

AUTHOR'S NOTE
for the
Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition

When I began writing *Water Witches*, I didn't own a cell phone. I had no idea that a thing called the Internet was about to change everything except, perhaps, how we grill a cheese sandwich. Vermont had daily morning newspapers (note the plural) with dozens of reporters and editors working into the evening at each newsroom. My daughter, Grace Experience, who is now twenty-five, hadn't been conceived.

And yet when I reread the novel because this twenty-fifth-anniversary edition was in production (thank you, Vintage and Anchor Books!), I was struck by how eerily timely it is. It's not that I am so prescient or insightful, but I was writing about Vermont in a moment when the small state was a microcosm for and an augur of change.

The novel had its origins one day when I read two newspaper articles. The first was a (forgive the pun) rather dry story about a Vermont ski resort's upcoming water-withdrawal permit hearing before a local environmental board—a hearing that clearly was going to be contentious as environmentalists and developers did battle. The second, beneath a photo of a magisterial woman with a magnificent mane of long gray hair, was about

the upcoming meeting of the American Society of Dowsters—or “water witches,” people who find water using divining rods or pendulums—held annually in Vermont’s remote Northeast Kingdom.

Wouldn't the world be a better place if we could simply marry the two articles? I thought glibly to myself.

And the novel, in that moment, was born. On the surface, *Water Witches* is about a ski resort that, in the midst of a cataclysmic drought, wants to savage a mountain’s rivers and forests in a massive expansion and the New Age dowsters and environmentalists who want to prevent the development. But John Gardner wrote eloquently about how the two points on a compass that matter most in fiction are conflict and human transformation. In *Water Witches*, whether some characters were going to prove capable of transformation was going to be as important to me as the more obvious conflict.

Despite the lack of cell phones, social networks, or Wi-Fi in *Water Witches*, there are two currents in the novel that feel as if they could be memes in today’s world. The first is how the novel addresses climate change and global warming in a book that is set in the mid-1990s. Among the sentences that haunted me when I reread the story was the moment when lobbyist Scottie Winston is watching his nine-year-old daughter sob and is unable to comfort her: “It is not solely for Elias that my daughter is crying, these are not tears spilled only for a once-ancient dowser. These are, I believe, tears shed also for trees now gone, for land that is scorched, and for rivers and brooks and streams that are dry. They are tears brought on by the drought, tears from a fear . . . that nature somehow is changing.” The references to holes in the ozone, the inexorable rise in Earth’s temperature, and the way that the weather and the environment have become dangerous suggest that even when I was writing the novel, these issues were beginning to alarm us.

The second of the themes that struck me as contemporary are the observations from so many of the women about toxic masculinity. Narrator Scottie Winston reveals early on, "Patience told me two things when Laura, my wife, introduced us almost twenty years ago. She told me that as a dowser she is in touch with the earth. And she told me that as a man I have great potential to become grotesque." I'm not sure I have written anything truer.

I love the character of Patience and how she constantly calls out Scottie and his male peers for the myriad ways that men have "unfairly co-opted power from women." When I saw her discussing "the ritualized subjugation of women," I felt her pain and frustration as acutely now as I did when I wrote those words for her.

Water Witches is the earliest of my novels that I allow to remain in print. It was my fourth published novel (and the sixth I had written) and preceded *Midwives* by two years. It is less about dread than everything that would come after, novels such as *The Double Bind*, *The Guest Room*, or *The Flight Attendant*. It was before I had started to write historical fiction, such as *Skeletons at the Feast*, *The Light in the Ruins*, or *The Sandcastle Girls*.

It was born in a period when all of my books were set in Vermont or (in one case) Vermont and New Hampshire. Everything I wrote between 1995 and 2007 was set in northern New England. I think, at the time, I thought that would always be the case.

And *Water Witches* is far and away the closest I have ever come to writing a novel with jokes. I'm not sure I can call it a gently comic novel because the stakes are too high, but I found myself smiling at Scottie Winston's take on his neighbors and the utter absurdity of what he does for a living as a lobbyist for big business, such as it is, in Vermont.

Finally, this is the only book I ever wrote with touches of magical realism. And that, too, made me happy.

I mention happiness here because while my work continued to evolve over the last twenty-five years, rereading this early novel made me smile. It wasn't simply the text; it was those Proustian madeleines of where I was at that point in my life. I remember how much fun I had researching and writing the tale, especially the days I spent with water witches outside and lobbyists inside.

And I remember imagining fatherhood and wondering what it would be like. There is a moment when Scottie is watching his young daughter, Miranda, dancing alone in the family backyard one summer night amid the fireflies, and he thinks to himself, "Miranda is grace." My daughter was at least a year from being born when I wrote that passage, but my wife and I named her Grace when she arrived. And while I hadn't yet discovered first-hand how much I would love being a parent, it's clear even from the text that parenthood would be among the two favorite roles I have gotten to play in this world. (The other is being a husband, a role that Scottie also cherishes.)

Water Witches will always exist for me in that liminal period just before I would become a father and just before the Internet would change the world—and as, quite literally, I was finally understanding how to write a novel. It was a gift for me to rediscover this story.

Happy reading. Fingers crossed my work never disappoints you.

—CHRIS BOHJALIAN