

★ **Miracle Country**

Kendra Atleework

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Kendra Atleework's radiant, wrenching memoir *Miracle Country* probes a home and its heartbreaks for meaning.

Atleework was raised in the Eastern Sierra, in spaces threatened by fire and droughts: "on this obsidian edge of California, God is the wind and the dust it carries." Her father taught his children to thirst after the skies; her mother led them to dreamy spaces in the woods, where they wondered aloud about her imagined Lupine Land. Despite the challenges presented by the very ground on which they stood, theirs was a near idyllic childhood, captured in snapshots of hot air ballooning, lessons in self-sufficiency, and expressions of love.

But when Atleework's mother died, her family lost its sense of footing. Her adopted son became angry and rebellious; her daughters grew apart, nursing their pain in more private spaces. And while his children found their ways to flee, Atleework's father kept their home lit and waiting, knowing that what's left behind may seem less beautiful, but it still answers a need.

Atleework's pages filter her grief through the wonders and contradictions of her home state, which she bounced around, fled, and returned to again in early adulthood, getting to know its nuances in stages. Her hometown was a place foreign to the golden dreamers of the state's tourism brochure locales; its water was rerouted for valley dwellers, and its land, too, was stolen from Native tribes. Atleework is incisive in detailing the losses the Sierra suffered, from that of its first residents to Hetch Hetchy Valley. Her work incorporates the words of Kevin Starr, Joan Didion, and Mary Austin, but remains separate—its own glorious, authentic picture of a place whose residents refuse to be pinned down.

Miracle Country is a singular, sympathetic memoir of loss and belonging, set in a troubled state that still occupies so many people's dreams.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2020)

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