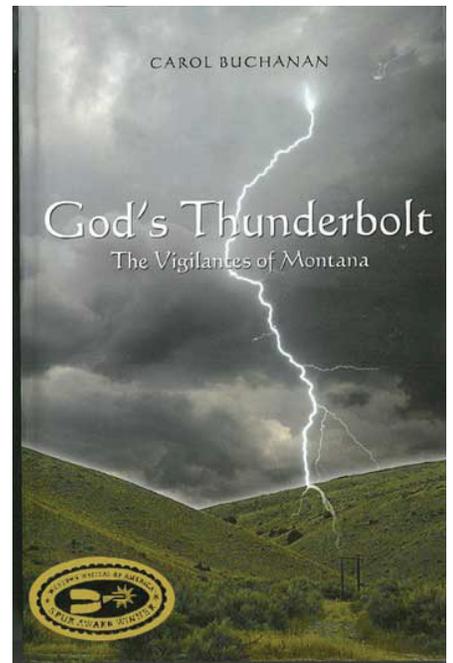


Interview: Carol Buchanan, Author of God's Thunderbolt, 2009 Spur Award Winner

<http://blogcritics.org/books/article/interview-carol-buchanan-author-of-gods/>

"God's Thunderbolt: The Vigilantes of Montana" *Carol Buchanan*



"God's Thunderbolt: the Vigilantes of Montana"

God's Thunderbolt: The Vigilantes of Montana won the 2009 Spur Award for Best First Novel from the Western Writers of America. Hold onto your Stetsons, though, because this is a self-published novel. Unlike many (most?) books in that category, God's Thunderbolt has already passed the author's break-even point and is well into the territory of financial success.

"I've waited three decades for someone to write a great novel about Montana's Vigilante era (1863-1864), and here it is," said noted Westerns author, Richard S. Wheeler, winner of the Owen Wister Award for lifetime achievement in the literature of the West.

With that sort of accolade, it is no surprise that Montana fans (not the Hannah Montana variety), lovers of Western lore, and readers who like the gold rush and Civil War era will enjoy this historic novel. Buchanan meticulously researched the story of Montana's Vigilantes and turned the nuggets she mined into the tale of Alder Gulch. While residents wrestle with Western settlement issues, the far-off Civil War also makes an impact on their lives. Throughout the novel of suspense and intrigue, a love story emerges that builds to a dramatic conclusion.

What was surprising was that a self-published book would win a prestigious national award. Past Spur winners include Larry McMurtry for Lonesome Dove, Michael Blake for Dances With Wolves, Glendon Swarthout for The Shootist, and Tony Hillerman for Skinwalker. Spur Awards are not restricted to association members only. The honors have been awarded annually since 1953 for distinguished writing about the American West. According to the association's website:

At the time awards were given to the best western novel, best historical novel, best juvenile, and best short story. Since then the awards have been broadened to include other types of writing about the West. Today, Spurs are offered for the best western novel (short novel), best novel of the west (long novel), best original paperback novel, best short story, best short nonfiction. Also, best contemporary nonfiction, best biography, best history, best juvenile fiction and nonfiction, best TV or motion picture drama, best TV or motion picture documentary, and best first novel (called The Medicine Pipe Bearer's Award).

The western is apparently a languishing genre in American publishing. Of the half million printed “Literature and Fiction” books listed on Amazon, a little more than 17,000 are categorized as “Westerns.” But that is Buchanan’s forte. It’s in her blood and the story of Montana’s vigilante period was the story she wanted to tell. As she says, “Daddy was a cowboy!” Rather than struggle with finding an agent to try to sell her book to a publisher, Buchanan opted to self-publish. She was already the author of three traditionally published nonfiction books, so she knew what she was getting into.

Q: Your first novel, *God’s Thunderbolt*, has already been a critical success, winning the Spur Award. Do you have any other criterion for considering the book a success?

A: Financial. I always knew publishing was a business and that once it was in print I would have to sell copies in order to break out of the “hobby” category.

Q: Did you self-publish primarily to establish yourself as a fiction writer, since your other books are nonfiction?

A: When I started to think about self-publishing, I had no expectations beyond hoping the book would do okay. I had a hunch it might because no really good historical novel about Montana’s Vigilantes had ever been published, and our history is important to Montanans. I had no thoughts then that I recall anyway about establishing myself as a fiction writer. In my view, it’s a financial success because the earnings are approaching the advances I made with two of my traditionally published nonfiction books. I had no expectation for financial success other than that it should make money and not lose it.

Q: Your book is targeted for people interested in Montana. What would you do differently if you wanted the book to sell to a more general audience?

A: Write a different book. Then I’d find a different, perhaps bigger, niche. I’d still think in terms of The Long Tail marketing to a specific, albeit larger, audience rather than taking a scattergun approach to the entire world. In fact, I’m planning to do that with, I think, the fourth book. It’ll be set in current time and have a female protagonist. Still set in the West, though, because that’s what I do. What I am. A Westerner.

The audience for *God’s Thunderbolt*, as you’ve mentioned, is comprised of Montanans and those interested in reading about Montana, or interested in reading historical fiction set in the West. There are people in that audience all over the world, so I depend on the Internet. Ultimately, word of mouth sells books. The best marketing method in the world is one person telling another, “I loved this book. I couldn’t put it down. You gotta read this.”

That happens to *God’s Thunderbolt*, but will it happen to *Gold*? [Buchanan’s next novel.] It’s not guaranteed. As an aside, people say not to depend on friends’ reactions. After *God’s Thunderbolt* came out, my friends started buying it and reading it. I enjoyed hearing the relief in their voices when they were able to tell me they loved the book. I could just imagine them thinking, “Whew. I don’t have to fib.”

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you very much for writing about *God’s Thunderbolt* and me.
