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https://www.dallasnews.com/arts-entertainment/books/2023/11/02/elizabeth-crooks-new-novel-taps-into-texas-roots-brings-back-a-favorite-character/

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT > BOOKS

Elizabeth Crook's new novel taps into Texas history, brings back a favorite character

Set in the 1860s, 'The Madstone' features an epic journey across the Lone Star State.



Austin-based author Elizabeth Crook's sixth novel, "The Madstone," is due out Nov. 7. (Charla Wood)

By [Shawna Seed](#)
5:00 AM on Nov 2, 2023 CDT

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Elizabeth Crook's novel *The Madstone* is the tale of an epic journey across Texas in 1868. The author brings back Benjamin Shreve, the narrator of 2018's *The Which Way Tree*, and sends him on a trip that will change his life. He encounters bandits, a woman fleeing an abusive marriage, a violent thunderstorm and a rabid animal — among other challenges. We caught up with Crook, a native Texan and Austin resident, to talk about her sixth novel, writing about the West and her upcoming honor from the Texas Book Festival.

What's the inspiration for the title?

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Madstones are stone-like objects, often porous and of various colors, found in the bellies of ruminant animals and once believed to have healing powers. Before rabies vaccines, these stones were traditionally soaked in milk and applied to the bite of a rabid animal, and if they appeared to adhere to the wound in any way, or to turn a greenish color, then they were thought to have been successful in drawing out the toxins. The most powerful madstones were said to come from the bellies of deer, particularly albino deer, and these were treasured and passed down in families, often kept locked up in a church or other place for safekeeping. Of course, they had no real medicinal or magical abilities, but the stones offered hope — and hope, in the face of death from rabies, was all there was. A madstone plays an important role in my story.

What made you decide to write about Benjamin Shreve again?

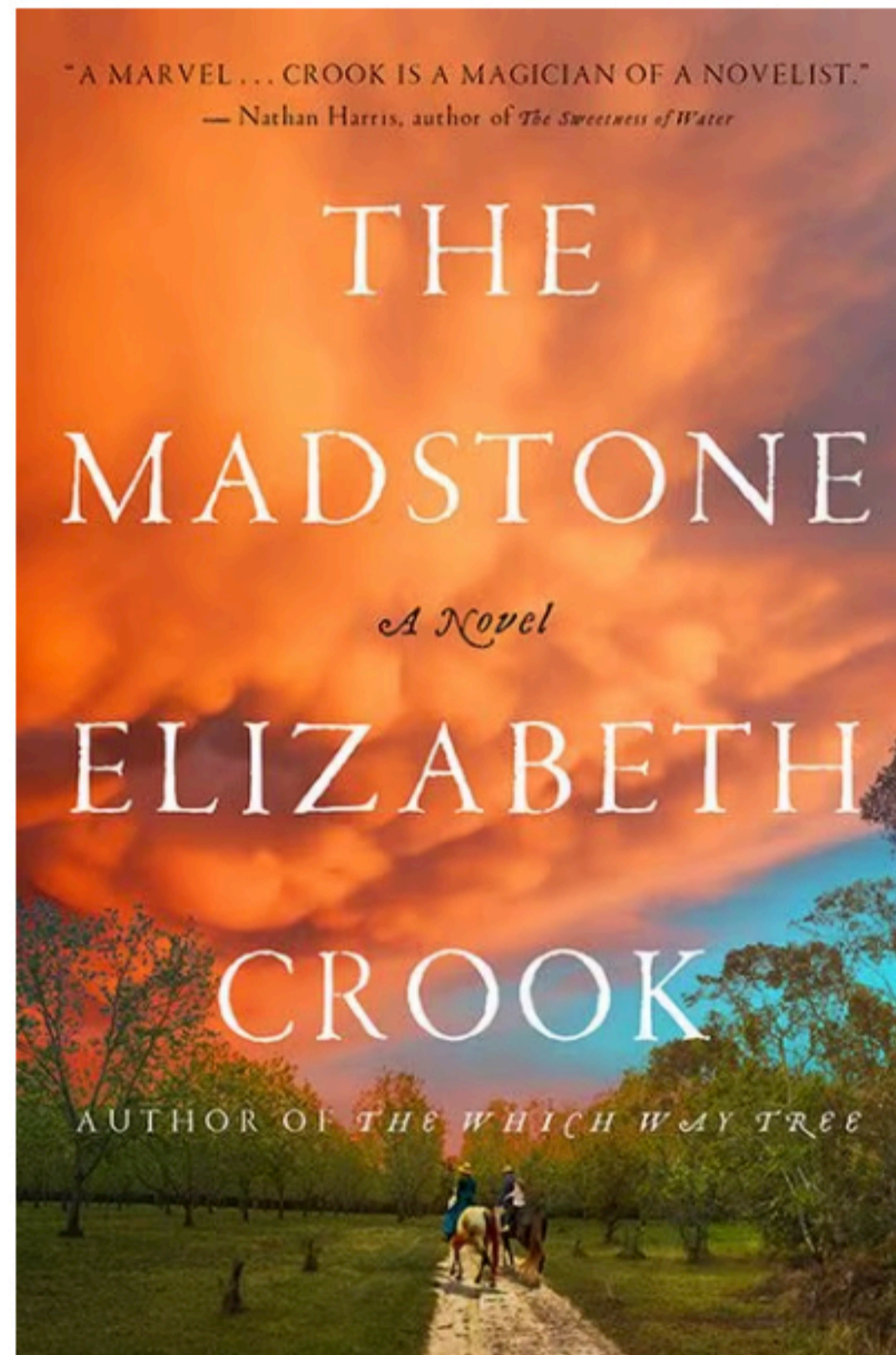
I just missed him. I've made up a lot of characters in my novels, and I've loved even the terrible ones because there's an intimacy in determining a character's every word and every move. But Benjamin remains my all-time favorite. So after I finished *The Which Way Tree*, I decided to age him up a couple of years and allow him another adventure and the opportunity for a first love. I should note that *The Which Way Tree* and *The Madstone* are stand-alone novels, independent of each other except for sharing Benjamin as a narrator. But if you like one, you'll probably like the other.

The novel feels like a classic Western, and yet it deals with issues that seem very contemporary — especially violence against women and racial minorities. Did you set out to look at the 1860s through a 2020s lens?

I try very hard to be true to the times I write about. I know Texas. I live in Austin and grew up down the road in San Marcos. I know all the places along the route of the story, but trying to imagine what those places were like 155 years ago, and digging through sources to find out was an extensive treasure hunt. I did a lot of research to make sure the characters were people of their own times and with their own sensibilities. So no, I wasn't trying to look at the era through a contemporary lens, but if it feels that way, I suppose some things haven't changed all that much.

What's the most challenging aspect of researching and writing a historical novel?

Creating the tale itself. There's the research, which is fun, and then imagining the characters, also fun, and not very difficult, as they often seem to invent themselves as the tale moves along. But creating the tale itself is a thorny process. I often struggle with what's going to happen on the next page, or over the next hill. This wasn't as much of an issue with *The Madstone* as it's been in previous books, because once I set my characters on the road, things just started to happen. And a lot does happen in the novel.



"The Madstone," the sixth novel by Elizabeth Crook, is the tale of an epic journey across Texas in 1868. (Little, Brown and Co.)

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MEMBER EXCLUSIVE

You're receiving the 2023 Texas Writer Award at the Texas Book Festival in November. Congratulations! Who are your quintessential Texas writers?

For me, it was always John Graves, Fred Gipson, Katherine Anne Porter, Larry McMurtry, Bill Wittliff and Stephen Harrigan — all truly great writers. In recent years, I've come to know and admire Attica Locke, Sergio Troncoso and John Phillip Santos, who provide new perspectives and expand the traditional definition of a quintessential Texas writer.

What's next for you?

A book tour. An opportunity to meet readers, which is always very meaningful to me. But as far as my next book? I wish I knew. I'm not one of those writers with a thousand ideas, so I'm stalled for a bit. I won't be stalled forever.

The Madstone

By Elizabeth Crook

(Little, Brown and Co.; 288 pages; \$29; due out Nov. 7)

Texas Book Festival

Elizabeth Crook will receive the Texas Writer Award at the Texas Book Festival, held Nov. 11-12 in and around the state Capitol in Austin. Most events are free. Tickets are required to attend sessions with Michael Cunningham, Roxane Gay and Stacey Abrams. Other authors scheduled to appear include Ann Patchett, Abraham Verghese, Paulette Jiles and S.A. Cosby. For more information about the festival, including a full list of authors, go to texasbookfestival.org.



[Shawna Seed](#), Special Contributor. Shawna Seed is the author of two novels, *Identity* and *Not in Time*. A resident of Pagosa Springs, Colo., she lived in Texas for more than 25 years.

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