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Review of *A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captivities in the West, 1830-1885* By Gregory and Susan Michno

Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola
University of Arkansas-Little Rock

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captives and captivities mostly taken from the narratives themselves. The book also includes maps, illustrations, and various appendices and tables.

The inflammatory title, *A Fate Worse Than Death*, is not ironic. In their introduction, the authors state that “the majority” of captivity narratives were “personal accounts of the horrors of captivity” for the women and children on which the book focuses. They continue, “The stories are replete with details of killing, mutilation, abuse, and rape. There is no particular joy in relating what the captives experienced, but there is a need for it.” Lest readers have not fully understood their agenda, the Michnos restate their reactionary thesis at the end of the book: “An Indian captive in the American West was almost assured of a horrible ordeal, and for many women it was truly a fate worse than death.” Unfortunately, it sounds as if the Michnos have uncritically absorbed the rhetoric of the preselected nineteenth-century texts they have researched.

The book is filled with biased and erroneous assumptions, but I have room to comment on only one. It concerns the authors’ conviction that captivity narratives are factual. For example, if a woman says she was abused or raped, they think it must have happened. They do not seem to realize that captivity narratives are extremely complex documents: many were ghostwritten, edited, even plagiarized, so that the information inside is very unreliable. Fact masquerades as fiction, fiction as fact. Further, the purported author of an account is not necessarily the real author; assuming therefore that descriptions of violence are what a captive experienced is exceedingly problematic. Let me take an example from my own work on the captivity narratives of the 1862 Dakota War.

Mary Schwandt was a teenager when she was captured. The first version of her story, which appeared in Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch’s heavily editorialized tome *A History of the Great Massacre* (1864), describes several Dakota “fiends” who “took me out by force, to an unoccupied tepee, near the house, and perpetrated the most horrible and nameless

A Fate Worse Than Death: Indian Captivities in the West, 1830-1885. By Gregory and Susan Michno. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Press, 2007. xv + 527 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

The field of captivity narrative studies has been expanding and evolving since the early 1990s. Thirty academic books have appeared since then, including individual editions, anthologies of narratives, studies of individual captives, and critical and historical monographs. Two aspects of Gregory and Susan Michno’s volume contribute to captivity narrative studies in a very limited way: first, it considers the still underexamined captivity narratives from the West and Midwest; and second, like a biographical dictionary, it provides basic information about unfamiliar

outrages upon my person. These outrages were repeated, at different times during my captivity." At this point, a textual comment set off typographically from the narrative reads, "The details of this poor girl's awful treatment, in our possession, are too revolting for publication.—EDITORS." When Schwandt retold her story in later life, as she did many times, there was no mention of rape. Instead, she focused on the kindness of her Dakota protector, a woman named Snana (Maggie Brass). Should readers automatically assume that the first version is true and that the first-person narration there is unmediated by the editors? I think not. Bryant and Murch's *History* played an important role in anti-Indian propaganda, and scholars now know that almost all the outrageous claims of rape by Indians made right after the Dakota War were untrue.

The publication of *A Fate Worse Than Death* only makes it more important that other scholars examine Indian captivity narratives in the West and produce a more historically, culturally, and critically nuanced book about them.

KATHRYN ZABELLE DEROUNIAN-STODOLA
Department of English
University of Arkansas at Little Rock