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Martha Ostenso , David Arnason (Afterword)

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Wild Geese caused a sensation when it was first published in 1925. To a generation bred on sentimental escapist literature, the idea of a heroine as wild as a bronco and as fiery as a tigress was nothing short of revolutionary. In the character of Judith Gare, Martha Ostenso had painted so naked and uncompromising a portrait of human passion and need that it crossed all bounds of propriety and convention.

Today, *Wild Geese* is widely recognized as a milestone in the development of modern realist fiction. Set on the windswept prairies, it is a story of love and tyranny, of destruction and survival, told with vigour and lyric beauty. It is also a poignant evocation of loneliness, which, like the call of the wild geese, is beyond human warmth, beyond tragedy, “an endless quest.”

From the Paperback edition.

Wild Geese Details

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Author : Martha Ostenso , David Arnason (Afterword)

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From Reader Review Wild Geese for online ebook

Ibis3 says

This book was really quite good. It was a gripping psychological suspense story, a little bit like say, Rebecca, though without any overt gothicism. There may be a touch of pathetic fallacy, but overall, the style is realistic and modern.

There's so much tension built up among the characters and we know it's going to break at the end, we just don't know how, and how much damage will be unleashed, how many innocents will be destroyed in the process.

Caleb Gare has been added to my list of cruel and evil characters, and his evil is less cartoonish than that of many (e.g. Quilp from The Old Curiosity Shop). He feels compelled to possess his wife, but never can because she loved and had a child with another man before marrying him. This inability causes him to become even more obsessed with controlling her and her children by him, and the land they live on, until he becomes an utter tyrant in as large a sphere as he can manage. He uses psychological manipulation and blackmail to turn his children into slaves and his neighbours into his pawns.

There's a lot of sexual energy infusing the narrative: Caleb's need for domination, Amelia's passionate memory for Mark Jordan's father, Lind's attraction to both Mark and Judith (the first romantic, the second on more of a physical level), Judith's mere animal presence and character that expresses itself not only in a desire for Sven, but an admiration for Lind, and a desperate need to escape her father's tyranny.

The descriptions of the landscape are evocative and often mirror the mental states of the characters: the bleak lake bed, the lush grain driven from the earth by Caleb's brutality, the ice blue lake, abounding with fish but forbidden to eat from until the bodies of two dead brothers are recovered.

There were times that I found the writing a tad repetitive, but that's a rather minor flaw.

Jocelyn says

I read about Wild Geese on my friend, Melanie's blog (roughingitinthebooks.ca) and she gifted me copy which sat on my bookshelf for 5 (6?) years until she wrote about it again here:

<http://www.roughingitinthebooks.ca/?p...>

Wild Geese is a story about isolation, and after I finished it I realized I read the entire thing believing it was set in Alberta. It's not, but really it could be set anywhere because it's about isolation and the rules we make up to cope with that isolation...

IT's really a beautiful book, at times the psychological drama had me reading late into the night and I carried Amelia's worries with me all the next day (What will become of poor Judith?). Such a great read, and it really does have all the feels.

I will be genuinely surprised if some rando cavalier film maker doesn't the film rights to it. Ryan Gosling as

Mark Jordan, please thanks

Book 3/17 I WILL NOT LEND IT TO YOU BECAUSE YOU NEED YOUR OWN COPY

Sarah says

The "mystery" at the heart of this book is revealed almost from the first page, yet it is more gripping than any mystery or thriller I have read in years, because the book's real mystery is the struggle between beauty and cruelty, freedom and resentment. It's a book that almost screams for an eco-feminist-Marxist reading, making it surprisingly pertinent to times in which insecure misogynists gas-light women and do every kind of outrage for more money.

Probably because of the prairie setting and bold character of Judith reminiscent of Hagar in *The Stone Angel*, this book kept reminding me of Margaret Laurence. Actually, Laurence is a later CanLit treasure, perhaps influenced by Ostenso. Ultimately, I think Laurence is a little more subtle and less "novelistic," so in comparison I would give this a 4.5 rating, but *Wild Geese* is a reminder of why I love literature and analysis. It would be a joy to teach, I think.

Jonathan Tshinanu says

I'll keep this relatively brief as this was a book read for my course and as a result, perhaps my opinion is sullied. I found that my biggest issue with *Wild Geese* was Martha Ostenso's desperation for literary notoriety and acclaim (seeing as I'm reading this over a century later, I suppose she achieved that). She's desperate to tell you about the symbolism here, instead of allowing the reader to make of the story's metaphors and themes itself.

I did, however, appreciate the multi-dimensional characters. The antagonist, Caleb Gare, can be seen as a simple tyrant but I found his resorting to only verbal abuse (until the end), and his own feeling of betrayal and inadequacy to give him layers. I also appreciated Amelia's own flaws, a woman whom protected one of her sons and had no pity for her other children. The counterbalanced femininity and masculinity between Ellen and Judith was also interesting to see. Ellen, more feminine and fragile, refuses to pursue her heart's desires, while Judith, lauded as muscular, beast-like, ends up in the most feminized position possible. Martha's at her best with these multifaceted characters and an endearing enticing story, even the minor characters have worthwhile layers.

I only believe that if she'd had more time perfecting her writing or a contemporary editor, the style itself would have improved - but that might simply be a question of time difference whereby her tendencies: showing not telling, plastering her theme everywhere and exclaiming it proudly though her main character - was common then. Nevertheless, I'm always enticed by a good romantic story, and even this gothic romance-like novel suited those interests.

Tom Gray says

“Wild Geese” is a novel of two protagonists. It is novel of the working out of a primal conflict between them. It is a novel that portrays the psyches of Caleb Gare and his daughter Judith and the inevitable conflict between them.

Caleb Gare is a man who is incapable of feeling anything for anybody but himself. For Caleb, there is nothing but his driving ambition that drives him acquire wealth in the form of the land that supports his farm. Those around him are either people whose land he can take by any stratagem or his family whose wills he can break and turn to his own purposes turning them into slaves to his ambition. Judith, his daughter, is subjected to his constant psychological torments. He uses the standard brainwashing technique. The only escape from the torments that he inflicts is to bend to his will. His wife and the rest of his family submit to this but his daughter Judith has a psyche which is incapable of submitting. There is an inner resolve which demands independence and self-will. She refuses to break and constantly and involuntarily attempts to escape internally and yearns for an escape from him in the external world. In the end, it is the land itself which destroys Caleb. He is trapped in the grasping muck of the muskeg and is pulled under and drowned. Judith escapes from him with her lover Sven and the remainder of the family is released from his psychological bondage.

“Wild Geese” is a novel of conflict within a family. The parent creates the child and tries to control her. In the end the child escapes and the parent is destroyed. I am no scholar, but this appears to me to be a working out of a classical trope. It is the trope from which I would suppose that the classical story of Oedipus comes. It is a compelling novel with strongly delineated characters. The conflict between them is a conflict that works out in different ways in many families and in many other situations. In that, it is a novel that explores important ideas. It is a novel that touches the inner emotions of the reader by exploring psychological conflicts that the reader has gone through. It is a novel worth reading.

Julie says

I would like to say that this has the resonance of a Greek tragedy. All the elements are present: a dead, romantic young regent; a controlling, cruel dictator; a captive spouse who is manipulated because of her past transgressions; a beautiful, strong-willed daughter who thinks of duty before happiness; a weak-hearted sister who is secretly jealous of the strong-willed elder daughter; a hapless prince-apparent who only wants to be happy and bestow happiness; an unruly younger child -- and an illegitimate son who is in danger of killing the cruel stepfather, unwittingly. If I put it that way to you, it's impossible that such a book should fail. But, while all these elements are true, this novel falls far short of a Greek tragedy and becomes something of a plain prairie tale, with neither morality or true redemption.

There are beautiful, captivating moments within this all-too common story of immigrant life on the Manitoba prairie but they are far too infrequent to leave you with a sense of satisfaction from something well-told. I puzzled through this book, wondering just what was not sitting right with me, and I think I may have found it in the author's biography.

While Martha Ostenso won a prize for this (a princely \$13,500 in 1925!) it appears that she may have been more than a little bit disingenuous about its authenticity, for she had it "edited" by her mentor (later lover, and finally husband), Douglas Durkin, English professor at University of Manitoba and a professional writer

in his own right. Ostenso admitted later in life that *Wild Geese* was "heavily edited" by Durkin. (Hmmm ...) Durkin and Ostenso went on to become courted in Hollywood, in fact, in the 1930s and '40s, and received "acclaim" for their screenwriting.

The other disingenuous part about her story is that she is only marginally Canadian. (Maybe her elbow; maybe her left foot.) She is most often described as a Norwegian American writer -- who won a prize as a *Canadian* author because she spent a year teaching in Manitoba at a schoolhouse much like the one described in this book, and a year attending University of Manitoba. Most of her life was spent in Minnesota, New York, and California. [Her parents emigrated to Manitoba from Norway, like a glancing blow, but quickly re-settled in Minnesota and later North Dakota. I suppose therein lies the "authentic" Canadian Connection.]

All those biographical notations notwithstanding, she did seem to know the Canadian prairie (which is undoubtedly much like Minnesota, in any case, à la Laura Ingalls.) and writes convincingly of the prairie settlers' experience. With characters larger than life, combined with the immigrants' song, she paints a compelling Canadian landscape of hard scrabble life, deprivation and isolation. Her characters are driven by hard-work, determination and single-minded purpose; and her characters reflect what that single-minded purpose often engenders: mental and spiritual starvation.

There is cruelty here, to an incomprehensible degree, in the patriarch of the family; his wish to succeed economically above everything else in life is his motivating force. There is submission here, to an equally incomprehensible degree, in the matriarch -- which at best is a misnomer of position, as she abdicates everything to her husband's will. She fails to protect her children. More than failure to protect, it seems more like a refusal to protect. All the children are subjugated into obedience, at the worst cost; and yet, there is no need. Even when presented with choices for freedom, they remain. I rebelled most strongly at the mother's weakness for at best she was a will-o'-the-wisp, languid, spiritless sort: more vapour than solid, even before she met and married her husband. His controlling character only reinforced an already-weak character -- but then, that is undoubtedly how such men win: they marry those who will be controlled easily, who will accept the yoke willingly.

It is an ugly tale of breathless survival. Fresh air enters only when the winds blow in "from the south" -- a fresh young schoolmarm from away; a handsome young prince from "the towns". Redemption, which I hinted is missing, does come in a backward way, but it only comes through inertia and accident. The hapless immigrant's family prevails through no action of its own. Again hmmm... Is that really the quintessential Canadian pioneers' experience?

It is a mishmash tale, probably representative of the mishmash birth of this novel: a fresh young voice, painted over by an experienced hand, who hearkens back to the 19th century rather than look forward to the 20th. Therein lies the dilemma in the end: the novel was composed by two opposing voices and so the tension within the novel is always telling two disparate stories. It is indeed like someone who is building a Greek tragedy of epic scope, but who ultimately paints it a bit flat, like the landscape upon which it's built.

Lorraine says

Found this in my stack of TBR books. What a surprise! It's set in northern Manitoba (actually in Interlake region) when new settlers were just moving into Can. The book was written in 1925. It reads like a modern novel, however, with an amazing use of language to create atmosphere, characters who are so real they seem to walk off the page, and a plot that grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. It deals with modern issues like

spousal abuse, parental abuse, bullying, greed, and love. There are two Romeo and Juliet couples who are threatened with exposure and danger. The conflict is multi-faceted - physical, emotional, and psychological. Underlying it all is a strong sense of sensuality and repressed sexuality. The environment carries a sense of danger and foreboding as well as fecundity and growth. All very common in modern novels but apparently this caused a lot of controversy when the novel was first published. A strong book that made me think and feel.

Natasha Whyte says

Ostenso's novel enacts conflict while its characters simultaneously shy away from it - by this I mean that the novel itself is both the source of conflict while it exploits the conflicts within to its own advantage. The novel is a living, breathing thing that influences the characters simply by documenting them. The characters consistently feel as though they're part of a story; that there is something moving beyond their control which they can only be influenced by rather than act upon. Caleb, as the main antagonist, takes it into his head that he can control the plot of the novel. The narrator, the fluid, moving voice that invades the head of every character we meet, knows he will ultimately fail and drops hints of this throughout the story. Lind, while she appears to be the main voice we hear, is dimly aware, or at least suspects, that Caleb will eventually get what is coming to him. What the narrating voice of the novel knows that she doesn't is the certainty of Caleb's demise. We may consider Grandmother Bjarnnasson to be the voice of the novel. On page 47 she reveals the end of the novel to Lind and to the reader.

"She says you will have a lover very soon," Lind was told. "There is a shadow of him. You will never know the secret of him. But you will be happy. That is all that is enough, she has told you."

After Lind's visit to the Bjarnnasson's, she (as well as the reader) has a dubious belief that Mark will never discover his own secret, just as Lind will also never know it. This means that Caleb will fail to ruin Mark's perception of himself, thus also failing to destroy Amelia, thus failing to break the rest of the Gare family.

The play between the novel as a conscious force and the characters as tools within it is interesting because it creates a feeling of inevitability and overwhelming resolution. When Caleb eventually dies, there seems to have been no other possible way to end the story. Both the novel and the characters know this and the reader knows this once he/she reads it that it couldn't have been different in any way.

Dessa says

Perhaps nothing is as satisfying as watching a truly horrible person get what's coming to him.

Parts of this don't hold the same weight I imagine they once did (illegitimate children! Life-ending shame and horror!) but other parts certainly do.

Simon Böhm says

Recommended by my Writing professor as it is an example of "prairie gothic" and, well, it is. Not bad by a long shot but it feels like something is missing. Can't really describe it.

Melissa says

I found this book in the travel guide under Great Canadian Reads. Not only did the author's description of the farms and the surrounding countryside take me there, but her characters were real and I felt their struggles too. I also have to say that I have never wished for the death of a character in a story as much as I did for the farmer/father/antagonist Caleb Gare. None of the characters mentioned homicidal thoughts, but it came through in the story. I was cheering on Lind, the new school teacher, in her encouragement of Judith and the rest of the family's escape from his tyranny.

Maddy says

Thinking of this book reminds me of the summer of 2004, when I was living by myself in Hamilton and (among other things) taking a summer course in Can Lit. I was a bit underwhelmed by the prof, but the classically Canadian feeling of vague despair of this book stays with me.

J. B. says

I just finished this last night. Whenever I ask someone if they'd heard of it, the answer is always no. I wonder why. It was truly wonderfully realistic and beautifully written. Her use of metaphors and similes was so original that I was able to visualize the landscapes as if I was watching a movie. The imagery was stunning.

I love many of her lines in the book, but one in particular stood out for me: "The dank, clinging smell of newly turned soil rose like a presence." Martha Ostenso has a special way with words; one that makes you smile while reading.

It was a story of tyranny, love, jealousy and most of all, the haunting call of the Wild Geese. An astounding Canadian novel. Not one to be overlooked!

Mrsgaskell says

This was an unexpectedly compelling and very satisfying novel. I hadn't heard of it or the author when I purchased it from the library discard table. Caleb Gare is a cruel tyrant who wields the secret of his wife Amelia's illegitimate child over her, and indirectly over their children. The children don't know their mother's secret but are cowed by the knowledge that any failure on their part to comply with their father's wishes will be taken out on their mother. Caleb only cares for the land and his precious field of flax. He drives his family hard, well or ill, and he merely observes while they work the fields and tend the animals. He is miserly; they are ill-shod, Ellen goes without needed new glasses, Amelia has been waiting years for new teeth, and Martin can only dream of the new house he would like to build. Only beautiful, strong Judith shows open rebellion. The atmosphere in the household is oppressive and hateful; even Amelia appears prepared to sacrifice her children because they are Caleb's. Caleb Gare does not limit his tyranny to his family; he is also not above blackmailing neighbours who own land which he desires. The setting is the

northern Manitoba prairie of 1925. The novel opens with the arrival of a pretty new teacher, Lind Archer, who will board with the Gares. Caleb makes a point of ignoring her. Lind befriends Judith, and also meets and falls in love with Mark Jordan, who has arrived from the city to run the farm of a seriously ill neighbour. Mark is the illegitimate son of Amelia but unaware of his true parentage. Ellen is too afraid of her father to go off with the young man she loves but Judith secretly begins to meet Sven Sandbo until her father discovers them. This precipitates a confrontation that will have repercussions for all of them.

Bettie? says

to look into/to hunt down/look at reviews
