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## **THE SKY, THE STARS, THE WILDERNESS**

By Rick Bass

Houghton Mifflin. 190 pp.

Rick Bass embodies a fortunate confluence of virtues. From his earliest story collection, *The Watch*, he's professed a devout love for the land. As a petroleum geologist, he also possesses a scientific comprehension of the land. And as a writer of superb descriptive gifts, he has few equals in describing it.

Many of us wish he'd spend less time on non-fiction and more on the spellbinding stories that have won a devoted following. For Bass the storyteller weds art to understanding. More than a writer, his is an interpreter.

But petroleum geologists bore into their ground obliquely. That's what Bass does in the two long stories and novella comprising his luminous new book.

"The Myth of Bears" is a contemporary fable set in Montana after the turn of the Twentieth Century. Trapper had met Judith when they were 18. After nearly two decades together he thought she was tame, but he was wrong. "He'd not understood she was the wildest, most fluttering thing in the woods." That's where she's fled now, having run away from Trapper, the only person who ever loved her.

It's an equivocal kind of flight, however. On the one hand, she wants freedom: "It's not that he is a bad man, or that I am a bad woman, she thought. It's just that he is a predator, and I am prey.... If I am to survive, I have to run." The night she escaped, she believes, "was the first night of her life."

Yet she wants to entice as much as elude Trapper. When she sees him tracking her to bring her back, "she watched as if it were her wedding day; she felt that much love for him, and that much relief that he was missing her." Although his pursuit feels oppressive--"Why won't he leave me alone?... All I want is my life"--when she thinks he's quit his hunt she despairs: "It is terrible without the thought of him out there chasing her, hunting her. It's horrible. There's too much space." Love is both security and entrapment. She wants to run, yet not run away.

In the forests Judith runs through, life is primal. She is never more than two days from starvation. Trapper is incapable of abstraction, wholly absorbed by the direct, sensual need for his woman: "There is no spirit world, he thinks. There is just her, whom he wants to capture.... If he can capture her...all will be made new again."

This is basic Rick Bass, usually at his most articulate when rendering inarticulate people, people who feel more than think and sense more than speak, less reduced than purified to their most elemental drives, moving darkly through a misty landscape, as though Bass were perfecting the silhouette as a literary form.

His cast is more cluttered, his plot more snarled in "Where the Sea Used to Be," making that story less engaging. Yet it, too, echoes the quest for freedom of the first story, as one wildcat oil man insists "that it was better to belong to yourself and have one acre in a drilling well than to belong to another man, even if that man had a hundred." Again, Bass conveys his passion of the land, which his characters find they cherish more than they can any woman.

Deep in Rick Bass runs a quixotic, eccentric vein. For years, he's lived on a ranch in northwestern Montana's Yaak Valley, a half-hour from the nearest phone. One Christmas, he sent a Manhattan friend a six-foot Douglas fir tree through the mail. In *Oil Notes*, a 1989 memoir, he described his first date with his wife, taking her to the park for a picnic lunch of BLT sandwiches, lugging a microwave and extension cord in his trunk to plug into the tennis court lights outlet to grill her bacon.

His love for and knowledge of the land, his quixoticism and his deepening in the years since *Oil Notes* all combine in the hauntingly beautiful title novella.

A 44-year-old woman returns to the West Texas ranch where she grew up. After her mother's death when the girl was eight, she lived there with three generations of men: her grandfather and the old Mexican hand Chubb, her father and her younger brother.

Now, all are gone.

But she is not alone. Her mother was not buried but "planted" on the land, and both the land and the daughter are alive with her presence. The daughter feels both mother and soil are deep inside her: "I am not the land itself, neither am I a clone of my family. But the magnitude of my attachment to these things--and the stability it affords--stagger me."

The men in her life did not teach her this love for the land; that seems to have sprung in her fully grown. They enhanced and balanced that love. Her grandfather knew all the constellations, loved the sky, suggested it's where heaven was, while she suspects it might lie in the earth, her home, the wellspring of luck and grace. Together, their views form the sky god/earth mother complement that gave rise to Greek myth. Constrastingly, her father fought to defend the aquifer beneath their ranch, even as she was finding blessings in the eagles soaring above it. Between the grandfather and Chubb, too, lay oppositions that were really complements. Chubb saw on the land countless sources of his people's myths and legends; the grandfather felt it could only be understood and preserved by those who practiced empirical, systematic reason. The daughter herself will later eschew his science for its lack of "sacred awe."

The duality of romantic and scientist has always existed in Bass himself, but they blend into a yin/yang unity. He writes of the land with that kind of love only profound understanding can bring. And, as numinously as he describes its points of focus, the love itself proves ineffable, breathing between the lines, an active, not a verbal, quality.

That's the lesson his 44-year-old narrator leaves with us: "I have seen what it is we do best, and that is to love and honor one another: to love family, and to love friends, and to love the short days." Whatever we love, she insists, we keep alive.