



## Jake Miller's Wheel

### James Ostby

James Ostby (Mar 15, 2014)

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*A young husband and wife battle inner demons and harrowing conditions to establish a homestead in Montana in the early twentieth century.*

A melancholic man and his bride, Mable, homestead on the treeless plains of northeastern Montana in James Ostby's dark *Jake Miller's Wheel*. Their struggles to cultivate land never before touched by a plow and to overcome their inner demons frame this realistic depiction of pioneer life in the early twentieth century.

Divided into four time periods, 1913, 1925, 1936, and 1937, the story begins as Jake Miller arrives in Charity, Montana, to prepare the one-room shack on homesteaded land for Mable's arrival. The couple hopes to succeed at wheat farming on rocky land in a climate of extreme temperatures and frequent drought.

Afraid of manifesting his father's alcoholism and his mother's mental instability, Jake has hastily abandoned his old life in Iowa, possibly because of an unspecified misdeed. A self-educated seeker of truth, he rejects the precepts of Christianity but gains solace from literature, philosophy, and parapsychology. Jake believes that a "Wheel of Life" irrevocably controls him. He also experiences frightening visions caused by what he calls "The Fatidic Light."

In addition to Mable and Jake's story, the text includes anecdotes about their community of homesteaders, which serve to chronicle the prevailing customs, social interactions, and idiosyncratic beliefs. These clearly drawn characters come from diverse backgrounds, and some settlers are rumored to hide unsavory pasts. Widely separated by farmland, they pass the news along by a conversational grapevine. Consequently, dialogue plays an important part in this narrative, balanced by descriptive passages and italicized excerpts that denote Jake's flashbacks and meditations. Some anecdotes have little connection to Mable and Jake's story and do detract from it slightly.

Ostby writes movingly about the strong bond between the couple. As the novel begins, Jake worries about subjecting Mable, whom he doesn't think he deserves, to living an isolated existence with few material comforts. But she has left behind her own unfortunate past and adjusts seamlessly to the simplicity of their new home. Shortly after her arrival, she prepares a pound cake to celebrate their new beginning. "My, how lucky we are," she tells Jake, setting a positive tone for their life together.

The author makes good use of puns to relieve the prevailing seriousness of this story. For example, Nils Anderson, a neighbor, tells Jake about another homesteader who, fed up with farming, robs a bank. Easily identified by the authorities, he retreats to his barn and is soon surrounded by lawmen. He tries to escape on horseback but is killed by a gunshot between the eyes. Ostby writes, "'He went out with a bang,' [Nils] sighed, completely oblivious to his unintentional pun."

The author knows his subject matter well, having grown up on the high plains of northeastern Montana, where his grandparents homesteaded in 1912. This, his second novel, brims with excellent detail about time, place, and social structure, which enlivens his fictional characters and their struggles. Although alluded to frequently, the nature of

Jake's mysterious crime and Mable's physical malaise remain hidden.

Those interested in the history of pioneer times on the untamed prairie will surely enjoy *Jake Miller's Wheel*.

MARGARET CULLISON (June 3, 2014)

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