

Local author Tom Mach celebrates suffrage in novel

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2012 is the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in Kansas, and local author Tom Mach doesn't understand why people aren't more excited.

"Kansas, Oregon, and Arizona are all celebrating their 100th anniversary of the passage of suffrage in their respective states," Mach says. "Yet I see no excitement in Kansas about this historic event. Look at all the attention the centennial of the Titanic received."

If anyone knows about women's suffrage, it is Mach, who spent the past several years researching and writing a historical novel using the women's suffrage movement as the backdrop. His book "Angels at Sunset" (Hill Song Press, 2012) is the third and final installment of the Jessica Radford trilogy. The novel begins just after the elderly Radford has cast her ballot in the 1920 presidential election, although much of the story is told through an account Radford's daughter has written.

"It is not just another historical novel," Mach says. "It is an accurate portrayal of the abuses women fought to not only get the vote but to obtain other rights as well, such as the right to own property, sign contracts, even the right to their own children. Try to imagine if history were reversed and it were men who were denied their basic rights."

"This (suffrage) movement is a remarkable story of America's greatest bloodless revolution, a revolution that resulted in the greatest bestowal of democratic freedoms in the history of the United States," writes Coline Jenkins, in the book's foreword. Jenkins, a descendent of suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, feels that more attention should be placed "on the hardships and tenacity exhibited by women and men in their quest for these rights and privileges."

That is where Mach comes in. His heroine, Jessica Radford, is witness to numerous historic events, such as the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and McKinley and the Great Chicago Fire. In 1917, Radford is present when suffragettes demonstrate in front of the White House. A scuffle breaks out, and many of the protesters were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

Radford, (like real-life suffragettes Lucy Burns and Alice Paul) is thrown into the Occoquan Workhouse, where she goes on a hunger strike. President Wilson, who was indifferent to the issue of women's voting prior to the protest, was appalled by the news of the hunger strikes and the general conditions in the jail. Hoping to minimize negative publicity, he soon came out in favor of women's suffrage. Two years later, Congress passed the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote.

Last spring, Mach was honored on the floor of the House of Representatives for his work highlighting the suffrage movement and Kansas' role in it.

Talking to Mach, however, it is clear that history isn't the only thing he is passionate about; he is also interested in the future. During the school year, he is a regular volunteer at St. John School, where he helps teach youths to write, and this summer he spoke about his craft to children of migrant workers attending the Harvest of Hope program at Kansas University.

Mach says students are often surprised to learn that he doesn't get writer's block.

"Once writers know a character intimately, they have no trouble writing their novel," he says. "(It) happened to me with Jessica Radford. She was so three-dimensional. I had no trouble writing her story."

With the end of the trilogy, Mach realizes he has reached a stopping point, and his wife, Virginia, couldn't be more pleased.

"She wants to do some traveling, which is difficult to do when I am working on a project," he says.

There is, however, another character calling him.

"I have another book percolating in my mind about Jessica's granddaughter Anne. It will be great, and I hope I find time to write it."

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