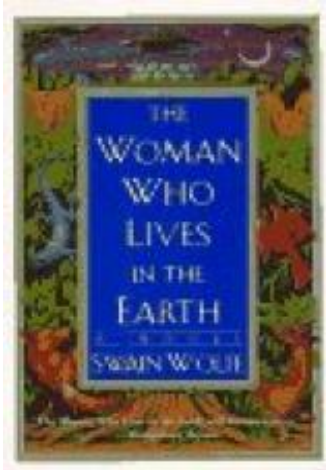

The Woman Who Lives in the Earth

by Swain Wolfe



About the Book

"Does the woman who lives in the earth know the weaver who lives in my soul?"

"Yes, I think she does," said her mother. The young girl watched the silver creek slide through the soft dark green of the cottonwoods. "And what," she asked, "does the weaver weave in the middle of the middle of my soul?" Her mother looked into her eyes and said, "She weaves a story that is hidden beneath all your thoughts and dreams."

-The Woman Who Lives in the Earth

The themes that intertwine to make *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* the rich tapestry it is, had been incubating in Wolfe's mind for sometime. In fact, the climax of the novel derives from a childhood dream. The story is of a young girl who overcomes fear and hatred by discovering extraordinary ways of seeing and understanding the natural world.

A fable for our time, when trust, peace, and connection are elusive, *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* is a classic story of transformation, of relying on our inner strength to overcome what is destructive and hateful in the world.

With the help of a friend, whose experience owning a bookstore in Missoula made her familiar with the inner workings of bookselling, Swain Wolfe published the novel himself. Starting with an initial printing of 2200 copies, he sold his book to bookstores by hand throughout the West. He worked closely with booksellers, scheduled readings, worked with school systems, and his book began to sell. He prepared his own press material, did his own review mailings, and found himself having to go back three times for additional printings.

Booksellers throughout the West made sure the novel reached the attention of several major publishing houses. On a business trip to Boulder, the publisher of HarperCollins asked a bookseller if any self-published books had taken on a life of its own. She was carrying an armload of *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*, which she was having difficulty keeping in stock.

On his return to New York, the Publisher gave the book to the Editor-in-Chief. Since she was intrigued by the title and the glowing reviews, she read the novel herself that night, rather than assigning the book to another editor. She was so struck by the novel's originality and language that she read it to her two sons as well. She reached Swain Wolfe the next day. A two book contract and a commitment for a national launch soon followed.

And now *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*, is on its way to becoming a modern classic. Swain Wolfe invites us to see the world and ourselves in a different way, to become re-encharmed by wonder and beauty, and most important to be assured that transformation is within our grasp.

The Woman Who Lives in the Earth is a timeless story of a young girl who uses the hidden forms and patterns of the natural world to transform herself as well as her enemies.

This tale about overcoming fear and hatred takes place in a time before modern machines or long after their fall. In a harsh, primitive world, an almond-eyed girl named Sarah and her family are threatened by a severe drought. Sarah's imagination and her fascination with the mysteries of nature lead the local villagers to believe she is an evil demon and the cause of the drought.

Sarah is pursued by the Lizard Woman, the embodiment of the villagers' fear and superstition. With her allies, Kreel, Greyling Eyes, and Henkel -- a treacherous triumvirate of authority, terror, and record keeping -- the Lizard Woman incites the villagers to burn the demon child.

In her attempt to save herself and her family, Sarah is aided by her great-grandmother Lilly and by a fox like creature whose voice comes to her like soft black sand sliding through her thoughts. She discovers her own power and redemption in a secret, transitional world defined by the memory of what has been and the hope of what will be.

The Woman Who Lives in the Earth is a mesmerizing story elevated to the status of modern classic not only because of the novel's universal themes, but also because of its deceptively simple language, vivid imagery and transcendent quality.

Discussion Guide

1. A young girl is the hero of this story. Why is Sarah capable of transformation?
2. What is the significance of the title *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*?
3. How does the emotional and natural landscape of the novel reflect our times? Why has this canvas been considered universal?
4. What is it about the language of the novel that creates the menacing atmosphere?

5. How does the sensual imagery of the story ground us in a reality that allows us to accept the magic realism of the story?
6. Some involved in the ecology movement embraced *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* as an environmental parable. What does the novel suggest about the power of nature?
7. The story has been described as a fable and a parable. How does such a form of storytelling serve to express the real story, which is true and useful?
8. What does the fox, Marishan Borisan represent? How does he act as an agent of change?
9. The story is unflinching in its portrayal of the aggression that accompanies fear. Do you see such a pairing on societal and individual levels today?
10. What does the novel suggest about the effect of an individual on culture?
11. How does the treacherous triumvirate of authority, terror and record-keeping embody the ills of society?
12. Sarah and her great-grandmother Lilly have a very special relationship. How do youth and age, or innocence and experience, resemble each other?

Author Bio

Swain Wolfe is a writer and filmmaker who has lived in Montana most of his life. *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* (HarperCollins Publishers) is his first novel.

His early films were made in Oakland, San Francisco, Seattle, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Montana. An interest in cultural anthropology resulted in the films *ENERGY & MORALITY*, about the effect of high energy use on social behavior, and *PHANTOM COWBOY*, about the ways groups and individuals heighten their sense of identity by using aggression to isolate themselves and their causes from the general public. His films have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and have twice represented the United States in the International Public Television Conference.

Recent projects have taken him to a Bedouin shanty town on the Gulf of Aqaba and to an island in Alaska to observe and film grizzly bears. The latter film, *THE SACRED BEAR*, will explore bear stories from early Eurasian and North American cultures, and compare our present views of nature with those of our early ancestors. One day in a meadow by the sea, he woke from a nap to find himself surrounded by five large grizzlies. He explained, "The bears were eating Chocolate Lilies. They ignored me. But sometimes, when I'm just waking up, I can still feel bears around me: large, serene, self-possessed bears."

For years Wolfe lived and worked around natural storytellers. The first were the cowboys he lived with as a boy on ranches in Colorado and Montana. As a young man he worked in the underground copper mines of Butte and Walkerville, and later as a logger in the Bitterroot Mountains. In an interview for the *Bloomsbury Review* he explained

how these jobs affected the way he sees the world.

"When you're underground for a while, you begin to get the feel of where the ore flows, how hard the granite is one place from another, how hot the wall temperature is from level to level, where the earth slips and messes up the tracks, and things you knew but never had words for. Then one day after work you drive over to Anaconda to see your girl and you realize something is very different. Your world is never going to be the same because you cannot be on the surface without thinking about what's underneath. And like water seeping through sand, that sensation invades everything, all your thoughts, your dreams. You're never the same. The mines let you see in unconventional ways. At the same time, many of the miners knew how to tell stories better and with greater purpose than any I've read.

"After the mines, I worked in the woods. I became intensely aware of trees, which created another world for me and a very different way of seeing. Our early ancestors believed the world was alive and aware of us. I know how that feels and it affects how I write and how I tell stories."

His novel, *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth*, evolved over a period of years. "The end of the story came from a dream I had as a child. The personalities of the people, even various animals, and, of course, all those experiences that show up in small, unconscious ways -- all these things became a vague sensation that surrounded my dream. Then one day it was a story. It was like seeing a face for the first time in the ancient plaster of your kitchen wall. We can look at something for years, and suddenly see it."

In recent years his interest as a filmmaker and writer have focused on the way different cultures and individuals use stories. He has just finished a children's story about a lonely man who discovers what it is that hides in his shadow and why his past follows him wherever her goes. Wolfe is currently working on a love story about two people who attempt to create a life outside the norms and conventions of society.

Why is a Story Like a Stone?

A story is like a stone because just as the shape of a stone is a record of the negotiation between what is inside the stone and what is outside the stone, so a story shows us the negotiation between what is hidden deep inside us, the reader and writer, and what is outside: the landscape of culture, parents, wind, and trees.

A story is dimensional, it is layered. I believe that in telling a story we always tell two stories. One story is on the surface. It is the story we can discuss, analyze, and teach.

It stimulates some very important, very necessary, thinking. From discussing the stories we read, we gain a better understanding of how our culture is changing. Discussion and analysis are ways of testing the water -- a way of reexamining the assumptions we've made about our lives.

But there is another story that moves around, through, and beneath the surface story. The surface story is part of this other story, the real story, which is dangerous and true and useful, and of which we are never completely conscious.

The real story allows our unconscious mind to reexamine and reorder the world for us. We use this story to solve riddles

hidden away, deep inside.

A story that works at both levels of storytelling can help us negotiate the differences between ourselves and our culture. We are always searching for a sense of who we are, and at the same time we are trying to negotiate a truce with the spoken and unspoken rules of society. We want to answer, among other things, how and where we fit into the culture, and we want very much to know how to change society's hold on us.

A useful story speaks to the quandaries buried in each of us, and, therefore, a story rarely says the same things to any two people. With time, the meaning and purpose of a story change for each individual. We know, from going back and rereading a story, how different it can be. I think it's possible that children listen to the same story over and over because the mysteries of childhood change -- from day to day and moment to moment.

What the writer means and what the reader needs are probably never the same. I do not know how important it is to know the writer's meaning. And in my case, at least, I often do not even know the meaning of what I've written until I've thought about it for a while. Perhaps the writer's purpose is given too much importance when it comes to discussing a story. As readers, we need to pay attention to the ways a story affects us. If a story resonates through our hearts and dreams in a way that moves and inspires us, we can assume that there is something in us that completes the writer's story. Without the reader, the story is unfinished.

Real meaning -- meaning that moves us, solves our quandaries, heals our hearts, that gives us new insight and vision -- that kind of meaning is expressed in the whole story, which includes the way it's told. All the images, patterns, word shape and word sounds, pauses, punctuation, and music are elements of telling. And because it is a total telling, pulling a story apart is impossible. Every piece depends upon every other piece for its existence. Meaning depends upon the reverberation of all the parts with one another -- a humming phantom drifting through our subconscious minds with no middle, end or beginning. The story must exist all-at-once or not-at-all. And that is why it's impossible even for the writer, especially the writer, to pull it apart and assign meaning to various pieces.

Meaning evoked through word images and word sounds is beyond the ability of words themselves to express. Meaning can only be realized, as the story can only be realized, in the individual reader's subconscious mental processes. Meaning is found in the individual quest -- the solitary journey for redemption and the resolution of personal dreams, demons and dramas set against the oppressive, inescapable landscape of culture.

Stories are powerful tools, not only for individuals, but for entire societies. Stories tell us who we are and where we came from. They allow us to change the shape and direction of our lives. The stories of our ancient ancestors told them how to negotiate with the spirits of animals -- how to acquire power through nature. Later our stories began to tell us how to acquire power over nature. Today they tell us how to negotiate the conflicts between the needs of the individual and the demands of culture. A circle of stories. Perhaps not yet a full circle, but a half circle. And it will be stories in the last half of the circle that will tell us whether or not we come to terms with Nature as well as human nature -- we will see our fate written in these stories.

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