

from the *Women's Review of Books*

Field Notes

A Novel in Verse with the Strengths of Each

By Robin Becker

Esther: A Novel in Verse

By Pam Bernard

Fort Lee, NJ: CavanKerry Press, 2015, 204 pp., \$18.00, paperback

Early in this beautifully crafted, genre-bending book, Pam Bernard brings to the page a girl-child's experience of sexual abuse at the hands of her illiterate father, and the novel follows Esther's course as she makes a life for herself and, eventually, her daughter. Flashbacks provide insight into Esther's mother, Bessie, who knows that her husband possesses "an appetite so unforgiving no food or smoke/ or drink would satisfy. He ate only to quell his gut,/ but the emptiness never left him." Bernard contrasts terrifying depictions of Esther's physical and psychic trauma with images of the child discovering and reading the encyclopedia her mother hides in the parlor:

Her head filled with sound—hieroglyph,
Himalayas, hoarfrost. Helleborus argutifolius,
a perennial found in Corsica, with palmate,
compound leaves—lory, an East Indian parrot
of the brush-tongued family Trichoglossida—
When she finished one volume, she
returned it and took down the next, until
page by page, the whole set was done.
Then she started over.

The only other words in the house
were those Aaron commanded Esther
read aloud from the Bible. So she fashioned
a voice, as she had fashioned a child,
to serve him, to keep to herself
passages she so dearly loved.

The novel moves chronologically through Esther's childhood and young adulthood—pacing and tone enhanced by Bernard's decision to eschew poem titles. Thus, the twelve verse-chapters function seamlessly to move readers in literal and emotional time, just as chapters in a prose novel do. Visually appealing, two, three, four, and five-line stanzas give the page plenty of white space. Bernard understands that a clean, inviting text will ease readers into the unfamiliar genre, and to that end, she employs asterisks to indicate temporal pauses and changes in point of view.

Forced by her father to leave her mother and sister in Kansas and travel with him to California, Esther carries the secret of his abuse on the journey westward. However, the frightful climate of terror Aaron creates wherever he goes comes up against a formidable force:

Aaron's bitterness grew over the one thing
he could not control—Esther's mind—how
a curious softness had come gradually

over her face and taken her away from him.
She'd turned ever so slowly inward
and nothing he did could get her back.

An omniscient narrator reveals Esther's thoughts and feelings as she watches the landscape change and tries to avoid her father's gaze. "Everywhere she had ever been in her life / was within the distance of the width / of her father's hand," she reflects on the train. One of Bernard's challenges—at which she succeeds—involves contrasting the claustrophobic atmosphere in which Esther lives with her expansive inner life and the world outside her window. Quietly, Esther experiences her own voyage: a young man slips her Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915) at a station along the route; a Harvey Girl (a waitress at a Harvey House, one of a chain of restaurants along western railroads) gifts her with a package containing an apple and cheese. The trip ends at a logging camp in Colorado, where Aaron supervises twenty men for whom Esther must cook. There, she meets Raymond, a young logger traumatized by his war experience in France, and the two begin a clandestine courtship.

Bernard uses the tools of the conventional prose novel—omniscient narration, description, interior monologue, and dialogue—to create dramatic tension. For example, when Raymond reveals his romantic interest in Esther, one of older loggers, Charlie, takes him aside and says of her father, Aaron:

He treats his daughter like a wife.
Raymond looked at him, confused.
Charlie folded his hands nervously on his lap,
waiting for Raymond to catch on. *Son,*
Charlie said finally, leaning forward,
softening his voice, *he has his way with her.*
And that's the god's honest truth.

Esther and Raymond escape the logging camp for Denver, shortly after Charlie learns of the abuse. In a brief, six-line passage, Bernard presents the single exchange the young couple has on the subject:

In the station, Esther waited quietly
for Raymond to speak. Droplets began
to trickle down the icy bottle in his hands.
I know, Esther. I know about it. Charlie told me.
But sometimes I don't understand.
Why didn't you say no? Why didn't you?

White space follows Raymond's question, and the narration turns back to earlier that day. This pointed silence visually re-creates the great gulf between Raymond and Esther, a potent motif Bernard repeats throughout the book. When I came to those lines, I paused, stunned by the terrible loneliness Esther must have felt hearing Raymond's questions. In Esther's silence, here and elsewhere, Bernard re-inscribes her solitude.

Along with believable dialogue and an ear for the conversations we have with ourselves, Bernard vivifies the American West of the first half of the twentieth century. Here, she describes a California church service and prayer meeting:

In the Miracle Room, wheelchairs,
piles of crutches—proof of Sister's cures.
Descending a gleaming white staircase
to the stage, she gathered her adoring flock
for the heavenly reward awaiting the righteous.
Behind her, the spectacle
of the evening's illustrated sermon—
through booms and flashes of a piped-in storm,

a dozen night-gowned maidens, who clung
to a papier-mâché Rock of Ages, were
dragged to safety by sailors of the Lord.
Accept your loving Father, Sister intoned.
Let his holy spirit enter you!
Aimee Semple McPherson wanted
Esther's soul. But Esther would not submit.

The small cast of characters lends this novel the feeling of an ensemble stage production—with the additional force of exposition and interior monologue. As I experienced narrative tension (wanting to know what happens to Esther), I simultaneously had the pleasure of Bernard's apt and musical language. Read this novel-in-verse to see how a gifted poet combines compelling stanzas with a novelist's handling of characters over time.

Robin Becker's Field Notes column is a regular feature of Women's Review of Books, where she serves as poetry and contributing editor. Her most recent collection of poems is Tiger Heron (2014). Liberal Arts Research Professor of English and Women's Studies at Penn State, Becker served as the Penn State Laureate in 2010 – 2011.