Train Dreams: A Novella by Denis Johnson

Interesting Novella By National Book Award Winner Denis Johnson

Denis Johnson’s Train Dreams is an epic in miniature, one of his most evocative and poignant fictions.

Robert Grainer is a day laborer in the American West at the start of the twentieth century—an ordinary man in extraordinary times. Buffeted by the loss of his family, Grainer struggles to make sense of this strange new world. As his story unfolds, we witness both his shocking personal defeats and the radical changes that transform America in his lifetime.

Suffused with the history and landscapes of the American West—its otherworldly flora and fauna, its rugged loggers and bridge builders—the new novella by the National Book Award-winning author of Tree of Smoke captures the disappearance of a distinctly American way of life.

My Personal Review:
Denis Johnson won an O. Henry prize for this novella of the old American West in 2003. It originally appeared in the Paris Review but is now reissued and bound in hardback with an apt cover art—a painting by Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton called The Race. If you contemplate the painting for a while, you may feel the ghost of the books protagonist, Robert Grainier, as he, too, felt the ghosts and spirits of the dead.

Robert Grainier is a man without a known beginning— at least, he didn’t know his parents, and neither did he know where he was from originally.
Some cousin suspected Canada, and said that he spoke only French when he was left off in Fry, Idaho, circa 1893, arriving there on the Great Northern Railroad as a young lad. His aunt and uncle were his parents, and he grew up in the panhandle by the Kootenai River with the loggers, the Indians, the Chinese, and the trains.

As the book opens in the summer of 1917, Grainier is helping his railroad crew of the Spokane International Railway (in the Idaho panhandle) hold a struggling Chinese laborer accused of stealing. They meant to throw him from the trestle, sixty feet above the rapids at the gorge, but the man, cursing and speaking in tongues, broke free and went hand-over-hand from beam to beam, until he disappeared.

The Chinaman, he was sure, had cursed them powerfully...and any bad thing might come of it.

And that was the signal incident--that curses, spirits, and demons would inhabit the landscape of Grainiers dreams. Often, in the background, is heard the melancholic whistle of the trains.

Johnsons story is a portrait of early 20th-century America as witnessed through the itinerant Grainier, a scrupulous, dignified man whose wife and infant daughter were consumed in a fire in their cabin while he was miles away working on the railroad or in the forest as a logger. Grainiers long life is seen through snapshots juxtaposed in a deliberately disjointed style, submerging our thoughts deep into the great Northwest, as forests are cleared and the trains tracks are laid that connect one land to the next.

He was standing on a cliff...into a kind of arena enclosing...Spruce Lake...and now he looked down on it hundreds of feet below him, its flat surface as still and black as obsidian, engulfed in the shadow of surrounding cliffs, ringed with a double ring of evergreens and reflected evergreens.

Grainier came back and rebuilt on the burnt lot, the grief of his loss now a thing in his soul, a muted or massive thing, depending on his memories or his dreams. The dead spirit of his daughter appears in abstract or animal form to haunt him, and the wolves enter his soul.

...when Grainier heard the wolves at dusk, he laid his head back and howled for all he was worth...It flushed out something heavy that tended to collect in his heart...

Love, loss, death, and lust are wound into this short but powerful story, a story of a time that is receding from the collective American memories. Denis Johnsons ode is an evocative and sublime remembrance of things past--of railroads built, of people buried, and of souls lost and wandering. Johnson awakens them, and puts them to rest.
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