

Winter of Beauty

Amy Hale Auker

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Vivid portraits of forthright characters and a graceful landscape revive the sense of place of the American West.

To write about the American West is to capture its graceful and unforgiving landscape and how it defines the people who live off its mercurial nature. Amy Hale Auker, winner of the 2012 WILLA Literary Award for Creative Nonfiction, aims to paint the lovely nature of winter as it permeates her characters' lives in *Winter of Beauty*.

Her characters are quirky and homegrown. They are filled with a pleasing cowboy nature—honest, charming, and uncompromising: The ranch owner, Sunshine Angel Lewis, or Shiney, a single, scotch-drinking woman who is tired of running the Tinaja and tired of not having a lover; the aging ranch hand and poet, Rafe, and his wife, Nell; and Monte, the foreman, who attempts to drag the Tinaja and everyone with it into the new millennium. There are numerous likable characters who populate Auker's cowboy saga, and throughout the four sections of this novel, their histories are revealed, and their desires and their sacrifices are relayed through short vignettes that expose their complex personalities.

The most striking "character" in the story is the ranch and its landscape. Auker ultimately, and perhaps unwittingly, makes place the star of her western carnival. The winter bride is the phantom barker that looms beneath the surface of the narrative, incanting each character to live the life he or she wants to live. This creates a subtle sense of hibernation in each character's story line and also reveals myths, legends, and lore of the American West to the reader.

Auker's strengths as a writer are her sense of place and her talent for description. This does become a bit dangerous for Auker because of her authorial presence in her love of place through her lyrical passages. There is a lack of clear narrative focus that cannot be overcome by language. Relying too heavily on the power of prose undermines the novel. The reader is presented with fragmented tales of each character but is unsure as to who or what the thematic message is.

In the end, the beauty of Auker's western winter is clear. *Winter of Beauty* is a tribute to the American West, ranching, and cowboys, and Auker has her tenderness on full display.

MONICA CARTER (Winter 2014)

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