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Bohemian Girl

Terese Svoboda
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Hollywood has handed us an American West of cowboys, cattle, train whistles, and Indian wars, but Terese Svoboda offers a different glimpse of history, from the perspective of a young girl abandoned by her father and forced to make her way in a world that has mostly cruelty to offer.

At a young age, Harriet is given to an Indian to pay her father's debt, a man intent on building mounds out of dirt and bones, no matter if his female slaves are exhausted to death through the endless task. Harriet survives; she is nothing if not a survivor. After escaping her harsh sentence, she meets up with a girl whose family has been killed by lightning, leaving her and a baby. They make an odd team that grows even odder when they meet up with an eccentric hot air balloonist and his companion.

Through a series of bizarre circumstances, Harriet finds herself the keeper of a shop in a frontier town where she nearly fits in, even with the lameness remaining from her years with the Indian. She accepts various new burdens, including the baby whom she raises as her cousin. But danger and disappointment are never very far away—the people she meets all have agendas below the surface and only through her steadfast strength and self-reliance does she continue to overcome the obstacles in life.

As wonderful a character as Harriet turns out to be—resilient, discerning, dependable, even funny—it's Svoboda's tensile, elegant prose that draws readers into the story and charms them despite the horrors on the page. Author of several volumes of poetry, fiction, and a nonfiction book, Svoboda offers a spare beauty through the language she uses to describe a life often devoid of anything beautiful: "So nobody's watching me close, what with the new shop and a war still raging, blue against grey, a regular bruise, and the Indians being hunted by what few troops are left, and these cowboys who are starting to annoy the settlers with ideas about their rights regarding fences and other such impediments to making the money that they in turn want to spend in the settlers' town's bars. Or else everyone's watching everything like they do in a town."

Svoboda shows bravery when she confronts the concept of forgiveness; in a rough-hewn world where people do terrible things to each other on a daily basis, many of those people choose to react with firepower. Harriet's character is unique in her approach to her past, and Svoboda should be commended for handling both confrontation and resolution without falling victim to saccharine description.

An eloquent exploration of the Wild West from the perspective of one of its victims who refuses to be victimized.

ANDI DIEHN (August 30, 2011)

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