

Train Dreams

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

DENIS
JOHNSON

TRAIN DREAMS



A NOVELLA

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I don't read many novellas but this one, *Train Dreams*, by Denis Johnson made several "best new book" lists recently. And it got rave reviews from quite a few other writers.

Grainier's first memory of trains is of being sent on one as a young child, with a fare receipt pinned to his shirt. His destination was Fry, Idaho, but he never knew his parents or even the origin point of this trip. One older cousin said that he came from Canada and that the French language had to be whipped out of him. Another cousin said that family had sent him from Utah where he had spent his first years as a Mormon. But all his life, he had only trains and their tracks for the history of his early childhood.

Johnson's book is set in the Pacific Northwest at the first half of the 20th century, and as you might guess, trains are an important element. It opens in 1917 with a real nail-biting scene where Grainier, a railroad construction worker now, joins a mob that is trying to throw a Chinese laborer to his death off a trestle bridge. Robert has no idea why heaven takes part, but something in the men's screams and taunts draws him in. Luckily, the Asian guy is athletic. Powered by adrenaline and fear, he manages to escape by racing across the bridge using his arms to propel him over the struts above a boulder-filled river below.

This hideous act is followed by one of kindness: he detours two miles after work to buy a bottle of Hood's Sarsaparilla for his nursing wife.

If nothing else, this novella teaches you how hard people used to work. For his usual job Grainier was a choker for a logging company. He tied cables around the fallen trees so that they could be hauled out by horses. In vivid prose, Johnson describes the intense labor and danger that logging involved. While reading it, I wondered about all the English words that are disappearing due to changing jobs and lifestyles. Who knew there were so many words for logging?

Not only was work extremely difficult then, including the sweaty labor of building your own cabin, but living in the wilderness exposed you to many dangers. Of course, some were expected--wild animals including bear and wolves--but others less so. One summer while Robert was away logging, an intense fire swept through his homestead and killed--or so he believed--his wife and child. In those days, no one had radio or TV or any warning except the smoke itself. By then it was often too late.

After the loss of his family, Grainier becomes more and more solitary and even somewhat wild himself. He has to rebuild his cabin and he uses the cindered trees so that his new cabin smells of fire. His only company is an unnamed dog that he howls along with to wolves on many nights. The climax scene in this book literally took my breath away with its powerful writing and a

surprise twist. But the writing throughout is spare, fluid, and extremely clear. It's a good novel for men and teenage boys and anyone with an interest in an outdoor lifestyle that is almost non-existent these days, at least in our country.

If you like this book, you might want to consider the work of Richard Ford and Jim Harrison. Richard Ford's newest book Canada is about ruptured family relationships in the American West and in the country to the north of us. Jim Harrison's True North describes logging also but in the U. P. of Michigan. Both of these authors present really strong characters living very physical lives outdoors.

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Posted by Dory L. on Jun 18, 2012



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[10] <http://mcpj.info/category/reviews/subjects/train-dreams>
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