

Essay & review: The Hearts of Horses, by Sandra Dorr  
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### A New Literature of the West

Can any literature be made new? Take time to savor Molly Gloss's fifth book, The Hearts of Horses, a gem of a novel that tackles Western history head-on, and doesn't waste a word in a poetic story of a girl horse whisperer who spends a winter during World War I in a mythic Oregon mountain valley. It's a warmhearted but unflinching story with another indelible Gloss heroine, who seems almost impossible to dream up but oddly familiar once you get to know her a little bit.

Dressed in worn rodeo chaps and spurs, Martha Lessen rides into Elwha County, two rescued horses snubbed up to her own, looking for work. It's the winter of 1917, when a tall, shy cowgirl is suddenly valuable, in a county so isolated it won't even have electricity until after the next world war. There's an almost inexplicable sweetness and toughness to Martha, who dreads motherhood, and is fleeing a father who has beaten her and taken a peculiar joy in brutalizing their horses. At 19, Martha dreams of the "footloose cowboy life" in the dime novels she's borrowed from the L.B. Hawkins Furniture store in Pendleton.

In the cold near-dark, she has the good luck to encounter George and Louise Bliss, a kindly couple who have grown children – one boy in the war -- and bay and a chestnut that need to be broke to saddle.

Now a man on a horse is almost as archetypal as the man on the cross. But what are we to make of a girl in a big dinged-up vaquero hat sitting on Dolly, a scarred mare, who fingers the reins and says she'll give back the money if the horse doesn't work out? Mystery, and a lot of trouble, happily, lie ahead.

The Hearts of Horses is also set in the ending years of the frontier, when one of the last big waves of homesteading fans out in the West, hope and rainfall run high, and wheat planted with government wartime encouragement will end up turning much of the land into dustbowls a little over a decade later. From the get-go Gloss poses questions about two strongly-held national fantasies: the myth of the lone hero and of progress itself.

By the time Martha's proved herself, settled into the Bliss's barn, and met enough neighbors to start gentling horses at six different ranches, we see the country through her eyes:

“In another twenty years people would wake up to realize that the timber was gone and the native grasses plowed up or eaten right down to the roots, that cheatgrass and rabbit brush and water-hogging scrub juniper had taken over all the disturbed ground. But it was still possible for Martha Lessen to look around and imagine the country as it must have been – the way Nez Perce and Shoshone Indians must have seen it, riding across with their big herds of ponies before white men overran the land, the kind of country where every gully and gorge in the foothills holds a clear, pebble-bottom creek, where the mountain slopes are clothed in timber and the valley floor is a golden grassland...the kind of country that leads people to name towns Eden or Paradise or Opportunity.” (P. 65, *The Hearts of Horses*)

Except for published diaries, letters, autobiographies, and the rare novelist — such as Willa Cather, Mary Austin, or Peggy Simpson Curry -- it’s really only in the last several decades that women have entered Western fiction simultaneously as author and character. Mothers, lovers, homesteaders, a few adventurers, and many prostitutes, in the pleasantly misogynistic tradition of the Old West, have been told. They simply weren’t told by women, or by men who understood women’s lives as real, urgent and central to the plot.

When I read Gloss’ *The Jump-Off Creek*, the story of a woman homesteader starting up her own tiny claim in Oregon, circa late 1800s, with strange neighbors like Blue and Mr. Forest Whitteaker, two kind, poor, almost incomprehensibly inarticulate cowboys, it was the first time I really understood what kinds of people came West. So many had almost nothing; so many were loners who *walked*, pulling handcarts, to the new territories. In Gloss’s *Wild Life*, circa early 1900s, an adventure writer and mother of five, lost in an old-growth forest, winds up living with a tribe of legendary “Sasquatch,” wild female and male creatures with children, becoming wild and fantastic herself.

Gloss, a fourth-generation Oregonian, is starting to stand out among a generation of writers whose fiction alters legends, and creates a new dimension of Western heroes, often women or minorities, marginalized or displaced. These writers explore the mythology of the West and write the darker side, which also produces very funny and tender, odd and unpredictable characters. People like Martha Lessen and Blue are not like anyone else, but not ten-gallon heros, either.

Some writers, like Gloss and Kent Haruf, or memoirists Judy Blunt and Mary Clearman Blew, take on cowboying and ranch life. Others, like Karen Joy Fowler, in *Sarah Canary*, show

a wicked sense of social humor set in the 1870s by pairing two men, Chinese and Indian, with a mute ecstatic woman on the run from an insane asylum. Ursula K. Le Guin sometimes departs from whole myth-spinning to write intricate contemporary stories set in the West, such as Unlocking the Air. Fowler, Gloss, and Le Guin all work in speculative, supernatural and historical fiction, and their books often hold glimmerings of all these forms. Perhaps it takes a sense of the fantastic to truly tell the West.

Mythic stories seem to eddy up from the purple sage and mountains, like the fog and mist that cover Martha's boots as she hazes the horses into the corral, flicks a whip in the air, whistles, sings, and touches them within an hour or two, an ability which wins her awe and some envy in Elwha County. When Louise lends Martha books, and they get to talking about Zane Grey and others, Louise observes that she doesn't remember so many gunfights in town, only one bank robbery in her lifetime, and Martha cautiously replies that there doesn't seem to be any fences in the Wild West, and nobody ever has to get down from the horse to open and shut the gate. It's a great intertextual moment, one of many in the novel, that reminds us of Westerners' isolation, and the importance of literature to people who rarely saw media or looked in the mirror, and were removed from images of themselves.

All writers of the West, it seems, owe a good deal to the first stories told for centuries on this land, ones that emerged in Frank Waters' The Man Who Killed the Deer, or Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony, or Debra Magpie Earling's recent Perma Red, among others, that weave myth like breath through the narrative, with wit and reverence. Writers dive from the archway of their deepest memory and dreams, hoping to create something strong, like glass, that mirrors the archetypes within the reader. Old stories issue from this immense landscape and our mutual consciousness of it; they cannot be forgotten, and they tell us, as Karen Armstrong has written, "what we have to do if we want to become fully human." P. 37, *Karen Armstrong, A Short History of Myth, Canongate, 2005*. Of origins, Le Guin once wrote, "I don't know; but I think fiction begins in dream and myth, and all its oldest forms are fantasies." P. 29, *Introduction, Ursula Le Guin, The Norton Book of Science Fiction, 1993*.

The shaman, dating back to the Paleolithic era, is one of the oldest heroes, female or male, who enters the other world in a trance to speak with animals. Traces of this spiritual transcendence still cling to stories of horse-whisperers. But myth changes with each shift in our

culture; Armstrong believes “there was never a single, orthodox version of a myth.” *A Short History of Myth, ibid., p. 11.*

Hence *The Hearts of Horses* is not a story of a girl who saves the day on her horse, or a heroine magically or emotionally transformed by her love of a horse. Instead it's truly a story of the people of the Elwha Valley, each scraping by with a different dream of the West, threaded by Martha's hard 15-mile circle ride to their ranches every day, taming fourteen horses no one else dares approach.

The entire novel becomes a metaphor for this work of gentling, as it's both Martha's tenderness and strength, her ingenuousness in the face of such strange things as condoms or cancer, and the hearts of her neighbors, big as a horse's generous one, that get them through the winter. Though the novel's sexuality is restrained, its physicality is not.

The war presses in on them; the wounded mount, spies are said to be everywhere, and more boys sign up joyfully to kill “Huns,” “Krauts” and “Heinies.” (P. 102 & 108, *The Hearts of Horses*) Horses rear up and fall down canyons, men die in 4” of snowmelt, women chop wood to keep their families from starving, wagons drop down ravines, and a drunken husband disappears at a crucial moment from his sick family, whom Martha saves. When sisters Emma Adelaide and Aileen Woodruff, a comical, shrewd ranching pair, fill Martha in on horses being abused, she must risk her own livelihood to confront a wealthy ranchowner and his bitter hired hand. No one in the valley can survive alone, not even Orville Tippett, a trapper who shoots old horses in the mountains for bait. In the emotional crux of the novel, Martha can only sit in a chair, hat on the floor, to help the family of a tender(gentle) man dying from a tumour.

Throughout the good-natured Henry Frazer, the Woodruff's hired hand, comes closer and closer to Martha through their rides on horses like Brownie and Pardner, Mata Hari and Duchess. Their quiet love story, which solves Martha's deepest fears, grows through a slow-paced Christmas dinner, a movie and a winter skating party, the kind of pure, solemn fun in Laura Ingalls Wilder:

“It hadn't taken him long to realize she knew her horses and was bashful and skittish away from them. She gave him a wild sort of look that he took for embarrassment. ‘I told Mrs. Bliss I have a terrible sweet tooth.’

He turned her words over until he got her meaning: the eggnog was sweet, and she'd gulped it down for the sugar. He grinned and said, 'Aileen made three cakes and I never saw her put any liquor in them, but I imagine she won't bring those out until we've ate up the pig.'

She silently twisted her fingers in the scarf tied at her waist.

These were the people we were, and the land as it once was.

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Houghton Mifflin/\$24.00/hardcover

ISBN 13: 978-0-618-79990-9 and 10: 0-618-79990-7

Published 2007 289 pp.