

Book festival Northern Arizona

***In This We Are Native*, by Annick Smith Reviewed by Joanne Isaacs**

Were Annick Smith to visit Flagstaff, I would invite her to walk with me through Buffalo Park in the female rain, maybe with someone who knows each plant by its Latin and English name, by its herbal healing quality, by its leaves or brush or flower, by its fragrance, by the color it imbues to cotton or silk or hemp, by the bird or rodent that finds it most tasteful, for that is where her heart dwells; then we would drink heartily at Charly's, feast on green chili stew and tortillas at Don Diego's, and two-step with broad chested, snug jeaned, black-hatted cowboys at the Museum Club, music by Mogollon.

In her book of essays published in 2001, this whirling tornado of a woman confides that she is the child of Hungarian Jewish refugees, the daughter of a sculptor father of great moods, was once a young widow with four children, and is a champion equally of huckleberries, Bolivian natives, weeds, canyon rafters, Humpback whales, wrens, the Grand Canyon, of Pablo Neuruda and shabby Hollywood's transvestite strata.

Annick (never Ms. Smith, I am sure), is a Chicago native, and lives now in Missoula, Montana. She fights yesterday and today and tomorrow to keep it pristine, uncommercialized, to save the grouse, elk, woodpecker, to save all of us. Annick is the Rachel Carson of the new millennium.

Dave, her husband, died after 19 years in her loving care, and I think today his illness would be cured or arrested. They followed their dream from Montana to Hollywood Boulevard, and when the drugs and crime, the weeds of urban life, entered theirs, they returned to Montana. Annick made her husband's dream hers, in the most old fashioned of ways, in the most loving of ways.

And, Annick has traveled, to Bolivia and Chile and Hungary and Glacier National Park. Always, it is the natives and plants and animals, that pull her into their universe, she champions those with small voices, or no voices.



“Big Bluestem” recalls the bison days of Oklahoma. She teaches us the value of natural burning of grasses, of our devaluation of weeds (she has us see them as “pioneer” plants), of the return of native grasses on their own time table, of life cycles, be they people or flora.

“The Whales are Singing” is a journey to Sitka, Alaska, and tells of the hypnotic song of the humpback whale. “Writers and scientists share an interest in blood connections. In sex. In songs, of life and death.”

And, should she choose to live here, Annick would hang out at Late for the Train, weaving her stories, and leaving us spellbound.

Yet, Annick does not speak much of friends, and she is cautious with tales of the heart. She will not marry her second life partner Bill, although they have been together for 23 years. “The truth of a widow's life -- the mundane truth of anyone's life -- is take love any way it comes. One year at a time, one day, one breath.”

Northern Arizona Book Festival

April 11-13, 2003

928-774-9118

bookfest@reliablewebdesigns.com

www.flagstaffcentral.com/bookfest