

Seeking Two Elks Fighting: Erik Larson: Sheepeater Indian Series

Joseph Dorris

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Seeking Two Elks Fighting is a rich historical novel in which a man works to find himself at the height of Idaho's gold rush.

Joseph Dorris's sweeping historical novel *Seeking Two Elks Fighting*, the fifth entry in the Sheepeater series, is a coming-of-age tale set on the frontier in the late 1800s.

The novel opens with the understanding that its hero, Erik's, first family is dead; he opts to lose himself in the wilderness in response to their loss, and grows up with a Native American tribe, the Sacred River band the Sheepeaters, among whom he's called Two Elks Fighting. He also finds love with Bright Shell. Erik helps the Sheepeaters when it comes to the encroaching settlers, though he is opposed by Runs Fast, who pushes a malicious agenda.

The settlers treat Erik as a competent guide, seeking his help to break trails and bring supplies to the booming gold rush towns. Indeed, Erik's time is split between the gold rush miners, the early towns, and the Native American people; among them all, he works to understand his prophetic visions of Idaho and Montana. After another tragedy strikes him, he seeks to hold those responsible to account.

Erik's struggle to find himself results in narrative tension. His human need for connection plays out against an unforgiving land, while evocative descriptions of the "burning rock lands" and of the Lemhi River result in a compelling picture of the rural frontier. Erik spends his winters trapping, and he struggles with the snow and the animals. Secondary characters prove important to his growth efforts, and he eventually matures from a self-centered youth into a man who cares for his community.

But Erik's story is often paused so that the narrative can cover its historical context. Descriptions of the origins of the settlers' communities in the Civil War, and of how Native American people would wait for help on a reservation, play in. While authentic, these ponderous asides slow the story's pace, as do repetitive descriptions of Erik's wilderness encounters. As the novel works to capture the Old West, both from Native American and settler perspectives, Erik's mission becomes tangential to its work. Still, the book's pencil drawings and maps of the Idaho and Montana territories help when it comes to understanding Erik's travels, and its images of a sheep skull in the brush, a winter trap line, and downtown Elk City help to define his experiences among the striking natural beauty of the West.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (June 18, 2021)

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