

INLAND

A Novel

BOOK
CLUB
KIT

TÉA
OBREHT

A man searching for a home he can't find,
a woman bound to a home she can't leave.

A LETTER FROM TÉA OBREHT

Dear Book Club Leaders,

People tend to react with surprise when I tell them I've been working on a "western." On its surface, the genre seems an odd choice for an ex-Yugoslav immigrant, and its themes don't appear to align with my first book, *The Tiger's Wife*, at all.

Many writers are drawn to the lightning rod of a character or event, to a series of questions that need puzzling out. For me, an Arizona campfire tale about two homesteading women cornered in their house by a creature of possibly supernatural provenance was the catalyst for *Inland*. The tale also provided a surprising inroads into the history of my adoptive country, whose mythos, though powerful, had always felt distant and narrowly defined by masculinity, gritty realism, and a very specific idea of what it means to be American. Reassuringly constricted by certain documented facts surrounding the yarn and its origins, I set out to explore the surface-level questions I found irresistible: Who were the two women in the house? What was their relationship to one another? What kind of journey had brought this strange visitor to their threshold?

Most writers also can't really understand why they were seized by a project—why *this* story, above all others, has commandeered their whole being—until long after they have ventured into it. I was surprised to find deeply personal questions at the center of *Inland*, questions with which I had grappled for many years: about home and belonging; about the power of place and the pull of self-invention; about empire and the abiding way it splinters the past, the present, and the identity of people both living and dead; about female rage and grief; and the way fear and powerlessness make us dangerously territorial of our own small, hard-won corners of life.

Perhaps the most thrilling thing I can tell you about the story you have just read is that the bones of it are true, based on absolutely real, though little-known, American history—a bizarre and improbable meeting of disparate lives, of fact and myth, truth and invention. I hope I have done the original story some justice here.

Thank you for spending time with my work.

With gratitude,

Téa Obreht

INTERVIEW WITH TÉA OBREHT

Why did you want to write a novel set in the American West?

I grew up a city kid, living with my mother and grandparents on a grey street in Belgrade. America, when I finally arrived here in 1997, was suburban Georgia, and eventually the neat neighborhoods of Northern California. The America of the western novels my grandparents loved seemed impossible to me—a landscape of the imagination, a painted backdrop. The first time I saw the Rocky Mountains in real life, however, I was helplessly lost to them. The landscape, its textures and smells, its sounds and solitude, were all I thought about, all I dreamed of returning to when I left. For someone who had spent a lifetime on the move, this pull felt entirely new. It felt, at last, how I'd always imagined the draw of "home." It seemed inevitable, before I ever arrived at any semblance of story, that whatever book I wrote next would have to grapple with that feeling and its myths, consequences, and illusions.

What did your research for this book involve?

I was deep into the research and drafting of a completely different western when I stumbled onto the substance of *Inland* by happy accident. Some years ago, an episode of the podcast *Stuff You Missed in History Class* detailed an old Arizona campfire tale about two sisters left alone on a homestead, and the inexplicable and terrifying encounter they have at their own front door. The podcast contextualized the incident and the bizarre, little-known, but utterly true 19th-century military experiment in which it was rooted.

I couldn't believe I'd never heard of it before, and that something so incredible and richly layered didn't have a more prominent place in the mythos of the American West. At first, I kept returning to the initial campfire tale. But then, as I traveled to Texas, Arizona, and Nevada, and pored over journals and newspapers of the period, what I learned of the experiment and its participants began to stir up questions I had only just begun to ask of my grandmother (a Bosniak Muslim who married into a very secular, but ethnically Christian, household) before she died. Questions about her sense of identity, as well as my own mixed ethnicity and how it shaped my sense of belonging and search for home—not just as an American immigrant, but as a child of a country that no longer exists.

What do you hope readers will be surprised by, and most take away from this story?

I hope readers seek out the true story of the Beale Wagon Road, and the people whose real lives and adventures inform many of the book's key moments. But I also hope readers find themselves turning to some of the questions that carried me along during the years I wrote *Inland*: What determines whether myths live or die? What is the tension between self and history? What does it mean to live at the periphery—of identity, community, landscape, empire? What is it about the American West that seems to put our need to belong at odds with the powerful urge to self-invent?

RECIPES

PAN-SEARED ELK STEAK

As soon as she had put Toby's fears to rest, she would ride into town with their lunch—the long way, calm and unhurried. She might even feel brave enough to stop by Desma's place to pick up the elk steaks.

Nora never did get her elk steaks from Desma. Later in the novel, Crace remarks that the steaks they eat are likely “slow elk” (cow) instead. But you can taste what Nora was hoping for with this pan-seared elk steak recipe.

Ingredients

- Thick-cut (1 inch or more) elk steaks
- Coarse ground sea salt
- Coarse ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp. butter per steak (or more if you so desire)
- Olive oil or canola oil
- Optional: Your choice of marinade



<https://howtobbbright.com/2018/10/18/elk-steaks/>

Instructions

1. Pat steaks dry on all sides with a paper towel. Liberally season with salt on both sides. Leave steaks out for 15-45 minutes to allow them to come to room temperature.
2. Lightly coat each steak with olive oil or canola oil. (Note: Some don't like olive oil for pan-searing as it can leave a bitter taste when cooked at high temperatures.) Liberally season both sides of the steak with coarse ground black pepper.
3. Put the top rack of your oven around 6-10 inches from the top of the broiling coils, set your oven to broil on high, and place a cast iron skillet on the rack to warm up. When the oven reaches temperature, pull the cast iron skillet out and set it on a burner on medium-high to high heat.
4. Place a tablespoon of butter in the skillet and sear the first side of each steak for one minute, then flip and sear each of the remaining sides for 30 seconds. Be prepared to fan the smoke detector: This part can get smoky!
5. Place another tablespoon of butter on each steak to melt, and put the steaks back into the oven. Broil for 2.5-3 minutes, then flip and broil for 2.5-3 more minutes for medium rare. Cooking times vary by steak thickness, but the general rule seems to be add a minute each side for each half inch of steak, or add a minute each side each level of “doneness” you desire.
6. Remove the steaks from oven, place on a plate or cutting board, and cover with aluminum foil to allow to rest for 5-7 minutes. Serve with asparagus, broccoli, and sweet or baked potatoes, and enjoy!

Source: <https://elknetwork.com/pan-seared-elk-steaks/>

DRINK RECIPES

WATER

The water had dropped further down the edges of the ladle. What possible reason could that fool girl in her employ have found to waste more water? But to refuse the Doc now would look like pettiness, and she could not bring herself to do it. She watched him drink it down with a lump in her throat. It was the longest, most luxuriant drink she'd ever watched another person take.

The most important drink to serve at your *Inland* book club meeting: Water! Thirst is almost a character itself in the novel, so quench it the old-fashioned way, or cut up some lemon slices, cubes of watermelon, or mint leaves for the pitcher to infuse yours with a little something extra.

SOUTHWEST BLOODY MARY

"I might drink some tomato," Nora said. She stood and split the top of a can and took two sour gulps of the reddish water. It stung going down, and stung coming halfway back, and stung still more going back down again. "Toby," she gasped. "You must have some."

Nora attempts to ease her thirst with juice from a can of tomatoes. For a nod to the book's plot and its setting, serve up these Southwest Bloody Marys.

Ingredients

- 1 oz. vodka
- 0.5 oz. mezcal
- 3 oz. Ketel One Southwest Bloody Mary Base
- charred bell pepper
- jalapeño slice for garnish
- 12 oz. tomato juice
- 5 dashes Worcestershire sauce
- 3 pinches salt
- 1 tbsp. horseradish
- 3 pinches black pepper
- 1 oz. fresh lemon juice
- 8 oz. salsa

Instructions

Add ice and roll ingredients from shaker into a rocks glass. Garnish with a charred bell pepper and jalapeño.



Source: <https://www.ketelone.com/vodka-drinks/southwest-bloody-mary/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: These questions contain spoilers.)

1. The novel's structure contains dual storylines—one from Nora's perspective, and one from Lurie's. How do these two stories differ, and in what ways are they similar? Did you connect more strongly to one story than the other? If so, why?
2. How and when did you realize that Lurie was telling his part of the story to a camel named Burke? How would you characterize the relationship between Lurie and Burke? Why do you think they had such a strong bond?
3. What do you understand the “want” that gets inside of Lurie to be? How is it driving him?
4. How would you characterize Nora and Emmett's marriage? What makes their union a strong one, and what has challenged it?
5. Why is Nora unable to let go of Evelyn? How do you feel her relationship with Evelyn changed, from the novel's beginning to its end?
6. Nora and Desma's friendship is a bond between two independent, strong-willed women. Why does it go awry?
7. What is motivating Jolly on his journey? What is the basis of his and Lurie's friendship?
8. How does the newspaper that Emmett and Nora own play a role in this story?
9. This novel is partly set during a time of tremendous drought. How does the author make you feel the weight of that as a reader? What elements of the story does this drought set into motion?
10. The novel's epigraph says that “Only things inside time change,” not time itself. How do you interpret this phrase in relation to the novel?