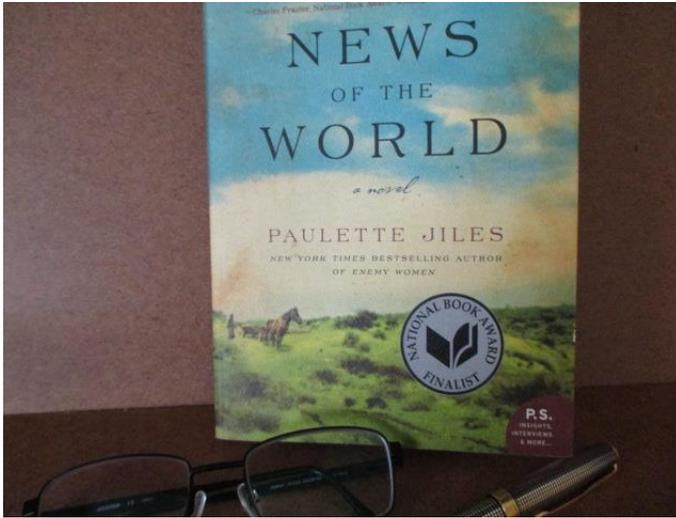


News of the World

By Rod Fraser



Jefferson Kyle Kidd is seventy-one at the time of this story. The year is 1869 and Kidd earns his living in post-civil war Texas, reading the news in small towns and cities in the northern part of the state. I mention the north because the south of Texas had readier access to newspapers and magazines from the East and abroad.

The civil war ended several years earlier and Texas is now under military occupation (and a corrupt one at that). The roads are unsafe.

Desperate men roam the countryside. Indian attacks on travelers and small farmers occur randomly. It is a dangerous time to live in Texas, particularly outside the larger towns or cities.

Kidd is a printer by trade, and intellectually curious by nature. He is over six feet tall, with silver hair and gold-rimmed reading glasses. He has a “strong voice for a man his age”. When he dons his crow-black speaking clothes and formal hat, he is a commanding presence on the stage.

In each town Kidd visits, he rents a hall and charges those who attend his reading a fee of ten cents. He reads from newspapers, mostly printed in the big cities of the East (and often from England). Here is how the author describes one of his readings (and I paraphrase):

He reads of faraway places, like his telling of the revolution in Chile. He always tries to bring his audience the magic of faraway lands or unusual happenings. He reads of the riots in the Punjab—and a new world of railroads and modernity, crushing up against ancient tribal hatreds.

Kidd gives a thoughtful and compelling performance and it is usually well received. His audience is made up of curious townspeople and travelers,

people without ready access to newspapers. Some are illiterate and others are merely eager to learn of a wider world they have never seen.



At the age of sixteen, Kidd joined a regiment in Georgia during the war with the British from 1812 to 1814. He was also a soldier in the war with Mexico in 1848. This latter war introduced him to Texas and to his future wife (deceased at the time of this story). He advanced to the rank of Captain and is often known to others in the novel as Captain Kidd.

For some unexplained reason, in the mayhem and disorder that followed the civil war, Kidd's printing business was no longer allowed to operate. This explains his taking to the road to earn his living reading the news to townspeople around the state.

Kidd has two daughters who live together in Georgia. One is married to a civil war veteran who lost his arm during the fighting. The other daughter is widowed—her husband a casualty of the war. Kidd is in regular correspondence with his two girls and they plan to move to Texas to join him, after they accumulate the money to do so.

Kidd is a lonely man, without much in the way of company, and he's sad at the state of his world. The

Texas economy is in depression and the political situation is volatile. He's widowed, lives apart from his family, and does the best he can, earning a modest living reading the news. Still, he is stoic about his situation and hopes to endure until his family is reunited.



In many ways, this novel is an American travelogue, much like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The characters to the plot are introduced early and the story develops as they travel.

While in Wichita Falls in the north of Texas, Kidd is asked to deliver a ten-year-old girl to her Aunt and Uncle who live down near San Antonio in the south of the state. He is offered a handsome sum of money to do so. One reason for asking him is that he is an old man and unlikely to harm her.

The girl's name is Johanna Leonberger. She was captured by the Kiowa when she was six. The Kiowa murdered her parents and little sister, and carried Johanna off to live with them. An Indian Agent has recently negotiated her release and wants her returned to her family. Johanna knows no English, has no knowledge of white culture, or the norms of living among white people.

After some hesitation, Kidd agrees to this arrangement. He buys a wagon for their journey and soon he and Johanna are on their way to San Antonio. This story is largely concerned with the development of their relationship in the course of their travels. It is a lovely tale.

As one might imagine, a young girl uprooted from her home, would be (and is) initially hostile to this arrangement. But as the journey continues, she realizes she is in good hands. He is a good teacher of the things she needs to know, a warm friendly companion and a sensitive, intelligent man.

Over time Johanna is taught English, simple arithmetic and civilized ways of eating, dressing and comporting herself. Soon she recalls many English words from her past. She has a good mind and learns quickly.

Johanna is an interesting amalgam of a freckled white girl, with hair the color of maple syrup, and an Indian girl who loves the freedom of the open country and limited restrictions on her behavior. Her travels with Kidd as a companion suit her personality and temperament.

She is also very resourceful. When they meet three men on the road who intend to murder Kidd

and kidnap Johanna for a sex slave, it is Johanna who converts a shotgun loaded with bird shot to a lethal weapon by packing the cartridge with dimes. In short order, one of their attackers is shot dead and the others scatter.



As they travel south, Kidd continues to read the news in the various towns they pass. Initially he hires someone to look after Johanna while lecturing. But soon he takes a chance, and has her collect the dimes he charges for admission.

She enjoys this new activity and when the audience laugh at the odd joke Kidd makes, she laughs with them joyously. It is clear she has bonded with this old man whom she now calls 'Kontah', the Kiowa word for grandfather.

As they get ever closer to Johanna's aunt and uncle, she tells 'Kontah' she doesn't want to leave him, she does not want to live with Aunt and Uncle,

"Kontah' was the only person she had left in the world and the only human being she now knew. He was strong and wise and they had fought together at the springs. She ate with a fork now, and wore her horrible dresses without complaint. What had she done wrong?"

Kidd was conflicted. He had accepted a fee to deliver the girl and he was a man of his word. Despite his sympathy for her plight, he planned to deliver her to her aunt and uncle. "And to do otherwise would be dishonorable. It would be robbery."



The story of 'Kontah' and Johanna is not quite complete. Yes—she was delivered to her aunt and uncle near San Antonio. And yes—'Kontah' left her there, despite his concerns and misgivings. But he didn't forget Johanna and there is still more to say.

I will leave those of you who are interested in this, to buy the book and find out for yourself all the wonderful details of this story. But for those of you who might like just a few more details, I will say this.

Some years later, when Johanna was fifteen years of age, a young man by the name of John Calley called at the door of her home. When she answered, he asked,

"Would you be Johanna, the captive girl that Captain Kidd was returning?"

Johanna replied, "Yes, I am Johanna Kidd". She had a small, dubious smile for this stranger in tall

traveling boots and a worn duster over his arm."

Calley continued, "Ah, yes, well, I stopped by to pay my respects to the Captain...."

"Certainly', she stepped back and lifted one hand to the interior of the old house. 'He is in the patio just now. Please come in.'"

When his business with the Captain was complete, John Calley asked if he might call again. And when he did, he brought several newspapers for the Captain and some roses he thought Miss Kidd might like. Here is a brief anecdote from their afternoon,

"Calley sat down at ... the piano and played 'The Yellow Rose of Texas' and did not look up from the keyboard, but waited to see if she would come to him. Before long, Johanna stood at his shoulder."

"He moved over on the piano bench, and after some hesitation, she sat down beside him with a graceful arrangement of her skirts, and for the first time smiled at him. He taught her the songs, picking them out note by note.... After a while, he stopped and just sat and looked at her.... "

John Calley and Johanna Kidd were married at some indefinite future time. According to the old

Southern custom, she was married in the bride's home. Jefferson Kyle Kidd was there to give her away, and his two daughters were in attendance.

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