

News of the World



By Paulette Jiles

Thu, December 12 @ 7pm

SSP Library Book Club

**Can a 10-year-old girl ever
recover from years in captivity?**

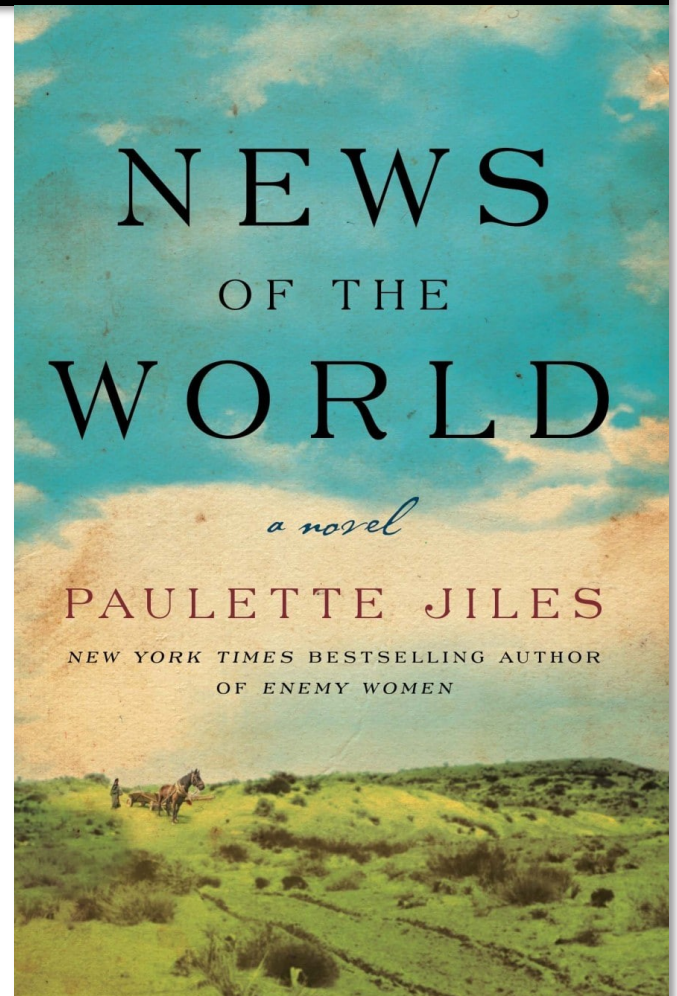
The Washington Post

September 27, 2016

By Wendy Smith

Paulette Jiles has always been a terrific storyteller, and her latest novel, *News of the World*, moves at a characteristically brisk pace across post-Civil War Texas. The hero, septuagenarian Captain Kidd, confronts a variety of predators who threaten his mission to return 10-year-old Johanna Leonberger to her aunt and uncle in San Antonio. Johanna has not seen them since a band of Kiowas killed her parents and took her captive four years ago. But stories are empty without heart and soul, and Jiles gives us plenty of both as she renders the pain of loss and the power of words for an old man and a young girl who don't really belong anywhere anymore.

Kidd has been on the move since his beloved wife died in 1865 and debts forced him to sell his printing business. "It was as if some tether had been loosened, the anchor rope of a hot-air balloon cut free and the Captain rose up



and sailed away on the winds of chance," writes Jiles, displaying the same knack for evocative, character-defining prose that distinguished her three previous historical novels and her marvelous excursion into dystopian fiction, *Lighthouse Island* (2013).

[Review: *Lighthouse Island*, by Paulette Jiles]

Kidd earns a modest livelihood by reading aloud from newspapers and journals in public halls across North Texas. He takes his small-town

audiences “to far places and strange peoples. Into mythic forms of thought and the structures of fairy tales.” He reads to them of Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations for the ancient city of Troy, of telegraph wires laid from Britain to India, of a ship crushed by pack ice off the coast of Greenland. In a former Confederate state now in semi-anarchy, these stories may as well be fairy tales; his listeners are enchanted, and Kidd is pleased that he can lighten hard-pressed lives.

There seems little he can do for Johanna, though. She’s devastated by her abrupt separation from the only family she knows. (The Kiowas have submitted to an order to return all white captives or face pursuit by the cavalry.) “They are different when they come back,” says a man whose adult son has barely readjusted following less than a year in captivity. After four years, Johanna has no memory of her white life; she doesn’t speak English, and she keeps trying to run away. In one of the novel’s saddest episodes, Kidd tracks her in a rainstorm to the banks of a dangerously swollen river, where she stands calling across to a group of Indians who respond with shots warning her to stay away.

“So alone, twice captured, carried away on the flood of the world,” says a friend of Kidd’s who cares for Johanna while he is reading. “You can put her in any clothing and she remains as strange as she was before because she has been through two creations.” Such flights of poetry would seem pretentious and implausible in the hands of a less skilled writer, but Jiles grounds her characters’ metaphysical musings in a starkly realistic portrait of the lawless Texas landscape. Every encounter Kidd and Johanna have on the trail between Wichita Falls and San Antonio seethes with the possibility of violence, from a band of

armed brigands who consent to be bought off with a half-dollar to a quintet of not-very-bright brothers who menacingly suggest that Kidd should be reading aloud stories about them, because “we killed a right smart of Mexicans.”

Kidd and Johanna forge a tentative bond as they negotiate these encounters and cement it in a pitched battle with the sinister Almay, who first offers to buy the girl and then attempts to take her by force with the help of two confederates. Even staunch pacifists may find it hard to resist being thrilled by Jiles’s intoxicating, blow-by-blow account of the way this unlikely pair, outmanned and outgunned, outwit and wreak bloody vengeance on their opponents.

This fiercely magnificent child, gentled just enough by her affection for Kidd, can’t possibly be delivered into dull domesticity, although it takes some stacking of the fictional deck to make sure Johanna gets the future she deserves. It’s easy to forgive a few moments of contrivance in a tale that maintains an optimistic spirit while depicting the consequences of war and social disarray. The evil some people are capable of is never as important, in Jiles’s generous assessment, as the longing of many more people for peace, order and love. Her lovely and tender novel, a National Book Award finalist, affirms that the news of the world can be good, if we strive together to make it so.



About the Author : Paulette Jiles

Poet, memoirist, and novelist Paulette Jiles was born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks and moved to Canada in 1969 after graduating with a degree in Romance languages from the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

She spent eight years as a journalist in Canada, before turning to writing poetry. In 1984, she won the Governor General's Award (Canada's highest literary honor) for *Celestial Navigation*, a collection of poems lauded by the Toronto Star as "...fiercely interior and ironic, with images that can mow the reader down."

In 1992, Jiles published *Cousins*, a beguiling memoir that interweaves adventure and romance into a search for her family roots. Ten years later, she made her fiction debut with *Enemy Women* (2002), the survival story of an 18-year-old woman caged with the criminally insane in a St. Louis prison during the Civil War. Janet Maslin raved in the New York Times, "This is a book with backbone, written with tough, haunting eloquence by an author determined to capture the immediacy of the heroine's wartime odyssey." The book won the Willa Literary Award for Historical Fiction (U.S.) and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize (Canada).

In her second novel, 2007's *Stormy Weather*, Jiles mined another rich trove of American history. Set in Texas oil country during the Great Depression, the story traces the lives of four women, a widow and her three daughters, as they struggle to hold farm and family together in a hardscrabble world of dust storms, despair, and deprivation. In its review, the Washington Post praised the author's lyrical



prose, citing descriptions that "crackle with excitement."

A dual citizen of the United States and Canada, Jiles currently lives on a ranch near San Antonio, Texas.

Coming Up

Thu, January 9 @ 7 pm

2020 titles to be
revealed December 12!

