



THE WHITE

novel

Deborah Larsen

# The White

A N O V E L B Y

Deborah Larsen



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ALSO BY DEBORAH LARSEN

*Stitching Porcelain: After Matteo Ricci  
in Sixteenth-Century China*

# The White

*In memory of Christopher*

*The sky is pale margin. Neither flesh nor a god, it appears to dissolve at the firm edge of land where a tale might begin.*

*These edges of earth, muddy browns and flat blacks with offshoots of green, are marked and distinct and indeed suffer their distinctions, just as the Seneca language suffers its difference from English or French. Only the snow sometimes softens the world—its bulwarks, stiles, and mountain faces; that pier-head, this rigging, those docks beyond which lie impassable waters.*

*I was born a white at sea on the way to the New World. From my youth in that world I wished to own land bordered by sky, as my mother and father had once purchased woods and fields which were dappled with changing light. In time this happened in such a fashion, I daresay, as it had happened to few women before me.*

*But I was taken by those whom we called Indians. Nearly speechless for a time, I was beset by terrors.*

*My birth name was Mary.*

## P R E F A T O R Y   N O T E

IN 1758 a woman around the age of sixteen named Mary Jemison—or as some now think, Mary Jamison—was actually taken by a Shawnee raiding party in south-central Pennsylvania; she was forced from her home, which lay close to what would later be known as the town of Gettysburg.

In 1823, in New York State, the aged Mary sat for three days with a physician and local historian, James Seaver, and told him the story that he wrote down and then published. Some time after this meeting, she reputedly commented on it: “. . . but I did not tell them who wrote it down half of what it was.” I imagine Dr. Seaver as a Latinist and a rhetorician. He writes of shots as a “discharge of guns” and of his heroine as able to “render herself intelligible on any subject with which she was acquainted.”



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A statue of Mary Jemison stands but fifteen miles from my present home in the woods. Some say that at a site not far from this statue, iron spikes and a single shoe buckle have been unearthed and that they belong to the vanished house that Mary's father built on the banks of a creek, the Conewago, which continues to cut the broad valley where this story begins.

*Adams County, Pennsylvania*

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DEBORAH LARSEN grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, and currently resides with her husband in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Her collection of poetry, *Stitching Porcelain*, was published in 1991, and her poems and short stories have appeared in *The Nation*, *The Yale Review*, *The Quarterly*, *Oxford Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*, among other publications. She has been a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a Wallace Stevens Fellow at Yale, and teaches creative writing at Gettysburg College, where she holds the Merle S. Boyer Chair.

#### A NOTE ON THE TYPE

THIS BOOK was set in Adobe Garamond. Designed for the Adobe Corporation by Robert Slimbach, the fonts are based on types first cut by Claude Garamond (c. 1480-1561). Garamond was a pupil of Geoffroy Tory and is believed to have followed the Venetian models, although he introduced a number of important differences, and it is to him that we owe the letter we now know as "old style." He gave to his letters a certain elegance and feeling of movement that won their creator an immediate reputation and the patronage of Francis I of France.

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[ 1 ]

Buchanan  
Valley

1758



MARY had loved the family axe as a glittering extension of her own arm. Her father had sharpened it the morning they were taken, and she had been splitting wood, cutting the thick white oak with ease, cleaving filamented piece from piece for the sake of warmth-filled evenings and for cooking. She imagined the flames tentative at first and then thrusting up, spending themselves in the foreign air for the comfort of her family.

And then for what seemed like no reason at all (because her father had said they could make it on their own until late spring, when the closest fort would send a militia to fend off Indian raiding parties), she saw feet in moccasins not far from the woodpile at the base of a shagbark hickory. She lifted her gaze to the impassive eyes and sculpted planes of what she would later learn was not an "Indian's" face but that of a Shawnee.

She spoke no word at this time, though a rage started up within her. So. Feet in moccasins.

So, feet in moccasins were now pressing into the very ground that belonged to her family, and she wondered how Father would explain them away.

How could he, how could he have left them as prey to what after all had hurtled across the horizon, to what with sureness had crept through their fields? No, he had actually *led* his family. How *could* he? How could he have led them, as it is written in Scripture, like lambs to the slaughter?



WAS IT for this that she had been conceived?

And born *Mary*, for so she had been born and named in the yellow air below-decks of the ship *Mary William*, out of Ireland, bound for Philadelphia. Thomas Jemison and the pregnant Jane Erwin Jemison had sailed out onto the loose, flecked fields of the Atlantic, preferring the clear American wilderness to the Irish civilization of the day. Away from Ireland, they would feel free to want something that was actually obtainable. They wanted a farm.

They landed; they moved straight on out of Philadelphia to a tract of land not far from what would become the town of Gettysburg. What they marked out as their farm lay on the tangled banks of a creek named Marsh. Later they moved to larger fields, on one of which stood a good house and a log barn, and it was here now where Thomas had let them all fall into the hands of six Shawnee and four Frenchmen and where his mouth had been suddenly stopped of his stories, of his resonant Irish jests.