

## A CONVERSATION WITH MARY LETHERT WINGERD

### What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

The early history of the land that became Minnesota has too long been neglected. For two hundred years before Minnesota became a state, Native people (Dakotas and Ojibwes) and Europeans/Euro-Americans lived and worked together here; they inter-married and created a hybrid culture that was neither fully Indian nor European. I thought that the creation and later destruction of this world was an important missing piece of our history.

### What research did you undertake in writing *North Country*?

Because *North Country* covers a period of more than two hundred years, I relied on existing scholarship as well as archival research. Specialists in Native American history and the history of the fur trade were particularly important in helping me weave all the strands of the story together.

### What do you like most about the book?

What I most appreciate is the loving care that the University of Minnesota Press lavished on the book's production,

especially the wonderful color plates that help bring the period to life. What I like most about my narrative are the historical characters

**"After becoming a historian and an academic, I was determined to write scholarly history in a way that was engaging and accessible to interested readers who were not academics."**

that I came to know like old friends (or foes) during the writing process.

### What was your journey to becoming a published author?

From the time I learned to read, I loved to write stories and was fascinated by the past. I was particularly entranced by Maude Hart Lovelace's Betsy-Tacy series that was set in turn-of-the-century Mankato. After becoming a historian and an academic, I was determined to write scholarly history in a way that was engaging and accessible to interested readers who were not academics.

### How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

I believe that every place has fascinating stories to be uncovered if you ask the right questions. But American historians have largely ignored the old Northwest and Upper Great Lakes region, which I think are critical to understanding American history. Besides, I am a fifth-generation Saint Paulite and to my mind there is no place like Minnesota!

### How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

I love to read, especially fiction. I think reading good fiction helps keep academics like me from falling into the dreaded (and dreadful) academ-ese that sadly made generations of students decide that history was boring and dull. So not true! History is exciting and full of intrigue and passion. Try it and see for yourself.

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23RD ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

**Minnesota Winner**

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## NORTH COUNTRY

THE MAKING OF MINNESOTA



MARY LETHERT WINGERD

***North Country: The Making of Minnesota***

by Mary Lethert Wingerd

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

# North Country



## SUMMARY

This comprehensive text explains how the land the Dakota named *Mini Sota Makoce* became the State of Minnesota. Moving from the earliest years of contact between Europeans and the indigenous peoples of the western Great Lakes region to the era of French and British influence during the fur trade and beyond, Mary Lethert Wingerd charts how for two centuries Native people and Europeans in the region maintained a hesitant, largely mutually beneficial relationship. This racially hybridized society was a meeting point for cultural and economic exchange until the western expansion of American capitalism and violation of treaties by the U.S. government during the 1850s wore sharply at this tremulous bond.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Minnesota history change when we situate Native people at the center rather than on the periphery of the story?
2. Definitions of race change quite markedly with the coming of settlement. What does this suggest about concepts of racial difference and hierarchies?
3. Do you think it would have been possible for Minnesota to have evolved differently? Could Indians and whites have crafted a society where they lived together as equals?
4. Which section of *North Country* did you find most compelling?
5. What can the history of Minnesota tell us about the larger American story?
6. The sesquicentennial of the 1862 Dakota Conflict is coming up in 2012. How should that event be commemorated?

7. How do the illustrations and graphics affect your reading experience?
8. How does this book fit into the modern relationship between Native Americans and European Americans in Minnesota?
9. How does *North Country* present a new angle on a long-standing issue?
10. If you wrote a book on an aspect of Minnesota history, what topic would you choose?

## ABOUT MARY LETHERT WINGERD

Mary Lethert Wingerd is associate professor of history at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minnesota. She is the author of *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul*.



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