

REVIEWS OF BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S *Q ROAD*

A farm in rural Kalamazoo County, Mich., provides the backdrop for Campbell's appealing first novel, a May-December love story augmented by suspense, secrets and Native American mysticism. Rachel Crane, a homely, foul-mouthed teenager, lives on a houseboat with her reclusive mother, Margo. They are tenants of George Harland, whose wife abandoned him to maintain his declining farm alone. Rachel is as antisocial as her mother: her one friend is David Retakker, a young asthmatic who idolizes George. Her sexuality is awakened by George's reprobate younger brother, Johnny, but when Margo catches them together, she shoots him dead, then disappears without a trace. George becomes irresistibly drawn to the strange girl and asks her to marry him; she accepts, but just so she can inherit "his damned land," to which she feels entitled because of her Native American ancestry. Only in an extended climax, when David's life is imperiled, does Rachel begin to allow herself to feel genuine love for anything but the land. The cast of well-developed supporting characters includes April May Rathburn, an old woman with some dark secrets; her nephew, Tom Parks, a cop who's suspicious of Margo's and Johnny's disappearances; and Milton Taylor, the born-again owner of the Barn Grill. Coincidence and synchronicity among land, animals, humans and weather are cards Campbell (*Women and Other Animals*) plays too often; likewise, descriptions of Rachel's profound connection to the earth (the girl all but sprouts roots) become tiresome. However, it would take more than that to spoil this thoughtful, well-paced, deeply moral (though not moralizing) novel full of hard lessons and the wisdom gained from them across generations.

Publisher's Weekly, 8/6/02

Social change threatens the longtime residents of Kalamazoo County, Michigan, but the verities of land and love endure-in this dark but finally hopeful debut. The action covers a single day, October 9, 1999, with the characters' memories going back to 1930s, when a tornado raked the area after a local schoolteacher was exiled for sleeping with a hired hand; and, farther, to the 1830s, when white homesteaders began to push the Potawatomi Indians off their native terrain. Rachel Crane, 17, is recently married to 50-year-old George Harland-because she wants his land, she tells herself, though we sense that she reciprocates at least a little of George's deep yearning for her. Asthmatic 12-year-old David Retakker idolizes George, who's holding on as a farmer while his neighbors sell out to developers. Subdivisions are springing up, peopled by urban transplants who overtax police officer Tom Parks with complaints about burglar alarms set off by raccoons and about the smell of pig manure. The omniscient narrator doesn't romanticize the way of life these interlopers are destroying: we see drunkenness, bigotry, and cruelty among the locals as well as neuroses and ignorance among the new arrivals. This is a harsh, unforgiving world: when David accidentally sets fire to George's barn, the narrator informs us, "There was no reason to think that the fire . . . would give a damn about the flesh and bones of one small boy, even if he could have kept at bay for another generation the builders and real estate agents who wanted to divide this wide fertile tract into unproductive rectangles and smother it with foundations for homes, concrete driveways, and choking lawns." But David does survive, provisionally, and the author has so powerfully conveyed her protagonists' grit and determination that we close the novel feeling they may yet prevail. Blunt and bleak, but the vivid, varied cast and palpable sense of connection to the soil give it a stern grandeur."

Kirkus Reviews, 7/1/02

You've withstood traffic jams, lines at the mall, the shock of watching your bank account shrink to near-nothing levels. And finally, the stockings are hung, the presents are wrapped and the tree is in full splendor.

Now isn't it time to give a gift to yourself?

For readers, there's nothing like discovering an exciting new author, a fresh voice to follow into the future - if only you didn't have to plow through a pile of lesser stories to find it.

This week, we make that task as simple as turning the page. In our ongoing effort to highlight new authors, our critics have spent the year reading debut novels. They've screened more than 100 titles, books we haven't reviewed in the normal course of the year. And they've carefully whittled this amazing group down to their favorites.

In this hectic season, when a person can end up feeling frazzled rather than refreshed, we urge you to take advantage of our guide.

Then lock the door, put up your feet and unwrap a great read. Even Santa would approve.

Author's background: Campbell, who grew up on a small Michigan farm, later studied philosophy, earned a master's degree in mathematics and a masters in fine arts. She also hitchhiked across the U.S. and Canada, scaled the Swiss Alps on her bicycle and briefly traveled with a circus.

Plot in a nutshell: This is a sort of May-December love story between a quiet Michigan farmer and a young half-breed woman raised by a mother on a houseboat. Rachel, who has a gift for gardening, agrees to marry George so she can inherit his "damned land," but a tragic fire and encroaching subdivisions threaten it.

Sample of prose: "On October 9, 1991, with no apparent concern for the life, the livelihood, or the desires of mortals, this fire clung to the hay-strewn floor and also climbed into the rafters of the barn and burned and burned.

"The blazing fire did not care that the teacher had made love in the barn with a man who was not her husband. The fire did not give a damn who'd been killed in this barn or buried beneath it, so one could not very well expect such a fire to spare an asthmatic child messing around with a cigarette."

Author reminds me of: Carolyn Chute, with her offbeat characters. And the author's larger view of the changing face of rural life is similar to that offered by Jane Smiley and Barbara Kingsolver.

Best reason to read: Campbell's spare, evocative prose is pure artistry, but her unusual characters and her unique way of linking the continuity of time with the land's inhabitants prove her a writer to watch.

Joan Hinkemeyer, The Rocky Mountain News, 12/13/02

A SATISFYING TALE OF COMMUNITY AND QUIRKINESS

More than a decade ago, in Harper's magazine, novelist Tom Wolfe famously published an essay bemoaning the lack of contemporary American novels that revealed the interactions of a whole community, as in, say, the Victorian novels of Dickens. To fill the gap, Wolfe gave us *Bonfire of the Vanities*, a big book about New York City gripped in the greed of the 1990s.

Q Road, by Bonnie Jo Campbell, also takes on this ambitious enterprise--presenting a community in its entirety--except that her setting is the vanishing farmland of Michigan, and she brings her novel home at fewer than 300 pages. Campbell bites off a smaller chunk than Wolfe, but she chews it no less thoughtfully, and in the end the meal is a satisfying one for readers interested in the quirks of rural life.

Not only does Campbell limit her slice of life to just one town--a town with the anywhere and nowhere name of Greenland--she also limits herself to the neighborhood that sits along one road--the Q Road that gives the book its name. Further narrowing the field, she restricts her action to what takes place over a 24-hour period, though her story reaches into the region's past and toward its future. It concerns in particular one married couple, George Harland and Rachel Crane. George farms a swath of fertile river valley land, having inherited the farm through the matrilineage of his grandmother, Henrietta Harland. When the novel opens, George's first wife has decamped from the rigors of farm life, and the gun-toting, 17-year-old Rachel Crane has signed on in her stead. Rachel has entered into this May-December marriage to fulfill her ambition of owning land, though there is also a healthy dose of pheromones in operation here, which may explain George's interest. In fact the people who live along Q Road have a penchant for choosing dirt over mattresses as the substrate for their lovemaking, and maybe this is because the land itself is described as horny. These are fields that "thrust their fertility up at a man, begging him, 'Plow me, sow me, reap me.'"

The lives of many people are threaded by Q Road's straightaway: a woman obsessed with UFOs, a boy and his alcoholic, abandoned mom, a local police officer dispossessed of his family and his home. There's also the young couple who live across the street from Rachel's vegetable stand: a wife in the grip of mysterious fantasies about murdering her husband, who is himself in the grip of fantasies about bedding the women to whom he sells new thermal windows. None of these people is evil; in fact Campbell makes it clear that all her citizens are compassionate and good. Rather than devious, they are dumbstruck--by the wild passions that have taken root inside them like weeds. And the fertilizer fueling all this growth seems to have been somehow siphoned off the land itself.

Campbell turns farm country into a kind of wilderness in which all kinds of natural and unnatural phenomena play out: extremes of weather, unexplained vanishings, involuntary sexual encounters, accidents of God. When Rachel is deflowered at 14 by the black sheep of the Harland clan, her eccentric mother shoots him, snagging her daughter and a chicken all with one shot. The daughter

survives (though the chicken does not) and lives to anchor the story's movement through one day--Oct. 9, 1999--that follows a few years after the shooting. The day in question pits wilderness against community in a good number of ways. Birdwatcher April May Rathburn serves as the community's elder stateswoman and its peacemaking visionary when she sees how "farms and new homes could coexist, if houses lined the roads and the farming took place in acreage behind the houses, if new people would be tolerant of the realities of farming, and if the farmers wouldn't automatically resist change." At such moments the author's creation risks being a mouthpiece for some political agenda (a reader almost can't not hear, "Can't we all get along?"). But we forgive April May, who owns the saving graces of her weird passions--for stuff like birds and gourds and fire.

Though the novel is narrated from many characters' points of view, there is also an omniscient speaker who swoops in at times to tell us pertinent facts from the region's natural and unnatural histories. We learn about the migration of caterpillars and the introduction of English sparrows. We're told that George's ancestors lived compassionately beside the Indians, and we even learn the native words for "I'm hungry," words whose utterance "filled the woman of the house with dread, but she would then remind herself that it was always an Indian who returned her milk cow when it got loose and wandered into the woods, and it had largely been the strength of Potawatomi arms that had raised the first barns in the township."

In this way the past inhabits the novel and shapes in particular the character (in both senses of the word) of Rachel. The half-breed girl is haunted by the story of an Indian girl who similarly sowed the land and who committed suicide rather than let herself be married and forced to cede her land to a husband. Rachel has the burden of propelling most of the plot, and she remains enigmatic and unfortunately the book's most wooden character, compelled to inject a curse into each of her sentences, a practice that quickly gets old. Clearly Campbell is shooting for an offbeat flavor by tagging her people with quirky traits, but in Rachel these traits seem not quite a natural outgrowth of her core. So the changes she undergoes by the novel's end are not as unexpected as one might hope: She is in effect the straw man (straw girl?) built to be disassembled.

Campbell is, of course, rooting for the oppressed; readers will have to deactivate their political-correctness meters and just roll with this narratorial heart that lies with the Indians and the exiles. But most of all it is the land that Campbell wants to champion, this dirt that is imbued with sexual desire. The lesson here is that nature will find a way to retaliate when sexuality is repressed, and we are offered the cautionary tale of Mary O'Keary, a schoolteacher driven out of town for her affair (carried on in a barn, of course) with a local farmhand. As Mary is swept out of town, a tornado sweeps through to knock out a house or two, and the townsfolk are left to mourn for what they have lost and for their own part in its loss.

Campbell's being such a knowledgeable naturalist and historian makes us willing to let her get up on her soapbox. She's a good candidate for the role of public defender of the land she so obviously treasures. Because the climax is placed a smidgen earlier than we expect, the story is afforded the opportunity to amble through a protracted close that is charmingly unaffected. Almost everybody is redeemed, and April May's vision of a community where agriculture rests in balance with development is temporarily achieved. And community itself rests in balance with wildness. As April May muses on behalf of all of Q Road's residents: "[I]t was also good sometimes to be at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. Like the tornado that destroyed a swath of the town when she was seven, disasters brought everybody together and gave them something to remember, put them in a common awe, the way God used to."

Lucia Perillo, Chicago Tribune, 10/27/02

Q Road, Bonnie Jo Campbell's brutal, ironic, and tender novel of rural life charts the tragic events of one day--October 9, 1999--on a particular stretch of county road in Greenland Township, Michigan. The narrative tension builds on the repeated suggestion throughout the first half of the novel that something disastrous will happen this day, something that combines the kind of poor judgment that can only be human with the horrifically detached forces of nature. And Campbell does not disappoint, delivering a terrible climax that is best left to the reader to discover.

The morning of October 9th begins benignly enough with twelve-year-old David Retakker pedaling his bike along Q Road, where farmland is gradually giving way to developed plots--prefabricated homes, a golf course, and a restaurant-cum-farm museum called the Barn Grill--though some families still operate working farms. David is biking toward Greenland Township's oldest barn, which he is scheduled to help farmer George Harland fill with straw. George continues to grow corn and soybeans despite low yield prices, ongoing pressure from developers to sell, and the fact that his hired hand and David's father, Mike Retakker, has left town without notice.

On his way to the barn, David encounters George's young wife, Rachel Crane, an unconventional, abrasive seventeen year old whose love of George's land has led her to marry the fifty-something farmer. George's obsession with and marriage to Rachel has surprised everyone in Greenland--he was formerly so prudent, reserved, and dedicated to his farm that his first wife left from sheer boredom.

This trio of characters-David, Rachel, and George-occupies the center of *Q Road*, and inundates the novel with the longing of loneliness and unrequited love. David and Rachel are essentially orphans. David and his mother, Sally Retakker, continue to live in the hired hand's dilapidated house on George's land, but David rarely sees his mother, and she often buys beer and cigarettes rather than food or asthma inhalers for her son. Rachel's mother, Margo Crane, disappeared mysteriously in 1996 after an encounter with George's younger brother, Johnny Harland, a swaggering ex-convict who has by his own claims "experience with dozens of young girls" he compares to "the illegal swimming holes he used to sneak into as a teenager-even as he was undressing and diving in, his mind was set on getting away without being caught."

Rachel, fourteen at the time of her mother's disappearance, lies about Margo's whereabouts to avoid being taken in to custody by the state and continues to live alone on the Glutton, the boat grounded on George Harland's side of the river where she was born and raised, never having known her father. George has lived alone in his farmhouse for ten years. The three form a peculiar love triangle: George loves Rachel; Rachel's burning desire to take care of David is the result of the night she almost shot him in her garden, thinking he was a coyote in the brush; David worships George and dreams of overcoming his asthma enough to help work the Harland farm. Through the awkward interactions of these unconventional, isolated characters, Campbell brilliantly illuminates the difficulties of human connection. After David and George have finished filling the barn with straw, George says, "Why don't you come back to the house now for some breakfast? I'll make you eggs and bacon. Or else I got some patty sausage." And though he hasn't eaten since lunch at school the day before, David refuses: "He wanted breakfast, of course, but then George would see how bad his breathing was, and David still had the feeling that one wrong move could spoil everything."

Campbell has assembled a large, varied cast of supporting characters who, like her protagonists, often knock stereotypes on their ears. Sally Retakker, David's neglectful mother, has an oddly appealing slovenliness, and we are not surprised when police officer Tom Parks is charmed by her. April May Rathburn, whose family has lived just down Q Road from the Harland farm for centuries, appears initially as a sensible middle-aged woman who muses that "if only everyone would be sensible and tolerant," the farmers, developers, and prefab homeowners in the township might get along. But April May's magnanimity is tempered by her exhilarated memories of the tornado of 1934, by the experience of watching nature assert itself over humanity. April May also cannot explain exactly what possessed her to watch silently as Rachel Crane buried Johnny Harland's body in the oldest barn in Greenland Township three years before. April May's thoughts of tolerance are also rendered ironic by the egocentric lack of sensitivity exhibited by nearly everyone in the story at one time or another.

Campbell reinforces human short-sightedness as a theme with the historical accounts of people driven from Q Road. The present action of the novel is punctuated by stories of the Potawatomi exile and two women forced out by their communities-one a Potawatomi girl Rachel calls Corn Girl, the other Mary O'Kearsy, a schoolteacher who came to Greenland Township in the early 1930s, only to be sent packing by residents of Q Road when it was discovered she was sleeping with a hired man from the Harland farm. Campbell's finely textured historical background serves to highlight the subjectivity of history itself-how the same events are described differently by different people, how stories change to suit new purposes as they are handed down generation to generation, and how people unwittingly relive their ancestors' mistakes despite their best intentions.

Campbell's thorough knowledge of the natural world serves her themes as well. The novel begins and ends with images of woolly bear caterpillars humping across Q Road, seemingly oblivious of the cars and bicycles that threaten their annual journey toward the shelter of woodpiles and building foundations where they will curl for the winter. The image of the caterpillars is particularly resonant, echoed later by that of the Potawatomi march as well as the sense throughout the novel of ceaseless struggle-animal and human-against natural hazards and even more dangerous human ones. Campbell also suggests that the mindless force driving the woolly bears is similar to the blind desire for expansion at the root of the conflict between the farmers along Q Road and the developers who seek their land like contemporary agents of Manifest Destiny. From her prefabricated home across the street from the Harland farm, Elaine Shore crusades for order on Q Road by filing police complaints for noise and untoward smells, and looking forward to a time "when the neighborhood would be row upon row of neat houses and paved driveways." For her efforts, she is dubbed a "pioneer" by her lawyer.

Such irony is balanced skillfully by Campbell's omniscient third-person narrator with dark humor and vivid, stark description. While Campbell never feels sorry for her characters, she does feel deeply for them. Like real people, none of them is pure, and nothing in *Q Road* is purely or conventionally beautiful. Instead Campbell makes beauty as fascinating and compelling as Rachel's odd looks or Mary O'Kearsy's face, which Old Harold Harland describes as "beautiful as the day is long" though "the two sides did not quite line up." The magic of this novel, with its grand themes of class, love, and regret, is that the author achieves suspense without manipulation, tenderness without sentimentality, and above all, originality without contrivance in character, plot, and voice.

Heidi Bell, *Controlled Burn*

It would be wrong of me not to plug this book, since I can remember nothing in the last couple of years that is both stirring and still steeped in mystery. This book glows with the land-bound energy of thousands of lives, and not a woolly bear or black eyed susan can do anything if not reverberate against the template of all that human despair and exhilaration in the name of survival. Larry Brown and Chris Offutt are peers, but Campbell is more evocative than Brown, and more subtle than Offutt. It's erotic and devastatingly funny, but when you finish there is a gestalt one feels, because the love of the land AND its inhabitants (the two go together) in this thing grows larger as you read, and the small, individual scenes sink into the book's larger purposes, which is to lament, with love, the present tense as it slides past, turning into history, the kind of history that is writ large in landscapes when one is attentive. In the past I've thought I've heard voices in old ruined houses, at dusk, out in some woods, and *Q Road* reminds me of those small transcendent moments on earth. There are plenty of stories embedded in this novel, and they all smolder beautifully together. I loved this book, and I hope a million readers discover *Q Road* and Bonnie Jo Campbell.

David Dodd Lee (Kalamazoo, MI), [Amazon.com](#), 9/21/02

As carefully constructed as a patchwork quilt, with colorful squares of quirky characters marching boldly from border to border, the denizens of Greenland Township, Michigan, are bound by the continuity of daily labor and an innate love of a rich and productive land. This is the very core of America, earth that sustains generation after generation of families.

Outside the city confines, sprawled across the countryside, each clan hones its particular idiosyncrasies. *Q Road*'s main protagonists are three wildly different personalities inexplicably attracted to one another, forming their own familial trinity: father, child-bride, son, almost predestined to form a unit that fills the painful gaps in each other's hearts.

The iconoclastic Rachel, a seventeen year-old bride who marries for the security of land ownership, beats a path through life with virtually no guidance or social context, save that of her own invention. Her middle-age-plus husband, George Harland, a sixth-generation farmer, knows only that his days are bearable, even mysteriously joyful, with Rachel sharing his backbreaking work and love-drenched nights. He cannot imagine life without her. And twelve year-old David gravitates towards the Harlands, craving fatherly protection and the pure female strength of the stalwart Rachel, while his own mother becomes ever more distant and self-involved. On a day just waiting for trouble, David becomes the catalyst for catastrophe, one lapse of judgment forever changing the landscape of their future in ways none of them could have predicted.

Encroaching suburbia threatens Greenland Township as much as a failing farm economy; reconstituted city people are willing to tolerate only so much discomfort in their newly constructed rural environment. Sprinkled with quirky individuals, neighborhood malcontents and busybodies, *Q Road* overflows with the many faces of humanity, many of whom reach bravely toward their better selves.

Luan Gaines, [Curled Up With A Good Book \(curledup.com\)](#)
