

North Country Pastoral Meets Lesbian Utopia

BY PATRICIA GOTT

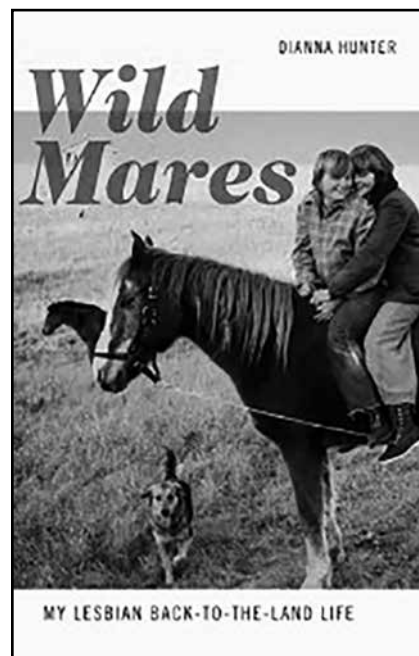
Dianna Hunter, *Wild Mares: My Lesbian Back-to-the-Land Life*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018. 248 pp. pap., \$18.95, ISBN 978-1517902667.

I picked up Dianna Hunter's memoir not knowing what to expect. I quickly became engrossed in her tale of how she and a small band of adventurous women forged new territory in terms of both geographical and mental space. Hardy and independent women are mainstream in much of the Upper Midwest, but I was struck by how much of a risk Hunter and her compatriots took in reclaiming what has traditionally been the province of males in the wilderness. In her prologue, Hunter relates that "[l]ike the fool in the tarot deck, I have stepped off many cliffs and managed to remain upright most of the time" (p. xi).

The book succeeds on three levels: as a coming-of-age narrative, as a celebration of lesbian life, and as an engrossing variation on the back-to-the-land movement that emerged in rural America in the late 1960s. Hunter relates the key accounts of her younger self at a somewhat dizzying pace, but her tone is confident and engaging, and we read on wanting to see how she perseveres both as a dairy farmer and as a woman-identified woman¹ searching for a feminist utopia: "When I put myself to bed each night amid city sounds and smells, I dreamed of horses and powerful, outrageous women living on the land" (p. 73).

As we immerse ourselves in Hunter's world, many of us who grew up in

the rural Midwest can locate ourselves in her quest for self-discovery. Hunter satiates her lust for city experiences while studying at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. It's at this point that her separatist worldview emerges: "Some of us could imagine shopping only at women's stores, eating only at women's restaurants, listening to women's music, and reading only women's books. I still wanted to find some women to share a lesbian collective farm and that would come in time. Getting there would turn out to be a process, a becoming and the journey that lies at the heart of this story" (p. 47). Much of the journey has its bumps in the road. About her role in the founding of the Lesbian Resource Center in the 1970s, Hunter notes, "We had to fight on all fronts, against the homophobia of others as well as the internal kind that we inflicted on ourselves" (p. 44). She begins to seek out a Minnesota version of the North Dakota rural life of her youth. When visiting Heidiya, a horse farm some friends started in Gilman, Wisconsin, some hundred miles further north than Minneapolis, her candor is refreshing: "I was twenty-three, really into magical thinking, and the sway that some mysterious force led me to this place" (p. 61). *Heidiya* is the Arabic word for "gift," and the farm was built by a one-legged woman; this idea of being exposed to something almost mythical sums up



the spirit — and perhaps the purpose — of this book: “It was amazing, I was learning, that when you looked for evidence of women’s work, you found that, too. Invisibility really amounted to a failure of paying attention” (p. 63). Hunter’s growing awareness of the issues women face in working the land by themselves is underscored several times. Of her friend K/T’s concern that she won’t inherit property because she’s a woman and will be forced to engage in conversion therapy with a local priest, she notes, “What I heard from her convinced me all the more that our only hope to set things right, to empower ourselves, and to have some chance for equality was to live on the land in a self-sufficient community with women” (p. 71). Other homophobic tropes that remain intact include her mother’s fear that some-

one “made” Hunter gay. Hunter takes ownership for her identity: “No one... was more responsible for my lesbianism than I was, and now that I had seen the lesbian nation taking shape, I craved lesbian company and lesbian culture fiercely” (p. 57).

Such fierceness underscores Hunter’s passion for living and building a world of one’s own and makes for

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fascinating reading. Her chronicle of a cadre of courageous and, by turns, naive young women who organized to produce something larger than themselves can act as a guidebook for young people searching for something beyond what today’s tech-based culture typically gives them. (And, of course, many young folks already are organizing to protect the environment against encroaching climate change, using tools provided by women such as Hunter and her fellow voyagers.) As Hunter takes ownership of the events that occur in the book — and, more importantly, in her life — the reader comes away with the sense that if women wanted to, they really could find a way to remake the world. And perhaps they are managing to do just that — one piece of land and one shared connection at a time.

Note

1. The expression “woman-identified woman” refers to a principle that was “the cornerstone of lesbian activism in the 1970s,” according to Tina Gianoulis, writing in the encyclopedia of the GLBTQ Archive (http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/woman_identified_woman_S.pdf). See that entry for more discussion of the principle and its history; see also a facsimile of the manifesto “Woman Identified Woman,” by the Radicalesbians in 1970, at <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wlmpc/wlmms01011>.

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