Review of Rightful Place by Amy Hale Auker Review of Honyocker Dreams: Montana Memories by David Mogen

Nick Bascom
Penn State University

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Much contemporary western writing, including memoirs such as Judy Blunt’s Breaking Clean (2003), abandons the mythic character of early western narratives, striving instead for realism. These two collections of essays do one better—offering a satisfying blend of stark realism and wistful nostalgia for heroic western archetypes. With contrasting educational backgrounds and biographies, their authors show us the West from widely different perspectives: Mogen has taught English at Colorado State University for many years; Auker married at nineteen and has worked on ranches ever since. Yet both strike a similar balance, capturing the harsh truths of western living while describing with enthusiasm and awe figures and landscapes plucked straight from western lore.

With language as precise and subtly poetic as Kent Haruf’s, and with as much reverence for her characters, Auker renders a broad and brilliant picture of the ranching community in Rightful Place. Her father, a rancher, told her “never to leave the land,” and she continues to work ranches in the American southwest alongside her husband, Nick. Her sentences evince a rancher’s work ethic, always taut, never indulgent, creating beauty out of brevity. “On the opposite side of the chute, Nick plants the glowing branding iron firmly against the damp curly hair of the steer’s hip,” she writes in “Facing the North.” Whether describing the ethereal (“A breeze brings chill bumps to my bare skin and makes the cottonwoods gossip”) or the earthly (“The ranch dog sleeps in a patch of sun, the ruff of his neck stained green where he rolled in cattle truck sludge”), Auker’s prose bears a faint but delightful musicality. She may modestly describe herself as “just a ranch wife and mom,” but her writing possesses as much lyricism as local color.

In crafting her memoir’s overarching message, Auker challenges the expected. She notes “the old theme of no longer seeing motherhood as the epitome of existence” when describing her motivation, but quickly moves beyond it. Striking out for new territory, she declares that “Everything I do must be toward a handmade life, custom-building my days out of the fabrics of my choice.” She includes both a love of family and outdoor work as well as the artist’s ongoing quest for self-expression among her fabrics. This explicit tension makes Rightful Place appealing to fans of female-empowerment tales and those with an interest in contemporary ranch life.

Abounding with rugged cowboys and their equally hardy wives (unable to make it to the emergency room in time, Auker miscarries in a ditch), Rightful Place surprises with complex gender portraits. Auker shows cowboys at...
their most competent, most heroic—as when moving cattle on horseback or prognosticating the weather—but also at their most vulnerable, most human. Nick cries when a three-year-old horse he’s worked hard to train dies after getting a hoof caught. In the wake of Auker’s second miscarriage, he “fumbles for words, does chores that don’t need doing.” Auker gives us real-life cowboys—weary, sentimental, and with thinning hair and beer bellies. The best part: they still seem “bigger than life.”

Of course, nothing beats Big Sky Country for a sense of grandeur, and David Mogen’s practiced memoir traverses much of Montana’s wilderness and history. Though some essays read as conversationally as travelogues, others reveal his academic background. For example, he observes “the peculiar identity crisis that most ‘westerners’ share, living in a place saturated with mythic images that refract the reality they know in bizarre ways. . . .” Though Mogen ruminates on such questions as “Where is the West?” and “What’s western?” in the voice of a literary or cultural critic, his language invites more than it obscures.

Some of the most riveting and emotionally stirring essays in Honyocker Dreams see Mogen recounting episodes in his father’s life, even letting the older man speak to us directly. Mogen’s father “cowboyed full-time” before and after serving as a medic in World War II (his war stories amaze and sadden), but gave up the ranching life after watching “those poor cattle die of drought and poor feed” during the Dust Bowl years. As a child, the elder Mogen slept four to a bed with his siblings and rode horseback five miles to school in Montana winters, enduring hardships that provide a humbling perspective for his son.

Throughout the book, however, Mogen comes to realize that his father “was [his] original flawed western hero.” He relates a time when the elder Mogen, a school superintendent, overreacted to board opposition and moved to a new school, needlessly jeopardizing the welfare of his large family. Eventually, “He became a crazy, distraught drunk,” Mogen writes.

As Mogen’s understanding of cowboys becomes more complicated, so does his understanding of American Indians. He experiences something akin to a ceremonial rite when he visits his Blackfeet relatives, who give him an Iniskim—a buffalo rock—and share the object’s mythological significance. “In the old days, [Iniskim] brought good luck in hunting buffalo, now they bring good luck in life,” explains Mogen’s Uncle Gene. Gene, however, looks nothing like the classic medicine man—he proves a regular guy who likes to fish and braid sweetgrass. Mogen contemplates his uncle’s diverse beliefs and also revisits the racism he witnessed in Frazer, Montana, recalling a high school teacher who called Indians “black bastards.” Such reevaluations of stereotypes concerning Native identity help Mogen reframe his notions of the western hero. While surveying his “growing pantheon of frontier figures,” Mogen comes to realize that some fascinate him “because they embody familiar archetypes of the West, others because they disrupt them, and most because they do both.”

Rightful Place and Honyocker Dreams fascinate because they reflect a rich, complex West. Heroes still exist, and many forces—poverty, alcoholism, modern development—challenge them daily. With scintillating language, Amy Auker provides a glimpse into the mind of a ranch wife. David Mogen offers critical acumen in thrilling anecdotes. Together, these two memoirs chronicle a West as intriguing as ever.

Nick Bascom
Department of English
Penn State University