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Book Review: *Naming the Winds: A High Plains Apprenticeship* by Caroline Marwitz

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Naming the Winds: A High Plains Apprenticeship. By Caroline Marwitz. Glendo, WY: High Plains Press, 2001. 223 pp. \$13.95 paper.

"To love the land was all," concludes Caroline Marwitz in *Naming the Winds: A High Plains Apprenticeship*. Indeed, Marwitz's unlikely love for the dry sagebrush steppe surrounding Laramie, Wyoming, where she spent her youth, anchors this memoir. Focusing on the friendship and guidance of an older woman named Nasim, who serves as a kind of spiritual mentor, Marwitz traces her haphazard path to the realization that the place where she grew up—"that rough, left-alone land" where "the wind was blowing so hard we could barely stand up"—holds a unique and inescapable beauty all its own. "Even the most barren of rocks, the hottest of deserts, the coldest of polar seas support some life," she writes, in defense of the place one nineteenth-century explorer deemed "a vast barren basin."

Although she writes with honesty and passion, Marwitz's story tends toward the sentimental and often relies on nostalgia to elicit its meaning. There are exceptions, of course, especially in her descriptions of the land itself, when her language takes on a tentative clarity. In her rendering of landscape, fine, original phrases emerge, such as water that has "fused with sunlight" and been "given spirit by the wind's rainy breath." Still, evocation of place alone cannot carry a memoir, which ultimately ought to reflect and explore the depth and complexity of human interaction. It is here that *Naming the Winds* falls short. Beyond her undeniable fondness for the land, we are given no real sense of the author herself, of her connection to the parents, siblings, husband, and children to whom she often refers. Except for one or two well-wrought scenes, even her relationship with Nasim is rendered flatly, with vague characterization and simplistic dialogue, so that we have only the most general notion of how this elderly woman shaped a young girl's understanding of, and love for, the land around her.

Despite the book's shortcomings, readers familiar with the Laramie Basin will appreciate Marwitz's genuine affection for a place thousands of people drive through without ever noticing. These readers might, indeed, find that "to love the land" is, in the end, enough.

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