Clarion Review

General

Rusty Springs: A Contemporary Western
Jo Ann Bender
Bender & Associates
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Kitty Klepacki is alone and on the run in this fast-paced tale of survival and romance. Unquestionably, seasoned writer Jo Ann Bender is fascinated by the American frontier, as evidenced by her other books, including the Americana-inspired *Story Cookbook* and the Western romance *Cries in the Desert*. With *Rusty Springs*, she blazes a trail from the shores of Saint Augustine, Florida, to the casinos of Winnemucca, Nevada, and, ultimately, to the remote mountain town of Rusty Springs, Montana.

Bender establishes Kitty as an independent risk taker from the beginning, where readers meet her dealing blackjack and bantering with the locals at the Lucky Star Casino. This girl can take care of herself, it seems. But when strange things start happening to her in Winnemucca—someone is writing threatening messages on her car windows, stealing clothes from her apartment, and arranging strange deliveries on her doorstep—she is forced to confront the past that led her to this town in the first place.

Is she being stalked? Should she fear the mysterious Gillis Black, who has so enchanted her from the day she arrived in Winnemucca? Or is the harassment related to her tragic past? Bender keeps the reader guessing by introducing new characters and revealing past traumas on nearly every page. Many of the folks in *Rusty Springs* are lightly drawn, bordering on cliché, such as the hillbilly neighbors who hide from the law, stockpile firearms, and talk to nobody outside their family. While few characters are highly detailed, their descriptions do provide local color—readers get to know a man by the logo on his hat and the tires on his truck. Her easy way with others also affords Kitty a way to tell her complex story, especially as she ventures out of Nevada and reinvents herself as Leigh Wiodonski, Montana pioneer woman.

Leigh is the most carefully developed character, displaying a mix of bravado and naïveté that ensure there is never a dull moment. In one scene she will be seducing the sheriff of Rusty

Springs, and in the next she is tied to a tree by an unknown attacker. The action is never subtle, and not always believable, but continually exciting.

An affectionate sense of place comes through when Bender describes the mountain life, with the pleasure of picking huckleberries for pie competing with the danger of cougars lurking in the forest. This is in contrast to earlier descriptions of the minutiae of blackjack play, which read more like a rule book than a novel's background. Bender's strength is in her knowledge of mountain life and her ability to draw the reader into a world of pig races, general stores, and paranoid, gun-toting neighbors.

Leaving the stalker mystery unsolved until the very end, Bender carries the reader along on Leigh's quest to escape her past and establish her future. A sequel is forthcoming.

Sheila M. Trask