

Depicting Texas history through fiction

SOME KNOW THE ELEVENTH LONGEST RIVER in the United States as the Brazos River. Author **Irene Sandell** knows it by its original name, Rio Brazos de Dios, or “River of the arms of God,” the title and setting of her second novel. “I love the Brazos because it changes personalities so drastically from where it starts to where it spills into the Gulf,” says Irene. “It is a completely different river by the time it gets all the way downstream. The three forks run together at about Graham, and from Graham down to the coast, it’s a more conventional river.”

The Brazos stretches 1,280 miles from Blackwater Draw, New Mexico, to the Gulf of Mexico. Its three forks are the Clear Fork, the Salt Fork, and the Double Mountain Fork.

It is along the Salt Fork in 1858 that readers meet Sarah Graham, a young woman who has been disowned by her father and thrust into the care of Eli Dodd. Eli runs a “swing station” of the Salt Fork, and the man is as pungent as the river itself. Mean, abusive, and intolerable, Eli impregnates Sarah and locks the mother and child in a cabin of the river. Shut from the world, Sarah is his prisoner.

Jump forward 100 years, and along the Salt Fork we meet Kathryn Rowley, or “Kate,” as she would prefer. Like Sarah, Kate feels trapped; ironically though, Kate lives in a large house on her husband’s sprawling ranch called Pantera. There’s nothing Colby Walters cares about more than Pantera, and Kate soon learns that the land he owns holds many dark secrets.

Kate and Sarah, two women a century apart, bound by a river...bound by its currents of abandonment, emptiness and turmoil. Who will save them, or can they save each other?

At one point Sarah says, “I’ve learned that a woman can’t depend on someone else to make her life complete or to give her freedom.” That is the theme of Irene Sandell’s novel, to not rely on others for happiness but to carve your own path and choose happiness. She clarifies, “The theme doesn’t apply just to women. I think most people can identify with that message. You’re a constructor of your own life. You have to take a stand for yourself.”

She continues, “I think it used to be very difficult in the 1800s and before, for a woman to be able to control anything. If she was in a bad situation, she was trapped. I’m not particularly talking about marriage, but many people can get trapped in a situation and see no way out. They need to know they don’t have to look to someone else; they’ve got to reach out on their own.”

The author’s first novel, *In a Fevered Land*, published in 2003, carries that same message. It is about two cousins who are determined to escape the financial ruin of cotton farming and pursue the Texas oil-field towns of Wink, Kilgore, and Odessa.

In a Fevered Land has been used in the literature classes in PISD high schools. “I think the students really identified with that book because it was about these young people trying to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives and the choices that they made,” says Irene.

A retired teacher of 33 years, Irene taught at Sigler and Shepard elementary schools before planting herself at Schimelpfing Middle School where she taught Texas history for 23 years. She is also an author of Texas and American history textbooks and has

written, filmed and produced numerous documentaries on Texas.

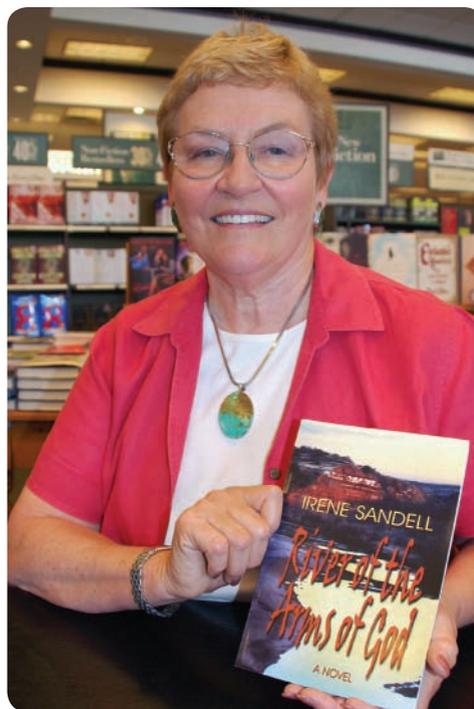
“I love Texas history,” she said, “but writing fiction is a lot of fun. You create your characters and then you let them go where they lead you, and sometimes they do or say things you don’t expect.”

“It was really almost a surprise to me how much Kate and Sarah led parallel lives,” she continues and adds, “I’ve been told by people that read it, that they really get involved in the lives of these characters as if they were real. I appreciate that because they’re very real to me.”

Another real aspect of Irene’s novels are the settings. For example, the Butterfield Stage Line was a stagecoach route in the United States

between 1857–1861 that carried mail from Memphis and St. Louis to California. The Salt Fork station was a resting point on the route.

Says Irene, “The interesting thing about that is I needed to have a temporary route where Eli and Sarah could be as isolated as possible for this story, and as I was doing research, I found an old map of the Butterfield Stage Line that showed there in fact was a temporary route used for the same reasons I said it did. The water was too high so they came



Author **Irene Sandell** with her latest novel.
Profile photo

upstream to a shallower point. One of the most fascinating aspects of writing fiction based on historical information is that often your research will uncover something that you'd already intended to include in your story."

Irene's enthusiasm for and knowledge of Texas history paired with her descriptive imagery of the Wild West has recently won the attention of an organization called Women Writing the West. She is a finalist for their Willa Literary Award, named after Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather, who is known for her stories on the frontier. Irene will go to Los Angeles September 11-13 for a convention where the winners will be honored. "I highly regard this award," says Irene, elated.

Born in Seymour, Texas, a small town near Wichita Falls, Irene is a fourth generation Texan. She grew up in Hamilton, Texas, along with her husband, and they moved to Plano in 1973. It doesn't look like they'll be tipping their hat and bidding farewell to the Lone Star State any time soon. Said the author, "I just love this state and enjoy learning about it all the time. Texas has a lot of interesting stories."

River of the Arms of God is available at amazon.com and eakinpress.com.

— BRIT MOTT

excerpt

From *River of the Arms of God*

"Whoa thar!"

The booming voice jerked Sarah Graham from a daze of exhaustion. She flinched and raised her hands to shield her face until the heavy chain that tied her to the wagon seat stopped her motion. The man called Eli glanced toward her, anger flashing in his eyes at her distraction, but his hands were full. He hauled roughly on the reins and the dust-covered wagon and team of mules halted.

Confused by the abruptness of the stop, Sarah watched as he tied off the lines and set the brake.



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