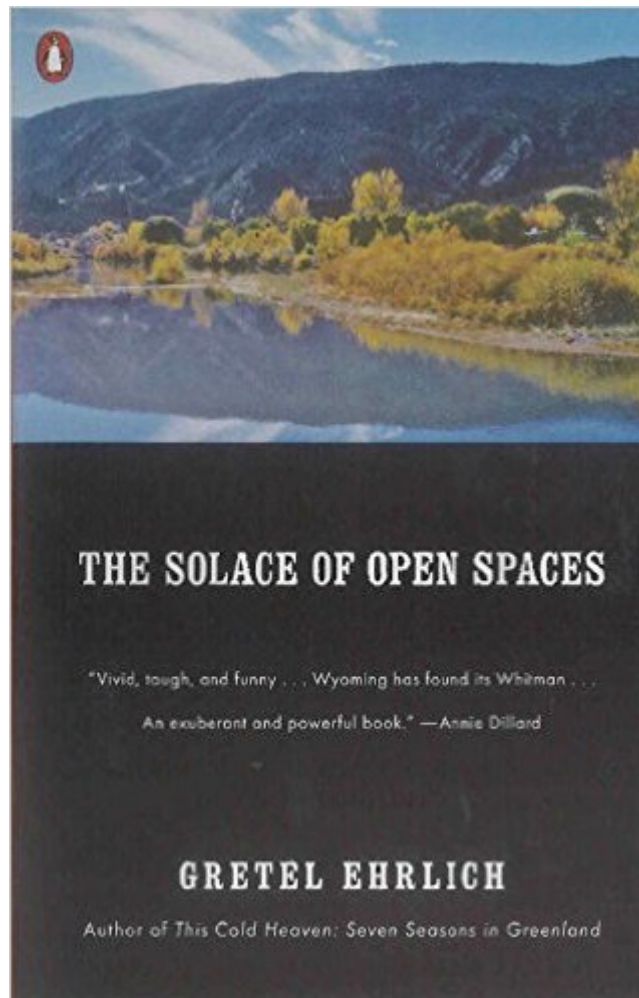


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The Solace Of Open Spaces



Synopsis

A stunning collection of personal observations that uses images of the American West to probe larger concerns in lyrical, evocative prose that is a true celebration of the region.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gretel Erlich was a poet and filmmaker when she first came to Wyoming in 1976. She was so taken with everything about the place that she became a cowherd, which gave her time to write about the American West. Reading her books, however, is very much like seeing a film, for her filmmaker's eye and awareness of nuance and gesture is evident in the way she chooses her words. In *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Erlich presents us with an eclectic bunch of frontier characters that she met while working as a ranch hand. Almost unaware of what's been accomplished, we readers find ourselves shedding former stereotypes of these people in exchange for seeing them for what they are: unique, quirky, interesting, inexplicable men and women. The *Weather* (and the word deserves that capital letter, as you'll see upon reading the book) plays as large a role as the people in Erlich's book. About the title: When she arrived in Wyoming, Erlich was grieving the death of someone important to her. As she works hard at physical labor, meets new people, falls in love with the land, and sheds her past like sweat running down her back, healing from grief occurs - although she doesn't exactly say this. Altogether, a beautiful book and a wonderful read.

My first images of Wyoming were formed as a boy, watching "The Virginian" on TV. It was a landscape of gently rolling hills and a mild climate where you could go around in shirtsleeves pretty

much all the time. Well, of course, Wyoming bears no resemblance to a Southern California back lot, as I learned when I finally went there as an adult. The climate is not benign, and the land has a scale that can make you and your problems seem very small indeed. Gretel Ehrlich writes about the true Wyoming of vast, lonely spaces, and brutal, bone chilling winters. In her book, it is a place to lose oneself and then find redemption in the rhythm of life lived in a hard place. She writes about the people that live in this place and their relationships. She writes of loneliness and endurance, friendship and new beginnings. The highlight of the book, for me, is "The Rules of the Game", an appreciative essay on Rodeo. I've not read anything like it. Ms Ehrlich's description finds the beauty in this celebration of both individual skill and achievement, and the power and grace of teamwork. It's a lovely piece in a wonderful book.

In these essays about Wyoming, the imagery of mountain and plain and weather calls to mind the sweeping landscapes of John Ford movies. Ehrlich, born and raised in California, retains her outsider's eye for detail, and is able to translate the perspective of someone trained in documentary filmmaking very effectively into the medium of words. Her portrayal of the men who work in this environment is very different from the stereotypes we know from Marlboro ads, "Bonanza," and movie westerns. She finds cowboys often tender-hearted, quirky, and curiously courtly. Not to be outdone by the men in this world of extremes and hard work, the women she meets and befriends are tough-minded and independent. Completing her picture are the Native Americans, whom she portrays respectfully and with an ironic appreciation for incongruity, as they both recover and reinvent a lost heritage. Hers is also a personal story. Beginning with the wrenching death of a close male friend, it recounts in her growing love for Wyoming and its people the discovery of a new life. And while her book is no heart-on-the-sleeve display of pain and recovery, one senses at almost every step the healing process that underlies the words. As slender as a book of poems, this volume of essays calls out to be read slowly and savored, word for word.

This little collection of prose is surprising. A reviewer who didn't care for this book mentioned that it didn't do much to develop or push its theme forward. I think that description is accurate, but misses the point: the book, like its subject matter (Wyoming, mostly, NOT Montana), defies being pushed in any direction. It has a way of imposing itself upon the reader. The vividness of phrase dominates the imagination, but the place it brings you to is an open space, where you're only supposed to linger, discovering and uncovering little surprises of detail as they arrive. It is a wonderful experience and highly recommended, though with a warning: you must be prepared to wander a bit and fall into a

different rhythm, with different rules, for at least a little while.

I first learned of this book from a wizened sheep rancher and shearer discussed in one of Ehrlich's vignettes, and expected a trite outsider's view of this area. (I live not too many miles from where she lived during most of the book). As I feasted on the author's prose, though, I was thrilled to find that I was wrong. This is a spirited, moving, and perceptive portrait of a land that can be both hostile and nurturing, and those people who have become a part of the country. The author relates her responses to the land, tying these reactions to emotional transformations she experienced as she learned the territory and its ways. Yes, the book is good as a travelogue. However, it really excels in its analysis of a land and its people. Ehrlich's book both confirmed and sharpened the impressions I had developed as I learned about my new home. Wherever you live, this is an excellent book for you to read.

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