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Foreword Review HISTORICAL

Zelestina Urza in Outer Space

David Romtvedt
Center for Basque Studies (July 2015)
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In the wildly imaginative *Zelestina Ursa in Outer Space*, David Romtvedt tells the captivating tale of a Basque immigrant, starting with her arrival as a teenager alone in northern Wyoming on a cold February day in 1902. Struggling to find her way and learn the language, Zelestina soon befriends another outsider, a young Cheyenne Arapaho woman, and together they learn to navigate this foreign landscape.

Zelestina's character is compelling, but what really distinguishes this story is the voice of the narrator. Inventive, opinionated, and erudite, the unnamed narrator is as central to the novel as Zelestina herself. He tells of her life, spanning many decades, while he inserts countless personal references to literary and pop culture, ranging from Aristophanes to *Galaxy Quest*. The effect, interspersing comments about man landing on the moon with descriptions of life on the early frontier, is both engaging and disorienting, exactly as intended.

A winner of the Pushcart Prize, former poet laureate of Wyoming, and teacher in the MFA program at the University of Wyoming, Romtvedt has a deep understanding of his subject and his craft. He's an enchanting, natural storyteller, with a light touch and a wry sense of humor.

But under all the playfulness, the novel also reveals a deep heart. A description of the massacre at Wounded Knee is profoundly moving. Similarly, the novel closes with a sincere tribute to love and loss:

> *There is no one else in the world this man could have loved the way he loved this woman. If she had been a tree, and he a bird, he would have made his nest in that beloved tree. Even a week without seeing her would break his heart. In the end though there is only the end and with these words, he must say goodbye.*

The title at first seems disconcerting and anachronistic, conjuring up *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, not historical fiction about the immigrant experience. But the more one reads, the more appropriate the title seems as the novel careens across the decades and across worlds to tell an important, unique, and strangely powerful story.

KRISTEN RABE (Winter 2016)

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