



The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman (Women in the West)

Margot Mifflin

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In 1851 Olive Oatman was a thirteen-year old pioneer traveling west toward Zion, with her Mormon family. Within a decade, she was a white Indian with a chin tattoo, caught between cultures. *The Blue Tattoo* tells the harrowing story of this forgotten heroine of frontier America. Orphaned when her family was brutally killed by Yavapai Indians, Oatman lived as a slave to her captors for a year before being traded to the Mohave, who tattooed her face and raised her as their own. She was fully assimilated and perfectly happy when, at nineteen, she was ransomed back to white society. She became an instant celebrity, but the price of fame was high and the pain of her ruptured childhood lasted a lifetime.

Based on historical records, including letters and diaries of Oatman's friends and relatives, *The Blue Tattoo* is the first book to examine her life from her childhood in Illinois—including the massacre, her captivity, and her return to white society—to her later years as a wealthy banker's wife in Texas.

Oatman's story has since become legend, inspiring artworks, fiction, film, radio plays, and even an episode of *Death Valley Days* starring Ronald Reagan. Its themes, from the perils of religious utopianism to the permeable border between civilization and savagery, are deeply rooted in the American psyche. Oatman's blue tattoo was a cultural symbol that evoked both the imprint of her Mohave past and the lingering scars of westward expansion. It also served as a reminder of her deepest secret, fully explored here for the first time: she never wanted to go home.

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The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman (Women in the West) Details

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Aimee says

Olive Oatman's story is fascinating. However, it was hard for me to get past the author's opinions and agenda to really enjoy it. I didn't like that her disdain for religion came through in little digs here and there. It was extremely well researched, but read like an academic paper with an agenda. In fact, I had to laugh at the irony that the preacher who published Olive's story and took so much liberty with her story to insert his own morality and political views really was no different from this author. Too bad. If it weren't for that, I would have given it at least 3 stars.

Kathy says

Very interesting..... Tattoos are an interesting subject themselves but given the extra background, circumstances and time period - well!! Now I'd like to read Mifflin's other book on tattoos - this book has made me more curious. Mifflin has done a ton of research and has enough references to make this almost text book-like.....but I found it to much more interesting than your average text book. And as nearly anything I read that has anything to do with Native Americans, I'm sad, sad, sad.

Pat says

I didn't know that "women in captivity" was an entire genre of 19th century writing. The first such book was 'A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson,' and was actually the first American bestseller in 1682. It was the story of a preacher's wife who spent 11 weeks in captivity among the Narragansett Indians in 1675. Times haven't changed: a great story sells.

This particular history is among many of the written stories and versions of Olive Oatman, many fictionalized. I found it captivating...

This version appeared to be well researched and consistently debunked the bestseller Olive helped to write with a Methodist preacher who profited from the exaggerations of her story.

I never got over the incredible curiosity of Olive's facial tattoo. I found myself continually turning to the front cover to stare at it a little longer.

Kristine says

Truth be told, the excerpt on the cover told the story better than the 209 pages of text.

What's touted as the biography of "a thirteen-year old pioneer traveling west toward Zion, with her Mormon family"(teaser on cover) is written with an obvious anti-Mormon sentiment. The Oatman family are actually

“Brewsterites”, a group headed by James Colin Brewster, a self-proclaimed prophet, determined to start his own church after disagreeing with the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Ironically, Mifflin addresses this, but fails to make the distinction between the two religious groups.)

The Brewsterites were not headed for Zion—which was the community in the Great Basin (now known as the Salt Lake Valley and is still the headquarters for the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—also known as the “Mormons”—but were actually following the Santa Fe Trail “arguing with Brewster about whether to continue to California or settle in Socorro, New Mexico”(pg 23). (Also clarified by Mifflin, yet still no distinction made.)

The “story” jumped all over the place. Instead of just focusing on Olive and what was known about her. Ms. Mifflin spends pages telling us about a variety of characters like Olive’s brother, Lorenzo, or Sarah Bowman and her “brothel across the river”(pg 113), or James O’Connell, the first tattooed man in America. Understanding that these people were influences in Olive’s life are in fact important, true. But sometimes it felt like we were exploring their histories just for the sake of shock factor.

Despite all the notes in the back depicting the accuracies in The Blue Tattoo, when it comes to the Mormon portion of it, The Blue Tattoo has many inaccuracies. The most glaring of which is on page 138; “...in the wake of Joseph Smith’s lynching...”. In reality, the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum were shot—martyred—in Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844. Given this obvious and easily researchable blunder makes me wonder how many other parts of this “biography” are figments of the author’s imagination.

With all of this said, learning about Olive Oatman and her past was intriguing. Yet there is a huge asterisk on that statement because of all the mistakes. Intentional or not, they exist and ruin what could have been a great portrayal of a mysterious historical figure.

Jessaka says

History, cultural anthropology, and an interesting true story all combined into one. What makes this book really good is that the author has done much research and has exposed some falsehoods that are presented in other books, especially the one written by Stratton.

In 1851, a family heads out to California in a prairie schooner. They are attacked and killed by Apache Indians, leaving only their two daughters, Olive and Mary Ann, who the Apaches then take back to their tribe and enslave. For a maybe a year they live a miserable life, but then the Mojave Indians trade goods for both of the girls, and they spend the next 2 or more years with them.

Their brother whom they had believed was killed along with their parents, had actually made it back to civilization and spent years trying to find them. When he does, he learns that Mary Ann had died of starvation, and only Olive is alive. Olive returns home and claims that the Mojave’s were very good to her and her sister.

What transpires after this is, Olive meets a Methodist minister by the name of Stratton, who then decides to write a book of her account, making the Mojave Indians appear as savages, and Olive, who has to live in this white society goes along with him, even giving speeches throughout the country.

It is actually a shame that she had to return to the white society, a society that was harsh towards those who stood up for Native Americans, who fantasized about her sexual life with them, and who considered her a freak since the Mojave Indians had put a blue tattoo on her chin. I can't imagine that any of her life had been that great for her.

Her life with the Mojave Indians is the most interesting part of the book since it gives you a view of their culture, which seemed somewhat idealistic. A life where they treated them as their own daughters.

Olive Oatman

Debby says

Very disappointing....I enjoyed the (short) story part but didn't expect the dissertation on the various other books pertaining to Olive Oatman. This author spent more time tearing about the other books as not believable and spent a lot of time on Stratton, the preacher who "helped" write Olive's own story, explaining in depth how the autobiographical account was half truths and Stratton's beliefs rather than Olive's actual feelings and experiences. I'd also guess the footnotes, citations, references, etc took up at least 1/4 of the book.

I wanted a story and got a dissertation that I was not expecting.

booklady says

One of the first things which struck me about Margot Mifflin's *The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman (Women in the West)* was the title. Why is a book which is supposed to be about the life of a woman called, "The Blue Tattoo"? Was this deliberate? Has the individual woman's identity become so lost or submerged behind the ink of her facial markings that she has all but disappeared? Or has the author simply failed to find or portray her? These and other questions intrigued me almost as much as the haunting picture of a young Olive which graces the cover of the book.

Upon closing the final page of Mifflin's biography, I was left with a somewhat nagging disappointment that I didn't know Olive Oatman Fairchild any better at its conclusion than I had at the beginning. *The Blue Tattoo* is well-written and—so far as I know—well-researched; although scanning another review here on goodreads seems to indicate otherwise, but it doesn't delve into the person of its subject, the woman, Olive. In that sense, the title is appropriate. The book is almost more a biography of the blue tattoo, and of the 'life' of Olive, in its rough outline, than it is a story about her. There is a lot of information about tattooing, its tribal use, history, significance and Olive's place as the first white woman to have been voluntarily tattooed. There were also a satisfying number of sketches and old black-and-white photographs included especially of

the variety of tattoos commonly used among the Mohave. There was an interesting, although limited, history of that tribe.

Mifflin's book offers the perspective which only time can. It does a fair job of considering what Olive must have suffered from her manifold tragedy: first the loss of most of her family to murder; then the forced adjustment to a new culture; being sent from one tribe to another; losing her only surviving sister; then a second forced cultural readjustment—this time back into white society where she had only a brother for family; and finally touring the country promoting the first sensational biography written about her by the Methodist minister, Royal B. Stratton, *Life Among the Indians*, published in 1857. With no mother after the age of 14 to guide her, and no close female blood relations after age 16, it can't have been easy.

However, if you hope to come any closer to understanding what Olive felt and thought privately about her experiences you won't find it in this book. There were indirect references from other sources but no quotes or letters. Still, considering what a spectacle was made of the poor woman in the 19th century, perhaps this curtain of silence is well-deserved. In any event, I enjoyed the book and the tantalizingly few intimate details Mifflin did offer—especially those about Olive's devoted husband and adopted daughter.

Jess says

I've been so intrigued with the Olive Oatman story. When I saw this come up on audiobook, I jumped all over it. Her story of slavery to one Native American tribe after witnessing her family's slaughter and subsequent adoption by another for 5 years has intrigued me. Her time with her Native American tribe was cut short when she was returned to her people and subsequent re-assimilation into white culture. Accounts say Olive wept when she was returned. She was promptly taken in by a racist minister who "co-wrote" her autobiography and launched her speaking career. Mifflin attempts to sift through what was truth and fiction in this accounting of Oatman's life.

My Thoughts:

- I had no idea Oatman had a Michigan connection until this book!
- I had some disappointment in the frequency of times Mifflin deviates from Olive's tale to discuss other happenings of the time. It more or less began to feel like there wasn't enough source material to create an accounting and she was filling in gaps to create a book.
- I was fascinated to learn that "captivity accountings/autobiographies" was a literary genre for the time. A woman taken captive in the 1600's had written an accounting and there are others Mifflin mentions.
- Overall, I think this book provides a nice overview but not a lot of in-depth material. Partially because of length or perhaps there just isn't enough material to dive in?

Allen says

I happened on the cover picture in a blog recently, and like many people, immediately thought "Hey, that's the tattoo from Hell on Wheels". Apparently the character's tattooing in that series was borrowed explicitly from Olive Oatman's. It's ironic that the TV character was a prostitute, as the Oatman's history as a captive of the Yavapai and Mohave raised questions about her sexuality in her own time.

Olive Oatman was a 14-year-old member of a Mormon splinter group. Her family was killed by Yavapai en route between Tucson and Yuma in 1851, and she and her younger sister were first enslaved by the Yavapai, then sold to the Mohave. The Mohave raised them as members of the tribe; her sister died, but Olive was returned to white society after five years with the two Indian tribes.

The author has practiced source criticism on the various accounts of Oatman's life, discounting distortions introduced to serve various political and social biases. The resulting narrative is a fascinatingly ambiguous story. Was Olive better off as an Indian or white woman? It's hard to tell, but clearly she had warm feelings for her former "captors" when she met one of them in later life. The sexual, social, and racial norms of the time are called into question by the story of her life.

As history goes, the book is an easy and compelling read -- I finished it in a couple of days. It's a thought-provoking contribution to the literature of white captives of American Indians.

Stephanie says

This is my favorite type of biography because it tells one person's amazing story couched in a larger historical and social perspective. Olive Oatman's tale is a fascinating account of one woman's adaptability and courage in the wild west, a strange frontier where women were expected to have great fortitude but still maintain their Victorian purity and gentleness. As the first tattooed white woman in America, she walked the fine line between being a heroic victim and an Indian-loving freak. Edited and censored by the men in her post-captive life, her actions often contradicted the idea that her salvation by the whites was a good thing, and Mifflin documents Olive's divided life in a thorough and interesting way. The end of the book slows down as the action in Olive's later life does, but the lasting cultural impact and mythology keep it moving along to a satisfying end.

Karen says

Captivity sounds like an old concept, something that happened in a time so far away that it doesn't seem possible. To capture someone and take them away to a culture and place that is so foreign that everything is new and unknown. Olive's story is one of acceptance and a determination to survive in an environment that is so totally strange to her, she learns to adapt in ways that will imprint on her soul and face in ways that when she is re assimilated into American culture she never totally becomes what she was. The tattoo on her chin is a mark that separates her from her old life and tries to stain her character. But she rises above this and learns to live a life in white culture that neither denies her captivity or her captors.

Lisa says

I really liked this book and found it absolutely fascinating. While reading it, I'd come home from work, pass by the kitchen, go straight to my chair and pick up reading where I left off. It's a fascinating, easy to read book that one can finish in a few days. It was also a nice distraction from my post holiday/January blues. (No pun intended....I guess MY blue tattoo in January is on my spirit, so maybe the timing of this reading was very appropriate.)

There's no element in this story that is not absolutely fascinating. From the beginnings of Olive's family as Mormons in Illinois, to their break with the church to follow another self proclaimed boy prophet, John Brewster (who was in direct competition with Joseph Smith), and the rift that it caused in Mary Ann Oatman's family (Olive's mother). Mary Ann's parents are going west with Brigham Young and were rightly concerned about Royce Oatman's (Olive's father) allegiance to John Brewster. Royce argues with his in-laws, even "prophesying" that if Mary Ann's parents go West with Brigham Young, that they will meet with disaster and die horrible deaths.....

which prophecy did come true.....but for himself and his own family. It made my blood run chill to watch the character of Royce Oatman, and how he was proud, argumentative and headstrong.....all the way leading his family to a terrible fate. It seems that when Mary Ann married Royce, she married herself and her children to tragedy.

So we watch the Oatman's choose the wrong westward movement to follow and watch how Royce isolates the family more and more as they move west until they find themselves alone in the Gila Valley, hungry and completely vulnerable to the thing that they feared most: Indian attack.

The attack was horrifying. I cannot imagine going through something like that, or witnessing it and surviving it. It was surprising to learn that Olive's brother, Lorenzo, also survived the attack and his survival journey, back to civilization, trailed by wolves, was also compelling.

The trials that Olive and her younger sister, Mary Ann, went through at the hands of the Yavapai were so sad. I cannot imagine the terror they endured, as well as the physical challenges.

It was interesting to study the character of the two girls: Olive, who is strong, adaptable and bent on not only surviving but thriving.....while Mary Ann's constitution was just not equal to the challenge. Two very different studies in personality and adaptability and survival.

The description of the Mohave culture made me feel like we should all be so lucky to have been Mohave. The author paints the Mohaves as the most gentle, kind, affectionate, happy, healthy, natural people who ever lived. And what happened to that culture and all the Native American cultures at the hands of European expansion was absolutely tragic.

It's sad when Olive has to leave her happy life with the Mohaves and be repatriated back to white culture. But it's even sadder to know that within 5 years of her repatriation, the Mohave culture was wiped out.

I can't imagine the inner storms with which Olive lived her life. And never really being able to tell her authentic truth, but to hold it within for a lifetime. It's sad. But perhaps we all do that to some extent, but her inner life must have been a huge one to keep tamped down.

Yet, she found ways to be happy and fulfilled. Her life really is a testament to the strength of the human spirit.

I really liked this book. And I'm glad to have started off my reading year with it.

Erin Lindsay McCabe says

The moment I saw Olive Oatman's photo and learned that her husband burned every copy of her "auto"biography (co/ghostwritten by an anti-American Indian Methodist minister), I knew I had to read more about her. This book is a great starting point. With a clear and easy-to-read style, the author cites plenty of sources and gives a very thorough overview of her life, positing very plausible theories about the parts of her story that are unknown. I appreciated the way the author handles conflicting information, and although it maybe meandered a bit in its discussion of "tattooed ladies" (obviously the author's particular interest, given her other work), it provided interesting historical context. Still, I found myself wanting to know more, especially about Oatman's feelings (about leaving her adoptive Mohave family, about her life with her husband-- especially, for instance, how she felt about him burning her book!). I very much appreciated the letter to her aunt included as an epilogue in my edition, which made me wish the book included more of Olive's letters (especially the letters she and her husband wrote each other). That said, an author of non-fiction can't include information or sources that no longer exist, so these aren't really quibbles I have with the book itself. I think the book is an admirable examination of Olive Oatman's story.

Brianne says

I thought this was an incredibly interesting read! I first learned about Olive Oatman from a post on Instagram, and it lead me to this book. The writing style was informative, but light enough to make it a pretty quick read.

I felt that Mifflin did a lot of research and I can't wait to look into some of the sources listed in the bibliography. My only real complaint is that I wish she had included some photographs of people she was describing, or, if there weren't any photographs available, that she said so.

If this sounds interesting to you, then I definitely recommend it. And even if it doesn't sound interesting, I'd still recommend it because you might be surprised. I'll definitely read her other book about women and tattoos.

Amy says

Olive Oatman was my great grandfather's cousin. Her family was massacred while traveling to California, and Olive and her sister were held captive. Years later, she was returned to white society. I grew up with this story, but recently several new books have been written about her. This one is supposed to be really good!
