

Review by Roberto Bonazzi

Jerry Craven's *Women of Thunder* portrays a multilayered journey through the dangerous jungles and waterways of Venezuela—a lushly detailed adventure of wild places, and a plot replete with fascinating characters.

The novel is told in alternating chapters by the authentic voices of Rosa Rojas, a wise Venezuelan beauty trained as a nurse, and Tom Seal, an intelligent American veteran of the Vietnam War. Tom has returned, hoping to find Rosa and to recreate their childhood adventure of 18 years earlier—wonderfully told in *The Wild Part*, an intriguing prequel (Angelina River Press, 2013).

Both narrators are visited by phantoms from the past and remembrances of their first river run as children. But they are adults now, and what they have experienced during the time apart slowly leaks into the story. The internal monologues in response to each other and in reaction to their remorse about past “sins” are adeptly articulated into an imaginative tapestry that never loses sight of the incredible trip on the jungle river. They encounter real dangers, especially in villages inhabited by a murderous cult leader and questionable mystic healers—arousing suspicion in Rosa's keen intuition or in Tom's outsider intellect, as well as the poisons and cures of local flora Rosa knows from experience (despite her denials of being a *curandera*).

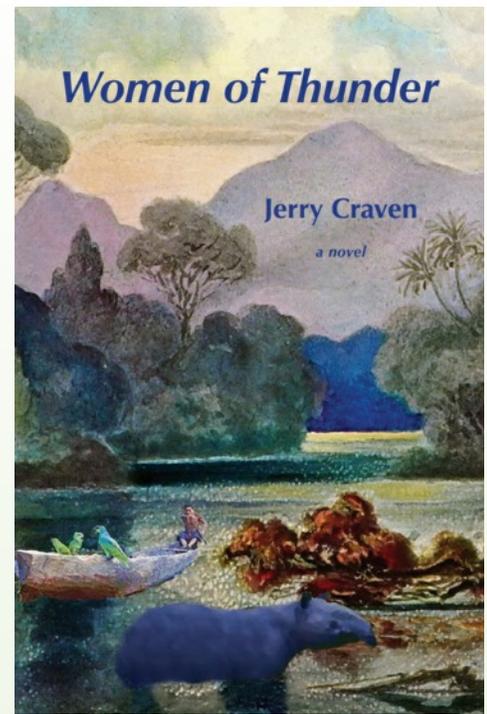
In tense scenes about outwitting the strange villagers, they find intimate refuge from the rain and insects by constructing crude tree houses for the nights. “The women of thunder have arrived,” remarks Rosa, “referring to a clap of thunder,” as “lightning crackled above the canopy . . . and we move closer together.” But it is not only thunder that represents these mysterious women, as we discover later. Deft passages flash forward to raise warning signals without revealing the future and glance backward to summarize the past without losing the intensity of the moment.

Craven's seamless style accomplishes this so subtly that we are never confused about where the narrators are or what they are thinking, but their complex dialogue is dramatic because they love each other, yet are unsure of who they have become. Tom is divorced from a wife who bedded his brother; she haunts him, as do the ravages of war. As a devout Catholic, Rosa blames herself for the deaths of her family during a cholera epidemic. Both try to erase each other's guilt, but cannot ease their own. The past invades their dreams and fits of insomnia and, even as they realize the visitations are imagined, the lyrical prose creates convincing substantiations.

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Throughout the novel, Rosa and others relate intriguing and fantastic folktales that carry valid lessons, which at first Tom debunks as meaningless. But since several reveal the validity of truths, he slowly begins to accept their pertinence, while Rosa relates folktales that sometimes vary from other's versions. Their belief systems—Tom's somewhat cynical take and Rosa's emotional view—create the novel's dialectic. This never obviates the exciting quest, which is one of the few “page-turners” to have both a gripping story and a dynamic exchange of ideas.

Tom reasons that the murderous cult leader “came to the jungle with his flock to find Eden like we did. . . Wasn't he burning and clearing part of the jungle for crops? Didn't he build houses? He came here to change the jungle but it changed him and before long all he could think about was death, so he forgot the reasons that brought him to the jungle in the first place and forgot all of the his wisdom or else remembered only the words



that were hollow to him and needed someone like you to see the wisdom behind the words about forgiveness.”

Jerry Craven's *Women of Thunder* reminds us of Gabriel García-Márquez's fiction because the literal world and the spiritual realm clash or converse on every page. No other North American novelist has created a better clashing conversation to ponder than this prize-winning Texas author.

Women of Thunder
A Novel by Jerry Craven
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Roberto Bonazzi's book of literary commentaries, *Outside the Margins*, will be published by Wings Press in 2015.