

Red Weather: Historical Contexts

1. *Red Weather* is set mostly in Central America, but the country Coatepeque can't be found on any map. Why not just set the book in El Salvador or Guatemala?

I considered it. I lived in El Salvador during the late 1980s and certainly I drew upon that experience in writing the book. As the book unfolded, I traveled in Guatemala and Nicaragua, attending not just to landscape and light and food, but to gestures, to nuances of body language. Ultimately, I think I would have felt presumptuous using any one country's literal political history. I wanted to create a place in which my character Neva, a mixedblood Indigenous *North* American could understand her own complex political history by witnessing one that not only parallels but is deeply connected to her own.

In *Red Weather*, Coatepeque's political situation is a composite. There is an oppressive, U.S. -supported government in power. While its repression is widespread, the people most brutalized by it are tribal peoples. Waging guerilla war on the government is the *Frente* ("the Front"). Prior to coming to Coatepeque, Neva has drifted into a liberal (and all white) activist group whose analysis of the situation doesn't get much further than "Frente = Good, Government=Bad." So her discovery that the leftist Frente has its own human rights abuses (land mines especially) is unsettling, running counter to Neva's desire for a sort of political purity. Ultimately, though, as Kira's story emphasizes, one side is fighting for human rights and economic justice and one side for power and money.

2. Your novel references AIM—the American Indian Movement—and Wounded Knee. Could you say a little more about what happened there?

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968 as an activist organization working for justice for Native people and nations. In 1973, some Lakota elders asked AIM to come to Pine Ridge, their reservation, because of escalating violence there. AIM eventually came to occupy the village of Wounded Knee, S.D., a town on the Pine Ridge Reservation and the site of the 1890 massacre of 300 Lakota by the U.S. Cavalry. For 71 days, as a protest against massive injustices against Indian people, AIM held Wounded Knee against armed federal forces. Because of the extensive coverage in the media, the occupation became an occasion for renewed hope and solidarity among American Indians throughout the United States.

There are many good resources available (film, print, and online) about AIM. I would especially recommend *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* by Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior.

3. The novel's backstory focuses on sterilizing Native American women. When and where did this happen? Who was responsible? Why don't more people know about this?

A very good introductory article to these issues is Jane Lawrence's "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women," which appeared in *American Indian Quarterly* in 2000 and is easy to find online. As Lawrence writes, sterilization "was a common occurrence in the 1960s and 1970s" (400). Girls and women were often sterilized without their knowledge or consent, by going to the Indian Health Service for other surgeries and waking up with a tubal ligation or hysterectomy; some were misled by being told it was reversible; and some coerced by being led to believe that other care was dependent upon consent. According to Lawrence and other scholars, between

25% and 50% of Native women (using IHS services) of childbearing age were sterilized between 1970-76. There is a growing body of research on the subject. An extensive bibliography appears on this website [LINK HERE?].

And that's a good question: Why *don't* more people know about this?