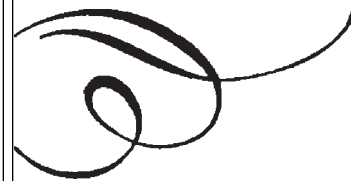


**IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
JAMES ALEXANDER THOM**

by Elizabeth Wright



James Alexander Thom is a highly acclaimed, best-selling historical novelist whose works include *Follow the River*, *From Sea to Shining Sea*, and *Panther in the Sky* among many others. Born in 1933 in Gosport, Indiana, he now resides in the hill country outside Bloomington, Indiana, in a log cabin that he built with his own hands. He is married to Dark Rain, a



member of the Shawnee National Tribe, of which Thom is an honorary member. Thom is a former Marine, newspaper man, and magazine editor. Contrary to what often happens with many aspiring

writers, it was a rejection slip that actually bolstered his belief in his ability to be a writer

No ordinary historical novelist, Thom first meticulously researches his subject which allows him to write with great authority and the verisimilitude for which he strives. He traveled the entire route of the Lewis and Clark expedition while writing *From Sea to Shining Sea*. Thom also mastered the use of 18th century tools and weapons in order to accurately portray the experience of using them in *Long Knife*. The high value he places on truth and the courage to be found in the human spirit infuses not just his works but also the manner in which he and his wife live their lives. The Thom work for environmental causes, and Jim Thom has written passionately against the policies and actions of the current U.S. administration.

The following is from an interview with Thom at his home. The questions I posed are in bold-faced type and are followed by his responses.

WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO BE A WRITER?

Not until I came out of the service. What I wanted to be was a forest ranger. It was the only job in the

whole world I could imagine doing for the rest of my life. When I came home from Korea, I had things on my chest so I wrote a story. It got such a wonderful response from *The Saturday Review of Literature* that I thought maybe this is something I can do. I didn't know at the time that *The Saturday Review* did not publish fiction. The rejection letter said "we don't publish fiction but if we did, we would sure love to publish this." That kept me going. I decided that until I could get stories and books published, I needed to support myself. I started studying journalism at IU [Indiana University] night school in Indianapolis, then transferred over to Butler [University] to finish and then immediately began working at *The Indianapolis Star*. I worked at *The Star* for about seven years and, at the time, most of us were working on novels. I kept at it. Basically, it was that rejection slip that gave me the notion that I could do it.

At Butler I had one of the most wonderful creative writing teachers that one could hope for – Werner Beyer. He was a Coleridge expert and a man with just an absolute passion for the power and beautiful use of words. He gave me some of the tips that really got me writing the right way. The most important thing he told me is, "write to the reader's senses," so that you can taste, see, feel, hear everything happening. It's a sensory experience for the reader so that they're in it. He said even though somebody is reading on a page, if you write to their senses they can experience even more than they can in a movie because in a movie, you can only see and hear. I know it's true because most of the fan mail I get is from people who say, "I felt like I was there." One woman said, "I almost starved to death while I read that book." So that was the best advice.

COULD YOU TALK A BIT MORE ABOUT YOUR METHOD AND APPROACH TO WRITING?

A lot of my research goes into being able to describe experiences. I don't write about a place where I have not been, so I go the locales where the things happened that I write about. I've learned how to use the tools and weapons that they used in those days so that I can describe building a cabin or shoeing a horse, that sort of thing. There are advantages besides being

able to describe it ineffably – if I'm describing some kind of process that they did, if there's some reader out there who knows something about that, then they'll say "okay, he knows something about it" and will go ahead and read the book. There are a lot of people who read history books and novels, and if they decide the author doesn't know very much they don't even bother reading it. But if they find it true, then they tell everyone else, and word of mouth is really the only thing that keeps books alive. *Follow the River* came out in 1981 and is still the best seller we have, but it was only advertised in the first couple of weeks.

The other big thing that makes a book last is that it has to answer some need that the reader has in his spirit or confirm something about the human spirit that they need to believe. That's probably the most important message. It's not a message you preach but it comes out as the story is told.

When I first started writing, my first two novels were not historical. They were modern and written from a newspaper man's perspective which was not looking at the positive side. I was looking at things that I didn't like. They were pretty good novels but they didn't get a warm response because they were very negative – newspaper men got that way because you'd see so much corruption. When I wrote the book *Long Knife* about George Rogers Clark, a guy who had vision, courage, audacity, strength – his principles were powerful and positive for the time – the response to that was so good from people who had apparently needed "hero." I realized this might be the key, to give something to people. The next book was *Follow the River* two years later about an ordinary person, a young woman who escaped from Indian captivity and made her way across the Alleghenies to go home. She was not an extraordinary person. She was not a trained soldier or anything like that, but her fortitude, determination, and the depth of her character just rang a bell. I've even heard from people that they were so inspired by the book that they decided not to commit suicide. That's about the best reward an author can have.

WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING?

Mostly foreign affairs magazines. The present administration has gotten me more concerned with politics than I like to be. I study these people harder than anything I ever studied in college. In terms of books, though, I've been on a spate of reading manuscripts for people. I'm not really reading any book at the moment. As I go along, I think "well, as soon as this book is done here are some novels I want to read." But I spend so much of time reading research material, I almost never get around to reading them. Or if I do get some time to read I just go back to reading some of my favorite things. Twain is first and foremost. I think my favorite living author right now is Kurt Vonnegut. He's living in New York now, and we've developed quite a

correspondence. I dedicated my latest book to him. He's a man whose life is dedicated to peace.

[Author's Note: This interview occurred in February 2007. Sadly, Kurt Vonnegut passed away in April 2007.]

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING FOR HUMAN BEINGS?

When you've worked at it for a long time, you begin to realize how important it is. I think okay, I don't raise food for people, I don't make clothes for people, I don't provide them medical services...all I do is tell stories so am I really doing anything important? I used to ask myself that question. But then all I have to do is look back and think how barren and meaningless my life would have been without all the stories. Not just the books – my parents had a wonderful library, but they also were wonderful storytellers; and we ran with storytellers. Life would not have been rich without the stories. So writing is one way of telling stories. I was too shy to tell them in person, but I found out I could write them and reach an awful lot of people. It takes them out of their own heavy concerns while they get absorbed in the story, and they can learn something while they're reading it. They can also get inspiration. When I look back over the expressions of gratitude that flood in, I realize I am doing something that's pretty important to me. Storytelling is really the world's oldest profession regardless of what you've heard.

Over the last 10 to 15 years I've been telling stories very much from the Indian point of view in which oral tradition has been such an important part. When you start thinking about how important the oral tradition is to tribal people, which is what most of us were up until a few hundred years ago, you realize that this is the thing they really lived for, to share experience. If you study the Native American oral tradition, you realize not just how important it is, but it's actually more reliable in my opinion than written history. Most of the people who write a history book have an ax to grind. In the oral tradition you are raised to tell a story the way it was. If I get in a situation where I have to compare a white man's version of a battle with the Indian's version of it, it's usually not too hard to prove that the Indian was right. Even if he wasn't the best guy in it, he's more likely to tell the truth.

Probably my second favorite living writer at this time is Howard Zinn, the author of *A People's History of the United States*. We're pen pals. His book is such a treasure because he did tell the other side. Most people would just say "oh we'd never do that, we're Americans."

WHAT HAVE LIBRARIES MEANT TO YOU IN YOUR LIFE?

I can speak with a great deal of passion about libraries. The library was my favorite place in the

community when I was a kid. Now, with writing about the historical stuff, there is so much research you have to do, not just in books but archives and old diaries and collections. When I started doing this frontier research, I would start at the Library of Congress. You can sit down in there, tell them what you wanted, and they would bring you, not just the things that they had there, but they could also tell you where the collections were in the country. So then I would go there. Then I moved back to Indiana in the 70s and started teaching at Indiana University. IU has such a tremendous library that they have just about anything. Actually, about two or three years ago, they asked me for my papers. So, libraries are such an important part of a community's spirit because they are where people gather to learn and be enlightened.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

In my last book [*Saint Patrick's Battalion*] which was about the Mexican war, I created a character who was a sort of a narrator. He was a kid who keeps a diary and he turned out to be such a wonderful character that I'm now bringing him forward to the end of the Civil War in which he gets involved. It brings out all the best and the worst in him. He's an Irishman who is a correspondent for *Harper's* and a battlefield artist. In *Saint Patrick's Battalion*, I did all the drawings that were in his sketchbooks, and I'll do the same in this one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Wright has been the Head of Circulation and Interlibrary Loan at Indiana State University since 2004.