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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Ann Pancake. *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007. 352 pages. Trade paperback. \$15.95.

REVIEWED BY LAURA LONGSONG

“What makes us feel for these hills like we do?” asks Lace, a main character in Ann Pancake’s first novel, as she half-rebelliously ponders why she has felt pulled back to her home in West Virginia. “I waited . . . And although I didn’t get an answer, I did know you’d have to come up in these hills to understand what I meant. Grow up shouldered in them, them forever around your ribs, your hips, how they hold you, sit astraddle, giving you always, for good or for bad, the sense of being held. It had something to do with that hold.”

Ann Pancake weaves her own compelling hold in this novel about a contemporary family living in a southern West Virginia holler. Lace and three of her adolescent children, Bant, Corey, and Dane, narrate all but two chapters of this book. Their individual desires and struggles are gutsy, funny, heartbreaking, and entertainingly peculiar. Pancake shows these characters’ lives as rich and story-worthy even while the steady, ominous approach of mountaintop removal operations binds their fates together.

Lace and Bant, her oldest child and only daughter, are very much alike. Both are tough realists who also deeply love the woods, a bond created in Bant’s infancy when they literally foraged for food. Jimmy Make, Lace’s husband, wants to move to North Carolina. Lace refuses and supports the family on a paycheck from Dairy Queen. Meanwhile, daredevil Corey brilliantly dreams and schemes to build a four-wheeler. He knows riding one will be heaven, pure and simple. Corey’s teflon hopefulness annoys Bant, who takes him trespassing onto a mine site, hoping the ugliness will teach him a little fatalism. She doesn’t have to teach this to her other little brother, Dane.

Dane at twelve believes he will witness the biblical End Time. He does chores for an old woman who survived the flooding from the

Buffalo Creek Mine disaster. She ritually recounts this nightmarish experience, which people want to hear because “her stories put shape and control and a kind of finality on a thing that was obscenely shapeless and uncontrollable and forever unfinished.” The stories give her and her family “both a luster and a taint. . . . And she told the details like a ritual—the car horns, Patty’s prayers, people half-naked climbing out of the mud, Shirl Benson’s soup. . . .”

Pancake fluently translates West Virginia to the page, from innumerable small details familiar in Appalachian lives to the overall intensity of belonging in and to this place. A canny realist, she does not make all her characters aware of this intensity. Indeed, Pancake doesn’t employ a single handy stereotype or too-easy sentiment to make this world less particular, less human. Even the scab miner stumbles into the light of the human glare, revealing a bewildered Ohio boy hoping for love and security.

Strange as This Weather Has Been shines with a bold and gritty lyricism. The style seems a graceful evolution from Pancake’s stunningly original and densely poetic story collection, *Given Ground* (Middlebury, 2000). In storytelling, too, Pancake stretches her talents to the novel’s demands. She reveals well-plotted arcs of characters’ lives, with intimate, everyday details sequenced and interlocked so smoothly the characters almost become people you know.

Pancake’s style is original and easily takes you in. She smoothly fuses her narrators’ objective and subjective observations and thoughts. On occasion, word choices that seem designed to thrust the reader deeper into the narrator’s consciousness may instead make the reader aware of the sentence. But Pancake is aiming to drill through assumptions made easy by language. She targets the complex country of the individual human heart, and her language keeps revealing the path. She seeks what one character recalls as the colloquial of his childhood, an “English smooth and wet, soft and loamy. Language you can wrap around, language that will work for you, play for you, easy in your mouth, welling up from a deep-knowing place under your tongue . . . while the other language’s words—“standard,” “proper,” “correct”—you must use like coins, shiny and rigid.”

This same character, Avery, narrates a single chapter. Avery left the state after college. Now he’s acutely aware that he both does

and doesn't belong here. Avery introduces a note of elegy as he contemplates "this place so subtly beautiful and so overlaid with doom. A haunt, a film coating all of it. Killed again and again, and each time, the place rising back on its haunches, diminished, but once more alive." But the mountaintop removal is an ultimate destroyer: "Only this, Avery knows, will finally beat the land for good."

Bant, tough beyond her 15 years, insists on finding out exactly what the locked and well-guarded mine sites hold. When her beloved mountain Yellowroot (colloquial for the healing goldenseal) is being blasted, she trespasses. Finally she views the sickening, barely-describable mountaintop removal site: "the whole top of Yellowroot amputated by blast, and that dragline hacking into the flat part left. . . . how lucky Grandma died, I thought. I thought that then. And past where Yellowroot had been, miles and miles of mountain stumps, limping all the way over to what used to be horizon, and what would you call that now? The ass-end of the world. . . . A flake of the moon's surface fallen to earth, and in that fall, it had kept its color, nickel and beige, kept its craters, its cracks. But then it landed not up, but moonside down."

Lace won't accept elegy, and she moves beyond the sickening shock that is destroying the hills even as you read this. She won't leave when their home becomes more and more in plain, complete peril. "Stay in their way—that's the only language they can hear. We are from here, it says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist."

I daresay this is the most enchanting novel you'll ever read that will also leave you with outrage and grief.

Barbara Kingsolver. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York 2007: HarperCollins Publishers. 384 pages. Hardcover. \$26.95.

REVIEWED BY MARNI FOGELSON-TEEL

Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* is a meditation on food and our relationship to it. *Animal, Vegetable,*