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PRESS

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The Whip: New Novel Inspired by a True Story, Captures the
Life of Charley Parkhurst, a Woman Who Spent Thirty Years
Passing as a Man in the Old West

In January, 1880, the *New York Times* ran an obituary for Charley Darkey Parkhurst, a one-eyed, tobacco-spitting gold-rush era Wells Fargo driver, one of the most celebrated of the famous California stage coach drivers. “It was an honor . . . to occupy the spare end of the driver’s seat when the fearless Charley Parkhurst held the reins of a four or six in hand,” said the *Times*. Everybody knew Charley’s skills as a driver and outlaw killer. What they didn’t know was that Parkhurst was really a woman. “There may be a strange history that to the novelist would be a source of inspiration,” concluded the obituary in her hometown paper, the *Watsonville Pajaronian*, in reference to the “cause that led this woman to exist so many years in such strange guise.”

132 years later, author Karen Kondazian has taken up the challenge in a new novel, *The Whip*, a beautifully written saga of the Old West—an alternately awe-inspiring and heartbreaking story—that lays bare, so to speak, the events that led her to live as a man.

“Parkhurst is a fascinating character,” says Kondazian, who when not writing “cracking good stor(ies) with more twists and turns than a

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wagon trail through the mountains,” is an award-winning actress who’s appeared in film, TV, and on the stage. “Life in the 19th century was far from easy. Pioneer women were strong, hardy types. But even by those standards, the life Charley Parkhurst chose was hard, dangerous, and requiring of enormous skills. Few men could do the job, no less a woman.” Indeed, “whips,” as these early drivers were known, were like today’s Top Gun fighter jocks. The sleek new Wells Fargo Concord Stage Coach—with someone like Charley on top—could get you from San Juan Bautista to “Frisco” in a matter of a day or so, with some time out for battling to the death with murderous outlaws. “Men” like Charley—fearless and capable—who could get you there in one piece despite all the dangers, were held in high regard. By men and women alike.

Kondazian demonstrates a considerable talent in the way she brings the heart and soul of this world vividly into existence. Her rich, evocative writing adds levels of pleasure to what would already be a satisfyingly good story even without the author’s artful touch.

The First Woman to Vote in America in 1868

Parkhurst, who died in 1879 of tongue cancer (presumably a result of prodigious amounts of cigars and chewing tobacco), is buried in Watsonville, California. Raised in an east coast orphanage, she made her way out west to take advantage of her talent with horses. The roles for women in those days were frighteningly narrow. Assuming command of a Wells Fargo Stage Coach wasn’t one of them.

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Reading *The Whip* (the term refers to the elite of the elite in stage coach driving) makes thinking about the rigidity of gender roles almost

inevitable. Men could have dreams, not women. Soft expectations about soft womanhood have probably deprived us of numerous achievements over the years. Parkhurst got to vote—for General Grant—fifty-two years before any other woman. But she had no political axe to grind—and neither does *The Whip*. This is a deeply personal story—as rich with insight as it is with adventure--about a woman out for revenge for the killing of her husband and child. That she ended up becoming one of the era's coolest male role models makes Kondazian's auspicious debut novel all the more fun.

For more information, please visit

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIMr48tm0dU> and
<http://www.thewhipnovel.com>

About the Author

Karen Kondazian's career began at the age of eight when she was chosen to be one of the infamous children on Art Linkletter's *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. The opportunity to miss school during tapings was all it took for Karen to abandon her life's goal of becoming a CIA spy and focus on acting.

She completed her schooling at The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA), and The University of Vienna, after which she began her theater career in New York. Her first professional work was in the award winning production of Michael Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Women* at the Circle in the Square Theatre.

Her theater career has included starring opposite Ed Harris in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Richard Chamberlain in *Richard II* (dir. Jonathan Miller), Stacy Keach in *Hamlet*, (dir. Gordon Davidson) Ray Stricklyn in *Vieux Carre* (West Coast Premiere-Beverly Hills Playhouse). She also starred in Eduardo Machado's off-Broadway play, *Broken Eggs* (dir. James Hammerstein), and *Kissing Fidel*.

She won the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Actress in *The Rose Tattoo*, (in which her work as actor and producer so impressed Tennessee Williams that they became friends and he gave her carte blanche to produce any of his work in his lifetime).

Other awards and nominations include Ovation, Drama Critics Circle, LA Weekly and Garlands for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley Rep.) Orpheus Descending (Fountain Theatre), *Night of the Iguana* (Old Globe, dir. Jack O'Brien) *Lady House Blues*, and *Freedomland* (South Coast Rep, dir.

David Emmes), *Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (Fountain Theatre), and *Master Class* (Odyssey Theatre, dir. Simon Levy).

She has appeared as a series regular lead in CBS's *Shannon* and guest starred in over 50 television shows and films including, TNT's *James Dean* with James Franco (dir. Mark Rydell) *NYPD Blue*, *Frasier*, and *Yes Giorgio* with Luciano Pavarotti.

She is a lifetime member of the Actors Studio, a member of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and of Women in Film. She occasionally teaches at the Lee Strasberg School of Theater and Film in Hollywood.

Karen is the author of the best-selling book *The Actors Encyclopedia of Casting Directors*. Her longtime column, "Sculpting Your Own Career," appeared in *BackStage*.

She currently resides in Los Angeles, California.

Praise for *The Whip*

Charley Parkhurst (1812-79) was one of the finest stage coach drivers Wells Fargo had during the dangerous gold rush days. But there's one thing Wells Fargo never knew about Charley: Charlotte was a woman. In her fiction debut, actress Kondazian dares to imagine the life such a dedicated disguise artist might have lived. . . . *This quick-paced, wily tale is a fascinating blend of both fact and fiction that is sure to engage Western and historical fiction fans and readers who enjoyed Gerald Kolpan's Etta.*

—**Library Journal**

*An astonishing novel . . . an amazing tale, about a strong, passionate and determined woman, a real-life heroine who lived her life as one tough hombre--one tough *male* hombre--in the Old West. . . . It's a wonderful read. Take it from someone who's had firsthand experience with great art exploring the human spirit in a Western setting: Karen Kondazian's *The Whip* is just that. This is a story that cries out through its adventurous surroundings a call from deep in the human heart, a call for understanding, for love, for identity and it does so through the skill of a magnificent writer. (It also cries out to be a movie. It's that rich, visual, and dramatic.)*

—**Jim Beaver, star of HBO's *Deadwood* and author of *Life's That Way***

You won't know what *The Whip* means until you read this *fascinating book*. It's a piece of the Old West, a part of America's past, *told with amazing authenticity*.

—**Thomas Fleming, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Conquerors of the Sky***

Karen Kondazian's *The Whip* is a *crackling good story with more twists and turns than a wagon trail through the mountains*. Kondazian takes what could have been a

hackneyed adventure tale of Charley Parkhurst's gender-shifting revenge and imbues it with surprising tenderness and yearning.

—**Edward Achorn, Pulitzer Prize finalist** and author of *Fifty-nine in '84*

Like a nugget of gold pulled from the riffles is Karen Kondazian's debut novel The Whip. . . . It may be a book for the times. . . .

We can all use a little cowboy wisdom about now and Charley Parkhurst may just be the gal to bring it. . . . *The Whip, a thrilling and soul-searching read*, raises questions about revenge and forgiveness as she takes the reader along dusty trails. Above all, *this novel captures brilliantly the zeitgeist of the stagecoach era.*

—**Art Kusnetz, San Francisco Books and Travel Magazine**

One thing I really like about this job is that I get to discover promising new talent far outside of the world of agents, New York publishers, academics, and establishment book reviewers.

Karen Kondazian's debut novel, *The Whip*, is in that category. *Her well-written work, based on a true story, displays all the confidence of a seasoned novelist. I didn't detect one false note. . . .*

Try on *The Whip*. . . . I think you will get as caught up in it as I was. *This is classic Americana.*

—**Fred Beauford, New World Review**

Compelling historical fiction that reveals the surprising places revenge can lead to. . . . *Karen Kondazian has created a memorable character in Charley Parkhurst, stagecoach driver extraordinaire. . . . An insightful psychological study.*

—**Peter Robinson, reviewer for KALW, San Francisco's NPR network**

The Whip is one of the best books I've read in a long time . . . a real page turner. I didn't want it to end and it stayed with me long after I put it down. The experience reminded me of reading Lonesome Dove---The story is unusual complicated, fast-paced and beautifully written. It's quite simply, epic. I can't wait for the movie version!

—**Elise Ballard, author of Epiphany**

Suggested questions for interviewers

1. How did you first hear of Charley Parkhurst?
2. Which parts of the story are fictionalized? Did Parkhurst have a baby with an ex-slave?
3. Acting and writing require two different skill sets. Acting is collaborative; writing is solitary. How do you view the two processes?

4. Were you interested in the Old West before learning of Charley?
5. It's harder for a man to pass for a woman than the other way around.
Why do you think that is?