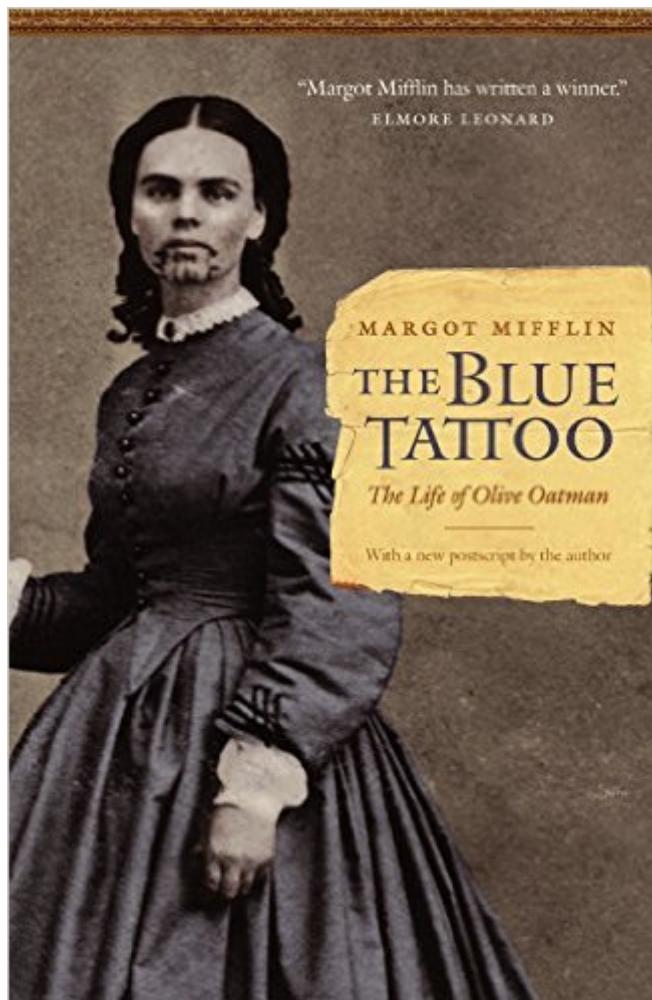


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The Blue Tattoo: The Life Of Olive Oatman (Women In The West)



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Maybe 15 years ago I found a used reprint copy of the 'Captivity of the Oatman Girls' while on a trip through the Mother Lode country with my wife and kids. The prose was turgid and the story heated up; the author's provocative sexual elisions made for a rollicking if only partially believable tale. I couldn't stop wondering what Olive's life was like after she returned to "civilization". Since then, I always shiver a bit when I drive under the freeway sign on the Arizona border that says "Oatman exit". Wow. Here is the real place where her family was massacred and her brother left for dead by the local Indians. This book is exactly the kind of scholarship that needed to be done on the topic. Although the girls were kidnapped and their family destroyed, Olive Oatman ended up living for four years with the Mohave Indians in a land-locked paradise of cool water and abundant food. She was not a captive but an adopted daughter and her return to 19th century 'civilization' was anything but a rescue. The book is a sweeping review of the widely dispersed resources available to a trained researcher: archives, secondary literature, ethnographic studies, newspaper articles and eyewitness accounts. The author has assembled an extremely readable account of Olive's life and the historical period of Western expansionism. This is not a biography. It is a very interesting story; fascinating and immanently readable. I particularly liked the fact that the author dealt with Olive's twofold cultural assimilation at an impressionable age, first to a Native American culture at age 14 and then back to the Anglo world five years later. Rather than declaim on the effect it had on her personality, the author allows friends and relatives to share their impressions from letters and first hand accounts.

Using family letters, documents and contemporary accounts, Margot Mifflin uncovers previously unknown aspects of one of the best known Indian Captivity stories -that of Olive Oatman, the woman whose chin bore the "blue tattoo." On her return to white culture as a "redeemed captive," Olive's tattoo served as a question mark to the shocked and sympathetic audiences who heard her lecture on her experiences - asking the question no respectable person of the time dare voice, what did the savages really do to her? The horrific massacre of her Mormon pioneer family by Yavapai Indians in 1851 began thirteen year old Olive's six-year adventure (or ordeal, as the legend would later have it). She and her sister, at first slaves of the cruel Yavapai, were purchased a year later by the much gentler, now little-known, Mohave people. In a secret valley of the Colorado River, the "American Nile" (the yearly fertile flooding ended with the construction of Hoover Dam), the girls entered an ancient Utopian culture, perhaps unique among American Indians. The Mohaves lived a near-vegetarian, near-nudist, sexually promiscuous life, and the girls participated in every aspect of the culture -- so much so that the hardboiled cavalry officer sent to "rescue" Olive, and who spoke

enough Mohave to understand her nickname (which indicated an exaggerated interest in sex.) changed her name in the Army's paperwork. Olive's tattoo, which was to identify her as Mohave in the afterlife, shows that she became a full member of the tribe, in spite of later revisions to her story. Olive's adventures didn't end with her return to white culture.

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