

goldenrod hangs on the wall: "what could be simpler than flowers, / a window, a door in the face of morning?" Then an interpolated line from Sappho destroys the calm mood and days arrive "When sunlight is not enough," and "the heart / is blue as a heavy door." Is there no one "Who can thread / the loom to weave such days to a whole?"

There are other poems here wherein images are posted in the early lines and either abstracted or distorted, sometimes grotesquely, as the stanzas progress. Sometimes the images are offered with such little context that the poem seems a deliberate riddle. "Anniversary Song" is one example, although it is possible that the small house described is the same as the one in "Weave Such Days," seen at a later time as ruin takes it:

A door, it's only a door  
of old wood. Paint peels

in streaks of turquoise  
coppered by sunlight.

The top brace (one end  
rot-chewed) shoulders

wide boards, all four.  
No latch, a knotted rope

worming through the key-  
hole half-hitches a nail.

If Susan Laughter Meyers's long sojourn with absence endured until her own death, the poems it drew from her will endure long afterward from now. *Self-Portrait in the River of Déjà Vu*, a cantata devoted to what is not present, will be with us for many years. The poet has departed, but she did not take her absence with her. ■

## TO GIVE VOICE TO EVERYTHING

*a review by Jim Coby*

Michael Parker. *Prairie Fever: A Novel*. Algonquin Books, 2019.

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**MICHAEL PARKER** is a retired Professor of creative writing at UNC Greensboro. He is a native of North Carolina but has moved from his home state to Austin, TX. Over the years, *NCLR* has published several of his essays and an interview with him in 2005. Read more about Parker in the story about one of his most recent honors, the R. Hunt Parker Award, in *NCLR Online* 2012 and find more of his work in *NCLR Online* 2015. Parker was also the honoree of the 2015 North Carolina Writers Conference in Washington, NC.

OPPOSITE Michael Parker and *NCLR* Fiction Editor Liza Wieland reading from their new novels at the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival, 19 May 2019

Michael Parker is a master at forming engaging, thought-provoking, and all around remarkable characters. The type of characters that, were they real people, would likely prompt the desire to hover within their orbit, to experience some of their charms in real time. This mastery of character was true in *The Watery Part of the World* (Algonquin Books, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012) and *All That I have in This World* (Algonquin Books, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015) and is no less true in his newest novel, *Prairie Fever*.

Enter Lorena and Elise Stewart, a pair of precocious sisters who live in the rural community of Lone Wolf, OK. Their story begins wrapped tightly under a blanket on the back of a horse named Sandy as the sisters ride to school through the near Arctic temperatures of a Midwestern winter morning. Upon their arrival, they are greeted by their North Carolina-born, but newly Midwestern-settled teacher, Gus McQueen. Over the course of the next several chapters, Gus evolves from educator to friend to paramour as the trio form a tempestuous, but deeply respectful relationship based on each one's appreciation of knowledge and language. Following a series of events consequential to each one of them, Sandy included, the trio of humans eventually find means of reconnecting, learning to trust and love one another, and plundering their collective memories to learn what special kinship unites them all.

Over the course of his novel, Parker crafts characters with so



COURTESY OF LIZA WIELAND

strong and unique a voice that readers may well forget they are reading something written and not lived. That is, when Lorena writes to her once and always classroom rival Edith Gotswegan midway through the text, the missives read like genuine artifacts plundered from some relative's attic-bound antique chest. And when Lorena begins her epistle with "I write from Wyoming, as you might have deduced from the postmark, if you are the type to read postmarks. But of course you are not, which is why I am writing to you in the first place" (211), all of Lorena's acerbic wit and personality rush forth so strongly that readers are apt to be swept along in the current of language. This detailed attention to language is another hallmark of *Prairie Fever*.

Parker has long had a penchant for wordplay in his novels – puns, double-entendres, and

bits of meta-humor – so it's no surprise that the characters in this novel quite literally play with their words. Parker notes that the Stewart sisters "warm themselves with words" (4) recited from their perusal of newspapers during the coldest days of the Oklahoma winters. (Fascinating side note: the stories the sisters read come from actual turn-of-the-century Midwestern newspapers; Parker's research knows no bounds.) Beyond a love of the printed word is the sisters' razor-sharp and rapid-fire banter between themselves. All of which amounts to attention to the craft of character, dialogue, and presentation that bring to mind the psychological explorations of Henry James or Edith Wharton.

Another area in which Parker clearly revels is in considering and expressing his consternation with the field of teaching, voiced largely through the

characters of Lorena and Gus. Anyone who has taught for any period of time understands both the frustrations and pleasures that come with attentive and (sometimes overly) engaged students, but Parker here reminds readers of the other side of the coin in his descriptions of Lorena's constant challenges to Gus's pedagogy. For example, after an unsatisfactory reply to one of her insights, Lorena muses, "To this [Gus] said only, 'Hmmm,' as if to remind me he was my teacher, for this is the sound teachers make when they want you to know you have said something ignorant but have not the courage or energy to tell you so" (60).

Parker's novel is aggressively readable, but at the same time deeply contemplative, both encouraging a quick initial read-through while also rewarding repeated, measured readings. Atmospheric and contemplative as it is, the novel moves at a swift clip until its final act when it becomes a more intense consideration of the roles of parenthood, loneliness, and familial bonds. As the sisters prepare for their first reunion in several years, Parker presents the excitement, but also anxiety that can potentially mar such vents. Throughout *Prairie Fever*, Parker continues to solidify his position as a master of observational and creative prowess, forging characters at once wholly fantastic while at the same time completely true to life. It's a pleasure to spend time with these characters, and one hopes that Parker continues to craft more like them for a long time yet. ■