



When Horses Had Wings

Diana Estill

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Estill has an ear for the language of her characters, making this story come alive.

When Horses Had Wings, the first novel by Diana Estill, brings to mind Hemingway's explanation of his own writing: "You see I'm trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across, not just to depict life, or criticize it, but to actually make it alive." Estill hits this mark so soundly that, by the end of her novel, readers will swear they hear a note from their own life or family.

This is the story of Renee Goodchild Murphy, who, living in rural north Texas in 1971 and pregnant at sixteen, marries Kenny, the father of her child. She and Kenny construct a physically and emotionally abusive relationship overburdened by poverty and isolation. How Renee works to escape her hellish life, and what she learns along the way, populates the remainder of this heartrending tale.

Renee has the profound ability to remain uncomplicated in the face of the most complicating of circumstances, as is evident in her explanation of how she got pregnant: "There, in the blistering backseat of a Plymouth Fury, I succumbed to a young boy's attempt to set my body and both our futures ablaze."

Kenny is a frightened adolescent lacking introspection or understanding of his role as a husband or father. His emotions and drives remain at a level often found in a middle school cafeteria. He watches cop shows and football on television, drinks beer, and tries to control every aspect of Renee's life. When Renee announces she wants to go to college, Kenny responds: "College is for smart people who think they're better than everybody else. And you ain't going."

Estill's ear for the language of her characters adds to the story's realism. Neta Sue, Kenny's mother, works cleaning offices and, like her son, has little education or sophistication. After cooking a turkey that was a gift from her employer, she announces: "I cooked that turkey right good, if I do say so myself... Pays to work for somebody who 'preciates you."

When Horses Had Wings moves forward steadily, gently guided by the author's skills as a storyteller. One chapter ends with Renee beginning to think seriously about leaving Kenny, and the next opens with a big event: "While I'd been only dreaming of flying away, Daddy had actually done it." In the midst of the tragic violent life that has become Renee and Kenny's marriage, Renee's self-righteous father runs off with the minister's wife.

The book concludes with an epilogue that Estill uses to tie up the loose ends of the story. Unfortunately, she cannot restrain herself from closing with a Hollywood-style last line, which is discordant with the rest of the novel.

The cover art, a photo of a young women gazing to the horizon over a wheat field, although perfectly suited to the tone of the novel, does not accurately reflect the description of the frizzy-haired Renee. Estill's heroine, however, like the field depicted, is growing and maturing.

Estill has written three other books, including collections of humorous essays. *When Horses Had Wings* is an impressive first novel that should have broad appeal.

JOHN SENGGER (February 25, 2014)

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