

REVIEWS

Ron Rash. *Serena*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 371 pages. Hardback with dust jacket, \$24.95.

REVIEWED BY JOYCE COMPTON BROWN.

Ron Rash's latest novel, *Serena*, is the best thus far from this author/poet who has always held himself to a rigorous standard. Its richness of epic grandeur made finer by the poet's exacting use of language detail results in a compelling read.

As *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin observes, this is the novel to call attention to Rash's complete body of work. Set in depression-era western North Carolina, it is a story of northern industrialists who come down to harvest the timber of the Smokies in a race with conservationists who are buying land for the developing Great Smoky Mountain National Park. As such, it offers relevance to the saga of robber barons of any age and place. Appalachian writer and scholar Jeff Biggers comments, "*Serena* might be the most dangerous and beautiful novel to hit the shelves this fall."

Clearly addressing our own time of greed run amuck, Rash portrays socioeconomic conflicts in Appalachia and in America. *Serena* is a tale of death and destruction of trees, land, water, a people, and the souls of profiteers. The story focuses on the Pembertons, who come to harvest lumber. Pemberton has procured land and hired workers for the logging operation, but he is ultimately no more than a tool for his wife, Serena, the central character. Serena serves as the voice of industrial ruthlessness, saying, as she prepares to leave, "We're proud of what we've done here." Rash adds, "as the mountain stands stump-ridden like pox sores."

Two strands of the writer's art come together to make this is a likely masterpiece of American literature. First, the author's careful craftsmanship is evident in every sentence, every word. Rash, the poet, selected language to give the novel a sense of continuity with the past. A young mother, Rachel, changes her baby's "swaddlings." She carries

a “tote sack.” Even the rhythm of language takes us away. “It’s a hard place the world can be. No wonder a baby cries coming into it,” says an old woman.

The poet’s sensibility permeates other word choices and creates an otherworldly aura. Rachel grieves for her father but finds comfort in one small memory. Her father had called her to the barn to show her a luna moth. “The barn’s stripes of light grew dimmer, and the moth seemed to brighten, as if the slow open and close of its wings gathered up the evening’s last light. Then the creature rose.” The fragile moth as enduring memory is especially poignant. The author himself recalls such a sighting from his childhood as he sat listening to his relatives talking in the dark of a Blue Ridge summer evening. The novel is deliciously filled with such poetry in prose form. But the same careful wording brings us into the blood-ridden world of the Appalachian logger, put at risk for the sake of feeding his own family, packing away wealth for employer-investors. Rash once spoke of his habit of quietude developed in childhood: “I had convinced myself that if I listened attentively enough to others, my own tongue would be able to mimic their words.” He has translated that skill to the written page.

The other major force which brings the novel to a sense of timelessness is Rash’s incorporation of classical and Renaissance motifs and elements. The novel has its own “chorus” of Appalachian loggers who comment on God, greed, fate, the quest for something intangible. A blind seer, Mrs. Galloway, leads a greedy man to his own soul’s destruction and the deaths of others. Her words are imbued with irony and foreshadowing, fully comprehensible only in the novel’s coda. Her son, a Gollum-like creature, does Serena’s bidding, compelled by a superstitious belief in fate. A sense of classical and renaissance destructive pride permeates the characters. Certainly, MacBeth comes to mind, especially in connection with “Bertram’s” woods, but ironic twists prevent exacting parallels. Pemberton destroys the woods around him but is himself destroyed.

But Serena is no Lady MacBeth. Her only regrets concern her failure to kill her smallest enemy. She is the penultimate amoral force, a larger than life villain, a *belle dame sans merci* made credible by her outsider origins and mysterious background. The novel is also suggestive of *Oedipus*, of an ironic twisting to *Paradise Lost*, of *Ulysses*.

Serena's literary ancestry lies not only in the siren, but also in the unnatural and demonic forces of ancient Celtic ballads and epic folk literary cycles. Rash's task in creating this larger-than-life villain was to create an other-worldly compelling woman who could be believable in an American time and place. Her haunting character has no parallel in American literature, but the use of classical elements and motifs allows the reader not only to accept Serena as real, but to follow her with a sickened fascination.

Daggers and unnatural disasters abound. A sense of fatalism hovers on every page, yet Rash is not providing such easy answers to human fate. Man is the source of unnatural disaster in the lumber camp. A boy too poor to afford logging boots is swallowed up by the log-jammed river. The gorge is too steep for harvesting, yet Serena orders the loggers to near-certain death.

A rattlesnake falls from the sky, not as a sign of the apocalypse but as an accidental dropping from Serena's trained eagle. Rats unnaturally haunt the workers' "string houses," no longer kept in check, because Serena's eagle is killing the snakes, another way in which Rash's irony twists the classical into modernity. Whatever danger the rattlesnakes represent is more than made up for by destruction of the balance of nature. Eden is cleared of its snakes; it is cleared of its own beauty. However, the devils in this novel are financiers from Harvard and Princeton whose civilized tongues speak of trade and profit. One thinks of Hopkins' world where "all is seared with trade...smeared with toil."

Interspersed with its aura of past literary conventions and delicacy of language lies a core of realism in time and place. Its specificity allows us to read it in the thematic tradition of James Still, or Wilma Dykeman, or Don West, a depiction of an era in which Appalachian riches have been taken away while its people have been left with disastrous consequences. Without resorting to direct moralizing, Rash takes us to the thirties near Waynesville, North Carolina, reminding us all the while of other destroyer-takers who have come and gone from Appalachia, the absentee landlords of mill villages, the coal company collusions, the railroads built to carry resources, not people, still carrying and burning Appalachia, the chip mills, the dead railroad depots.

The novel depicts individuals who are working toward formation

of a new a national park, a gift of sorts. Horace Kephart is sketched in as a man with personal failings but with a high sense of ecological ethics. The Vanderbilts host a business dinner where most of the wealthy give token approval of the park, especially since they will be able to sell the timberland which had once belonged to farmers of a past era. But Rash always reminds us of the complexities of change and displacement, never opting for easy answers.

In many ways, *Serena* is a study in post-colonialism. Takers come in, wreak havoc to a people and a way of life, and leave. The culture of education which they bring as the “civilized” wealthy leaves them devoid of compassion as they engage in the colonial practice of dehumanizing local people. In no way is that dehumanizing more evident than in the choice of an inept camp doctor, named Cheney, who waits for the owners’ approval before bothering to attempt any saving of life. Such efforts may not be cost-effective.

Sheriff McDowell rings true to Appalachian rural tradition. When the law fails, Appalachians have followed their own sense of righteousness. The replacement sheriff, paid for by the Pembertons, serves as a reminder that American capitalism has historically managed to make the law work for the industrial rather than individual good.

One person prevails in *Serena*. Rachel, a naïve girl seduced by Pemberton, grows into a strong woman empowered by love of her child. She survives and builds a life, but she must leave the mountains to do so. Hers, too, is an Appalachian story.

Serena was three years and twelve drafts in the making. It shows. Now is the time for Rash’s recognition as a major American writer, for his works to be seen as not just regional, but universal. It may also be the time to look at the greatness present in other Appalachian writers who have been too easily categorized. Eudora Welty recognized the term regional as careless and condescending. After all, she added, “The art that speaks most clearly...and passionately from its place of origin will remain the longest understood.” We, as Appalachian readers, have known that for a long time.