

# A new perspective on a Northwest story

In the 20th century, generations of schoolchildren were taught a one-sided version of the Whitman Massacre, when Dr. Marcus Whitman, his wife, Narcissa, and several others were killed at the mission they'd established near the Walla Walla River to proselytize among the Cayuse tribe.

More recently, the narrative has been expanded to include a more sympathetic portrayal of the people whose lands the Whitmans had invaded.

Now Tom Jiroudek, a longtime Cannon Beach resident whose wife, Laurie, is a descendant of one of the massacre survivors, has written a new book that centers on others who were involved in that deadly event and the incidents leading up to it. "Eliza" adds new layers of complexity to the tragedy.

In their 1846 journey, the Whitmans were accompanied by another missionary couple, Henry and Eliza Spalding. Narcissa and Eliza shared the distinction of being the first white women to traverse the Rocky Mountains.

The Spaldings settled in Lapwai, within present-day Idaho, to establish their mission among the Nez Perce tribe. Mrs. Spalding in particular cultivated a good relationship with the Nimiipuu, and enthusiastically learned their Sahaptin language. Eliza, the Spaldings' first child, grew up speaking both English and Sahaptin fluently.

The Spaldings kept in touch with the Whitmans and other Protestant missionaries who arrived later. They depended on one another for support, but also bickered over how to manage their affairs. There were also Catholic missionaries in the region, whom they regarded with mutual antipathy.

Over the next decade, more white pioneers traveled along the Oregon Trail, usurping land that had been traditional tribal territory for millennia, and – inadvertently, but lethally – bringing diseases that

the native people had little resistance to. Tribal mortality relating to measles became catastrophic.

Eliza, then 10 years old, was sent to the Whitman Mission to attend school just as tensions between the tribes and white settlers reached a boiling point. Unlike Eliza's mother, Narcissa Whitman reviled the Indigenous people. Reciprocally, some in the Cayuse tribe had developed extreme resentment toward these haughty and harmful white interlopers.

## This week's book

'Eliza' by Tom Jiroudek

Self-published – 760 pp – \$19.95

The massacre at the Whitman Mission occurred on November 29, 1847. Not only were the Whitmans and several others killed, but more than four dozen women and children were held captive by tribe members for weeks, uncertain as to their fate.

As the only bilingual hostage, young Eliza was thrust into the harrowing position of advocating for the survivors, who eventually were ransomed by the Hudson's Bay Company.

This biographical novel is told from young Eliza's point of view — even, rather unusually, from a time before she was born, although the author manages that deftly. Jiroudek does an even-handed job of conveying the grit and idealism of those early missionaries, while also considering their folly and fatal prejudices. "Eliza" is an exceptionally hefty book, but it's also a fairly accessible read.

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# Eliza

## The First Pioneers



# Tom Jiroudek

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