

'My characters walk around in my dreams'

Rocky Mountain News books editor Patti Thorn chats with Margaret Coel, author of the popular Wind River Reservation mysteries, about her contribution to **A Dozen on Denver** and her writing life.

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Let's start with your Denver story. What attracted you to the 1860s?

When I was asked to write one of these stories, I said immediately, "Oh, I want the 1860s." That was Larimer Street for me because I've done a lot of research in that time period and it was such an exciting time. All the gold seekers coming here, the immigrants from the Eastern part of the country flooding into Denver, all the buildings going up, and you could hear the hammering and chiseling all during the day and night and the wagons clomping down the street . . . There was everything going on here, but mostly it was just a decade of hope. This was a new land, a new place. And I thought, "Oh, that's what I want to write about."

I loved your character for her feistiness. She's not the usual pioneer woman you see in movies, cowering while the men protect her. What gave you the idea for Mary Ann?

I've always been really fascinated with the idea of the women who came here and the wonderful journals they left. Some of them even wrote books. And what they talked about was the freedom they had here; they could just feel the shackles falling off them as they came across the plains. So I thought, "I'm going to write about a woman like that." And then I came across the fact that there was one safe in Denver in those very early days, and sometimes it just takes that little kernel, and you say, "OK, I can build a story around that."

Did people actually make a living the way she does with the safe — or was that something you imagined?

No, people did do that. They did make a living that way — not only in keeping the gold, but also a lot of people started grubstaking the prospectors, giving them enough money to live on until they found gold and then they got a piece of the (profits).

You write mysteries about the Arapahos of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. What drew you to that setting?

I became interested in the Arapaho people out of my interest in history. The first book that I wrote (*Chief Left Hand*) was about one of their great leaders here in the mid-1800s. That's what took me into the Arapaho world. The government happened to send them to a reservation in central Wyoming, so when I decided to write mystery novels, I thought, "I'll set the nov-

els on the reservation."

At the time, I was a big fan, still am, of Tony Hillerman, and I thought, "Maybe I can do what he did with the Navajos." . . . There's a lot going on on any Indian reservation — and certainly on the Wind River Reservation — that lends itself to mysteries. There's a lot of crime there, a lot of abuse, addiction, there are casinos. So there are all these things that lend themselves to mystery novels.

I read that you base your stories on actual crimes . . .

I get a lot of ideas for my stories out of the newspaper — I read three newspapers a day, including the *Rocky* — and I clip, clip, clip anything, *anything* that has to do with what's going on in Indian country. There's just so much happening. So many things I couldn't even make up.

Your books are lauded for their authenticity. How did you gain entree to the Wind River reservation?

I gained entree while I was researching *Chief Left Hand*. Another writer who had written about the Arapahos took me under her wing and introduced me to the people. What was lovely about it is, she was an elderly woman, she had a lot of gray hair, and they love and respect elderly people, and so they loved her. Here she brings me along, and that was a wonderful entree. And then I just kept going back.

You have said that your main characters came to you in a dream. Tell us about that.

My characters walk around in my dreams, no question about it (laughs). When I started looking for my main character, I wanted to write from an outsider's point of view, because I'm an outsider. I started looking around. Who are the outsiders? On a reservation, they are FBI agents, doctors, nurses, social workers, librarians — all very worthy professions — but I wasn't getting really excited, and then all of the sudden in my dreams (laughs) is this really tall, good-looking, red-headed Irishman walking around, and I said, "Well, who are you?" He said, "Well, I'm a priest." I said, "You're a priest? I did not set out to write about a priest."

But there's a Jesuit Mission on the reservation and it's been there almost from the beginning, and I thought, "Well, OK, this will work." So that's how Father John O'Malley came to be.

And then I wasn't really comfortable with the fact that I now had a white man





solving the murder and putting everything to rights. So I thought, "I want a strong Arapaho voice," and I wanted to write from the point of view of a woman, and here comes Vicky Holden walking into my dreams. (Laughs.)

Really? She also came to you in a dream?

She did, too. Oh yeah, she did, too.

Now you have a new mystery, *Blood Memory*, with a whole new set of characters. Your heroine is a Denver reporter. Obviously my first question is: for which newspaper?

I guess that's a question that readers are going to have to figure out (laughs). I wanted her to be with a major paper, and she does have her competitor on the other paper who's chasing after the same story, so there's that little bit of competition going on.

Somebody is trying to kill her, and at first she thinks it's because of something she's written. But very early in the book,

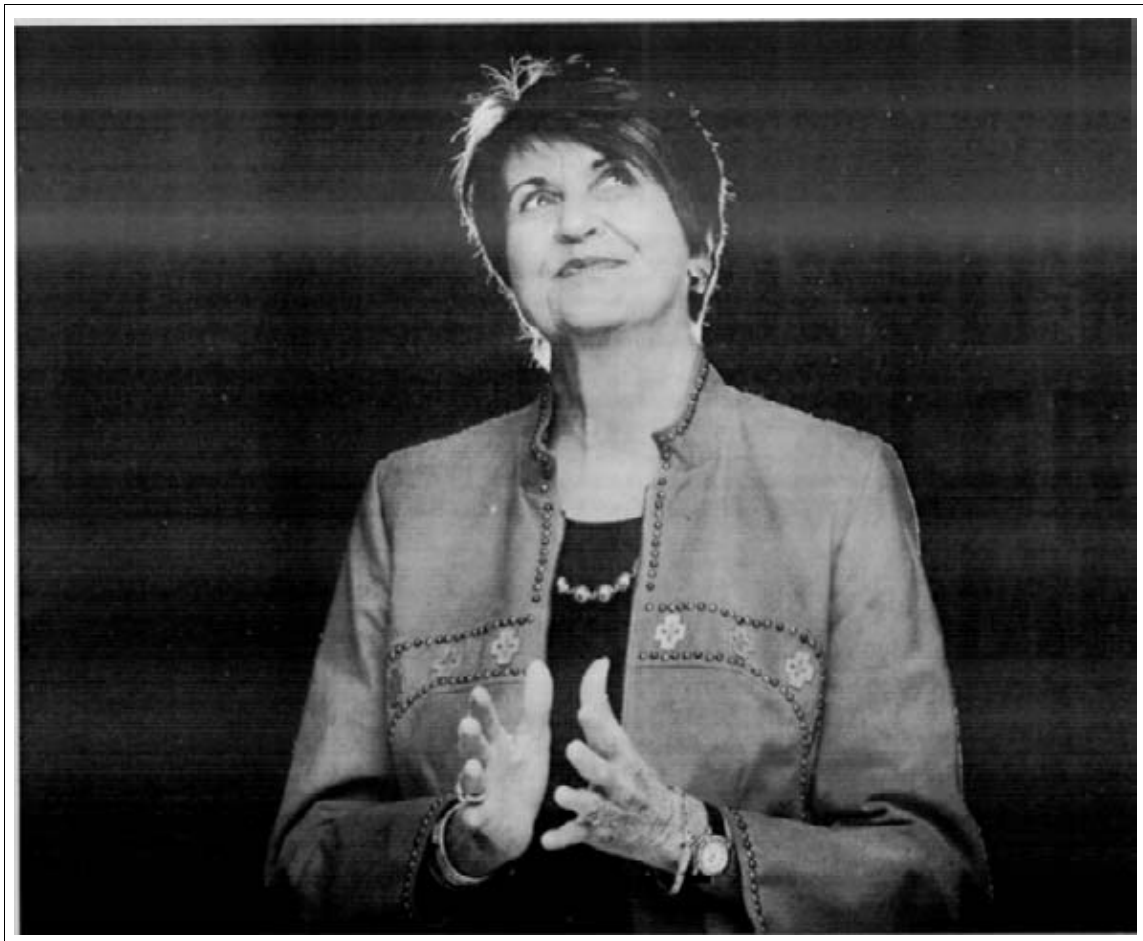
she realizes it's because of a story she's working on and she doesn't know which story that is.

It (the novel) deals with the Sand Creek Massacre of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho people and really is a takeoff on what happened in 2004 when those tribes tried to get some land out by DIA to build a casino. I thought, "This is interesting and, well, I can take off from that."

Can readers expect this to be a continuing series?

Well, I don't know. It's very interesting; the advance reviews are all calling it the first of a new series. I don't think my editor knew that (laughs). So it's really going to depend upon what my publisher thinks. But right now I'm writing another novel with Father John and Vicky, so I'm back with my old friends here for a while and that book will be out next year.

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A DOZEN ON DENVER: 1860s

Yellow roses

BY MARGARET COEL



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She had wondered how many days would pass before someone came to tell her what to do. It had required two weeks. Two weeks to the day that the horse-drawn wagon had carried the plank coffin out onto the brown bluffs that wrapped around Denver City. The men had dug a hole in the hard ground, lowered the coffin inside, and shoveled earth on top. She had planted a yellow rose on the mound. Then she had grasped Little Mary's hand and followed the small crowd of mourners back to the log cabin on Larimer Street that she and Jed had moved into only a month ago.

Now Tom Holt sat on the other side of the plank table that Jed had nailed and glued together. The coughing had been so bad he'd had to stop and catch his breath every few minutes. When she'd washed their clothes in the tub outside, she had found blood on the rag he used to cover his mouth.

"Have you thought on what you will do, Mrs. Salton?" Tom Holt had deep-set brown eyes and bushy eyebrows that pulled together. He set his black cap on the table alongside two porcelain cups with the other yellow rose bushes she had brought from St. Louis, sparing her own drinking water to keep them alive.

"You may call me Mary Ann," she said, trying to put him at ease. She gathered Little Mary onto her lap. Fitting that Tom Holt was the one delegated, she thought. She had half expected Mrs. Ericson with the stone-carved face and the gray hair tightened into a knot on top of her head. But it was Holt who had guided the wagon train safely across the plains into the gold region. Only two families in the train — the Ericsons and the Saltons — and all the rest single men bragging about how they would strike it rich, go back home and live like kings.

At first Jed had pitched a tent for the family on the banks of Cherry Creek. But within a few days, he had given one of the go-backs eighty dollars — nearly all of their funds — for the log cabin and its contents: An iron stove in the narrow room attached to the back and an iron safe painted the dull green that squatted in one corner of the front room. The only safe in Denver City, he'd said, as if that made the ugly thing more acceptable.

"Nothing else I've been thinking on," Mary Ann said. The door stood open, allowing the early October warmth to flow into the cabin. She was aware of the carts and wagons passing outside, the sounds of metal wheels grinding into the dirt street and the boots pounding the plank sidewalk. "I'm afraid I don't have any plans."

"In that case, Mrs. Salton — Mary Ann . . ." Holt cleared his throat, making a loud, strangling noise. "I expect to organize the last train for the states before winter sets in," he continued. "Men are coming down from the mountains every day. Tired of wading in the freezing creeks trying to pan a little gold. They're wanting to go back. It'll be best for you and the child to join the train."

"I see," Mary Ann said. They had passed trains of go-backs on the crossing, shoulders hunched in discouragement, faces set in bitter lines. She had watched them pick up some of the leavings along the trail — heavy pieces of furniture that folks had pulled out of the wagons for fear the oxen would collapse before they got to Denver City. Jed had set out her mother's mahogany desk and the organ he had loved to play. She had wondered if someone would pick them up. She had never thought she would be among the go-backs.

She brushed her lips against Little Mary's silky yellow hair. Such a docile child, small fists wrapped around a cloth doll. Not yet four years old, but paying such close attention to the man across from them, as if he had parted a veil and revealed her future. Madame Sylvester's school in St. Louis would mold her into a proper young lady who spoke French and knew how to make lace. She would grow into a pinched and placid woman, like Mary Ann's own mother, who took her pleasure every afternoon at the front window watching the world pass by.

"This was our dream, Jed's and mine," Mary Ann said. They had wanted something different for the child. A new land with new ways and possibilities. Even on the trail, the women had worked alongside the men, as if they were

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equus. She had loved striding beside the wagon, the swinging movement of her legs and arms, the blue sky all around, and Little Mary running ahead.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Holt was looking about the cabin, and she followed his gaze: the chinked log walls and swept dirt floor, the ugly safe claiming its space, the mattress in the opposite corner, and the barrel still packed

with sacks of flour, sugar, salt and hardtack, winter clothing, quilts and good china, the few things that had made the crossing. There had been no time to settle in when Jed was sick, and no reason afterward.

"The fact remains," Holt went on, "Denver City's a rough place, lacking in civilization. No place for a respectable woman and a little girl. Could be Indian trouble any day."

"The Indians seem friendly enough." Mary Ann had often seen Arapahos mingling with goldseekers on the streets, trading buffalo robes for tobacco, coffee and sugar. An Arapaho village stood at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte, a short distance away. The teepees shimmered white in the sun in sharp contrast to the brown dullness of the log cabins and frame buildings going up around Denver City.

"Friendly enough so far," Holt said. "But hostile Utes killed some prospectors up in the South Park a few weeks back. Indians could go on the warpath any time. And must I mention the desperados arriving every day?" He tossed his head toward the opened door. "Getting drunk on Taos Lightning, shooting up the place."

That was true, she thought. Some nights gunshots had shook the log walls and frayed the muslin coverings that passed for glass in the windows. Sick as he was, Jed had pulled her and Little Mary close and shielded them with his own body. But Jed was gone now.

"Best be ready in the next few days," Holt said, getting to his feet. His fingers pleated the brim of the black cap. "Wouldn't surprise me none if the Ericson family decided to leave. Old man didn't have any luck in Clear Creek. Might be they'd have room in their wagon for you and the child."

Mary Ann dipped her head close to Little Mary's and stared at the yellow rose bushes a moment. She had brought three. One was planted on Jed's grave. She meant to plant the others in front of the cabin before she had to go back.

The child slid off her lap as Mary Ann got to her feet. She thanked Tom Holt for his trouble and showed him to the door. A warm breeze stirred up little clouds of dust along the street. The bluffs in the distance had turned golden in the afternoon sun. On the horizon, the mountain peaks, streaked with snow, floated into the blue sky. She could hear Jed's voice: *There's possibilities here like we never could've dreamed.*

She watched Tom Holt make his way down the plank sidewalk, dodging groups of men milling about, until he had disappeared past the piles of wagons and carts. Then she tied on Little Mary's bonnet and put on her own.

"Where we goin', Mama?" The child looked up at her, blue eyes and pink face filled with hope. Oh, how Madame Sylvester would change all that.

"Out for a good walk," Mary Ann said, taking the child's hand and leading her outside. Wagons clattered past, wheels kicking out sprays of dust. The air was thick with the smells of horse droppings. The sun burned through her gingham dress. They made their way through the

Mary Ann tightened her hand around Little Mary's. What was there in such a place for a widow and child? How could she earn her keep when all she knew was French and lace making? . . . This was a place of goldseekers. How could she traipse into the mountains and pan gold with Little Mary to care for?

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groups of men standing about. Past two fine hotels, the Pacific House and the Broadwell House, past the drug store and the news and periodical shop, past saloons and billiard halls and a barber shop. Some of the men tipped their slouch hats. *The widow Salton.*

Mary Ann tightened her hand around Little Mary's. What was there in such a place for a widow and a child? How could she earn their keep when all she knew was French and lace making? She might start a school, except there was only a handful of children in town and few families. She might take in laundry and sewing, she supposed, but that would bring only a small pittance. This was a place of goldseekers. How could she traipse into the mountains and pan gold with Little Mary to care for?

They turned into the confectionary shop. Mary Ann

found two pennies in her skirt pocket, and Little Mary selected a peppermint stick, which she sucked loudly as they continued down Larimer, weaving through the knots of men. Wagons clanked past, and sounds of laughter erupted from the saloon in Apollo Hall. Several men were lined up in front of the Eldorado eating house on the corner. Rough and uncivilized, Tom Holt had said, and yet Denver City seemed a place of energy and possibility. They would walk every day, Mary Ann decided, until they had to leave. She would memorize every detail of Larimer Street. She never wanted to forget.

They reached the dry bed of Cherry Creek and were about to start back when Mary Ann saw what looked like a crowd of prospectors bunched in front of the two-story plank building that stood in the middle of the creek bed. A sign that said ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS stretched across the top of the peaked roof. Wagons were rolling in, prospectors jumping out and joining the crowd. Each man gripped a drawstring, canvas bag.

She walked the child a little way down E Street until she was close enough to make out the sign on the side of the building: ASSAY OFFICE, Byers & Shermer. In an instant she understood why Jed had paid out so much of their funds for the cabin. Too ill to follow the creeks into the mountains panning for gold, he had searched for another way to earn their living. Then he'd met the go-back looking for somebody to take the cabin and its contents off his hands, and in the cabin was a safe.

She started back, pulling Little Mary along, something opening up inside her, like a rose turning to the sun. "We must hurry," she told the child. Little Mary started skipping ahead, as if she, too, sensed a new possi-

bility.

Inside the cabin, she dropped to her knees in front of the dull green safe. The door held fast. Somehow she would have to work out the combination. She leaned in close, the way she'd watched Papa open the safe in the back room of his store countless times. She turned the knob slowly, listening for the tiny clicking sound. Ah, there it was.

She kept turning the knob. Another sound, then another. Still the door remained locked. She sat back on her heels, stung by the sharp sense of defeat, and closed her eyes a moment. She could almost feel the bounce of the wagon and smell the perspiration pouring off the oxen. They would be going back to the past, when the future was here. She glanced around at Little Mary, dancing the doll across the table top, her yellow hair flowing freely over her shoulders.

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She got to her feet and stepped over to the small chest of Jed's things that she kept beside the mattress. Folded inside was Jed's second best shirt, the one he wore every day. She had seen that he wore his best shirt for burial. She set the shirt and a few other clothing items on the mattress and lifted out a mahogany box. She opened the lid and stared at Jed's revolver, memories tumbling through her head. They had walked along the bed of Cherry Creek a half mile or so from town, she and Jed and Little Mary, and Jed coughing so bad. He had placed the revolver in her hand. "You must learn to shoot," he'd said. "Ladies here must know such things."

She set the mahogany box to one side and drew out the canvas-backed ledgerbook. The lined pages contained the accounts of their life together, recorded in Jed's precise handwriting. The pay he had earned in Papa's store, the costs of household items and food. The last entry was September 16, 1860. \$80. Log cabin and contents.

Beneath the entry was a series of numbers separated by dashes. She went back to the safe and turned the knob according to the numbers. The door sprung open. She clasped the ledgerbook to her chest, conscious of the salty tears stinging her eyes. "Thank you, Jed," she whispered.

It didn't take long — not more than twenty minutes, she reckoned — to tear four empty pages from the ledgerbook into narrow strips, the size of calling cards back in St. Louis. On each strip, she copied the same words with a black pencil:

**KEEP YOUR GOLD SAFE!
THE ONLY SAFE IN DENVER CITY**
Located on Larimer Street
Proprietor: Mary Ann Salton

She put the strips of paper in her pocket and tied Little Mary's bonnet under her chin again. "We're going for another walk," she said, guiding the child into the street. Little Mary skipped ahead, trailing her doll along the sidewalk, giggling in the afternoon sun.

Mary Ann recognized Tom Holt's footsteps on the sidewalk before she opened the door. Outside the yellow rose bushes were beginning to stand tall. Holt studied them a moment before he removed his cap and stepped inside.

"What's all this?" he said, looking about the cabin. She had hammered pegs into the log walls and hung the clothing that had been in the bottom of the barrel. A good linen cloth covered the table, and another linen cloth draped the barrel. The wood carton she'd found on the street made a satisfactory cabinet for the good china. She had made another doll from scraps of fabric in the barrel, but Little Mary seemed happier running and playing on the sidewalk. The child had insisted upon helping her plant the roses.

"We've been settling in," she said.

"Settling in? The wagon train leaves day after tomorrow. I must warn you, there's snow in the mountains. Winter is coming soon. Won't be any other trains going back. Mrs. Ericson has been kind enough to make room for you and the child, but you must leave your belongings behind."

"I thank you for your trouble," Mary Ann said, "but we won't be going back. This is our home now."

"Heard about your scheme, renting space in that safe of yours." Holt nodded toward the corner of the room occupied by the iron safe. The bushy eyebrows pulled together. "Don't see how that's gonna bring in enough to keep you alive."

"I'll be using some of my earnings to grubstake the most reputable clients," she said. "I will have a share in whatever gold they find. Other clients are wanting to join me in the investments, and I will see even larger profits for putting the ventures together. There are great possibilities in this place, Mr. Holt. Little Mary and I would be sorry to leave them behind."

Holt let out a loud guffaw. "At the mercy of the flotsam and jetsam out there?" He stepped sideways and waved through the opened door at the passing wagons, the knots of men sauntering along the sidewalk. "Mr. Holt, "

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... of men searching along the sidewalk. "They'll burst in here and rob you blind."

Mary Ann moved toward the barrel, lifted the linen cloth and brought out Jed's revolver. The metal felt cold in her hand, but not uncomfortable. "I hardly think that will be a matter of concern," she said.

■ **Margaret Coel** is the author of 13 novels in the Wind River mystery series and of five nonfiction books, including *Chief Left Hand*. Her latest novel is *Blood Memory*, set in Denver. She is a four-time winner of the Colorado Book Award, and recipient of the Women Writing the West's Willa Award and the Left Coast Crime Conference's Rocky Award for Best Mystery Novel set in the West. Her Web site is margaretcoel.com.

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About the stories

A Dozen on Denver celebrates the 150th anniversaries of Denver and the Rocky Mountain News, and features 11 original stories from local authors commissioned by the Rocky. Each author was asked to choose a different decade of the city's history, mention Larimer Street at least once in the story and keep the piece to 2,500 words. We'll run a new story every Tuesday.

■ To follow the series online and hear an audio version of each story, go to RockyMountainNews.com/extras.

■ Next week: Joanne Greenberg

