



The Grand Promise: A Novel

Rebekah Anderson

Empty Bowl (Jun 1, 2022)

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The epic historical novel The Grand Promise covers a grand vision, human resilience, and the enduring power of love.

Rebekah Anderson's compelling historical novel *The Grand Promise* covers the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam—in terms of its benefits and its consequences.

Set in the 1930s, when the effects of the Great Depression were taking their toll, the novel, though epic in scope, seeks to human-size the grand venture of the dam's construction. It cuts across demographics to humanize those who were swept along by the force of the nation's vision for the future. It embodies this conflict in Carter, a young man who flees his conflicted relationship with his dominating father, his failed marriage, and his possible arrest to seek a new life elsewhere. He finds work on the dam project, which is also set to swallow up his hometown.

In his words, actions, and thoughts, Carter is revealed as a sensitive man. He loves books; his worldly inexperience gets him into trouble, though. Above all, he's a truth seeker in a confusing world. He struggles to understand other people's inclinations toward prejudice and racism, and he is confused by the dam builders' lust for power and belief in progress at any cost. To Carter, President Roosevelt's vision of a nation in which all citizens are "members of one another" is more compelling.

Around Carter, others are also seen grappling with the effects of cataclysmic change. Some of them—including Penn, a girl who becomes important toward the end of the tale—have elusive backstories. Still, each person is compelling as they try to cope with the change before them: some are courageous; others escape into alcohol and debauchery. Members of various groups, dressed for war and bearing rifles, take a stand along the riverbanks; and a brief scene of a dynamite blast raining down dry bones from a tribal burial site is heartrending.

Achieving a balance between its instances of tension and release, the story holds attention throughout. It handles disparate elements with skill, including the technical aspects of the project; its environmental, political, and social effects; and intimate details of conflicted family life. People's conversations are spare but natural; oftentimes, they're concerned with responses to the dam, showing how, with the right timing and setting, even a single-word response can be effective.

While most of the story is focused on the attitudes and actions of men, its women are caring and strong too. Indeed, it is Carter's younger sister who intervenes to turn the tide of despair, all while herself keeping a terrible secret. And the book's descriptions of the natural world—the beauty of light reflecting on water and trees, bright birdsong at dawn, and of rough, memory-filled dwellings—highlight what could be lost in the name of progress.

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KRISTINE MORRIS (May 16, 2023)

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