

*The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman.* By Margot Mifflin. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xii + 263 pp. \$24.95)

A young woman stands erect in a photograph taken in 1858 in Rochester, New York; her right hand rests on a chair, her left touches her floor-length gown. Her hair appears black, and her face has high cheekbones, wide dark eyes, a closed mouth, and an unusual chin. Her chin is marked with five downward marks that give this book its name, *The Blue Tattoo*. The figure is Olive Oatman, daughter of Mormon parents and a captive, along with her younger sister, Mary Ann, in southwest New Mexico Territory, first of the Yavapais and then traded to the Mohave in the 1850s. Her parents were killed, as were four of the other seven children. If one sees this Olive Oatman photograph, it is a hard one to forget.

Others have told her story. The first was Oatman herself. Margot Mifflin has researched these early stories by Oatman in the Western press, especially in the *San Francisco Herald* and the *Daily*

*Alta California*. Oatman's story was soon dominated by minister Royal Byron Stratton who produced several editions of her biographies. In these best-selling works, Stratton depicted "degraded bipeds" in his interpretation of the story (p. 2). In the last century her story was explored and discussed by anthropologist A. L. Kroeber (pp. 129, 132, 141–142) and reprinted with a foreword by Wilcomb Washburn (1983); in the twenty-first century it was retold as a biography by Brian McGinty as *The Oatman Massacre: A Tale of Desert Captivity and Survival* (2005).

Margot Mifflin is a great storyteller. She has moved through the three editions of Stratton's books, materials by Olive Oatman herself, and writings by her brother, Lorenzo. Mifflin gives us many early photos of Oatman and her relatives, as well as the engravings from Stratton's works, the Yale Library, the Sophia Smith Library, and the University of Arizona, among others.

Mifflin's work also succeeds in bringing the lives of Yavapais and Mohaves into the picture. She researched the tattoo rites of the Mohave and presents us with photographs of Mohave men and women and drawings of their tattooing practices. She differentiates these two Southwest groups and gives us her thoughts as to why the Oatman family was attacked by them. She tells us of the exchange of Olive and Mary Ann to the Mohaves, who apparently created a familial experience for the Oatman sisters. She also provides a chapter on Mohave lives, looks, and practices. Mifflin does not let Olive off the hook and tracks down the way she changed her own story after she was returned to white society and became something of a cult figure. She traces Oatman's marriage to John Brant Fairchild, their setting up house in Texas, and their adoption of a child, when Oatman set up a rather secluded life.

Mifflin's book attempts to answer many of the questions that Olive Oatman's photograph and the many versions of her story raise. She especially examines Oatman's return to white society and questions whether Oatman really wanted to come back. Like Kroeber, she points out the role of acculturation but uses the word "transculturation"—a somewhat different usage. Her sense is that, with the Mohave, Oatman found a new family. They helped her and brought her into their world. You may or may not agree, but *The Blue Tattoo* is well written and well researched; it re-opens the story of white women and men going West and Native people trying to survive these travels.

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