

Book Review: *Drinking Dry Clouds*, by Gretel Ehrlich (Capra Press)
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by Sarah Pollock

Gretel Ehrlich says her characters just wouldn't go away after she finished her 1988 novel, *Heart Mountain*, about a small ranching community in Wyoming during World War II and the Japanese Americans who were relocated to an internment camp nearby. The novel ended at the conclusion of the war, yet, as Ehrlich writes in a prefatory note to her latest book, *Drinking Dry Clouds*, the characters returned to her and "seemed to want to report to me, so I let them speak in the first person."

She was, however, faced with an immediate narrative problem -- how best to introduce the characters to readers not familiar with *Heart Mountain*. She resolved the difficulty by devoting more than half the new book to recapitulated chapters from the earlier novel, an approach that sometimes works well and other times creates confusion. She compresses much of the original narrative, sometimes dropping details that seem crucial, and the reader is often plagued with a vague sense that something is missing.

Nonetheless, the first-person stories that comprise the new material of this slender book are lovely. Even without the narrative structure provided by *Heart Mountain*, these brief, post-war monologues have a strength of their own. They are like etchings on glass: sharp, focused sketches defined against the luminous, wide-open backdrop of the Wyoming landscape.

Madeleine, the young rancher whose husband, Henry, was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese, tells of her fear on finally seeing him again, her humiliation when his weak stomach causes him to vomit after eating a few forkfuls of her homecoming dinner, and her revulsion at his pathos when he can't stop himself from hoarding food after the deprivation of the prisoner of war camp. Later, in a stunning one-page story, Ehrlich delivers Henry's version, complete with the remarkable observation that there was more privacy in prison because "no one looked."

Pinkey, the alcoholic ranch hand, speaks from the grave as he tells of his own death. McKay's brother, Champ, who was wounded in action, returns with a limp and a new-found fear, which is exposed when his roan colt shies from him and sprays clods of dirt in his face. McKay, who loves Madeleine but also is close to her husband, is profoundly ambivalent about Henry's return.

These are lives that have been irrevocably disrupted by political events quite remote, and the characters are only beginning to grasp how much reconstructive work lies ahead. As Madeleine explains, since the war has been over everyone has been trying to return to normality, and yet "'normal times' were always a couple of lengths away and we secretly knew our valiant efforts had been failures."

One of the added pleasures of this book is the author's connection to the natural world. She brings to life the basin in which the ranches are set with the peak of

Heart Mountain towering in the distance. Even her people are not far removed from the local fauna: McKay's body, for example, is "more legs than torso... as pale and graceful as a Sandhill Crane's."

The human narratives are so closely woven into the natural backdrop that a large part of their power derives from the dramatic clouds, suddens storms and the cattle runs that punctuate these lives. Always, we are aware that these compassionate stories take place against endless expanses of grass, greasewood and sagebrush, with long lines of rimrock on the horizon. These characters are deeply bound to one another, and the vast distances against which those connections are displayed sustain this quiet book.

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