

*Tobacco Wars*

by Paul Seesequasis

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Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

In this slim volume, Paul Seesequasis juxtaposes a modern urban culture of homelessness, strip joints, clubs, bouncers, and porn theatres with First Nations mythology and imagined encounters of real people to turn history upside down and backwards. The novella's style is perfect for readers (like me) with attention deficit issues. As easily and as quickly as we flick channels, every second or third page the point of view switches, from that of Bear Woman to Wolverine to John Rolfe, Pocahontas, Ben Jonson, and others. Sometimes it seems hallucinogenic – *Pirates of the Caribbean* pop culture meets a Jacobean masque. However, the collected vignettes create a collage of kaleidoscopic montages, challenging readers to see or create connections.

*Tobacco Wars* also sends readers to check “the facts.” Yes, John Rolfe (1585–1622) did bring in better seed from Spanish territory and establish the tobacco industry in Virginia's Jamestown colony. Yes, he did marry Pocahontas (1595–1617), a daughter of the Algonquin-speaking King Powhatan, after she was captured for ransom but chose to assimilate, to convert to Christianity and not return to her people. Yes, the couple did go on a nine-month promotional tour to London in 1616. (Paul Seesequasis, who says that Pocahontas saw Rolfe as her ticket to ride, has him die on the trip over. [28]) Yes, Pocahontas and her entourage did attend a Ben Jonson masque where she was introduced to King James I. I haven't found evidence of interactions with Jonson (1572–1637), or of Jonson travelling anywhere other than Scotland after 1616. In fact, Pocahontas took ill as she was leaving England and died in Gravesend, in John Rolfe's arms, just as the ship heading home to America was about to leave the Thames for the high seas. In Seesequasis's version, Pocahontas lives and Jonson follows her home to America. John Smith (1580–1631), real-life former leader from Jamestown and Pocahontas's adopted relative, does not appear in *Tobacco Wars*, although Jonson's encounters with pirates, the shipwreck, the capture, parallel some of Smith's adventures.

Seesequasis presents America as a natural paradise, “a land untouched by evil” (70), which eventually “turns on” (104) Jonson. As a young bride, Pocahontas fears for the future: “It is as if a new day has dawned . . . it perhaps lessens us, a little more each day” (22). But her husband reassures her with a pat “You worry too much, my dear” (22). Shown through Pocahontas's eyes, the London of 1616 is rat- and disease-infested, gender-segregated, rife with prostitution, panhandlers, and poverty. Bears are chained and baited to entertain the crowds. Artists brag about the men they have killed and compete at putting down each other and ridiculing each other's work.

When the infatuated Jonson is rescued in the New World: “And then water is put to his parched lips and a blanket wrapped around him, and then he is gently picked up on the back of a strong savage and carried to his salvation” (104). Jonson finally mates with his idol and the penetration results in a pregnancy. Before Pocahontas abandons him to return to London with her precious commodity, Jonson has learned to feel fear: “He is no Indian . . . he is a fool, a clown, a buffoon, an idiot lost in paradise” (92). His desire to convert is a desire to be “truly human” (97). He resolves to write a New World masque to celebrate “the arts of life” (87). *Tobacco Wars* is not so much about the

noble savage, or the ignoble colonizer, or the lying imperialist, as it is about the noble wilderness in which the sacred survives. Mimicking the child prostitutes in London (37), the Trickster in the Wild fantasizes a return to virginity, to Virginia, to virgin forest.

So there is much tongue in the many cheeks and folds of this story. If some things make you queasy – bodily functions, sexuality, eroticism, child abuse, sly lazy tricksters – maybe you should pass. Stay home. Don't look. But if you're challenged by games and puzzles, go for it. Take a trip with the homeless Bear Woman into her numinous world, down the mighty rivers, around the thousand islands and hills she creates, through a landscape informed by her ancient mythology, without superimposed lines and boundaries. Pick up Seesequasis's tantalizing pieces, the coloured shards of art, beauty, commerce, love, sexuality, myth. Twist and turn them until they fall into place. Then twist and turn them again. ♪

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