

Deborah Nestor

The Power of Nature: A Review of *Horse People*

Cary Holladay. *Horse People*. Louisiana State University Press, 2013.

Cary Holladay's *Horse People* presents itself as a volume of short stories, but reading the nine stories in order is like burying oneself in an historical novel that spans the Civil War and reaches into the second half of the twentieth century. At its center are the Fentons, whose story is told largely through the perspective of their long-lived matriarch, Nelle. As historical sagas go, this one is succinct, told with a modernist sensibility that invites its readers to contemplate recurring themes like the passage of time and the inescapable processes of nature. Both concepts feature in the volume's table of contents, which provides a date for each story and situates them in Rapidan, Virginia, a rural community along the Rapidan River.

In the first story, "The Bridge," Rapidan serves as a strategic site in need of protection from marauding Yankees. Its title serves to call attention to the connections between the stories and the people within them. "The Bridge" begins from the perspective of Bonnie, a young, unwed mother hired by Henry Fenton to give early notice of a Yankee incursion:

Bonnie gazed down into the water, oh, watching and listening for the Yankee army, for spies and traitors, reading the sky for clues, believing the hawks and buzzards would warn her of enemies' approach. . . . Even then, back in 1861, Bonnie must have known she wasn't accomplishing a damn thing.

This shift from Bonnie's naive excitement to the narrator's wry irreverence characterizes the method Holladay uses to bind the different voices in the narrative together.

The next story, "A Summer Place," returns to Bonnie's perspective. More experienced now, she soon realizes that the summer people who have hired her are examples of the very Yankees she guarded the bridge against twenty-nine years earlier. The pay tempts her, "Bonnie near jumps, it is so much," but she decides it is not enough when she encounters more of the family: the drunken mother, terrified boys, and soon-to-be-absent father. The precocious, six-year-old Nelle immediately tests Bonnie and finds her wanting. "This child is in charge," the new "nanny" marvels as she finds herself obeying

the orders of a six year old. It's not personal though: Nelle extends her rule, not without some justification, to everyone in the household, everyone except her father, who escapes on extended "business" trips to avoid life with his dysfunctional family.

This glimpse of Nelle at six prepares us for Nelle at twenty-seven. It is hardly surprising that an intelligent child raised in chaos should grow up wanting to exercise control over her life. The three most compelling stories in the volume, "Seven Sons," "Monstrosities," and "Nelle on the Grass," form an arc in the narrative that begins with Nelle as a young wife frustrated by the constraints of her body and tradition. The title "Seven Sons" refers not only to the inevitable processes of pregnancy and childbirth, but also the power that prophecy holds over Nelle:

"Seven sons," an old woman in India had told her when she traveled the world with her parents and brothers. The old woman held up seven fingers, the nails horribly long and whorled. "You will have seven sons."

The effort it will take. Nelle doesn't want to think about it.

Having a finite number assigned to her pregnancies offers Nelle the comfort of predictability, however irrational the source. As we see next in "Montrosities," Nelle, who thinks "she doesn't believe in God the way" her Presbyterian neighbors do, still clings to the belief that events are predestined, knowable to those who can correctly interpret the signs. Perhaps the best story in the collection, and certainly the one that will most successfully stand alone in an anthology, "Monstrosities" shows Nelle in the process of transformation, of coming to terms with a world over which she will never exercise complete mastery.

To illustrate the effects of this transformation, the next story, "Nelle on the Grass," begins with Nelle stopping between house and stable and laying herself flat on the ground, an act that alarms her family, but for Nelle and those like her, the position is not only familiar but symbolic, mirroring as it does those times when even the most skilled horse people are forced to acknowledge their limitations. The horse embodies the power of nature and its inherent unpredictability. Nelle has to embrace both if she wants to be "borne aloft in that pleasure that she lives for, herself and her horse riding the curvature of the Earth."

Cary Holladay was Artist-in-Residence at Fairmont State University in spring 2013. —Eds.