly evil. "Twenty years later I still wonder how such ice exists in a human. I still fear it. I wonder, also, how, in my wish for love, I came to stand beside it" (69). Marie grew up to severely abuse her own children and even deny their existence. "When the unattached become mothers -- even if you don't believe in it -- all hell breaks loose" (89).

Later, Hogan developed an illness called fibromyalgia which took away her strength and muscular power. It is also an illness accompanied by a sleep disorder, so it affected Hogan's ability to sleep and dream. Without sleep and dreams, Hogan's ability to mend herself was compromised. For years she sought every medical treatment she could, hoping to find healing. "The physical healing never came. Finally, there were medicines that helped, but I did not ever return to what I had been before illness, nor have I ever been out of pain in all this time" (134).

Perhaps some of Hogan's most powerful relationships were with horses. She tells the story of Mystery, a hauntingly wild mustang she had an affinity for. "When we walked together it was at the same pace and rhythm, as if we were the same animal" (153). Mystery was pregnant, and when the time of the birth drew near, Mystery began thrashing and rolling with pain. The pain was so great the horse tried to drown herself in a trough of water. When the vet arrived, the thrashing ended, but the colt was already dead from a broken neck. It was rare for a mare to survive this trauma. "And now she stands, a beautiful survivor, as if she is a sister to me in some kind of time before. I looked at her and wondered if someone I came from knew her ancestors. Because with Mystery, it was not just her sturdiness or wildness, not the loss of a foal, that brought us together. We had these other things in common, a shared history, a world we once knew, the ache of being rounded up, being branded, owned, and battered" (158-159). Ironically, both Mystery and Hogan had a pelvic fracture, Mystery's broken in a roundup of wild horses, Hogan's in a fall from a horse.



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Hogan's subsequent relationship with another horse -- the "Big Red Horse" would prove to have a profound and everlasting effect. Hogan was hoping to buy a roan Tennessee walker, a horse, she said, that was going to change her life. She fed and groomed the horse, gave him apples and carrots, cleaned his hooves. When she was ready to ride, the owner saddled him, but to Hogan, nothing felt right. "Now that I know horses better, I can say that the saddle didn't fit the horse. And with such a strong feeling I would not, now, ride, because the bond between rider and horse is a connection, an agreement and negotiation, that has to be mutual, and that day the horse disagreed" (160-161). She woke up in the hospital almost three weeks later. She had suffered a brain injury, collapsed lung, broken pelvis, tailbone, ankle, elbow and numerous other injuries. For two years there was short-term memory loss. "In an injury like this, meaning escapes language and description. I didn't remember that I'd try to say a word but another word would come out, that I didn't recognize my daughter, that she had to feed me pureed food by spoon, that there was a possibility I was going to be permanently damaged" (166). The mystery of the accident remained. She never really knew what happened.

Woven into Hogan's memoir are stories of the American Indian past, where she reminds us, "We are never not Indians. We have never forgotten this history" (59). She helps us understand the connection of the past and the present. "History is our illness. Those of us who walked out of genocide by some cast of fortune still struggle with the brokenness of our bodies and hearts. Terror, even now, for many of us, is remembered inside us, history present in our cells that came from our ancestor's cells, from bodies hated, removed, starved, and killed" (59).

Like the broken clay woman, who will remain fragmented and unwhole, but beautiful, Hogan shows us that for all of the suffering, we can live in a center of compassionate understanding. "In my own life, I was changed by pain, shaped by history, transformed by events, viruses, accidents, even chemistries. But somehow, even through it all, there was something I managed to love into life. It wasn't grace so much as it was the courage to look at myself and others, full in the face with a core of honesty, to look upon a greater world" (204-205).

Reviewed by Sandy Bartel