



***Badlands* offer Briton's vision of America**

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By: Margaret Carlin

Melinda Camber Porter, a British artist, poet and novelist, first laid eyes on the dramatic landscape of South Dakota in 1983.

After an artistic and journalistic career in London and Paris, Porter, divorced and looking for adventure, embarked for New York City, where she continued to write poetry, paint watercolors, oils and mixed media, and eventually met and married Joseph Flicek, a specialist in new-product development.

It was Flicek who introduced Porter to his home state, South Dakota, and the Sioux Reservation at Wounded Knee.

The lasting effect of the dramatic Dakota landscape and - the area's long and tragic history led to Porter's first novel, *Badlands* (Writers and Readers Publishing, 248 pages, \$22).

On a recent visit to Denver, Porter, 44, said frequent trips to the West with her sons, Robert, 7, and James, 2, allowed her to "see the spirit of America much more clearly."

"When you are in New York City, and I do love it, you tend to get wrapped up in the never-ending fashions and trends and what's new and happening. You get caught up in the media interpretation of what's going on. But it's while talking with farmers and ranchers out West that you get a different outlook, a feeling of what's going on in people's lives."

Badlands is Porter's vision of America.

"America is very spiritual and very technological at the same time. It is such an emotional and passionate country but there is a constant conflict between the spiritual and materialistic," Porter said.

The action takes place in the Badlands of South Dakota. The protagonist is Blackfoot, an American Indian who wants to reclaim all land taken over by the white people. The action is seen through the narrator, an unnamed white woman, who emerges with a belief that anything is possible if people will see each other as souls, not as members of different cultures.

"Everyone in the book is a little strange" Porter said, adding with a laugh that the book is autobiographical to a point. "But it certainly isn't a diary. I distilled my experiences in the West and tried to interpret them through the characters and their moods, as well as the dramatic landscape."

Here's how she describes Pine Ridge: "The big sky in which God lives lies heavy and sagging over the dust tracks, like an old half-dead cow, udders drooping, dead with the heat, smothering Indian country.... These were not real mountains, they were caked mud and they dipped and rose, wrinkled horribly, twisting and turning, a labyrinth without issue."

Porter does not mean her novel to be a critique of American society.

"It's more intellectual, more a vision filled with gut feelings of the early days of the West," she said.



“What happened to the pioneers. What was lost in the conflict between the Indians and the early settlers.”

“There was much lost on both sides in those conflicts, and there is a lot of guilt in America. Many people don't know how to deal with the violence of the past. But I think wonderful times are coming. I get a sense of the land flowing back, of the land itself becoming more important to all Americans.”

Porter is a dedicated New Yorker. She lives in a Gothic-style duplex in New York's West Side, where she maintains an art and writing studio. She begins her day with a half-hour of yoga, to “set the mind's mood.”

She's always at work on a painting, a poem or her next novel, which will be *Frank*, the story of an unnamed heiress and her Constant travels. *Frank* is a character the heiress meets on a plane jaunt. Publication is scheduled for 1997.

Porter, educated in modern languages at Oxford University, can speak with authority about the artistic influence of three cities: London, Paris and New York.

“England, of course, set my course with its long literary tradition. I am devoted to Emily Bronte and *Wuthering Heights* for the way Bronte links character and landscape. I adore everything by Thomas Hardy, especially *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for its sensuality and sensitivity to the deepest part of the soul, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* for its inspirational view of a woman's struggles in life.”

Paris? “In a way, it's been more important to me than London. I love its sensuality in every aspect of life: food, clothing, even streets are beautiful. Baudelaire is my favorite French writer, I keep rereading *The Flowers of Evil* because he is so honest. He tells the truth about the unutterable pain of love and existence.”

New York? “It's so full of optimism and unabashed energy that a person just has to love the city. So many good writers, but I guess I'll choose Joan Didion and her *Book of Common Prayer*. She's not afraid to delve into disturbing subjects, and she writes such beautiful lyrical prose.”

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