



Sheepeater: To Cry for a Vision

Joseph Dorris

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An evocative historical novel, Sheepeater sees a family fighting for survival in foreign and unnerving territories.

Joseph Dorris's historical coming-of-age story *Sheepeater* follows a family west toward the Salmon River in Idaho.

When he is young, Erik Larson travels from Minnesota with his family, seeking new territories that a family friend has likened to the valleys of Sweden. The Larsons travel alongside other families; each passing day makes their dreams seem farther away. Erik's mother falls ill; his sister is sent ahead with another family. Erik and his parents leave the trail for the winter, though it is a harsh season that they may not have the skills to survive. They also have to deal with the threat of encountering the Tukudeka, a Native American tribe. Along the way, Erik has to learn to let go of his past and concentrate on making it through the unforgiving terrain.

Erik shows remarkable valor and maturity for his age, taking up many demanding roles and making hard decisions regularly. He shows outstanding initiative and bravery, as when, having run out of options, he takes his sick mother to the Tukudeka tribe, commonly referred to as the Sheepeaters, for help. His initial fear dissolves as the Tukudeka tribesmen do all they can to help his mother.

The book's tone is dispiriting, especially in the beginning, when the Larsons and their fellow travelers face mysterious illnesses, frustrations, and constant desperation. There is little hope to hang on to as Erik faces insurmountable losses.

The desperation of the Larsons' situation is best shown through Jon, Erik's father, and his dreams to build a better life. The burden of making this happen weighs heavily on him, and he suffers from self-doubt. His memories of Sweden, Chicago, and Minnesota are well integrated, as are the threats of war and cholera that make the family leave for the West.

The book moves chronologically; the plot is clear and consistent. The beautiful yet terrifying canyons are a fitting backdrop, and the Sheepeaters' perspectives of the land—which they consider beautiful and which is their lifeblood—are usefully juxtaposed to the Larsons', who see it as foreign and foreboding.

The text is light on dialogue; communicating with the Sheepeaters is complex, and neither Erik nor his parents are eager to openly express their inward concerns. Though its characters' interactions are marked by this hesitance, the story ends in a gratifying way that imparts deeper understandings.

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EDITH WAIRIMU (August 6, 2018)

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