

House of Earth

by Woody Guthrie; New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2013, 288 pages

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Woody Guthrie's recently discovered novel, *House of Earth*, was published posthumously and makes tangible the timeless issues of poverty and oppression. The story takes place in the 1940s, after the height of the Depression. Tike and Ella May Hamlin begin as renters of a piece of arid, desolate land that barely sustains them. When it's time to renew their rental agreement, they are left with one option; they become sharecroppers, which deepens their hole and wedds them to a life of debt and poverty. Hope for change is harder to come by, but determination never deserts them.

They hold onto their dreams of an adobe house, the ideal design to protect them from the elements and to keep them comfortable. They hold onto their dreams with a tenacity and

strength that exceeds the ability of their current home to protect them with its frail and decaying wood.

The scenes on their farm are as real as life itself. Even their love making consists of thoughts, dreams, and conversation interspersed with the sweet rawness of sex. All aspects of Tike and Ella May's existence are consumed with the idea of building a home for themselves and having a piece of land they can call their own. The Hamlins use humor and laughter to tether themselves so the winds won't carry their souls away.

If there is a point where the book veers from realism, it is when Ella May is in labor. Her baby's head is visible at the edge of the birth canal, and Tike takes in her "sobs and moans of pains mixed up with laughs that she laughed just to give him ease." It is difficult to imagine Ella May's laughter as being anything other than part of the myriad emotions that women experience dur-

ing this part of the birthing process. It appears to be a weak link in Guthrie's otherwise amazing ability to capture the nuances of giving birth from a female perspective.

This is a gritty story of what it means to try to eke out a living for oneself in spite of unrelenting work. It is a harsh reminder that the willingness to work hard without increasing social equity is not enough. Capitalism doesn't work to benefit everyone.

The beauty of this book is not only in the story but also in the introduction written by Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp. The introduction helps to provide a larger story and gives the context in which Woody Guthrie wrote *House of Earth*. It tells the tale of Woody's hardships in enduring the dust storm on April 14, 1935, in Pampa, Texas. It talks about his battles for social justice for farmers. Brinkley and Depp describe Guthrie as believing that "being a farmer is God's highest calling."

Woody Guthrie is as poignant in *House of Earth* as he was in his songwriting, reminding us that in this land of plenty there are plenty who still suffer.

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