



Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere

Poe Ballantine

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Even if you have never read Poe Ballantine's work before, you know him. He's the guy sitting next to you in the bar whose stories are so entertaining that you stay longer and drink more than you planned. His memoir, *Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere*, about his life in small-town Chadron, Nebraska, is a fascinating read that seems more spontaneous and conversational than planned.

The book opens with gossip about the mysterious death of a mathematics professor. Then, contrary to literary convention, Ballantine soon drops the murdered man from the story, replacing him with amusing riffs on Chadron and its residences. Halfway through the book, the murder assumes importance again.

Once a self-described wanderer and failed writer, Ballantine finally settled in the hardscrabble prairie town of Chadron, with its small liberal-arts college, because "it felt like a dying town, politely hanging on. I felt akin." While working as a short-order cook and living in a two-room shack near the railroad tracks, Ballantine befriends the locals who inspire an amusing set of backstories. Among them was Shawn Marie Delinger, "who is inhabited by a Gaelic faerie and teaches private music lessons for 10 bucks an hour," and crime professor Loren Zimmerman, "loose-skinned and yellow toothed as an old crocodile ... his age ... approximately that of Satan."

Eventually Ballantine weds a young Mexican dentist with whom he has a son, Tom. Later, school authorities deem the boy autistic, but as the book progresses, he appears simply as unique and free-spirited, like his father.

Ballantine has written a clever book about the highs and lows of the writing life, small-town America, and the loony foibles and fantasies under which we all live. That perspective also looms large in his chapter headings, such as "Big dick omelets" and "Donut coma."

The publisher, which appears as a character in the memoir, has designed this book to be as easily readable as the author's prose, although Ballantine's cascading descriptions of town characters can sometimes become tiresome. Still, *Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere* is a breath of fresh air, a long view across the plains of human existence, a memoir well worth reading whether we live in the city or country.

NANCY RUBIN STUART (Winter 2014)

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