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All But the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family

Mary Clearman Blew

New York: Viking Penguin, 1991.

\$19.95; cloth.

Reviewed by Peter Soliunas

Mary Clearman Blew's new book of personal essays, *All But the Waltz*, can be frustrating. The writing is consistently sharp, often poetic in its precision, but is strangely unfulfilling. The strength of the writing often highlights the problem in the book; by evoking the past so strongly, Blew sacrifices the development of a strong present. Without this objective setting, little resonates.

The essays that do resonate include "Dirt Roads," an account of the death of Blew's father, and the title piece. They are powerful because the author is a participant in the events. "Dirt Roads" works because Blew's analysis of the events and mythologies surrounding her father's death never overwhelms or replaces the importance of event. The events are so powerful and mysterious they require analysis. This essay, like most great personal essays, would work as a short story; all the great story elements are in place. When Blew allows herself to become a character, the work soars.

Unfortunately, Blew's conception of the book—an extended history of her family and its relationship to the landscape of central Montana—limits her presence in the book. Often, as in "Reading Abraham," Blew exists only to describe piecing together the life of an ancestor through fragments of his letters, journal entries, and other assorted jottings. The character Abraham is fascinating, a man who feels compelled to write an account of every event in his life, and then saves all of these scraps. Blew pieces these fragments together and tries to reconstruct a life from the written artifacts. The idea is fascinating, but Blew can't seem to find the essay's heart. It moves awkwardly between two frames, between Abraham's documented life and Blew's present-day research. Blew is reduced to a detective in the piece, and this slights both her work and Abraham's life. A film analogy helps clarify the flaw: Abraham's scenes are real

action, runaway carts, encounters with Native Americans, and the like; when the film cuts to Blew's story, the camera pulls back to reveal little more than the author poring over scraps of paper with fading ink. For the essay to work, Blew's story must be as compelling as Abraham's. Otherwise, Abraham remains nothing more than an oddity, an alien figure from the past.

The treatment of the past as alien appears elsewhere. "Little Jake and the Old Ways," about Hutterites in Montana, works because this alien quality is justified through point-of-view. When the author first sees Hutterites, she is a child, fascinated and frightened by these "Midnights," a wonderful mis-hearing of Mennonites. Blew also goes further to isolate the Hutterites, using the history of the church to show historical precedent for such isolation. Blew's re-imagining of a childhood perspective is effective because it is a reflection of a real character, which keeps the sense of mystery and wonder grounded.

When Blew removes herself, the pieces lose that grounding. In "Going to Fort Peck," an essay about Montanans working on a New Deal construction project, Blew disappears entirely and lets other characters develop the narrative. Without Blew, the story lacks a center. It is difficult to determine the line of the essay: which character is important, which event is critical, which story to follow. The piece cleanly divides into halves: the interplay of workers in the first half and the struggles of one specific couple in the second. But it never congeals, never satisfyingly connects its two parts.

The feeling of dissatisfaction in "Going to Fort Peck" hangs over the entire book—several essays fail to find their centers. They remain distant and become frustrating reading. The sections that work make the book a worthwhile read, but they also make the weaker essays seem worse than they are. It's like going through the photo album of someone else's family. The images are perfectly captured, but it's as if the one person who can tell you about the people in the photographs has left the room.