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Readers and Writers: Diane Wilson says 'The Seed Keeper' grew out of Dakota heritage and devotion to seeds



Diane Wilson, author of “The Seed Keeper,” is a planter of old seeds, executive director of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance, and former executive director of Dream of Wild Health, an organization aimed at restoring health and well-being in the Native

community by recovering knowledge of and access to healthy Indigenous foods, medicines, and ways of life. (Courtesy photo)

By **MARY ANN GROSSMANN** |

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April 17, 2021 at 5:57 a.m.

It was cold the day Diane Wilson was walking some years ago in the Dakota Commemorative March, a 50-mile journey to honor the Dakota people who were forcibly removed from Minnesota in 1863 in the aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War. Some 1,700 exhausted women, children, and elders had been marched at gunpoint from the Lower Sioux Agency to Fort Snelling.

During the 20-mile-a-day memorial march, Wilson heard the story of how women on that removal sewed seeds into the hems of their skirts and hid more in their pockets, so they would be able to plant corn and other foods in their new homes.

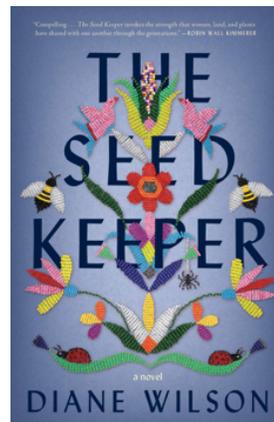
Those brave women inspired Wilson's debut novel, "The Seed Keeper" (Milkweed Editions), born also out of her own devotion to life-giving seeds and her desire for people to look at their relationship to food in the long-term way Native Americans have done for centuries. She is Mdewakanton on her mother's side and Swedish-American on her father's.

“About 20 years ago I fell in love with seeds,” Wilson said in a phone conversation from her home in Shafer, Minn. “I wrote a memoir ‘Spirit Car: Journey to a Dakota Past,’ (winner of a Minnesota Book Award) and a nonfiction book, ‘Beloved Child: A Dakota Way of Life.’ So I was moving toward this story while developing those books. It took about 10 years for me to get at that magical, mystical part of seed that gets people to fall in love with them. I am awed by the brilliance in that single seed that holds the spark of life. It knows when to be dormant, when to come to life. It knows what to do. It’s beyond comprehension.”

Wilson says she turned to fiction “because you can use beautiful language to tell the story.”

Her lyrical poem, *The Seeds Speak*, opens the book:

“We are hungry, but the sleep is upon us.
 We are thirsty, but the mother has instructed us
 not to waken too early.
 We are restless, chafing against this thin
 membrane,
 pushing back against the
 dark that bids us to lie still, suspended in a
 near-death
 that is not dying.
 We hold time in this space, we hold a thread to
 infinity that reaches to the stars ...”



Wilson’s story of four generations of women and their connection to seeds was Introduced in March during a week-long celebration of Native American arts at All My Relations Arts in Minneapolis, It was listed as Most Anticipated Book of 2021 by nine publications, as well as a receiving a mention in *The New Yorker*. The beautiful cover was designed by and is the beadwork of Dakota artist Holly Young.

“The Seed Keeper” begins in 2002, when Rosalie Iron Wing returns to the little cabin where she was raised by her father, who taught her to hunt, gut a deer, dry meat, fish. She’s a widow, having been married to a white farmer but now nothing is holding her to the farm. Rosalie discovers carefully-stored old seeds that she plants, and the narrative moves between her struggles to grow crops from the old seeds and 1862, when Marie Blackbird’s mother caches food supplies as the white soldiers approach.

“I started with Rosalie, based on the story I heard about Dakota women on the commemorative hike,” Wilson recalled. “I couldn’t see down the road since this is my first novel. But I knew that what the women did in 1862 was the heart of the whole novel. Their actions in protecting seeds to be sure there was food for their family teaches us what we need to do today to protect seeds for future generations. That story wanted to be told.”

As the novel evolved in Wilson’s imagination, other characters appeared. “They started telling other aspects of the story in a flood of traditional teachings of how we have relationships with food, the effects of assimilation,” she recalls. “Years ago, (artist/teacher) Ernie Whiteman told me, ‘If you control food, you control the people.’ Big moments in history are connected to food that controls indigenous people and people of color.”

She points out that our current conversations about racism have food availability embedded in them. For instance, when schools closed because of COVID-19, low-income children didn’t have anyplace to get food. After George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, the two primary grocery stores in the area — Target and Cub — were closed and residents who were people of color had to rely on inconvenient public transportation.

“The Seed Keeper” also takes on the controversy between advocates of corporate genetically-modified seeds and those like Wilson who believe in the importance of preserving old seeds.

“We can’t have these conversations around the dueling wars of data without looking to a world view that informs your relationship with seeds,” she says.

In Wilson’s novel, a representative of a company that has patented GMO seeds persuades Rosalie’s husband and other farmers that the modified seeds will give them better yields with less work. But the farmers have to buy all their supplies from the company and if the GMO seeds are cross-pollinated with other seeds, even by accident on a windy day, the farmers can be sued for violating the company’s patent.

What nobody anticipated when GMO seeds were introduced was bad consequences, such as the appearance of resistant Super Weeds.

“There are tradeoffs short- and long-term for the sake of large corporations making profits,” Wilson says. “It’s one reason I brought the river into the story, to represent what’s happening to water with farm chemicals carrying GMOs that end up in drainage ditches and then go into rivers to create dead zones. People take for granted this is our food system. That’s why I provided historical context, to let readers see it wasn’t always this way.”

She argues that indigenous varieties of seeds, such as Dakota corn, were found through testing to have genetic integrity still present, along with higher nutritional value than in hybridized varieties. Besides, corporate-grown foods just don’t taste the way they should, she says. Older people remember what corn used to taste like. Now, Wilson says, “It’s so sweet, eating it is like eating a doughnut.”

“A lot depends on the choices you make,” she continues. “Do you support industrial agriculture by choosing commercial wild rice grown in paddies, or do you choose wild rice harvested in the traditional way that’s sold at White Earth and other reservations.”

Wilson believes we must ask hard questions about the future of foodstuffs because the trend is toward just a few limited

varieties of seeds.

“What happens if we eliminate diversity from planting, allowing for catastrophic disease?” she asks. “It will be like the potato famine in Ireland. Diversity of nature is there for a reason. We need to take a seven-generation perspective when we allow technology to alter our old relationship with another being — seeds — and be mindful of those consequences.

“We receive all these gifts of foods from seeds but we have a responsibility to take care of them. When you do that work, it brings you back into gardening, cooking with these foods. People come together around food. There are beautiful teachings in seed work that are so profoundly healthy for ourselves and our communities and we’re not paying attention to them.”

About Diane Wilson

Diane Wilson, who grew up in Golden Valley, lives in a log cabin-style home on 10 acres near Shafer that she shares with her husband, Jim Denomie, and a rescue dog from Oklahoma. Denomie, a member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe, is an award-winning painter.

Their property includes a tamarack bog to which Wilson is very attached.

“The bog has a unique ecosystem,” she says. “To me, this is one of the remaining original habitats that goes way back in Minnesota’s history. Our role now is to be a steward for that.”

Wilson knew little about her Indian heritage when she was growing up and her mother, Lucille, didn’t talk about it much. Her Indian great-grandmother, Virginia LaCroix, lived on a hill overlooking what is now Mendota’s main street and is buried in the peaceful cemetery near St. Peter’s Catholic Church in Mendota. Her great-great grandmother, Rosalie Marpiya Mase, a full-blood Dakota woman, married a French-Canadian fur trader, Louis LaCroix.

In 1991, Wilson made the long, hot drive to the South Dakota boarding school where her mother was left for several years because her family couldn't afford to feed her. She would spend the next decade visiting other landscapes in Minnesota, Nebraska and South Dakota where her ancestors walked and owned land. That research led to "Spirit Car" (Borealis Books). When that book was published in 2006, Wilson was asked during a Pioneer Press interview whether she considered herself an Indian.

Her reply: "I consider myself Dakota but mixed blood, with two strong heritages."

Hear the author

- Diane Wilson will discuss "The Seed Keeper" at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 22, presented via Zoom by Marine Community Library at Marine on St. Croix. Information: MarineCommunityLibrary.org/events/.
- Wilson participates in the Loft's Wordplay festival at 7 p.m. May 8 in a conversation about Tending the Earth with Kazim Ali ("Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water") and Moheb Soliman ("Homes"). Presented in St. Catherine University's Critical Conversations portion of Wordplay. Information at: loft.org.

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**Mary
Ann**

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Mary Ann joined the Dispatch-Pioneer Press in 1961 when there were two papers. She has been a fashion writer, a women's columnist and the women's department editor who brought "society" pages into the 20th century. She was named book editor in 1983, just when the local literary community exploded. She has won the Minnesota Book Awards Kay Sexton Award, a Page One Award and YWCA Leader Lunch Award. She retired in 2001 and works part time. A graduate of Macalester College, she lives on St. Paul's West Side in a money-sucking Victorian house with assorted old animals.

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