

# Novel inspired by true stories of the Big Muddy Ranch

By Brian Mortensen  
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The canyon-corrugated, undulating land east of Antelope was once known as, and is again known as the Big Muddy Ranch. The Big Muddy has experienced it share of turmoil, both on its surface and among the people who have inhabited it over time. But in its aged resiliency the Big Muddy has experienced miracles.

These miracles are what Jane Kirkpatrick allows readers to experience in her novel, *A Land of Sheltered Promise*, released in April.

Kirkpatrick lives with her husband Jerry on a remote spot on the John Day River about 70 miles east of the Big Muddy Ranch. She worked on the Warm Springs Reservation as an educational and mental health consultant for 17 years. Additionally, her parents resided at High Lookee Lodge.

"I still have people there who are important in my life," she said.

Her book focuses on women who were visitors to the the Big Muddy. Native Americans, who lived, traveled and hunted for roots in the area, now part of the ceded lands, are present when the book opens around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book then moves through the time of the land's occupation by the followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in the 1980s, to the efforts in the 1990s to begin what the Big Muddy Ranch is now, Wildhorse Canyon, a camp owned by the nationwide youth ministry Young Life.

Kirkpatrick was at Wildhorse Canyon to launch her book as part of a retreat of the Wildhorse Partners Club last month. Such a tie-in makes sense: *A Land of Sheltered Promise* is a study of faith among its characters, three women on different marks of a timeline, but its main character could be the land of "the Big Muddy" itself.

"I think the interest for me came because it was a landscape that seemed to attract extremes," Kirkpatrick said. "During the Native experience here, there was a bloody time. Chief Paulina was supposedly killed somewhere in this vicinity. And then I learned about the sheep and cattle wars. There were issues about whether it was overgrazed. And then the Rajneeshees came in and there was the question of whether they abused it or improved it."

"But, through it all, the land, even though it looks to be changing, remained unchanged. I think it's a spiritual place."

When the Rajneeshees left



Jane Kirkpatrick

the area in 1986, they left much of the buildings and infrastructure that would be central to the construction of Wildhorse Canyon, which opened in June of 1999.

"In many ways, whatever overgrazing happened, whatever went on with the dramatic rapid building during the Rajneesh era, whatever happened, if you look around, it looks healed," she said.

The book is in three parts. It begins with the story of Eva Cora Thompson Bruner, a young wife who waits as her husband, D.L. Bruner, a shepherd for the Prineville Land and Livestock Company at the Big Muddy Ranch, is on trial and eventually sentenced to life in prison for murder.

Eva, a mere teenager when she marries D.L., bears the couple's daughter while her husband is in prison and remains faithful to him, believing her husband did not kill on purpose — her belief confirmed while she hunted deer alone after his sentence.

While her husband contracts tuberculosis in the Oregon State Prison, Eva successfully works with his attorney to have D.L. pardoned so he may return to his wife and daughter to live on the Big Muddy Ranch.

"What I know about Eva Bruner in fact is that she was married to D.L. Bruner," Kirkpatrick said. "She was 17 at the time of the trial in 1901. She was asked to testify against him, from what I could gather, in the court hearings. And D.L. was actually pardoned. But the rest of her story, about why she wanted to come here or having a child and working on behalf of herself, hoping that something might happen, that's all fictional."

The second part of the book is set in 1984, during the time when Antelope was called Rajneesh and the Big Muddy was called Rajneeshpurham. This was when thousands of people lived in the canyon with the promise of a life of enlight-

enment through detachment. It focuses on a mother who tries to rescue her daughter and granddaughter from the clutches of the Bhagwan's teaching and the oppressive control of his minions like Ma Anand Sheela.

Having an acquaintance who became a *Sannyasin*, or follower of the Bhagwan, and living in the area during the time, Kirkpatrick knowingly chronicles the Rajneeshees' attempts to swing a county election their way by busing thousands of homeless people to the area, and allegedly poisoning 10 salad bars in The Dalles, resulting in 751 food-poison cases, the first bioterrorism attack in the United States.

"I was director of the mental health program in Bend, so we had some connection through the Central Oregon Counselors Association and the Rajneeshees would send some representatives to that," she said. "And then in '84, which was the upbuilding and deterioration, my husband and I were living downriver about 70 miles. We didn't have a phone for a year and a half, and we didn't have local radio, because we were down in the canyon, so we didn't know much about what was going on except through the newspapers."

"I did have a contact, a woman who had been here, and she is actually the former mayor of Antelope. I had come here in '82, and I spent an afternoon with her, trying to understand what she was doing here. She was certainly devoted and believed this was the best thing that could happen. Most of the *Sannyasins*, if you talk to them, even today, they will say it was the best time of their lives."

The third part of the book moves to 1995, when Tom and Jill Hartley helped turn the abandoned Rajneesh compound into what is now Wildhorse Canyon. The section follows Tom Hartley's dogged belief in the vision and Jill Hartley's initial

skepticism and conversion, all the while regaining faith in her marriage.

"I wanted to identify, in the first section in particular, about those times in our life, particularly in our faith life, when we feel separated and we feel maybe betrayed and we wonder what we can do, and do we have to wait for something to happen before we can make a change," she said.

"My philosophy is that we don't have to wait. It's still always up to us in how we deal with circumstances that are handed out to us, and we can either let them weigh us down, or we can say this is what I can do, take a risk, basically."

Of the second part, during what she describes as being a "hostile" time, Kirkpatrick said "that even in those times of great tragedy and great trial, people can still change, people can still make new connections."

In the third part, Kirkpatrick said she wanted to "convey what it would be like to be married to someone who seemed to have a calling and identify with what your own loyalties might be, that love certainly asks for some sacrifices, asks for some change, and that change doesn't have to be a negative thing for us."

She said she wanted to explore the "divisiveness" between those more demonstrative in their faith from those who may be more private, and the way they can come together over a common cause, a love for people.

Naturally, the third part of

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Jane Kirkpatrick

the book was easier to research because most of the people involved with the current Wildhorse Canyon are still alive and were available for interviews, which Kirkpatrick said was new to her, since she deals with mostly historical subjects in her writings. The challenge, she said, was accounting for the myriad people who contributed to the forming of Wildhorse Canyon yet maintaining focus and consistency with the first two parts.

"Jill and Tom were not nearly as strong in the first draft as what they became," she said. "It really became Jill and Tom's story and the rest of them were peripheral. In the original draft, it was 'everybody's story,' and I was trying to show all these people and it was chaotic."

"My hope is that it will be a story for someone who's never heard of Young Life, or never heard of Rajneeshpurham, or could care less about the West and cattle and sheep. They could pick it up and read it as a story about life challenges and capacity to change and God's faithfulness."

Throughout the novel is the

presence of Native Americans whose heritage has always been and will forever be tied to the land that enfolds the Big Muddy, from the root diggers in the first part to Buckle, the chauffeur from Warm Springs, in the second part, who also appears in the third part.

"Obviously, that's purposeful, in part because I wanted to keep the reader aware that before there were all these things, there were Native Americans here, and that's an influence that I hope will continue to be."

"Buckle is an independent businessman, he's doing the best he can, he transfers people around, but he's a kind and generous person who can see what's going on here. He's not a part of it, but is willing to assist someone who might be needing a way out. He's a good guy."

Kirkpatrick said her interest in communal societies led her to her next project, a two-book series about the Bethelite people who formed in Missouri in the 1850s and, in their search for a new home, sent a group of nine men and one woman as a scout team.

"I think it's a book about trying to find your unique identity within a community that, particularly with the women, tends to require conformity," she said. The book will also take a look at defined groups where people who profess to be charitable to others and may in fact be charitable remain isolated within their own denominational lines.

She said this project was due to be delivered to her editors next month.

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