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Gamble's 'Water Dancers' bridges class gap in resort town

By Diane Weddington

CONTRIBUTOR

WHILE most people take a short summer vacation, an elite group "summers" for months in resort communities. Films and books have created a romantic image of this lifestyle, for the most part set on East Coast beachfronts.

In "The Water Dancers" (William Morrow \$24.95), San Francisco author Terry Gamble brings to life a mid-20th-century resort community in Northern Michigan. Her faithful rendering of the privileges and problems of upper class life is drawn from having been one of the elite summer residents of Harbor Point, the model for Beck's Point.

Gamble grew up in the 1960s, when the social conventions she saw in Harbor Point were quaint anachronisms. Privilege still existed, but social structures were fraying. In the face of such change, elite power circles grew even tighter and closed to outsiders.

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In creating the March family and their crumbling waterfront estate, Gamble says she intended "to write about

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issues of place, not class. They have a sense of entitlement. They cleave fiercely to the land and think it's theirs."

Thus her portraits of matriarch Lydia March and son Woody March are letter-perfect. The soiled remnant of a dying dynasty, Lydia and Woody cleave to a life of manners and conventions as their lives and property literally decay, and the world around them rejects all they embody.

However, "The Water Dancers" is no mere reworking of "The Great Gatsby," no simple look at the decadence and decline of the mannered class. Gamble's work is unique because she stood within the circle of

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power yet watched and identified closely with those who did not.

Speaking of her childhood in Harbor Point, she recalls, "I was only one of 17 cousins there, and I often felt invisible or a shadow. I came to understand what it means not to be noticed, and it helped me to understand those who are never noticed."

Her novel looks closely at two groups which are rarely noticed: the domestic servants who cater to the needs and whims of the elite and the Native Americans who eke out a life from the harsh Michigan peninsula year round.

She draws upon interviews with Harbor Point residents who had been domestic servants in the 1940s, the time when the novel begins, to create a multi-dimensional portrait of the Marches' servants and their families.

With an adept eye, she chronicles their exhausting work and invisibility within the households. She balances this with compassionate and humorous sketches capturing the meaning in their lives apart from their summer employment.

Yet her identification with the Odawa and Ojibwa tribes and orphan Rachel Winnapee most engages the reader and drives the novel.

Rachel's story could be likened to one of Louise Erdrich's novels, a somber tale which shows the tragic despair in Native American culture. Unlike Erdrich, Gamble is not Native American and says she struggled to give Rachel a voice. Although she watched the Native Americans in Harbor Point from afar, Gamble understands that she always stood on the outside. To write about them, she studied histories of the region and talked with tribe members who explained much of their history and tradition to her.

As it was in Harbor Point, the Jesuit orphanage which housed Rachel and other Native American children was quite separate from both the year-round residents and the summer community. The Native Americans who scraped by in the outlying forests, making quill baskets and bark canoes to sell in town, were treated as invisible outcasts.

Gamble creates parallels between the Native Americans' real entitlement to the land and the Marches' assumed entitlement, using Rachel's story as the link.

The 16-year-old outcast becomes the lover of the March heir, bears his son and takes both the boy and the secret away until she can bring redemption to both her lover and her tribe. Lydia March and Rachel Winnapee, both stubborn and needing to control those they love, prove that the human heart is not restricted by class structures. As parallel archetypes, they inextricably link the struggles of two very separate communities in a convincing and profound way.

Underlying all these family stories is the permanence of the land. Gamble discusses in some detail two practices, the eating of earth for nourishment

and religious practices and the eating of stones. Rachel licks the stones of the Michigan shoreline and savors the salt, her saliva outlining the ancient fossils which undergird the land and whose permanence outlives all class conflicts.

Terry Gamble will read from "The Water Dancers" at Lafayette Books at 7 p.m. Friday. The bookstore is at 3579 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette. (925) 284-1233.

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