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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

## Women Who Roar: Female Pioneers of Alberta

**Annabelle Wilson**
Trafford (Jan 24, 2011)
Softcover $16.26 (244pp)
978-1-4269-4608-0

While occasionally somewhat familiar, Annabelle Wilson's women lack the roar that her title suggests. Wilson has fictionalized the life stories of seven real women, chosen for their ability to "serve as an inspiration to the rest of us" and make a "significant contribution to our lives." However, there is little of extraordinary courage or resilience reflected in their stories.

From women who humbly accept the ongoing philandering of their husbands to women who ignore their own children for the sake of their careers, Wilson's heroines are a motley crew at best, and, as presented, they are a decidedly unappealing bunch. Their predicaments so often are self-created, their reactions so absurd, and their justifications and "solutions" so weak, that Wilson leaves little in them for readers to admire.

For instance, the character Sister Annabel, a nun who wears the traditional habit of the Sisters of Charity, feels a sexual attraction to a young veterinarian. When the young nun confesses, "I have lost my heart and my soul … to a young man who was weaponless," and whose "intentions had been honorable," readers must wonder exactly how that young man wouldn't have noticed the good sister's habit, complete with a crucifix pin on the lapel and a "navy blue veil … that hung to her shoulders."

In another story, the character Jaylene faces a group of adolescents intent on harming a homosexual youth. Jaylene declares, "I am a master at … Shuai jiao. It's an ancient Chinese martial art that with a single chop to your neck will instantly paralyze you." It is not surprising that these nasty boys don't run away at this remarkably lame threat. And what is it that prompts this woman, described as terrifying and controlled, to add, "And my husband … is a master criminal lawyer"? It is difficult to tell whether it is Jaylene or her husband who is truly the threat here. This woman's own strength is not what comes across.

Marilyn, yet one more of Wilson's all-too-flawed pioneer women, is an artist who states honestly, "My first love was and always has been art." Her husbands and three children all are apparently part of what she deems "marking time… waiting for [her] real life to begin." That she suggests her complete devotion to art does not exist at the expense of those children seems a poor justification. Perhaps readers will wonder, then, why one of her children might have commented, "I hate you. All you do is paint," or why she admits, "for months they nagged me about being a bad mother."

Readers may question whether it is the real-life stories themselves or the fictionalized retelling of them that misses the mark in this collection. Maybe the seven women represented in the stories really *were* pioneers of sorts, but the message simply is not conveyed here. The end-of-chapter Queries to Ponder come across as absurd, asking readers to relate to and even emulate some rather unspectacular characters. In addition, Wilson's book is littered with errors in grammar and punctuation, posing stumbling blocks on every page.

Perhaps a solid rewrite and a good edit could help the author make these women "roar" as she undoubtedly believes they can and have. Her own views of them are not enough; she needs to convince her readers that her characters are the pioneers she claims them to be.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (August 30, 2012)

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