



South Dakota enthralls Briton

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Making sense of the kaleidoscope that is American culture, with all its fractured images, manifest contradictions and anarchic verve, is a daunting task for most Europeans.

At the same time, as Tocqueville proved, they may be best equipped to decipher the code.

For British-born artist and writer Melinda Camber Porter, the stream of impressions began to coalesce not in Manhattan, where she now lives with husband Joseph Flicek and their two children, but in the Badlands of Flicek's native South Dakota. So transfigured was she by her experience there among the ghosts of Native American civilization that she set her new novel, appropriately named *Badlands* (Writers and Readers), in this magical landscape.

The Oxford-educated Porter, former cultural correspondent in Paris and New York for the London Times, became fascinated not only with the contemporary richness of Indian culture, but with the echoes of its history and its abiding concern with spirituality — in the broadest sense.

"The immensity and diversity of American culture makes it difficult to define," says Camber Porter, who visited Sullivan's Island this week. "And it's not centralized. A lot of people from Europe don't understand this, because in England everything comes from London. The same is true in Paris. But here it's not all in New York. It's not all in L.A. You can go to Minneapolis, for example, and find some of the most amazing museums. Some of the best, more original art shows are coming out of other places than New York.

"There's another difference. In England and France there is an English and a French way of doing things. Whereas in America, the 'American way' is much vaguer and much more absorbing of other ways. It's not a strict code that you either adapt to or become an outsider."

In contrast to New York, South Dakota was a revelation.

"It sounds hokey, but I felt that the land was peopled. I felt very strongly these Native American spirits in the land. I could feel a presence. For a European, it's amazing to see the huge expanses of land, the very scale of things. It's amazing, particularly for an English person, that there are so many different landscapes — and so many of them unspoiled.



“So I was feeling that, and meanwhile I’d been trying to write a book on popular vs. high culture in America, based on my work for the London Times. A tough job. In Paris you can do it because, again, it’s the center. You can go to the intellectuals. And the intellectual life in France pervades the whole culture. Here, it’s not exactly the case. New York is not the center of everything. The intelligentsia is somewhere off in a corner.”

The project had become tiresome for Camber Porter before her sojourn to the Dakotas. Upon arriving there, she suddenly realized she had found the “center” she had been seeking.

“In the Badlands I realized ‘This is where it comes from. This is really the root of the culture,’ and I could only write about American culture in a kind of passionate visionary book. I couldn’t write a book of journalism about it.”

The novel reflects this realization, and much more, given the almost uniform praise afforded *Badlands*. A dominant theme of her paintings — the interplay of eroticism and spirituality — also suffuses her fiction.

“My feeling about eroticism is that it is one of the most interesting emotional areas to explore, for me, as a novelist and a painter,” says Camber Porter, whose essays on French culture were collected in “Through Parisian Eyes” (Oxford University Press). “It links the physical with the intellectual and spiritual. And I think that in eroticism you can actually see a whole being come together. I like to use it in my novels quite a lot because I feel it is incredibly revealing of character.”

Upon moving to the States from Paris, Camber Porter was struck by the apparent inability of Americans, as a whole, to discern the difference between pornography and the erotic.

“In America, I think that people find it hard to see eroticism as being a spiritual activity. They see it as a physical or fun or visual or grimy activity, but not that it is a way toward spiritual enlightenment. In Indian culture, in Tantric philosophy, and even in France there is the Sense that the two are — or can be — linked.

“At the same time, eroticism does not necessarily have to have a spiritual component. And it needn’t be criticized if it doesn’t. But the spiritual and the erotic usually are married in my work. I’m a very sensual and tactile person. It’s a world I’m naturally drawn to.”

Camber Porter began painting seriously — and writing poetry — while in Paris. An exhibition of her paintings — which, among other influences, suggest Chagall — has been touring the United States continuously since 1993 and thus far has been on view in 15 states. Several of her works from the exhibit,



which celebrate this erotic-spiritual connection, are included in her poetry collection *The Art of Love* (Writers and Readers, 1993).

Painting was among her first means of expression, but Camber Porter does not view her art and writing as separate entities.

“I think it's equally divided or linked. The strange thing is that people find my novels have the same imaginative flavor as my paintings. It's not two separate activities for me. Often, when I can't move myself forward in a book, I move to my painting and it breaks down my intellectualism. I take a big swim in the ocean of images and then come back.”

A PBS documentary on Camber Porter's writing and painting has been seen by more than 30 million viewers. Her next project – the illustrated novel *Frank*, will be published in the fall of 1997. She is also composing a mixed-media piece based on the novel, which will be performed at Lincoln Center - the site of her inaugural success as a playwright (*Night Angel*).

On Sullivan's Island, where she is staying in the home of Peter and Marjory Wentworth, Camber Porter may be spied reworking *Floating Boundaries*, a novel of Hong Kong and mainland China begun eight years ago.

While *Badlands* evolved into a “document on the process of learning to love,” *Floating Boundaries* shares with *Badlands* one overriding feature: a passion for accuracy, factual and emotional. It is for this reason she determined not to publish *Floating Boundaries* until it met the standard.

“I feel I was able to distinguish *Badlands* by being as accurate as I could be, in a journalistic sense, about my process, by making sure that I knew that I was telling the truth about myself — though the book is not autobiographical. I found that most true emotional journeys are very exciting.

“By comparison, I did not feel that the 900 or so pages I wrote for *Floating Boundaries* were an accurate account of the journey I was trying to tell. And so I'm going back and putting more reality into it. As one writes one learns; the writing of a book is a journey as well. If you start off thinking you know exactly what you're going to write and you know what love is, and you know how the story is going to end because you've learned these things about love, I don't think it works.”

In *Badlands*, the narrator moves steadily through the novel to a kind of epiphany. She grows intoxicated by her vision of life, which comes through an appreciation of the world of dreams, states of ecstasy and, in Camber Porter's words, “Native American easefulness with the world of visions.”



“She moves toward a state of enlightenment, which is intoxicating. And as she moves forward, this intoxication grows and her prose becomes more poetic. It's all related to an understanding of her past and an ability to use lost loved ones in her awakening. And of course Native American culture is very much linked to ancestor worship and being in contact in a much more visceral way with one's history. In our culture we do it through psychotherapy or through more intellectual processes.”

Camber Porter regards spiritualism as a vital force in a culture. In America, she says, it is as valuable to people, as anywhere else.

“Unfortunately it often seems to be in the hands of the charlatans. However, it doesn't trivialize the real thing. I do believe that there is a very powerful world of spiritual reality that is not owned by charlatans. Some people find it in religion, some in love. Everyone has a different language for it.”

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