

A Chorus of Buffalo: Reflections on Wildlife Politics and an American Icon

Ruth Rudner

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“Now that the buffalo’s gone,” the last line of a Buffy Sainte Marie song, is a tragic fact to many Americans, including Native Americans. In Rudner’s book, however, the buffalo maintains a delicate presence on the plains, walking a dangerous road across a chasm of extinction. Power and majesty reign on one side; fear and control threaten on the other.

Rudner’s enormous respect for the buffalo shines through as she relates a host of stories about the buffalo—personal stories, legends, political strife. Her preface defines the ostensible cause of the controversy over the buffalo’s return to the wild—the dangerous disease brucellosis, carried by cattle and some buffalo, that causes cows to abort calves and, in humans, causes undulant fever. The whole herd of cattle is destroyed if one cow tests positive. Buffalo, she relates, although never known to transmit the disease to cattle, suffer the same fate in a deadly preemptive strike; the stakes are high.

There is also the pasture issue, she notes; cattlemen claim that buffalo encroach on grazing lands and are bad for the environment, when in fact, she points out, they are better for the environment than cattle, and they utilize pasture more efficiently. But the ranchers’ fears, and the brutal inefficiency of bureaucratic solutions, cannot be denied. She takes the reader along to watch as buffalo are slaughtered for the crime of leaving Yellowstone.

Rudner’s magnificent chorus blends the voices of legend and reality as she relates the story of Don Meyers, son and grandson of Sun Dancers, who manages the tribal herd of buffalo at Rocky Boy Reservation—where, in 1918, the Sun Dance had to be performed without the skull of a buffalo, because not even any bones remained. Then there’s Jerry Wayne Olson and Chief, his trained buffalo, who tour the rodeo circuit and show that perhaps man and buffalo can coexist with respect for one another. Under Mike Fox’s care at the Fort Belknap Reservation, Indians now once again eat buffalo meat and find their health improving—and perhaps their hearts, too, as their spiritual tie to the buffalo is restored. And Alma Snell tells of her vision of an angry white buffalo in the sky, and her mysterious rapport with the buffalo on Ted Turner’s ranch.

The dominant voice in this chorus, though, is always the voice of the buffalo, an undertone of majesty and power and death and life. The buffalo, Rudner concludes, is more than an animal. It is a spiritual presence, certainly for Native Americans, but also for the white man—if he will learn.

MARLENE SATTER (May / June 2000)

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