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General

The Road Home
Jim Harrison
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This is Harrison's first full-length novel since Dalva a decade ago; a complex, bittersweet prequel encompassing nearly a century of family history from the American heartland. It is a wondrous tale, larded with earthy humor and crafted with the painstaking attention to detail that is a Harrison hallmark.

This is very much Dalva's story, although told in a somewhat roundabout fashion through the voices of four relatives—her half-Lakota Indian grandfather John Northridge, whose warrior spirit is tempered by an artist's heart; Nelse, the son taken from teen-aged Dalva at birth, now a nomadic, rebellious young man in search of the mother he never knew; Dalva's uncle, Paul; and her widowed mother Naomi. Only in the final section does Dalva herself assume the storyteller's role. A somewhat unorthodox approach, yet the author pulls it off, as each narrator becomes not only the central player in a compelling mini-drama but a vehicle for advancing the larger plot and developing the character of the heroine. By the time Dalva takes control of the story, the enthralled reader is unsurprised by the fatalistic serenity with which she faces her greatest trial.

Compelling though the storyline is, the most remarkable feature of this work may well be Harrison's virtuosity in use of language. His skills are constantly on display, whether relating Northridge's youthful encounter with a bear and her cubs, the heart attack that convinces him death is near, or Nelse's vivid descriptions of birds, Northern Michigan forests, the nighttime Nebraska sky and the voluptuous body of his stripper girlfriend.

Harrison develops his characters by having them recall events from their past, drawing upon his seemingly inexhaustible ability to spin anecdotal yarns. Woven into the narrative is a fair amount of social commentary, enough to prick the reader's conscience about the plight of Native Americans and environmental degradation unless he or she is of a different political persuasion, in which case the declarations may seem merely preachy.

Regardless, this is a masterful novel, one that compels the reader to care deeply about its fascinating cast of characters and treasure, with them, the beauty of nature and a life freely lived. (October 1998)