

Kent Meyers, The Work of Wolves, New York and London: Harcourt, Inc., 2004.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

This is an uncommonly good novel, one of the best ever by a South Dakotan. It has all of the elements of first-rate fiction: memorable and evocative settings, excellent characterizations, interesting and engaging conflicts, dramatic action which intensifies throughout the narrative, culminating events which are compelling, and a believable and satisfying conclusion.

The primary setting is out of doors, the long vistas of western South Dakota, and the narrative is punctuated by landscape paintings such as this one:

From where they loitered they could see the last light glowing on the tan tops of the hills above Lostman's Lake, and they could see, in contrast, the deep shadows of draws angling down those hills. To the southwest the earth turned into what looked against the darkening sky like high and ancient pueblos sheared off and sharpened by wind and rain: the Badlands, where stone skeletons rose from the land year after year, a rebirth by erosion, an alphabet of bone that, read rightly, told a story stretching back to the endless water of the Bearpaw sea.

Or this:

A prairie falcon left a power pole and flew low over the orange-brown expanse of a milo field, and a hen pheasant came out of the road ditch grass and returned. A jet labored across the sky and disappeared, and its contrail disappeared.

But the author is also very good at descriptive snapshots of the endlessly alive prairie that are interwoven with the narrative action. For example:

She put the pickup into gear. They bounced over the ruts of the field toward the road. A covey of quail leapt from the fence line grass, torpedoed away, disappeared into the ground.

And:

He walked to the open barn door, stood in the rhombus of light created by the descending sun. A duck rose from the stock pond below the pasture, circled the pond twice, changed its mind for some duckish reason, and angled back, braced its feet, splashed into the water precisely where it had left.

However, prairie near and far are not the only significant settings in this narrative. There are also many suggestive interior spaces: farm and ranch houses, reservation houses, and even houses of a key character's remembering of interior spaces in his native Germany. In all of these place descriptions, the author's keen eye for detail contributes significantly to creating the moods, the psychological settings, which intensify the narrative action.

The characters in this fiction are equally various and well-wrought. Character creates character, and there are numerous character pairings that reveal and deepen the characters that people this book. There are multiple father-son pairings, and youth-age juxtapositions, and Indian-white counterpart relationships which are also very revealing. In regard to the latter, the author has achieved what few authors even attempt: authentic Indian and white characters in believable give-and-take relationships with each other. As a result, this fiction is truly multicultural, and therefore a heartening dramatization of the possibilities for inclusiveness in literature and in life, which makes it both atypical and a very good model for all writers of this region and beyond it.

There are also numerous compelling conflicts in this narrative. There is classic villainy against the good intentions of those who have enough courage to oppose it, and conflicts between those who love the land and those who would leave it, and conflicts between those who value old cultural ways of being and those who are given over to the corrupting temptations of the present—and there are also the wars within, the inner conflicts which make any story especially meaningful. Divided selves are central to literature because, of course, they are central to life, and there are a number of characters within this story with whom readers may relate based on personal experience.

This narrative also features an especially interesting subplot, or a parallel plot, really, because there are so many important connections between it and the cultural and historical context for the main plot. The focal character for this subplot is a German exchange student whose family's troubled past in Hitler's Germany coincides in various ironic ways with the history of the country that student is temporarily experiencing. Comparison leads to wisdom, and the unfolding of this parallel plot through the exchange student's memories of his personal and family experiences is both thought-provoking and informative.

Finally, this narrative focuses memorably upon the earth itself and upon what has been lost through gain, and upon what can be helpfully remembered and perhaps even reclaimed. The central figures of this focus are the horses, which are the main source of conflict throughout, and the wolves of the title, existing now only in memory. How all of this is brought together in the end, an ending that is satisfyingly inclusive, is truly impressive.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you look for in a novel?
2. How do you compare this novel to others you have read?
3. Which of the characters in this novel interest you the most? Why?
4. Is the device of the prologue effective? Why or why not?
5. Does the author use foreshadowing to effect in this narrative?
6. Which is your favorite scene? Why?
7. What does the narrative reveal about philosophical differences between tribal people and others?
8. Is the dialogue believable?

9. Why does the author make so much of the images of grocery sacks in some of his descriptions?
10. What do birds contribute to the narrative action?
11. Does the division of the book into named sections contribute to the overall effect?
12. What is the role of memory in this narrative? How is it evoked?
13. Is this a love story?
14. How might the nature versus nurture argument be applied to this narrative?
15. What does the story reveal about the nature of evil?
16. How is humor used to further the narrative action?
17. How effective is the metaphor of the cage in the story?
18. Is the recurring use of the story of the Goat Man an effective device?
19. Are the story's characters well-named? Why or why not?
20. Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Kent Meyers grew up on a small farm in southern Minnesota, attended the University of Minnesota, Morris, and obtained a Master's degree from Washington State University. His first novel, The River Warren, was a finalist for the Barnes and Noble Discover Series Award and also a finalist in the Society of Midlands Authors book awards. The Witness of Combines, a collection of essays, won the Friends of American Authors Award in 1998 and was a finalist in the PEN/West Awards the same year. Light in the Crossing, a collection of short stories, was a New York Times Notable Book in 1999, and his most recent novel, Twisted Tree, has received a Best Adult Fiction of 2009 award. Meyers has also published fiction and non-fiction in numerous national literary journals, and he has won several awards for his stories. He teaches in the English Department at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, South Dakota.

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