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Book Review: *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields* by Sharon Butala

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Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields.
By Sharon Butala. Toronto: HarperCollins
Canada, 2000. Sources. 206 pp. \$28.00.

In the aftermath of September 11th, the recommendation of a book by what the *Toronto Star* called “one of this country’s true visionaries” may seem an ill-afforded luxury. Butala’s odyssey may become all the more suspect when we realize that her book centers on walking in a field in southwest Saskatchewan. How might such a book address the smell of burning metal and flesh?

Actually, quite well.

Wild Stone Heart asks us to descend into an underworld of both grief and possibility which works in, with, and under the land upon which Butala traverses. She envisions “layers of presence” where the present is infused by the past, the material world “cracked and split narrowly” by the world of myth. Dualities of the ideal and mundane, then and now, natural and human, holy and humus are bridged into a holistic epistemology celebrating both connection and difference.

But this is not New Age pabulum; Butala is too nuanced a thinker. She advocates “life lived on the ground” and invites grounding on deeper levels as well. She is sobered by the presence of “the unhonored dead of the field,” especially the indigenous peoples. She is emboldened by the knowledge that in her backyard she is “literally walking on dinosaurs.” She is humored that she manages to badger a

badger by accidentally intruding upon her in one of her walks.

In Butala's world of "stones and bones," "softer boundaries" exist between the animated and supposedly inert. In her vision is refuge. But refuge is not retreat. Butala writes: "To understand the profound meaning of land . . . is to be terrified, shattered, humbled and in the end, joyous. It is to come home at last. . . . I knew my knowledge of the field was a gift given me, but it was not just for me. . . . I

would try to transform the gift given me by the field into a payment and a tribute to ease the wild stone heart of the earth."

September 11th was rooted in a vision of death, destruction, and diminishment. Butala proffers a protest vision rooted in grief and gratitude, grounded in humus, humility, and hope.

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