Thriller

Quick Fall of Light
Sherrida Woodley
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This apocalyptic thriller weaves together the repercussions of human destructiveness with the advances of cutting-edge science to produce an eerie meditation about death's widening gyre in a frighteningly modern world. When Josephine Russo risks contagion by a virulent avian flu to investigate her husband's death, she discovers a scientific facility deep within Washington's primordial forest. Guided by forester Gary Sterns, she journeys across the United States to retrace her late husband's laborious training of a bird that may be humanity's only hope for survival.

First-time novelist Sherrida Woodley draws on the coincidental timing of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 with the slightly earlier extinction of passenger pigeons, birds that once flew continental distances in flocks numbering in the millions. Over-hunting and habitat destruction in the nineteenth century decimated the passenger pigeons, and only a few sightings were recorded after 1900. Woodley imagines a secret rescue project that is based first on a wild hope that a few survivors still remain and then on a genetic link that keeps one pharmaceutical company ahead of—and more profitable than—all competitors in the race to save humanity.

Josie is an unlikely sleuth, naïve enough about the world outside her home to leave the laptop that contains all of her husband's research on a stump in the rain forest, although she retraces her steps once she realizes her mistake. This loss of science within nature becomes a metaphor that runs throughout the book: technology seems to be in control, but is endlessly threatened by it. As Josie and Sterns search for the key to the passenger's salvation, they are stalked by Martin Pritchard, a hired gun sent by a profit-driven pharmaceutical corporation that wants to ensure its continued monopoly over its right to choose which of the world's populations merit the most advanced form of vaccination against this rapidly mutating threat.

Quick Fall of Light was a 2010 *ForeWord Reviews* finalist for Best Book of the Year, and it is easy to see why. Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* echoes through

Josie's flu-stricken dreams, but the landscape she and Sterns travel also invokes Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, an 1990s novel that also revolves around fires that burn out of control over millions of acres and the unintentional results of biomedical research. Ultimately, it will all come down to the success of one small bird, flying alone through a dying wilderness.

Elizabeth Breau