



Rick Bass, *All the Land to Hold Us*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 336 pp. Hardcover \$25.00.

In his novel *All the Land to Hold Us*, Bass brings a poetic lushness to an arid West Texas. Against a harsh backdrop, the characters find themselves living on the desert's edge, hungry. Men lust for and consume the desert's treasures: salt, oil, water. Stones whisper secrets; elephants cry and dance; children cremate puppets in a funeral pyre, and skeletons hear music and possess a longing that hasn't perished with their bodies. This strange and beautiful landscape, brilliant and searing, draws toward it treasure hunters, oilmen, and two pairs of lovers from different generations "as the eye of the needle of heaven is said to draw human souls."

In the West Texas salt flats, we follow three generations of characters. Starting in the seventies, we meet Richard, an oil geologist who falls in love with the porcelain beauty, Clarissa. The story next weaves together Marie and Max Omo and their children who are later transformed by an elephant in need of rescue. We find them watching the dust uncover the bodies of creatures, evidence of failed attempts to cross that enchanted and barren desert. Bass then stitches these lives together with a renegade Mormon school teacher living in the isolated outskirts of Midland. The prose fills us with a kind of heartbreak and joy that only the wildness of the salt flats can give, and the novel reads like a family history of the landscape, a book of time: full of half-truths, mystery, and love.

The beautiful prose pushes us to experience nature in a kind of dream-time in a place where we can feel most fully human; a phenomenon that occupies a space neither within the body or mind, but in the space between rocks. Bass writes with a profound respect for the landscape and dramatizes that thirst for oil, that lust and hunger for life. William Kittridge once wrote that the world exists under our skins, in our stories. In *All the Land to Hold Us*, Bass provides us with the foundation, and spins the web to hold the salt down.

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