

SANTA MONICA

# CITYWIDE READS

JOIN A

## CITYWIDE BOOK CLUB

MARCH 7 - APRIL 4 | 2009

For free public book discussion groups and other events, check the Santa Monica Citywide Reads web site at [www.smpl.org/cwr](http://www.smpl.org/cwr), call 310.458.8600, or visit our blog at [www.santamonica-citywiderads.blogspot.com](http://www.santamonica-citywiderads.blogspot.com)

### THE SHADOW CATCHER

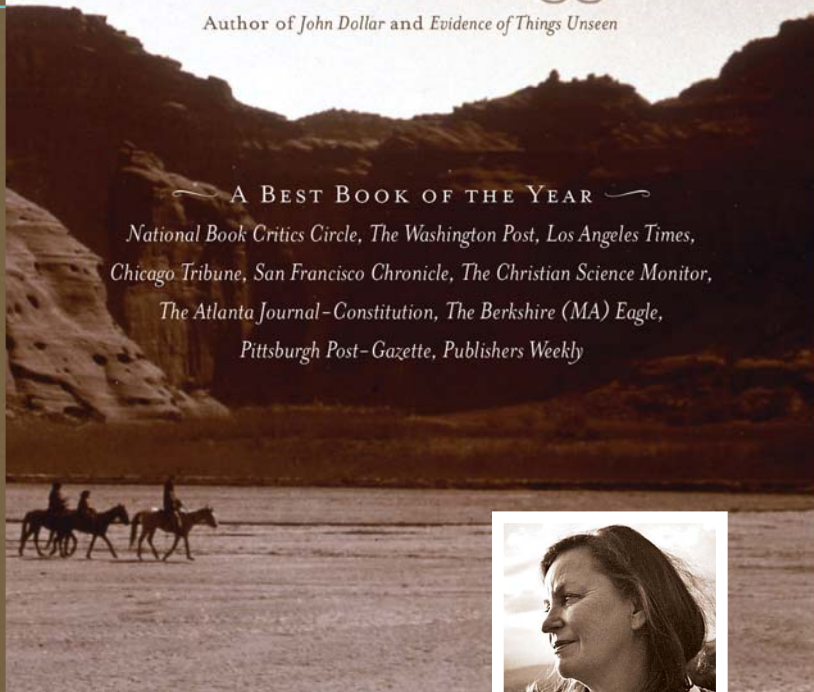
*A Novel*

Marianne Wiggins

Author of *John Dollar* and *Evidence of Things Unseen*

A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR

*National Book Critics Circle, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, The Christian Science Monitor, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Berkshire (MA) Eagle, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Publishers Weekly*



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## MAYORAL WELCOME

Welcome to the seventh annual Santa Monica CITYWIDE READS program. This community reading program encourages people who live, work in, or visit Santa Monica to read and discuss the same book at the same time in discussion groups and other events held around the city.

This year's book, *The Shadow Catcher*, by local author Marianne Wiggins, intricately weaves two stories of family history and personal loss together. There's something for everyone in this novel – historical fiction set in the great American West, contemporary Los Angeles life, Native American culture, and the art of photography. It is certain to provide a framework for dialogue in our community.

*The Shadow Catcher* is available from the Santa Monica Public Library or your local bookstore. Please plan on attending one of the many free public events being held around the city from March 7 to April 4.

I hope that your participation in CITYWIDE READS is a very rewarding experience that brings us together as a community through literature.



Ken Genser, Mayor  
City of Santa Monica

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*"I write on a visual canvas, seeing a scene in my thoughts before translating it into words."*

Marianne Wiggins [Interview with Pamela J. Johnson, *USC College News*, July 2006]



Marianne Wiggins was born in 1947 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to John and Mary Wiggins. John was a grocer and preacher at a Protestant Church founded by his father. Rigidly conservative, John committed suicide while Marianne was still young, leaving her with her mother Mary, the daughter of Greek Orthodox immigrants. In 1965, at the age of 17, Wiggins left home, got married, and gave birth to daughter Lara.

In 1970, Marianne Wiggins divorced her husband and moved with Lara to Martha's Vineyard and started her writing career.

Her earliest books – novels *Babe*, *Went South*, *Separate Checks*, and the short story collection *Herself in Love* – explored themes of feminism and single motherhood.

In the early 1980s, Wiggins moved to London, where she would live for the next sixteen years. It was there that she met and married fellow author Salman Rushdie. On Valentine's Day, 1989, barely more than a year into their marriage, Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* death sentence against Rushdie for blaspheming the Islamic faith in his book, *The Satanic Verses*, forcing the couple into hiding. That same year, Wiggins experienced her largest acclaim to date for her novel, *John Dollar*, which won her The Whiting Award and the Janet Heidiger Kafka Prize for fiction.

Wiggins separated from Rushdie and divorced him in 1993. Focusing on her own work, she published the novels *Eveless Eden* (1985) and *Almost Heaven* (1998). In 2003, her novel *Evidence of Things Unseen* was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

In 2000, Marianne Wiggins moved to Los Angeles, where her daughter had become an accomplished photographer. Wiggins, too, shared a passion for taking pictures and channeled that interest into a novel built around the famed photographer, Edward S. Curtis, known to the Native Americans whose images he captured as "The Shadow Catcher." In addition to her continued writing, Marianne Wiggins teaches in the English department at the University of Southern California.

## ABOUT EDWARD S. CURTIS

*"All I want you to understand, before you read the book I've written, before you even spend another day entertaining the idea that Edward Curtis was a saint, or a poet, or a hero, is that his life was long. His life was...complicated."* Marianne Wiggins [*The Shadow Catcher*]

Photographer Edward S. Curtis, known as "The Shadow Catcher," created a defining moment in American publishing history with *The North American Indian*, a collection of more than 40,000 images and rare ethnographic information on over eighty American Indian tribal groups. He spent thirty years photographing American Indian tribes west of the Mississippi, ranging from the Mexican border to the Arctic.

Born near Whitewater, Wisconsin in 1868, Curtis exhibited an interest in photography from an early age, constructing a camera and processing prints by the time his formal education ended with the sixth grade. He married and had four children after his family moved to Seattle. Following a chance meeting in 1898 on Mt. Rainier with a group of mountaineers, including experts in the area of conservation, forestry, Indian ethnography and publishing, Curtis launched his North American Indian project.

Despite continued financial hardships during the thirty years it took to publish the twenty-volume *The North American Indian*, Curtis was able to employ technicians, scholars, and researchers to assist with collecting intricate details of past and present Native American cultures. His dedication to recording as much detail of traditional life as possible is evident; his work includes descriptions of dwellings, food, clothing, burial customs, games, and mythology. The final volume was published in 1930. Edward S. Curtis died in Los Angeles in 1952 at the age of 84.

# THE SHADOW CATCHER

*"Reading this [book] is like swimming in a braided river."*

Marianne Wiggins [Internet radio interview - <http://www.edrants.com/segundo/bss-134-marianne-wiggins>]

In *The Shadow Catcher*, Marianne Wiggins combines fact with fiction, past with present, and words with images in the unconventional telling of two compelling stories, set nearly a century apart, yet seamlessly intertwined. In one narrative, a writer named Marianne Wiggins has written a novel, also titled *The Shadow Catcher*, about the photographer Edward S. Curtis, who came to fame through his attempts to photograph Native American people before they vanished from the American landscape. Wiggins' story takes a turn when she is called to the deathbed of her father, a man she knows died when she was a child. In the other historic narrative, we follow the story of Clara Phillips as she journeys across America and into the life of Curtis, the enigmatic photographer she would marry.

For years, Marianne Wiggins toyed with the idea of writing a novel about Edward S. Curtis. She wrote and rewrote large chunks of her novel, but struggled to find the interior tension that would sustain

the work. Finally, two revelations pointed out the direction she was seeking: the truth, and not the illusion, of Curtis' life and work, and its correlation with her own complicated history.

In researching the legendary photographer, Wiggins discovered that the reality of Edward S. Curtis was often not what it seemed. While his mission was to capture an image of truth before it vanished into history, Curtis saw nothing wrong with dressing a Navajo as a Sioux or removing a modern artifact that might betray whatever historic "truth" he was trying to convey.

Curtis was an absent husband and father, and Wiggins came to realize how closely this absence paralleled the emptiness left behind when her own father committed suicide. Threading elements of her own life into the novel, Wiggins was able to weave its two disparate storylines into a single haunting portrait of family history and personal loss.

## READ-ALIKES

### *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood

In this multi-layered family saga, Margaret Atwood explores themes of loss and regret in the story of the Chase sisters, Iris and Laura. The book begins with Laura's suicide in 1945 and takes complex and unexpected turns with the posthumous publication of Laura's novel, *The Blind Assassin*, reprinted in its entirety here as a novel-within-a-novel.

### *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* by Ellen Feldman

Another creative reimagining of real people's lives, Feldman's novel plays "what if?" with the life of Peter van Pels, the teen boy who shared a hiding place with Anne Frank. *The Boy Who Loved Anne Frank* considers what might have become of Peter had he escaped the Nazis and lived to see the publication of Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*.

### *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer

Like *The Shadow Catcher*, this novel by a past Citywide Reads author features a protagonist named after the writer and intricately weaves parallel tales of present and past, as a young man travels to the Ukraine to find a woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis.

### *The Last Summer of the World* by Emily Mitchell

Mitchell fictionalizes the life of another famed photographer, Edward Steichen, tracking the artist's work and disintegrating home life against the bleak backdrop of World War I France. Like Marianne Wiggins' novel, *The Last Summer of the World* is as much a portrait of its main character as it is of a historic place and time.

### *The Emigrants* by W.G. Sebald

Cited by Wiggins in her acknowledgments as an influence, W.G. Sebald strikes many similar chords in his works as does Wiggins in *The Shadow Catcher*, such as the persistence of memory. In this novel, Sebald also utilizes photographs to illuminate and expand the story of four Jewish émigrés.

## RESOURCES

### *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*

Edited by D. L. Birchfield

A multi-volume set with colored photos that is arranged alphabetically and includes entries on different tribes, subjects such as beadwork, and people such as Edward S. Curtis.

### *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*

Edited by Naomi Rosenbloom

This reference book is for the general reader and includes terms and technologies, historical context, and biographies, including an entry on Edward S. Curtis.

### *Shadow Catcher: The Life and Work of Edward S. Curtis*

By Laurie Lawlor

An accessible and insightful biography that delves into the professional and personal life of Edward S. Curtis and his impact on photography and Native American history.

### Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian: Photographic Images from the Library of Congress*

A comprehensive site that includes photographs taken by Curtis and a presentation about Curtis' life and achievements. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ienhtml/curthome.html>

**Marianne Wiggins' website**, produced by her publisher Simon and Schuster. The site includes video footage of the author. [www.simonsays.com/content/destination.cfm?tab=7&pid=357079](http://www.simonsays.com/content/destination.cfm?tab=7&pid=357079)

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THANKS TO THE FRIENDS OF THE SANTA MONICA PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE PRINTING OF THIS RESOURCE GUIDE.

## SPECIAL CITYWIDE READS EVENTS

### **An Afternoon with Marianne Wiggins**

**Saturday, March 21 at 2 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium**

The award-winning author of *The Shadow Catcher* presents a reading and discussion, followed by a book signing.

### **Los Angeles as Literature**

**Sunday, March 22 at 2 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium**

David Ulin, from the *Los Angeles Times*, moderates this panel discussion with local authors. Panelists will discuss Los Angeles' various incarnations in literature, in both a contemporary and historical context. Learn about CITYWIDE READS author Marianne Wiggins' place in the canon of fiction about Los Angeles.

### **In the Land of the War Canoes Movie Screening**

**Tuesday, March 24 at 7 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium**

In 1914, Edward S. Curtis released a longer version of this documentary feature film on the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island under the name, "In the Land of the Headhunters." This incomplete portion was rediscovered and rescued in 1973. It is now regarded as the oldest existing American documentary feature film and was selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. Silent film, with soundtrack of original Kwakiutl music recorded in 1972.

### **City TV Call-In Show**

**Wednesday, March 25 at 7 pm | Tune in to Channel 16**

A live, moderated discussion of *The Shadow Catcher*.

### **Introducing Edward S. Curtis**

**Saturday, March 28 at 3 pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium**

Edward S. Curtis expert and scholar Bruce Kapson presents a historical overview on the life of Curtis and the significance of his work in the history of photography. Vintage examples of Curtis' work will be available for viewing after the presentation. ([www.brucekapson.com](http://www.brucekapson.com))

### **Evidence of Things Unseen Book Discussion**

**Thursday, April 2 at 7 pm | Main Library, Community Room**

Published in 2003, this other novel by Marianne Wiggins was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Set between the World Wars, it follows a family as their lives are affected by science and the atomic age.



City of  
**Santa Monica**

P.O. BOX 1610  
SANTA MONICA  
CA 90406-1610

DATED MATERIAL

## BOOK DISCUSSIONS

*Trained volunteer facilitators lead these free public book discussions. No registration is required.*

**Sat, March 7 at 2 pm | Main Library, Multipurpose Room\***

**Mon, March 9 at 2 pm | Emeritus College, 1227 2nd St., Room 407**

**Sat, March 14 at 10:30 am | Café Bolivar, 1741 Ocean Park Blvd.**

**Tue, March 17 at 7 pm | Barnes & Noble, 1201 3rd Street Promenade**

**Wed, March 18 at 7 pm | Montana Avenue Branch Library, 1704 Montana Ave.\***

**Sat, March 21 at 11 am | Fairview Branch Library, 2101 Ocean Park Blvd.\***

**Thur, March 26 at 2 pm | Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 829 Wilshire Blvd.**

**Sat, March 28 at 1 pm | California Heritage Museum Lawn, 2612 Main St.**

**Sat, April 4 at 11 am | Main Library, Multipurpose Room\***

\*City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Administration 310-458-8606 (TDD 395-8499) at least 3 working days (Monday-Friday) in advance.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you prefer the contemporary or historical narrative? Do you think the stories fit together cohesively?
2. Do the photographs, both by Edward S. Curtis and from the author's family, add to the story for you? Do you like mixing the art of photography with the art of the novel?
3. What types of myths does Wiggins explore?
4. How would the novel have been different if the story was told by Edward and not Clara?
5. What did the character Asahel add to the story? What does Colonel Edwards, Jr. add to the story?
6. Do you think Wiggins took too much liberty with the life of Edward S. Curtis?
7. Do you feel that the author captured contemporary Los Angeles life?
8. How does the novel reflect contradictions?
9. How would you characterize the ending of the novel?
10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?