

*“To endure, unchanged”*

*Seasoning Fever*, Susan Kerslake. Porcupine’s Quill, 2002.

This remarkable novel is Susan Kerslake’s first book since her collection of stories, *Blind Date*, was published in 1989, and her first novel since 1984. Many years in the writing, it is an assured work of stunning originality. Those familiar with Susan Kerslake’s previous works — *Middlewatch*, a novel, was published in 1976, and her story collection, *The Book of Fears*, was nominated for the Governor General’s Award in 1984 — will not be surprised by the limpid sensuality of her prose and the closely controlled manner in which the narrative moves across the years. However, they will easily recognize that *Seasoning Fever* marks a significant step forward in the art of this writer and that by any standard this is a major work of fiction.

An historical novel set in a westward-expanding America in the years following the Civil War, *Seasoning Fever* is the tale of Hannah and Matthew, who leave their New England homes and their families and travel into the continent’s vast and untenanted prairie heartland. They settle in country that is unnamed and largely unmarked, and it is here — literally in the middle of nowhere — that their story unfolds. When we meet them in the book’s early chapters they seem little more than children, closely watched by their mothers, immature and naïve and yet brashly determined to leave their homes and head west. But maturity comes quickly, as it must under such circumstances. After marrying they take the train as far west as it will carry them, and then travel further by other means. At the end of their journey they find themselves on a parcel of land that they must clear and plant in order to feed themselves, residing in a dwelling that Matthew has built from the only material at hand: sods. Isolated at first, they slowly connect with

the land and with the other families that surround them. But survival is never far from their thoughts; the basic necessities of life — water, food, reliable transport — are genuine everyday concerns.

By leaving the sheltered safety of the New England coast, Matthew and Hannah forfeit any claim they might have had to the protection that a civilized society affords its citizens. This is the price they pay for autonomy and for settling on a piece of unclaimed land. In their house on the prairie they sit exposed — to the Indians who have lived there for centuries, to the wildlife that both threatens and provides a capricious source of food, to their own untested ability to raise crops and keep livestock, to weather that can change without warning and claim lives without remorse, to the utter indifference of nature to their continuing survival. But their story also takes place on another level. Kerslake makes it clear that Matthew and Hannah are living in a kind of perilous Garden of Eden, and that what is really being tested is the strength of their commitment to each other and to the project they have undertaken.

Over time a community develops, and the new settlers cannot do otherwise but become involved in the lives of others. There is a town within a day's ride, but their closest neighbours are Addie and Lewis and their gaggle of children. The two families become intimate, in the way that necessity thrusts strangers together and fashions a symbiotic or mutually beneficial relationship out of mere proximity. Tully, the oldest boy of Addie and Lewis, develops an affectionate and protective attachment to Hannah, which turns to aversion in an instant when the pregnant Hannah makes a thoughtless remark after Tully's sister Rosa dies. For the rest of the novel, Hannah is haunted by Tully's undisguised antagonism and his inability to forgive her. The scene in which he finally confronts her is terrifying in its subtle evocation of twisted bitterness and suppressed violence.

Like other of Kerslake's works, *Seasoning Fever* possesses a dreamlike quality. This is in part attributable to the rhythmic flow and intricate texture of the prose, but also results from the aura of timelessness the author creates by refusing for much of the novel to situate the action either chronologically or geographically. The year 1871 is mentioned, as is the name Lincoln, and Hannah and Matthew's progression from east to west is suggestive of expansionist America, but other than these clues the reader must rely upon the action itself and an abundance of brilliantly drawn descriptive detail in order to place the action within its historical context.

And this is a book that is lush with detail. Every page offers up a succession of vivid images and one exquisitely wrought phrase after another. Yet we never feel the author is showing off or allowing her mastery of language to get the better of her internal editor. As with all good fiction character remains at the core of Susan Kerslake's novel, and beyond its ability to dazzle, the language of *Seasoning Fever* serves its primary function — to evoke setting, to reach inside characters and bring them to life, to tell a story — with rare fluency.

In the grim light of red fires laundry shuddered in slow dances. There were no stars to be seen through the smoke, and blurred sounds of strenuous drinking masked the wilderness just beyond. Once more she looked at the cow, who dozed because she had never smelled or been smelled by a wolf. Sleepless, pensive, Hannah was without two true thoughts to rub together. Her thoughts of old comfort were at an end, but nothing new replaced them. She admitted a thin, elusive feeling of loss but no regret. She didn't know how to recognize regret.

In the end *Seasoning Fever* belongs to Hannah and Matthew and their story of passion and survival in the American mid-west of the nineteenth century. By allowing us a glimpse of the everyday lives of those living in frontier country, Kerslake makes it possible for us to understand how people can persist and even thrive under circumstances that are both uninviting and unforgiving. By the end of the novel Hannah and Matthew have entered their third year in their new home. They have two children and have withstood misfortune, but have also made some astounding discoveries, about themselves and the world around them. Susan Kerslake has written a powerful novel about the resilience of the human spirit.

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