ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Dead Woman Hollow
Kass Fleisher
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The book begins secretively, mysteriously, in the mountains of Pennsylvania. And like the lives of the characters it is about to describe, the opening scene is devoid of frills. No melodic dialogue, no gentle segues, just a bleak and blunt description of the aftermath of an event that is only later, and somewhat slowly, revealed. When dialogue does begin, it is not permitted the customary punctuation marks to separate it from the narrative. Somewhat challenging to decipher, the melding of dialogue and description gets so close to revealing the characters' souls that it cannot be taken in large doses.

This is a book to read in small portions. At the same time, the characters placed into the foreground have their stories to tell. And what appear to be three separate tales are so closely related that it is no surprise to find the main character in each has the same name: Jenny. She is central to the entire story, a story divided into three segments of time in America's history: from when the women's suffrage movement was first taking hold, then through the Depression, and ending in the 1980s. The Jenny of each story is inquisitive and aware, and she is possessed of an inner strength that finds its way off the pages to grip the reader.

The other main character is the land—the farmland, the trees, and the hills and mountains of Pennsylvania. Through Jenny's eyes, the beauty, the vastness, and the harshness of the land are always there. They add another layer of tautness to each story, as the land itself has a tale to tell of the greedy and destructive nature of man. While there is little counterpoint to this theme, there are piquant reminders that, no matter what, there are always simple joys, along with some amazing truths, to be appreciated in life: "Mama twirling in the garden, chasing snowflakes with her tongue … Mama yelled, Just like you girls! Don't you ever forget that you're special like snowflakes!" This is the memory that fills Jenny's head even as she and her family are struggling to find food and shelter and one of her younger sisters has become weak with starvation.

Dead Woman Hollow will be appreciated by those who have a taste for an unusual writing style and for strong women whose lives are viewed within a historical context.

Patricia Morrow