The Plain Sense of Things

Joern, Pamela Carter
The Corresponder
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Book Review
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The Plain Sense of Things
by Pamela Carter Joern
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Like the desolate Nebraska prairie in which they struggle for survival, Pamela Carter Joern’s characters appear to be devoid of warmth and feeling. However, just as the frozen winter soil contains the seeds of a new spring, the characters of The Plain Sense of Things conceal an abundance of feeling that they dare not display before an unforgiving environment and a merciless world. This novel consists of a collection of stories that trace the unfolding saga of the Preston family. Joern explores the aloneness of the individual and the importance of those rare moments when human beings escape from the clutches of fear and painful memory in order to respond to the immediate need for human connection. Joern introduces her novel with a selection from Wallace Stevens’ poem, “After the leaves have fallen, we return / To the plain sense of things.” This portion of the tumultuous pages to come will echo in the reader’s mind as he or she is introduced to Gramp, the patriarch of this Nebraska family and a man who is making the trip to the town of Heartstrong to acquire Billy, the son of his recently deceased daughter, Carlene. In this first chapter, “Ghost Town,” Gramp spends the night in his daughter’s broken down home and is forced to confront his own haunted house of memory. Like a midwestern Jacoby, Gramp wrestles with his feelings of guilt regarding his treatment of Carlene and the dark depths of poverty into which he cast her by rejecting “his wayward daughter, her rampish ways.”

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In one of the novel’s most poignant scenes, Gramp discovers a papier-mâché doll beneath Carlene’s bed, his own gift to her, symbolizing his wish that she had remained in a perpetual state of innocence, unmarred by sexual desire:

All tucks and pleats and buttons and lace, the way he thinks a girl should look, perfect and innocent... He lays the doll on the bed. She looks cold and lonesome, and he feels the edge of his wife’s quilt over her. He tucks it around her face, holds her curved fingers in his large bumbling hand.

Like the characters in the chapters to follow, Gramp fears the chaotic nature of emotion and memory, elements of human experience that must be foregrounded in the struggle to survive the Nebraska prairie. However, Joern’s characters cannot wholly succeed in repressing emotion and memory, but are forced to confront these dark twins of the psyche through their daily interactions with one another. While The Plain Sense of Things is a history of the Preston family’s pain, it also chronicles its joy, albeit joy that is hard-won.