The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness by Rick Bass (review)

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The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness. By Rick Bass.
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We've grown used to a prolific pace from Montana writer Rick Bass. The present collection of three "novellas," successor to *Platte River* (1994), represents his eleventh title in twelve years. *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* forms an odder package, as it includes a recently published story, "The Myths of Bears" (*The Southern Review*, winter 1997); Bass's first published short story, "Where the Sea Used to Be" (*The Paris Review*, spring 1987); and the title piece, the much longer novella written for this book. Thus, it enables us to gauge Bass's fiction across a decade, assessing his strengths and weaknesses.

"Where the Sea Used to Be" is a strong story reminiscent of Bass's days as a petroleum geologist, particularly as reflected in *Oil Notes* (1989). Protagonist Wallis Featherstone, age twenty-eight, is an independent oil prospector and something of a barnstormer pilot who lives and works in the field; he is a favorite among north Alabamans and a very good prospector. Lined up against him are antagonists whose names seem appropriate symbolic suggestions: some are comic (i.e., Jack, a parody, and old Harry Reeves) and some are not (i.e., Old Dudley, a Mississippi oil billionaire). Plotwise, Wallis learns to love twenty-year-old Sara Geohegan and, eventually, prospects a few wells that don't prove, thus breaking his streak. The most original aspect of the story derives from the title, for in this idea of an oil basin/ancient sea, Bass discovers a complex, resonant symbol he describes at some length. This ancient sea beckons to Wallis, who knows it better than anyone else; as an organizing metaphor, it has beckoned similarly to Bass, who has been working on a novelistic expansion of it most of the past decade since his work first appeared in print. Clearly, it has figured centrally in his imagination.

"The Myths of Bears" seems to me much more problematic. The plot expands from the failing relationship between Harley and Shaw painted at the beginning of the earlier novella, *Platte River*. Trapper and Judith, who left Tucson in 1909 for the Yukon, have marital problems, and Judith flees, eventually allowing herself to be lured back and caught in one of Trapper's traps. Bass sets the story between the 1890s and the 1920s, but its setting is secondary to its predominantly mythic texture. Bear myths aside, Bass has constructed a male predator/female prey fable, foreshadowed by a John Haines epigraph, to assess a faltering marriage. Judith is insistently likened to an ungulate, and Trapper to a wolf. This fable runs the risk of being either too predictable or too literalized. At the climactic moment of "re-capture," the narrator says of Judith: "She feels some part of her escape with the current—her other life, the mythical one. She feels, too, the second life—the

real life, also just as mythical—the one he has in his grip once more" (45). Some readers might find the story confuses rather than clarifies the relations between "mythical," "life," and "real life"—the characters' or their own.

For "The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness," Bass's longest published fiction to date, he returns to his first geography, the Texas Hill Country of *The Deer Pasture* and the title story in *In the Loyal Mountains*. The lengthy epigraph from *Self-Portrait with Birds* by John Graves—a Texas writer whom Bass loves and who has certainly influenced his writing—reads as a shorthand for Bass's novella. Deep and intimate family/land connections represent the novella's thematic center, and the tone is always reverential. Anne's story (which is simultaneously a biography of her family and their ten-thousand-acre Prade Ranch) is one of inheritance—all she has learned from Frank, her maternal grandfather; his intimate, the Mexican hand Old Chubb; her father, a maverick county agent and ecologist; her deceased mother, whose spirit pervades the Nueces River that flows through the ranch; and from the land itself, particularly its resident and migratory birds. She inherits the most from her grandfather, whose successor she is and whose lifespan of a century closely matches the ranch's life.

The novella summarizes Bass's career to date, as if he had taken the lessons but muted the occasional anger of such stories as "Days of Heaven" and *The Book of Yaak* and rewritten them in the form of an exemplum. "The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness" retells the mid- and later century's tale of steady environmental destruction and offers Prade Ranch, an "island of wildness," as antidote. Bass offers Anne to us as a model of retreat from the outer world and complete intimacy with a local landscape; she worships, as should we, at what her grandfather calls "the altar of specificity." "The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness" contains the best writing in Bass's newest book, even if it lacks substantial elements of the mythic or engagingly bizarre that marks his earlier fiction. As exemplum, it might feel a bit too didactic, or its lines of affection and criticism too familiarly drawn, for some readers. Too, one wonders what future life Anne, as protagonist and role model, faces, since, by Frank's measure, she has more than half her life to live. Does such a life, or a plot, become increasingly redundant? How does one sustain the narration of the marriage of self with landscape? In what ways can—or can't—it be ever new? These questions belong to many like Bass who work in the genre we call nature writing and write fiction as well as nonfiction. I deeply respect this definition of self and Bass's presentation of a slice of central Texas, even as I question tensions between this definition and the nature of narration.