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Heart Mountain
By Gretel Ehrlich
Viking, 412 pp.

Gretel Ehrlich's poignant 1985 book, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, was a non-fiction account of the author's move from New York to Wyoming where the open spaces permitted her a slow, hard-earned healing from the loss of the man she loved, dying at not quite 30. It won her a corps of devoted readers; "Wyoming has found its Whitman," Annie Dillard proclaimed, while the San Francisco Chronicle compared Ehrlich's best prose to Thoreau's. *Heart Mountain*, her second book, is her first novel, and here the open spaces are filled with humiliating confined spaces and wounds fester rather than heal. While at times *Heart Mountain* reads like a first novel, it may well prove to be one of the most important books of the year.

Set amid cattle ranches and small towns in Northern Wyoming near the Montana border, the action unfolds under the long shadow of Heart Mountain and the shameful chapter of American history it represents. The story begins in February, 1942. Barely ten weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt has signed Executive Order 9066, and immediately over 100,000 Americans of Japanese birth (called Issei) or descent (Nisei) are whisked from their homes and businesses and interned in ten camps strung from California to Idaho to Arkansas, one of them Heart Mountain Camp. Here they try to occupy their hours of enforced idleness without spending too many of them wondering why Americans of German and Italian ancestry can live free but their own yellow skin entitles them to less liberty and pursuit of happiness. Some turn to the study of bonsai, zen, Noh theater, ironically regrafting more and more to the ethnic roots they'd thought severed by becoming Americans. They now must face the mounting evidence that they never were considered Americans, simply the people referred to by the signs in the Wyoming store windows: “NO JAPS SERVED HERE."

Four miles west of the camp McKay Allison, whose lame leg keeps him out of the war, raises livestock and food on his family ranch while his brothers serve overseas. Also overseas is Henry, the husband of neighbor Madeleine Heaney who had been McKay's childhood sweetheart, both born on the same day in the same hospital and convinced the other was the first person they had ever seen. McKay soon finds himself passionately in love with Mariko, a lovely painter interned at the camp. McKay can see the Nisei artist infrequently as passes to and from the camp grow scarce. Mariko's most frequent companions are her grandfather who learned Noh mask-carving in his Kyoto birthplace and Kai Nakamura, a graduate student in history who is quartered in the next room.

Kai keeps detailed journals during the four years of imprisonment, the entries usually long enough to form entire chapters in the novel. Ehrlich uses Kai's journals to show how the younger internees react to the injustice they find themselves suffering. While the older, first-generation Japanese-Americans accept their bondage with the philosophical resignation that enabled their cousins across the Pacific to endure even Hiroshima, the younger inmates are wedged between fury at their own United States government and alienation from the remote Japanese customs of their parents. They are men and women without a country, stripped of almost any identity beyond guiltless prisoner.

As the world wages war beyond the novel's setting, Ehrlich fills the book with vivid accounts of the day-to-day work and passions of these people thrust together by external events, and this is where her richest writing lies. We get glimpses of Bataan and military hospitals and prison camps and Hiroshima in letters home from McKay's brothers and Henry, but mostly we see wild horses being broken, cock-fighting, rugged men and women trying to find love in a room or behind a waterfall, and the starkly challenging landscape of the American West. Ehrlich has a poet's eye for evoking a textured sense of place and an empathetic heart that helps us feel the erosion of people's lives. Her research seems exhaustive. Among the people she interviewed in preparation for this book are several former internees at Heart Mountain and other camps, soldiers who had survived the Bataan Death March and been prisoners of war in Japan, and a Japanese painter who spent the war 100 miles from Hiroshima. Ehrlich's travel took her from the Noh theaters of Kyoto to the libraries of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Like Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, which treated the same subject from a Canadian vantage, this novel speaks with convincing authority.

The author's intentions are clearly so large that only with regret must we note that not everything in the novel works. Her prose is often graceful but not always tight. Many of the pieces of plot and characterization she tries to weave together look jagged at the seams. Although Ehrlich's first book itself began as a journal, what are meant to be Kai's journal entries in this book often lack the immediate voice of journal keeping and read instead like Ehrlich writing essays on injustice, with a profundity constantly strived for but only intermittently achieved. Many of the supporting characters reach no more than one-dimensional shape and fail to engage us completely.

But what could be severe blemishes in a work of less noble and ambitious design begin to pale in this case next to what the author achieves. *Heart Mountain* has a panoramic and historical sweep that places it on a grand scale while its focus zooms close-up on people patiently enduring an American bigotry that sparks the reader's sense of outrage and remorse. If not always concise and unified, this first novel is without question absorbing, compassionate and substantial.