

Playing Custer

Nederland native's novel frames Battle of Little Bighorn through eyes of re-enactors, historical figures

By Kevin King
Contributing Writer

Nederland native and Lamar alumnus Gerald Duff, 76, recently released his 19th book, *Playing Custer*, a novel narrated from varying points of view, illuminating personal and political events leading up to the death of General George Armstrong Custer. The release of the book by TCU Press came on the 139th anniversary of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, famously known as Custer's Last Stand, which was fought June 25, 1876.

Neither Custer nor the 209 men in his immediate command survived the day, an article by Smithsonian Magazine states, and an Indian counterattack would pin down seven companies of their fellow 7th Cavalrymen on a hilltop over four miles away. According to the article, of about 400 soldiers on the hilltop, 53 were killed and 60 were wounded before the Native Americans ended their siege the next day.

"I'm not trying to write history," Duff said. "I'm writing fiction, but at the same time I

wanted to be true to, as much as possible, the framework of the facts. Several years ago I got the idea that it would be fun to write about Custer in a fictional fashion. There is so much going on there that is beyond the history — his emotional reality. There's so many interesting, fascinating characters in this whole drama. I wanted to get the details of the battle straight, but in getting inside their heads, that's where my own sense of freedom comes."

Duff depicts the historic events of Custer's Last Stand through the story of two men from the late 20th century — one white and one Native American — who travel together to the annual re-enactment of the battle at the Little Bighorn National Monument battlefield. The story's theme, however, encompasses much more than the battle itself.

"Playing Custer means a couple of things — playing Custer, like these guys who are re-enactors, and also playing Custer is like when you play somebody. You make a fool of



Edgar S. Paxson's 'Custer's Last Stand,' c. 1899 (Oil on canvas)

them or get over on them in some fashion," Duff said. "I wanted people to try to use Custer for their own purposes like Buffalo Bill later on, but I also wanted to show that even Custer himself was playing a role. And he was playing a role. He was very theatrical — very dramatic."

Duff said that Custer, himself, was actually fighting two battles — the Battle of Little Bighorn and a political battle in Washington. Custer was considering a bid for presidency, and sought a bold and dramatic victory to secure it.

"The Convention of Democrats was being held in Washington, D.C., later that summer. Custer thought that if he went in there and whipped the Sioux and Cheyenne and got back there quick enough that he would have a good chance to be nominated for president," Duff said.

Although much of the novel takes place in the Great Plains, it does include characters that are from East Texas, where Duff spent parts of his childhood in Livingston.

In the novel, the character Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine is a re-enactor from the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas. Duff said the memories and times he shared with members of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe inspired the character of Sylestine, which is, in fact, a popular surname among tribe members.

"I lived very near the reservation," Duff said. "It was probably about three miles from

where I lived. I played basketball with some of the (Alabama-Coushatta) boys my age."

The character of Mirabeau experiences inner conflict with his Native American roots, Duff said.

"Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine is a guy who is living in two worlds," he said. "He is a computer technician ... living in this contemporary American world, but he feels ethnic kinds of 'Indianness' working in him. He's trying to play this game of being a Plains Indian. He also thinks that the romantic Indians were the ones who were on the Plains — the Sioux, the Cheyenne, the Crow. Here he is in the woods of East Texas. He thinks of his background of being much more of an agricultural one. Of course, the Plains Indians ... they were meat eaters. They were not attached to the land at all the way that farmers are. He wants to be something other than what he is. Everybody in the book in some way wants to be something other than what they really are."

Sylestine lives out his fantasy of being a Plains Indian by re-enacting the character of Crazy Horse, the famous Sioux war chief that helped defeat Custer and his men.

Waymon Needler, Sylestine's counterpart, is a home economics teacher who is looking to find his machismo through playing the role of General Custer in the annual re-enactment of the battle in Montana.

"He's perceived to be kind of

wimpy," Duff said. "He wants to be Custer-like — romantic in a kind of heroic sense."

Chatting during their journey, the two re-enactors discuss their obsessions, personal ambitions, and failures of nerve.

Interwoven with their progress toward the battle are narrations, journal entries, and first-person viewpoints from many others who were actually involved in the historic events. Soldiers and scouts for the cavalry; Sioux, Crow, and Cheyenne witnesses; and wives and daughters all offer their versions of "truth," establishing a texture and depth of irony, humor and tragic meaning to those modern Americans driven to attempt to "play Custer." All this builds toward the real and re-enacted final moments on the battlefield of Custer's Last Stand.

"The re-enactors show how people can be unsatisfied with their own identity and have a need to achieve a new one by modeling themselves after Indians and Custer — modeling themselves after something that is heroic and something you can't be anymore in our modern age," Duff said. "You see some characters that are truly heroic — not heroic in a kind of flamboyant way, but even though they are looking defeat in the face, they don't coil and give up. They go down with a kind of dignity."

Playing Custer is available on both Kindle and in paperback through Amazon.com or TCU Press. For more information, visit www.geraldduff.com.



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