



At the Edge of the Orchard, by Tracy Chevalier
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, February 2017

Tracy Chevalier had established herself as a first-rate historical fiction writer with her blockbuster novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, based on Dutch master Vermeer's iconic painting. Now, in *At the Edge of the Orchard*, Ms. Chevalier turns her attention to rugged 19th century America.

Leaving a comfortable life in Connecticut, John Goodenough moved his family to northwest Ohio in the 1830s. He is determined to grow a successful apple orchard. But circumstances forced him to settle on the edge of the Black Swamp, an unfavorable place for an orchard. Undeterred, John stubbornly plants his beloved Golden Pippin apples. He favors those sweet apples known as "eaters," and he "craved them more than whiskey or tobacco or coffee or sex." However, his cantankerous wife Sadie prefers growing sour apples—"spitters"—that can be made into cider or applejack, to which she is addicted.

Ms. Chevalier's scholarship is apparent; *At the Edge of the Orchard* is rich with period details. Once again, the author interjects a true-life character into her novel. John Chapman, known in children's lore as Johnny Appleseed, makes an appearance. He supplies the Goodenoughs with seeds and saplings, as well as life-affirming wisdom, while the family struggles to make a go of their orchard. Ms. Chevalier's prose perfectly captures the raw, unforgiving landscape of the Black Swamp.

After the family's latest hardship, Robert, the youngest son, strikes out on his own for the West. The story's narrative turns to his wanderings which take him all the way to California during the Gold Rush. His travels are described in a series of letters to his siblings. Robert is naturally drawn to the land, as were his parents. Missing the apple orchard of his Ohio home, he seeks comfort in the redwood and sequoia groves. Instead of prospecting for gold, Robert finds work collecting seedlings for a British naturalist who sends the plants to English gardens.

In essence, *At the Edge of the Orchard* is comprised of two separate stories: the Goodenoughs' apple-orchard travails in the Black Swamp and Robert's west coast wanderings. The change in action in the middle of the book may seem abrupt and a bit jarring. However, each half successfully paints a vivid and memorable portrait of American pioneers.