

Martha Moody**Susan Stinson**

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Susan Stinson's *Martha Moody* is an exuberant, cheeky Western in which sensual hunger steers an offbeat homesteader toward freedom.

Stuck in a dull marriage, Amanda is a Bible reader with an overactive imagination. She's closest to Clara, her gossipy neighbor, and spins yarns for Miss Alice, her bovine companion. When a temperance riot gets out of hand, Amanda seeks refuge with Martha Moody, the hefty, red-headed owner of the town's general store. Under the guise of selling butter, Amanda agrees to their trysts, all while writing racy stories about Martha and the angel Azrael, a winged cow. When Amanda's husband discovers her writing, it leads to violence.

Descriptions of Moody's general store capture a frontier bulwark that Martha helms with unflappable poise. Her backstory, which involves a harsh patriarch, is colorful, and her infrequent speech gives her a mysterious air that intensifies Amanda's far-fetched, pulpy fables.

Between turning reclusive and near-feral and rejoining her Christian ladies' community—which, in a fresh twist, never shuns her—Amanda fuels each development. There's both humor and tenderness in her hardscrabble life and her ideas of Martha as a sprawling, heroic landscape. Her frequent dairy metaphors, and her references to thirst and dryness, convey fervor, but are sometimes overindulgent.

The book's tense second half gathers around doubt and Martha's reaction to Amanda's success as a magazine writer, culminating with the revelation that trouble has a silver lining. And amid its LGBTQ+ themes and celebration of curves, the novel's enriching wider arc concerns forgiveness. Amanda's initial loneliness is rewritten in a satisfying way, and Martha is able to shed some of her mythical stature to become a vulnerable human being.

With its down-to-earth portrait of a woman finding her voice, *Martha Moody* is an entertaining lesbian fantasy.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2020)

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