

Fire Is Your Water

A Novel



Jim Minick

Q&A with author Jim Minick

How does your family history play into this book?

My family's stories figure into *Fire Is Your Water* in many different ways. My great-grandmother Ida Minick was a powwow doctor, and, as in the opening of the novel, she did go into a burning barn with my grandmother Sarah. But after the fire, another person was called in to heal Sarah's hand. So I was curious: why didn't Ida heal Sarah's hand? Since both women are long dead, I kept working on that question until I realized it could be the basis for a whole novel.

The love story is based on my parents' love story. Mom and Dad met on the Pennsylvania Turnpike where my mother was a waitress at Howard Johnson's and my father was a pump jockey at Esso.

What makes Pennsylvania's Appalachian culture stand apart?

Both southern Appalachian culture and Pennsylvania Dutch culture have been stereotyped. In the 1920s in the Lancaster area, which is not in the mountains but near Philadelphia, there were two male powwow doctors or witches. One believed the other had put a hex on him and taken his power, so he killed the other. This made huge national news, followed by a novel and movie. (Look up Pennsylvania Hex Trial for more info). It really created this stereotype in the national media of the Pennsylvania Dutch being backward people, and this in turn forced a lot of individuals to give up their belief in folk healing, or to at least go underground with it.

People tend to view Appalachian Americans and the Pennsylvania Dutch as monolithic groups. Everybody's white, everybody's heterosexual, and all the men have beards. I wanted to highlight those groups' diversity and complexity. There were, and are, skeptics throughout both cultures. Appalachia is not all one geography and one type of people, and the same can be said of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Ada is of the Pennsylvania Dutch culture. Is this the same as being Amish?

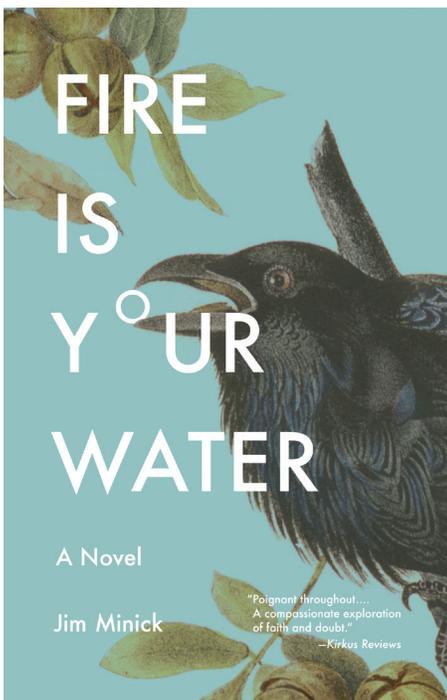
There are many different religions underneath the umbrella of Pennsylvania Dutch culture. Amish is just one. And Ada is not Amish but Brethren, which eventually became Methodist.

In what ways is Cicero essential to the story?

I didn't realize this initially, but including Cicero created a love triangle, so it brought that tension. And the more I realized he was an integral part, the more I explored his role as wise-ass commentator and Greek chorus. He gives us perspective, makes us see we're not the center of the universe. We take so much of the natural world for granted, and he calls us on that, tries to make us a little more honest.

As a nonfiction writer, how did you approach writing a novel?

Fiction is a whole new genre for me, so I had to study. I reread and pulled apart some favorite novels like *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier and *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy. I tried to figure out how they did certain things, especially when it came to imagining the characters' interior lives. One of my major obstacles was, as a male author, figuring out how to inhabit a woman's perspective, and how to inhabit a raven's perspective. The raven was easier.



"Minick's coming-of-age novel is poignant throughout. The supporting players are as carefully drawn as the protagonists.... A compassionate exploration of faith and doubt."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

"Minick uses an extraordinary mix of realism and enchantment to tell a love story wrapped in horror, fire, and faith. An utterly original novel."

— Lee Smith

Fire Is Your Water

A Novel

By Jim Minick

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