

**THE HEWLETT-WOODMERE READERS:
A Monthly Afternoon Discussion Group
2009 – 2010
OUR TENTH SEASON OF GOOD READING!**

***Aug. 3 (Tuesday) at 11 AM: THE WIVES OF HENRY OADES: A NOVEL by
Johanna Moran**

Discussion Leader: Edna Ritzenberg

Two women discover they're both rightfully married to the same man. Serious, sometimes horrific developments are lightened by touches of understated, salty wit in Moran's fact-based historical, a fresh and unusual story that moves from New Zealand to California in the 1890s. – *Kirkus Reviews*

* Summer Schedule

Sep. 13 at 1 PM: LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN by Colum McCann

Discussion Leader: Jane Isaacson Shapiro

"Philippe Petit's 1974 high-wire walk between the twin towers is pivotal to the lives of residents in this novel, a winner of the 2009 National Book Award."-**New York Times**

ABOUT THIS BOOK (*From the Random House Reading Guide*)

When Henry Oades accepts an accountancy post in New Zealand, his wife, Margaret, and their children follow him to exotic Wellington. But while Henry is an adventurer, Margaret is not. Their new home is rougher and more rustic than they expected—and a single night of tragedy shatters the family when the native Maori stage an uprising, kidnapping Margaret and her children.

For months, Henry scours the surrounding wilderness, until all hope is lost and his wife and children are presumed dead. Grief-stricken, he books passage to California. There he marries Nancy Foreland, a young widow with a new baby, and it seems they've both found happiness in the midst of their mourning—until Henry's first wife and children show up, alive and having finally escaped captivity.

Narrated primarily by the two wives, and based on a real-life legal case, **The Wives of Henry Oades** is the riveting story of what happens when Henry, Margaret, and Nancy face persecution for bigamy. Exploring the intricacies of marriage, the construction of family, the changing world of the late 1800s, and the strength of two remarkable women, Johanna Moran turns this unusual family's story into an unforgettable page-turning drama.

author interview

A Conversation with Johanna Moran

Random House Reader's Circle sat down with Johanna Moran to chat about the story

behind the story of **The Wives of Henry Oades**. It was a breezy summer day in downtown Sarasota, Florida, and they each enjoyed a glass of wine at a café, just around the corner from Johanna's home.

Random House Reader's Circle: When I first heard the premise of your novel, it struck me as such a fascinating and unusual story that I thought there must be a family connection here. And indeed there is, though not the sort I would have guessed at. How did you come to write **The Wives of Henry Oades**?

Johanna Moran: More than a half century ago, my father, a law professor, came across an abstract on the Oades case and showed it to my mother, who was attempting to write short fiction in her nonexistent spare time. She was intrigued and gave thought to fleshing out the story, but that's as far as she got. She might have had three kids down with mumps that week, or a spectacular birthday party for twins to host. In any event, five children and writing never did mesh. My mother squirreled the abstract away, perhaps thinking she'd get to it eventually. She gave it to me about ten years ago. I was drawn in immediately and went from there.

Fascinatingly, I've since learned from an Oades family descendant that the case, which was reported on in the *New York Times* and made its way into several legal texts, including *Readings in American Legal History (1949)*—70 plus years later!— may actually have been a hoax. There's some debate about whether the story was in fact invented by a California newspaper as a way for them to illustrate a loophole in the law that would have permitted bigamy.

RHRC: What in particular about the abstract drew you in? Did you and your mother discuss the narrative at all while you were writing?

JM: Well, I considered my own marriage. It's my first, but it's my husband's second. How outraged would I have been in Margaret's shoes? (She who didn't want to leave England in the first place.) My mother, two sisters, and I have discussed the narrative at length, from both women's perspectives and from Henry's, never arriving at a perfect solution.

RHRC: What aspect of the story did you find most challenging to fictionalize?

JM: The greatest challenge was knowing Henry. I regularly interviewed my husband and other men. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear," I'd say. "Tell me what you'd really do/say under these circumstances." Of course, no two men had the same answer. I came away with a mix of responses. My Henry Oades is a bit of a composite. I like and respect him. I also feel sorry for him at times.

RHRC: One of the things that's so compelling about your novel is how sympathetic the three main characters are: The reader can relate to each of them and understand their predicament and the choices they make— even if we don't always agree with them. While you were writing the novel, who did you feel most connected to or sympathetic toward— Margaret, Henry, or Nancy?

JM: Easily, Margaret. She's endured the most and is more entitled to Henry than Nancy. But then that's one first wife talking about another. Others will surely feel differently.

RHRC: How do you think the three Oadeses would have fared today?

JM: Good question. The women certainly would have had more options in the twenty-first century. Either one might have divorced without the social stigma attached. They might have gone on to fulfilling careers, in a different city of their choosing. They might have enjoyed the freedom of life on their own, or found new love(s), with or without the benefit of marriage. But that's assuming one or the other was willing to give up Henry, and that's not the case. Both consider him their rightful, lawful husband. A modern world would not have mitigated the heartache.

RHRC: There was a scene that didn't make it into the final draft— one in which Henry gives Nancy and Margaret a rather unusual gift, and it takes the women a bit of getting used to. Tell us about the earth closet and where that idea came from.

JM: I laugh thinking about that scene. I came across the earth closet in my reading. It was essentially a human litter box, consisting of a commode, pail, and dirt. Its popularity was very short lived. In the original draft, when an earthquake destroys their outdoor privy, Henry surprises the women with this indoor contraption. Nancy is particularly horrified. American women took some time getting used to the idea of any sort of indoor toilet. The “necessary” was associated with germs and disease, and naturally belonged outside.

RHRC: *The Wives of Henry Oades* seems like quite a wonderful tribute to a wide swath of your family— writers and lawyers. And in your previous career you traveled extensively, didn't you?

JM: That's right. My grandfather was a district judge; my father was a professor of law. I've long had a fascination with the law because of them. The love of writing came from both parents. My father was a published author, as was my maternal grandmother. Too restless to spend another four years in a classroom, I began my flying career at nineteen, first for National Airlines, a regional carrier, then for Pan Am. They were exhilarating years for the most part, interspersed with union strikes and the rare close call. I live a little more quietly now with my husband, John— for whom, in Margaret's or Nancy's situation, I would have fought tooth and nail.

RHRC: Had you been to any or all of the three locations the novel takes place in (London, England; Wellington, New Zealand; Berkeley, California) before you began writing? Did you visit afterward? Do you think your travel experience helped you create vivid portraits of each city?

JM: My husband and I visited all of the settings in the novel before I began writing. So, yes, actually being in a place is a huge help in creating a visual. We've been back to England and California since. We walked down Polk Street where Dr. McTeague's dental parlor is located. And we ate at the Cliff House and drank champagne at the Palace Hotel,

though not as much as Margaret and Nancy did that day.

RHRC: Of the places you've traveled, where has been your favorite and why?

JM: For natural grandeur— hands down: New Zealand, particularly South Island. It is a spectacular country, and the people are lovely. An Air New Zealand pilot invited us to dinner simply because we were new to the place. I'd love to go back. And I will always hold San Francisco dear. John and I honeymooned there. It is one of the most romantic cities in the country.

RHRC: Can you tell us a little about what you are working on now?

JM: I'm working on a story about a friendship between two nineteenth-century prostitutes, one of whom was in fact murdered by Abraham Rothschild.

Reader's Guide

1. On the voyage to New Zealand, Mrs. Randolph, a fellow passenger, cares for Margaret as she miscarries. Later, when Margaret tries to explain her grief over her new friend's death to Henry, she thinks, "the small transactions between women, particularly mothers, cannot adequately be explained to a man. Some, like hers with Mrs. Randolph, will bind women for life." Do you agree with Margaret? Can a strong relationship between women be forged in a matter of hours? With whom have you felt this connection?
2. Why do you think Mr. Oades misidentified Mim Bell as his wife? How could he have made such a grievous error?
3. Margaret refers to the quid pro quo of her faith: "One takes communion every single Sunday for thirty- odd years. One humbles herself, embraces every last dogmatic note, and no good comes of it, no help when one needs it most." Nancy, too, feels as though she has been cheated. Have people's expectations of contemporary Christianity changed?
4. Margaret teaches her children lessons every evening: grammar, mathematics, and etiquette. "It was her duty to prepare them for their return. She refused to accept the possibility that they might grow old and die a natural death here. Margaret never once considered setting her children free to be slaves." She refuses to allow her children to live the life before them, planning, instead, for the life she hopes they will claim. Why does Margaret remain so steadfast during their captivity?
5. Henry finally accepts that his loved ones are dead, and eventually he marries another woman. What is the catalyst for this turning point? Do you agree with his actions?
6. Why do Margaret and the children receive such a chilly welcome when they finally return to the village from the Maori camp?
7. Several matches proposed in this book seem made for convenience: Portia and Henry, Margaret and Captain Fisk of the *Sacramento*, and even Nancy and Henry, at least in the beginning. Do you agree? If so, why do you think that is?

8. At what point do Margaret and Nancy start to get along? What sparks their friendship?
9. Though it's a wretched situation for everyone involved, which Mrs. Oades do you think suffers most? With which woman do you most identify?
10. Was there a better solution for Mr. Oades and his non-traditional family? Or did they make the best possible choice? Would there be a better solution today? What would it be?
11. The claims of the Daughters of Decency seem ridiculous to modern ears. Can you think of any recent court battles that might seem as hysteric and unnecessary a century from now?
12. Consider the Maori premonition in the beginning of the book. How does it relate to the story?
13. What, in the end, do you think was the main theme of this book? Were you surprised?

History pulls a fast one on author

The New Zealand Herald, April 18, 2010

Slavery by Maori, unjust courtroom persecution for bigamy, heartache in Wellington - the story has it all. Henry Oades, an English accountant with a farm near Wellington, loses his first wife and children, presumed killed in a Maori raid.

Grief-stricken, he abandons New Zealand, moves to California and marries again - only for his wife and children to turn up alive and well on his American doorstep, years later.

The Wives of Henry Oades, a work of historical fiction by first-time Florida-based author Johanna Moran, published in New Zealand this month, is an unconventional love-triangle with a basis in recorded history.

Moran sketches the travails of Henry, Margaret and Nancy Oades in a tale that culminates in Henry's bigamy trial before the California courts.

The review copy of the novel, an uncorrected proof, notes the story-behind-the-story was based on details of a bigamy case found by the author's father in San Francisco court records.

And, delving into 19th-century newspaper archives, it appears Moran has unearthed an extraordinary long-forgotten episode of New Zealand history.

Reports of Henry Oades first ran in the now-defunct Los Angeles Evening Express on December 16, 1873. As the story slowly spread across the United States, then to London and New Zealand via courier and ship, stories ran in outlets as varied and august as the Wanganui Chronicle, the New York Times, the North Otago Times and Pall Mall Gazette.

The Los Angeles reporter's non-fiction accounts from the time far eclipsed Moran's

historical fiction in sensationalism.

"On this trial it was proved that about eight years ago Oades was living in Wellington County, New Zealand, on the frontiers; when without warning, the Maoris - a tribe with whom the English were at peace - made an inroad into the settlements," the Evening Express reported.

"Oades was at the time temporarily absent in Victoria, and returned only to find his homestead burnt and his family disappeared. Some human remains were found in the ruins; and from this and from such information as he could gain during the ensuing two years he was gradually forced to the conviction that his wife and children were dead; and being loath to remain amid the scenes of his distress he left New Zealand and came to California."

But the story got better, with the arrival of Oades' first wife and children in California.

The newspaper recounted an interview with Oades' second wife: "Oades, she said, had sworn that if she attempted to annul his second marriage he would not only beat her half to death, but he also would never live with her any more; that she wouldn't mind the beating so much, but that she preferred to submit to the present state of circumstances rather than lose Oades altogether."

Lacking a complaint from either wife, and because remarriage is legal if one partner genuinely believes the other dead, Oades was sensationally acquitted of bigamy.

The moral majority, however, gathered to discuss how to debate the court verdict. "The silence was relieved by a prominent citizen of Los Angeles, who proposed to hang Oades. "This," he said, "was a very common way of arranging such affairs in Los Angeles, and it has always met the public approbation except on one occasion when, indeed, they had perhaps gone a little too far in hanging 17 Chinamen."

The story ends with an action-packed chase as Oades flees and the lynch mob gives chase: "Oades, after a close race, reached his house where he barricaded himself and drove off the crowd with a shotgun."

Taking this report as inspiration, Johanna Moran wrote her novel, featuring two wives and spanning three continents. There's a long sea voyage, a difficult life in colonial Wellington and years spent by a woman and her children in slavery to Maori.

Moran moved the timeline, shuffling the year of the trial to 1890 and switching the setting from San Bernardino to San Francisco.

"I was fascinated with Berkeley at the turn of the century," she says.

Her Oades is a kindly man, racked by grief, who deals as well as he can with an impossible situation. But on the trail of the real Oades, this curious story gets even curiously.

In Wellington's National Archives digitised collection of 19th-century newspapers, the only mention of Oades is in mid-1874 reports sourced from the trial reports in newspapers in New York and London. Alexander Turnbull Library research librarian Peter Attwell says the absence of such a sensational story from newspapers of the time is strange. The Wellington farm being raided by Maori, and women and children believed killed in the mid-1860s, would have sparked news coverage - as would Oades' family's

miraculous escape from captivity some years later.

"The story, if it really did break, would have been in Wellington's Weekly Mail. There's no mention of anyone by that name," Attwell says. He trawled the library: "I've had a look in our records to see if there's any mention of Henry Oades. I haven't managed to find anything."

And Wellington iwi* Ngati Toa, no strangers to warfare in the days of Te Rauparaha**, can't recall any raids or slave-capturing missions during the time in question, either.

Ngati Toa's former Treaty of Waitangi claims manager Miria Pomare says: "It sounds too late for that sort of activity to have happened. If it was the mid-1840s, and was based in the Hutt Valley, then there's a remote possibility of something like that." Told the whole story of the Oades saga, Pomare is sceptical. "It's an incredible story - unbelievable even," she says.

Doubts were raised with the publishers of *Henry Oades* in August last year, six months before the book was released, when Englishman Richard Myers wrote to US commissioning publishers Random House, claiming he was an Oades descendant.

"He looked forward to reading my book and in no way was he trying to cast a bad shadow over it. He was mostly curious," Moran told the Herald on Sunday. "But he was quite adamant this was a hoax."

Contacted by the Herald on Sunday, Myers said his research found that it was 1908 - well after the events in question - before any Oades arrived in New Zealand and the only Oades in the United States at the time of the bigamy trial was living in Nebraska.

For her part, Moran said Myers' letter was troubling. "It did throw me at first," she said. But, on the balance of probabilities, Moran said she still believed the story to be true. She believed the controversial Oades - painted as an alcoholic, wife-beating bigamist in newspaper reports - was likely a black sheep of the family.

* = people

** = Chief and war leader (1760s – 1849)

Further, the tales of Oades and his two wives had been part of Moran family history. Her father, a law professor, came across the abstract in a legal text and passed it to her mother - a budding, but never blooming, short-story writer - to use as inspiration.

"I don't believe it was a hoax. I base it on the fact that it appeared in a Harvard Law School text 70 years after the fact," she said. "I don't believe a Harvard Law Professor would get taken in by a hoax."

Stuart Walzer, a prominent California family law attorney, also came across the strange story of Oades at Harvard, where he was a student in 1950.

The case was included in a course textbook, *Readings in American History*, the same text in which Moran's father first came across Oades. As Walzer writes in a 1991 article for legal journal *Western Legal History*, the story was wildly popular.

"To the delight of every law student, it contained a 19th-century account of a bigamous California marriage, with humorous and racy overtones," he writes, "I thought it too good

to be true".

Tracing the original reportage, Walzer reprints the widely circulated Evening Express story from December 16, 1873 - and also includes a little-publicised follow-up published two weeks later: "A short time ago, we published an imaginary case of bigamy, to show that under the new California Codes a man may have two legal wives.

"The case was artfully worked up by the author, and by a process of *reductio ad absurdum* she showed a defect in the codes which could not have been so strikingly illustrated in any other way. And now some asinine reader from San Bernardino gets mad at us for publishing the case. The ninny! He thought every word of it was true!"

Polygamy in 1870s California was a hot political issue, partly driven by anti-Mormon hysteria.

It seems the hoaxer from the Evening Express, in seeking to close loopholes in bigamy laws, was successful beyond all intent. The story ended up sucking in 19th-century newspaper editors, 20th-century law professors and a 21st-century novelist.

The Herald on Sunday sent Moran the Walzer article several days after first speaking to her. "It came as a bit of a shock," she says.

Moran says the Oades story has been part of her family lore, after it was passed from father to mother, and then down to daughter, over the past 40 years. "It was a big part of my life. I heard the conversations, I heard my mother discuss it, then she gave it to me. This was one of the facts of my life," she says.

Writing *Henry Oades* was a nine-year effort, she explains, and the revelation her inspiration was an elaborate hoax makes her question the near-decade she spent writing.

Would she have written the book had she known the story of the real Oades? "I really don't know. I don't know if I'd have even started it," she begins. Collecting herself, she continues. "I take that back ... I was compelled by the unfairness of the story."

She says her Henry Oades didn't set out to have a polygamous relationship, but was persecuted for trying to do right by both of his wives. Casting either out of the house would be an injustice, she says. "I thought it was unfair they weren't able to have their family life undisturbed."

American writer James Frey was lambasted for having fictionalised large elements of his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*.

But Moran's book, a work of fiction, cannot - and should not - be subjected to the same criticism. Like Booker-nominated New Zealand novelist Lloyd Jones' *Biografi*, who was criticised for blurring the lines between fact and fiction, Moran presented her story as fiction.

Victoria University associate professor of English Mark Williams says: "Fictions are by definition untrue - lies of a benign variety."

US-based literary critic Jolisa Gracewood, best known for discovering large chunks of Witi Ihimaera's book *The Trowenna Sea* were plagiarised, says the truth of Henry Oades will come in the writing, not the back story.

"It doesn't really matter whether the inspiration comes from real life or from an urban

legend ... What matters is that the author transforms it into an original, persuasive and affecting work of fiction." Gracewood does add a kicker, though: "If it's being promoted as 'based on a true story', the publishers might want to rethink that strategy."

And, it seems, publishers have quietly backed down from claims that *Henry Oades* was based on fact. The back cover note to the New Zealand release has now been changed from that on the review copy, to say the story is "based on a widely-publicised and controversial newspaper account of the 1800s".

However, it seems at least part of the interest *Henry Oades* was due to its original claim to be based on fact.

One online reviewer, in a glowing write-up, notes: "I would not have believed this story if I had not read beforehand this was true."

The last word in the strange saga can go to Bill Manhire, director of Victoria University's Institute of Modern Letters. "All the good stories," he says, "are too good to check." - **The Wives of Henry Oades**, by Johanna Moran (Harper Collins, RRP \$33)



Review: Johanna Moran's 'Wives of Henry Oades' was inspired by 1800s bigamy case

Review by Colette Bancroft, Times Book Editor

In Print: Sunday, February 28, 2010

Johanna Moran inherited the plot of her debut novel, *The Wives of Henry Oades*. Fifty years ago, Moran's father, then a law student, came across the case of Oades, who was tried and acquitted— three times — for bigamy in San Francisco a century ago, in an era when bigamy was a hanging offense.

Moran's father always thought the tale would make a fascinating novel but never got around to writing it. Now his daughter, a Sarasota resident, has proved that his instinct was right.

Oades is a young British accountant who takes a job in New Zealand, moving there in 1891 with his wife, Margaret, and their two youngsters. A year later, just after Margaret gives birth to twin girls, she and all the children are kidnapped during an uprising by the Maori, New Zealand's indigenous people.

Oades, heartbroken, searches for them for more than a year before giving them up for dead and sailing for California. There, he becomes the prosperous owner of a dairy farm and marries a young widow, Nancy. In 1899, Margaret and three of the children (one baby died during the abduction) appear on Henry's doorstep, having survived slavery, a perilous escape and a grueling sea voyage to reunite with him. He loves both his families and cannot see why he should cast either one out, despite the law and a community gripped by anti-Mormon sentiment (although the Oades family were not Mormons).

Moran focuses her satisfying, briskly paced novel on Henry's two wives. Their experiences and attitudes are very different, yet their love for their children and their shared husband brings them to an unusual and courageous alliance.

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