

## COWBOY UP: Art Kusnetz reviews Karen Kondazian's *The Whip*

One thing I learned growing up around horses is an appreciation for Cowboy culture. Cowboys by nature tend to use idioms as shorthand to express their feelings. For example, "I loved you better than my horse." This means I'm breaking up with you and I regret my foolishness for letting you into my heart—a mistake which I now recognize and rectify. Cowboy culture can be both a philosophy for life and a mindset for dealing with the world. This mindset lends itself to great stability especially in the face of adversity and is often invoked by the simple phrase, "Cowboy Up."

Like a nugget of gold pulled from the riffles, Karen Kondazian's debut novel *The Whip* embodies this cowboy culture. *The Whip* is based on the true life story of Charlotte "Charley" Parkhurst, who, for thirty years, passed as a man. Working as a Whip, a stage coach driver, for Wells Fargo, she became one of the best at her job and that was before she shot and killed a notorious bandit in a gunfight! Her secret only became known upon her death—her motivations remained a mystery.

Through the eyes and experiences of a fictionalized Charlotte Parkhurst, we meet an orphan who discovers a life worth living through her interaction with horses. From her surrogate father, an older, black livery stable hand, she learns about love, family and the irrelevance of race. But it is her subsequent relationship with a black man, something the surrounding culture cannot abide, which leads to tragic consequences. From that, we find motivation for the anger and frustration that led her to don men's clothing and seek her revenge. What makes the Parkhurst character so compelling is the philosophy of the Cowboy expressed by Kondazian through Charley's thoughts and speech. "Life's going to upset your wagon. Maybe someone's riding next to you can help you set it right. Maybe not," or "A good kick in the head, if you survive it, is bound to make you examine your life, one way or the other." Yup, both statements wise, pragmatic and straight out of Cowboy speak.

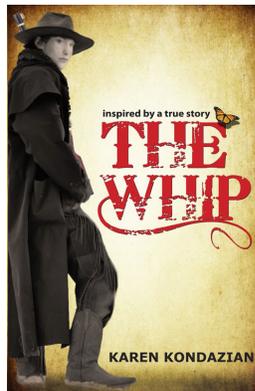
*The Whip* may just be a book for the times. We can all use a little Cowboy wisdom 'bout now and Charley Parkhurst may jus' be the gal to bring it. "I done my share of thinking about life, the way a man does when his clock starts to winding down; an whilst I never been one to be shook hard over heaven, I do believe we are guided at times by an invisible hand." There's faith in a nutshell. What does Charley say about adversity? "Just change your mind about it. Just decide to stop struggling and embrace it all as a gift." There is a strange and interesting toughness combined with a sensitive softness that makes her such an intriguing character.

Kondazian had her own experience with the invisible hand while searching for a publisher for *The Whip*. As she told Intimate Excellent, the Fountain Theatre blog; her friendship with Tennessee Williams led to her being photographed with him. When another friend wanted to use that photograph in a Tennessee Williams book, the publisher had to track her down to get permission to use it. That conversation eventually led to *The Whip* being published.

As Charley says, "Friendship, true friendship is a curious dance. Why does one recognize and embrace one soul and yet not another? Always we are searching for those recognizable eyes, so that we might at last be recognized ourselves." And through Kondazian we have come to know, care and understand Charley Parkhurst and perhaps even ourselves.

*The Whip*, a thrilling and soul-searching read, raises questions about revenge and forgiveness as she takes the reader along dusty trails. Above all this novel captures brilliantly the zeitgeist of the stagecoach era.

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## Are we being railroaded again?

For those who favor the installation of high speed rail in California, read *RAILROADED: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* by Stanford historian Richard White and you may change your mind. His study of the Gilded Age, the robber barons and the development of the railroads leaves the door open for comparisons to our situation today. As Mark Twain observed, 'History does not repeat itself, it rhymes.'

In *'Railroaded'* he compares the many and massive failures to their fewer successes and explodes the myths of the glories of the railroad's golden age. Take his example of the cost of these endeavors which layered debt upon debt to the point that it caused the economy to face a devastating nationwide panic. Late 19th century history reveals that only rich investors benefited at the expense of the nation.

The two best examples were Collis Huntington of the Associates, Jay Gould of the Union Pacific who turned corporate and national economic disaster into personal fortunes, and Gould made a killing on Union Pacific stock and left the decaying and decrepit railroad to others. Huntington's Central Pacific staggered away from the railroad-induced Panic of 1873 only to launch a wasteful corporate battle with Tom Scott's Texas & Pacific. The least shrewd—Leland Stanford—stumbled through it all at the sufferance of his corporate friends.

The transportation "bubble" of the nineteenth century accelerated the tragic end of the American bison, prepared the ground for the open-range cattle industry and ended up making the railroads a contributing factor to the political corruption of the period. In the Gilded Age it took the form of corporate or political friendship, an understanding in which favors were exchanged as a matter of course, without the need for bribery or quid pro quo. These favors extended from free passes on the railroads to favorable prices for stock, low-cost loans, campaign contributions, and more. Efforts to regulate the railroads failed.

In a *New York Times* editorial Professor White wrote, "For the country as a whole, the Pacific Railway Act of 1864 and subsequent legislation subsidizing the transcontinental railroads—the lines that crossed the continent from the 98th meridian to the Pacific Coast—were the worst laws money could buy. By encouraging dumb growth, those laws sacrificed public good for private gain, and Americans came to regret it."

He concludes, "Proponents promised all kinds of benefits they did not deliver. They claimed that the railroads were needed to save the Union, but the Union was already saved before the first line was completed. For three decades California commodities could move more cheaply, and virtually as quickly, by sea. The subsidies the railroads received enriched contractors and financiers, but nearly all the railroads went into receivership, some multiple times; the government rescued others." White encourages us to slow down and re-visit the project and perhaps apply the brakes in our current economic climate.

—Peter Robinson

