



★ **Before Us Like a Land of Dreams**

Karin Anderson

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Karin Anderson's *Before Us Like a Land of Dreams* is a narrative extravaganza that ponders the bristled roots of ancestry, unbroken by time or place, and the muddled truths and fallacies of family history that inform who we believe we are.

As the novel begins, Anderson, the storyteller, battles an existential crisis. She's fifty-four, a divorced mother of four, a Mormon apostate, and a professor from Utah. She divulges: "I no longer know who to be."

Pathos and long-simmering grudges compel Anderson to drive to her father's birthplace in Arizona—a landscape that belongs to the Navajo and Apache. Time shifts, and in a spirit of revelation, Anderson communes with her dead relatives at the funeral of her grandmother's one-day-old daughter. Anderson steps into this long-ago scene, seeking advice from her grandmother and reckoning from her grandfather.

Answers are subtle and opaque, and Anderson remains curious about her legacy. From here, Anderson recedes. She yields to her dynamic ancestors, who chronicle their pasts in redolent and imbued voices. Anderson's "dead affiliates" recount their early acquaintance with sorrow and how they learn to shed "great shards" of their hearts to endure. Their portrait of the family is excellent. Though their origins span continents, they are an American assembly. Their talk defines the spirit of American settlers, the religious worshiping in freedom, and the modern citizen grappling for the American dream.

Appropriately for a book that sketches the American experience, the plight of the American Indian wends throughout, piercing and echoing in its tones of dismay.

This masterwork flouts expectations. Anderson's incomparable rendering churns with existential turbulence—the ideation that "the people who made us walk around in the people we are" is unnerving. The book's conclusion is either a chilling rebuke to the vision of Matthew Arnold's poetry, from which the title derives, or an exuberant acquiescence.

Reading *Before Us Like a Land of Dreams* is an experience. Rereading it is a must.

AMY O'LOUGHLIN (May/June 2019)

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