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A GRAVESTONE MADE OF WHEAT

By Will Weaver

187 pp. Simon and Schuster.

Will Weaver follows his acclaimed first novel *Red Earth, White Earth* with a collection of twelve well-crafted stories unified by a compelling sense of place. These stories rise from the farmland of the American Midwest with an equal balance of pathos and humor. While not all are completely successful--the endings of "Dispersal" and "Gabriel's Feathers" could each, in different ways, use more restraint--most are excellent and all are effective. Weaver shows range and inventiveness in "You Are What You Drive," which traces the history of several Midwestern lives all linked by their common ownership of the same Buick LeSabre and "The Bread-Truck Driver," a series of interwoven scenes leading the Elvis-coiffured driver Jerry Lee to an uninhibited showdown with a frustrated college professor, a rock 'n rolling lark with a haunting finish. Particularly affecting are the title story and "Heart of the Fields," warm narratives about abiding loves that show up more clearly for the wide-open spaces of their settings. Weaver finds sources of affirmation in unlikely places. The title story relates Olaf Torvik's attempt to bury his wife on their farm against a state ordinance prohibiting home burial, which he defies by burying her in the heart of the farm and covering the grave in earth richly fertilized so the wheat there would forever grow "greener, taller, and more golden than all the rest. It would be the gravestone made of wheat." "The Cowman," Wayne Moen, Jr., finds himself at home and unburdened only after giving up his city job, returning to the farm he grew up on, and losing his father, mother and the heifer he nurses through failed labor as his wife leaves him, a story almost Scriptural in its illustration of a man finding his life by giving most of it up. In "The Trapper" Weaver refuses to shrink back from the vexing moral choices inherent in a tense conflict between an animal-loving harpy and an aging man who traps minks to retain his own freedom and independence. Will Weaver offers a gracefully written collection of stories that view America's heartland with a charitable but candid eye.