



Author uses poet's passion, artist's imagery for unusual look at America

Excerpted from: *Post-Bulletin*, [Rochester, MN]: 7 September, 1996

By: Joyce Nelson

The journey through this book is a rough one, somewhat like careening through a steep, narrow canyon, dragging your tender tail in the dust while trying in vain to slow the descent by grabbing at passing scrub brush. You eventually slide to a stop at the bottom, dazed and exhilarated, bloodied and battered, bruised but beatific.

Camber Porter brings the passions of a poet and the imagery of an artist to this most unusual look at America. The author is a British journalist who focused on French culture from Paris, exhibited watercolors and oils to an enthusiastic European audience and wrote poetry before moving to New York. She wrote this first novel after a visit to the Badlands with her husband, a native of the region. Her view of this place was thus unobscured by cultural presumption, her observations more acute.

Readers are first introduced to Lakota land as the narrator, an unnamed young woman, and her lover, a lawyer, now New Yorkers, drive in for a working visit. He hopes to promote the case of Blackfoot who wants to reclaim German farmers' land as sacred Indian burial grounds. As the narrator sees the territory for the first time, she sees it as a gaping wound, a ghetto for the excommunicated, a wrinkled hell. As she meets the Indians who reside in this abandoned plain, she sees them as the Incas of America, subjugated people living a nightmare. She thinks, "For to have myth and magic in one's past, to be part of the child world, believing in mountains becoming men, and such, seems to be the stuff of which failure is made."

Both of the travelers feel alone, guilty, haunted by death, prey to images of abandonment and emptiness, nothingness. The wide-open spaces make them feel vulnerable. As they spend hours with Blackfoot and two children roaming the area, they are fearful of the intense emotion, superstition, lack of inhibition and guilt. The roaming becomes more meandering as the book continues. Pilgrimages are made to the father of the lawyer. The dead mother of the narrator appears in dreams, and there is a blurring of time, personal boundaries, and reality. The author stops using quotation marks and there is a stream-of-consciousness feel. The visitors become wounded dreamers plumbing their own depths, "like the first settlers, then, fearing the Indian ways, but drunk on them."

Finally, after suspecting that the noble savages are really cynics, and that political motivation paled in the presence of personal need, that a heroic epoch had dwindled to the stuff of soap operas, the charac-



ters do emerge from their wanderings, healed and made whole by their associations with the Badlands and the Lakota. Their aimlessness is revealed as a search for love — the kind that is all embracing, elemental. Their reconciliation with life comes only when they recognize the earth as an animated sphere, dating back to an ancient time when there was no need of man. The vision of this earth changes all. “You’ve died in a way, living in tune with a consciousness made of stone and storm and gas and the winds of millions of years etched in mud, the Badlands sing of this.”

Camber Porter may frighten readers with the power and raw emotion of such a primitive planet and people. However, her poetry captures the awesome possibilities of life and invites a contemplation and celebration of cosmic and timeless mystery.

© Post-Bulletin [Rochester MN] 1996

