The Solace of Open Spaces Study Guide

The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich is a work of non-fiction. The book was written over a period of five years, from 1979-1984. According to the author, the book actually began as a series of rough-edged journal entries sent by Ehrlich to a friend in Hawaii. It was written in "fits and starts" as many journal entries are. The intent when turning it into a book was to write a complete narrative in chronological order. After the text was written, Ehrlich created a flow in the work, although it is clear that the work is a sort of mosaic rather than a single painting.

Ehrlich grew up in Santa Barbara, California, an academic, who decided to give it up for the open spaces of Wyoming. The original reason for the trip was for Ehrlich, who was a filmmaker in addition to being a writer, to film a documentary for Public Broadcasting. The documentary was designed to focus on sheep herders and their lives throughout the high months of the year, which are June through September.

In 1976, Ehrlich traveled from her native California to Wyoming to start shooting the footage for the documentary. Shortly before Ehrlich set off to meet with the sheepherders in Lovell, she learned that her lover, David, was dying. Despite David's worsening condition, Ehrlich went ahead with the film project. David lasted throughout the project but died shortly thereafter.

While in Wyoming, Ehrlich fell in love with the wilderness of the state, its primitiveness, and wide open spaces. As a result of this transformation and her introduction to the world of ranch life, Ehrlich began to write The Solace of Open Spaces in 1979. Over the next five years, Ehrlich would record her experiences as a ranch hand and herder as well as a friend to others in the same occupation. Those experiences are what Ehrlich used to draw upon for the book, which was completed in 1985.

While in Wyoming, Ehrlich tried her hand at many things from lambing to calving, branding, and herding animals across thousands of miles. Part of the reason for the stay in Wyoming was for the author to lose herself in the wide open spaces. However, the exact opposite occurred and Ehrlich found her true self in spite of her efforts.

Along with a great deal of information and insight on the lives of ranchers, herders, cowboys and their beliefs and work ethic, Ehrlich also shares many tales of her relationships with these people. Many are humorous and show how people of a certain region have their own way of doing everything just slightly differently than everybody else from the language to the way they regard one another. In Wyoming, everyone knows everyone and there is a strict Western code to be followed. Ranchers are courteous and kind, hardworking, tough and yet gentle. The demanding and difficult weather and terrain make a unique type of society where people are often isolated for many months of the year. One woman in the book hadn't left the ranch in 11 years. That type of isolation causes a lot of strange behavior, from the violent to the apparently crazy. No matter what a person's attitude, however, he or she is accepted.

Ehrlich left Wyoming to travel but always returned, much to the relief of friends such as John the sheepman, who has been by the author's side since her arrival in the area. After getting married, Ehrlich and her husband settled in Shell, Wyoming. Ehrlich continued to help out when needed, whether it was for herding or any other duty. Ehrlich and her husband also operated their own ranch.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one: "The Solace of Open Spaces" begins with the author waking up from a nap out in the desert. The dogs have taught Ehrlich how to sleep; against sagebrush so she will not be blown away by the high winds that are common to the area. Ehrlich is on a 55-mile journey through the badlands of Wyoming. The trip will take as long as five days because the sheep will not move when it is hot outside. Instead, the animals rest in the shade until it has cooled off. Ehrlich comments a lot on the terrain, from the wide open spaces to the dry, arid valleys, rugged plateaus and red rock mesas.

In Wyoming, winter lasts six months of the year. The author talks about how the long, frigid winters affect everything from the mental health of the residents to the health and survival of the animals. The temperatures can get as cold as -60 degrees, leaving vehicles disabled and ranchers all but trapped on their lands. The descriptions of Wyoming are detailed and awe inspiring. The countryside covers 98,000 square miles, most of which is open space. Sagebrush covers 58,000 square miles of that land. The real Wyoming bears little if any resemblance to the image shown in the movies and on television.

There are only five settlements in the entire state that can be referred to as "cities." At the time the book was written, only 470,000 people lived in the state. The author says that the buildings tend to be low slung and "fugitive looking" while some of the towns are referred to as "trailer cities." Even the towns boast few people, from 2,000 down to 50 residents.

The author states that it can easily take 2-3 hours to get from one ranch to the next, a trip often made for dinner or some other social event to keep the ranchers from going stir crazy. Ehrlich speaks of one rancher with so much land, spreading across two states, that it is not unusual for him to put 100,000 miles on his truck without ever leaving the property.

Ehrlich is quick to dismiss the usual stereotypes of ranchers and cowboys. In the author's view, none of the cowboys she knows bear any resemblance at all to the Marlboro man. Rather, the cowboys Ehrlich has spent years with are simple, hard-working people. It is true that the men are tough, but underneath, the cowboys have tender hearts and show the utmost respect for the land and the animals.

A rancher's love of the work is often the only thing that keeps him going. The work is extremely hard and does not always pay well. For some, the way of life is in the blood. The author states that being "at home on the range" involves self-reliance, common sense, and vigor. "A person's life is not a series of dramatic events for which he or she is applauded or exiled but a slow accumulation of days, seasons, years, fleshed out by

the generational weight of one's family anchored by a land-bound sense of place" (Page 5).

Wyoming ranches are like towns in themselves. This is particularly true of those that have a large cache of employees, from house staff to ranch hands. The isolation factor means that each ranch must be autonomous in nearly every way. It goes so far as to have the ranchers speaking their own language, a brief, clipped style, one that often consists of as few words as possible. Verbs and adjectives fall by the wayside, as if using them would take up precious time better devoted to something else, such as a chore or important task. Ehrlich also comments on the ranchers' sense of direction, or rather, their inability to give directions that could be understood by outsiders. Of course it makes perfect sense to them, which is all that matters.

Cowboys are known to use phrases like, "Which one needs rode?" The author talks about a set of directions she once received during a sheep herding expedition. "Ride up to that kinda upturned rock, follow the pink wash, turn left at the dump, and then you'll see the water hole" (Page 6).

Ehrlich talks about settlements in the state, often referring back to the early 20th century and the homesteaders. In those days, ranch hands were known to survive by drifting from ranch to ranch. Ehrlich states: "Seventy-five years ago, when travel was by buckboard or horseback, cowboys who were temporarily out of work rode the grub line - drifting from ranch to ranch, mending fences or milking cows, and receiving in exchange a bed and meals" (Page 4).

The out-of-work cowboys were also the main means of circulating news. Because of this, any cowboy was welcome at a ranch despite his reputation. The ranchers were lonely and desperate for company, no matter what it may mean. Ehrlich says: "Gossip and messages traveled this slow circuit with them, creating an intimacy between ranchers who were three and four weeks' ride apart" (Page 4).

Leaving the ranch is often so rare that leaving can cause a sense of disorientation for the ranchers and cowboys. The author says that everything looks new and vivid in the nearby town. Ehrlich struggles with the need for human company and the need to isolate on the ranch. The weather in Wyoming changes in a flash and is the main cause of isolation. Perhaps this is one reason why everyone in the region is friendly and neighborly, always ready to help or wave hello when spotting anyone on the road. Ehrlich paints a vivid picture of two ranchers stopped alongside one another on the road in their trucks, chatting and sharing a cigarette or coffee. Although many things have changed over the years, it is this type of camaraderie that remains the same and perhaps is the thread that keeps the lifestyle intact.

One problem with the isolation is that it often causes cabin fever, which can result in a type of madness. This madness can show itself in many ways. Some go into town and spend all their money faster than they can make it. Others gather for dances and socializing, although Ehrlich states that the local dancing halls had to be closed down because of the fighting. It seems that for some ranchers, fighting is the only way to

exorcise the demons created by being out of touch for so long. Ehrlich shares some tales of the more comical episodes of this madness and the easy way in which the others take it in stride.

One day, the author came across an old ranch hand who sat near a severely-decayed carcass of a cow. The ranch hand sat there, shaking his finger at the cow, saying, "Now, I don't want you to do this ever again!" When Ehrlich asked a friend what was wrong with the ranch hand, the friend replied, "He's goofier than hell, just like the rest of us" (Page 11).

The madness may also be attributed to the long and grueling hours that are necessary to keep the ranch going through certain times of the year. When Ehrlich first arrived at her friend John's ranch, the author spent 14 hours of 14 days shearing, delousing and branding sheep. Thousands of sheep were handled that spring. Ranch hands are often called upon to spend 14-16 hours a day at work, often averaging only 4 hours of sleep per night. While this is not the norm for every day life, one must be prepared to go through such demands on mind, body, and spirit.

There aren't many women ranchers in Wyoming. When Ehrlich announced to an old male friend that she intended to become a rancher, the only advice given to the author was that she needed to be a good one. The women that do make it are strong, self-reliant and respected once they have proven themselves to the ranching community. Ehrlich mentions several including Dorothy, a fortyish cowgirl, and Ellen Cotton, a neighbor and solo sheep herder.

Chapter 2: "Obituary" begins with the sale of one of the biggest sheep ranches in Wyoming. In the last decade, the ranch had gone from being highly prosperous to being put on the auction block. It had been 87 years since its lambing sheds were empty. Cliff, the auctioneer, was melancholy and was reluctant to begin the sale. However, the sale did go off without a hitch and every item was sold. The demise of a ranch is much like the demise of a society. It can be compared to the bankruptcy of an entire town. In order to make up for the loss, other ranchers will step in and take care of their own, by offering food, shelter, schools, and even a place in a graveyard for those that died on the ranch. Ranch hands are typically given at least one tool of the trade so that they may prosper elsewhere. This could be a horse, cow, sheep, dog, saddle, or tools. If a ranch hand goes to a new position with nothing, the ranch hand is taken care of, usually by being provided with a job in an air-conditioned tractor. Old timers are also taken care of, given a place to live out their days. If able, those who were too old or ill to work would be given a task such as feeding the dogs or cooking for the other ranch hands. In other words, no one is ever put out into the cold.

One rancher, plagued with tick fever who could no longer work, was looked after by the neighbors, even though he preferred to remain isolated. Another, Henry Tucker, was also an isolationist. Tucker, who had contracted syphilis in his younger days, had a vendetta against women. Tucker was the man who had been scolding the dead cow.

The author talks about lambing, which begins at the end of February and ends in April. During this time, everyone must pull his own weight, and the ranch must run like a well-oiled machine. Naturally, there were arguments about the placement of wagons and other things but all were eventually ironed out. The author describes the sheep maternity ward, which runs 24 hours a day. It smells of ammonia. Workers were inundated with many chores from cleaning the lambs, removing ones that had died and branding others with red paint. Ehrlich states that the branding is necessary because like humans, sheep cannot recognize their newborns by sight.

Ehrlich explains the hierarchy of the ranching community. Ranchers and cowboys are at the top, followed by herders, and then other workers that the author refers to as town idiots. Because herders and workers are considered low-class citizens, it is imperative for them to develop a good sense of humor that was usually self-deprecating in nature.

Ehrlich refers to the drinking problems among the workers. One example given is the story of Grady, an Alabaman hired to clean sheds at night. Grady was known for his one explosive and all-consuming drinking binge each year, which usually managed to get it out of his system. Grady would bark at cars on Main Street, shoot up his wagon from the inside and then ask Ehrlich how she liked his new picture window. Eventually, Grady would beg to be locked up even though the town did not have a jail, just a rusted metal cage that was left over from years ago when there was a proper lock up. The ranchers would give Grady just enough booze to ward off the shakes. After the drunk wore off, Grady would ask for a shave, a bath, and a hot meal. The binge was over for another year.

Ehrlich speaks of other neighbors, such as John the effeminate bachelor, who was known to care for all the old timers, and Fred Murdi, a Basque who at 77, preferred to play his harmonium "only for the sheeps" and hoarded so much stuff that he had to sleep sitting up. Fred was a particularly interesting character. Fred and his family were among the 14 million people who came to America with a third-class steerage ticket and entered the new world via Ellis Island. Fred was happy with his lot in life and saw no need to complain. Fred was a non-smoker and non-drinker; his only vice seemed to be international politics. Unfortunately, Fred's old ways caught up with him one day. After being injured in a fall, Fred attempted to treat a bad cut on his leg with a poultice of sheep manure and died of gangrene shortly after.

The only person to ever give Ehrlich trouble was Albert, a herder from New Mexico. Albert made unwanted advances toward Ehrlich. When Ehrlich rebuffed him, Albert hit the author with a broom. The next time Albert came around, Ehrlich hid under the bed. Bob Ayers, a world weary man, was another of Ehrlich's favorites. Ayers had done time in prison, having been mixed up in a shoot out between herders and ranchers seventy-five years earlier. Seven men attacked the herders and shot them in cold blood, ending a feud that started in the 1800s. The men went on to kill the entire band of sheep, which Ayers was involved in herding. Ehrlich does not go into further detail.

The last time the author saw Ayers, he was in jail once more. According to Ayers, cattlemen were allowing their cows to wander onto his property, even though they had

been warned repeatedly. Harkening back to the incident of 1909, Ayers finally shot 6 of the cows and was arrested. Ayers simply said that at least he didn't shoot any people. The nature of the town was such that Ehrlich was able to spend an entire afternoon chatting with Ayers with the jail cell bars between them.

Ehrlich talks about the changing times, the effect that the economy is having on ranchers forced to take out loans they can't repay, and laments the death of several old timers.

Chapters 3-8

Chapters 3-8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3: "Other Lives" begins with Ehrlich's trip to Lovell to film four sheepherders from June through September on Big Horn Mountain. Ehrlich was forced to make the trip alone, as her partner and lover, David, just learned that he was dying. David was only 29. The author talks about a Mormon settler and his great grandson who owned land in the area.

Ehrlich remained in Lovell to work on the documentary but made a trip every third day to call David. It was obvious he was getting weaker, but everything that needed to be said had been said. Eventually, David decided to travel back east to visit his children. At the end stage of his life, David called out for Ehrlich who prepared to board the first flight out of Wyoming. Before the author could catch the plane, David's mother called to say her son was dead. Ehrlich did not go to the funeral but instead stayed in Wyoming where she attended the funeral of a friend. It was then that the tears finally came. According to Ehrlich, those tears lasted for two years.

Ehrlich left Wyoming and went traveling, finally settling in Santa Fe at the house of a friend. The author would call to check in with John, who finally managed to convince Ehrlich to come back home to Wyoming. The homecoming was just what the author needed, along with the new friendships of local women.

Winter came with a vengeance. The air was frigid and it was a struggle just to keep alive. The author realizes that living in such conditions ensures that one learns how to make do, not only materialistically, but emotionally as well. The next summer, Ehrlich moved across the Basin to a house outside Shell, a town of fifty people. The town was full of the type of people Ehrlich had come to love, straightforward, no nonsense types that had few qualms about speaking their minds.

One of the people the author got to know was an old hermit that lived in a house that faced the mountains. The man, a painter, insisted on covering his windows with army blankets to avoid being seen. The author describes the hermit and his surroundings in a vivid way and sums up the lifestyle of many people throughout the book:

"The stench inside the house was of billy goats, dead mice, and unaired emotions." Ehrlich talks of the man's ethereal voice and how it lightened the squalor of his home. Then Ehrlich goes on to say, "His bed was a narrow plank blanketed with torn overcoats; hanging from the ceiling by a piece of barbed wire were a baseball bat and a paintbrush - icons, perhaps, of the battle he had taken up with the problems of imagination and survival."

Pete and Reyna would become central characters in the lives of the people in Shell. The couple had come from Arizona to find ranching jobs and moved into a house next to

the town's tiny cemetery. The couple was well loved and when they finally decided to forgo the Wyoming winter to return to Arizona, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. After the couple left, the owners of the house cut down all the trees surrounding it, as if in mourning.

Ehrlich met a rancher shortly after she moved to Shell. The pair became involved for a time, showing that perhaps Ehrlich would be able to begin to move ahead with her life.

Chapter 4: "About Men"

Ehrlich finds that when she is back in New York, Wyoming beckons so strongly that the author finds herself searching for the Marlboro ads that decorate the subway. The author talks about the life and pay of a cowboy, including the great physical toll it takes on the body. The isolation is covered once again, with the author commenting that even the young cowboys do not know how to express themselves, so that they are "Jekyll and Hyde creatures - gentle with animals and rough on women..."

Chapter 5: "From a Sheepherder's Notebook: Three Days"

Ehrlich received a call from John, saying that he needed help herding sheep because one of his men just quit. It didn't matter that Ehrlich remembered almost nothing about herding sheep. John dropped off Ehrlich on a ridge at 5:00 AM with a horse and a border collie. True to the cowboy way, John left instructions: "Just go up that ridge, turn left at the pink rock, then keep agoing. And don't forget to bring the damn sheep." (Page 54)

Ehrlich details her stint herding sheep. Except for eating and sleeping, every minute is spent outside. The author details the animals, scenery, and night sky. A thunderstorm threatens to send the sheep over the side of a cliff. Only quick thinking on Ehrlich's part saves them. The sun takes its toll on Ehrlich, who had forgotten to pack sunscreen and a hat. On the second day, John checks in to make sure everything is all right. The journey continues.

Chapter 6: "Friends, Foes, and Working Animals"

The author talks about animals versus people and the westerners' view on the comparisons. In a cowboy's eyes, most animals are smarter than people and it is easier to know and spot their motivation in various circumstances. Ehrlich also points out the differences between cows and sheep regarding their herd mentality.

Chapter 7: "The Smooth Skull of Winter"

Ehrlich talks about winter in Wyoming. "Winter looks like a fictional place, an elaborate simplicity, a Nabokovian invention of rarefied detail" (Page 71). The author also refers to Seamus Heaney who believes that the landscape is a type of sacrament. In Wyoming, the winters can be bitterly cold with very little light to warm the land. The aches caused by the cold are both physical and mental. Just as the gentler creatures such as the eagles vanish with the cold, so do the small niceties practiced by humans.

Chapter 8: "On Water"

Ehrlich refers once again to Frank Hinckley, a septuagenarian who inhabits a nearby ranch. Hinckley is much more interested in irrigation than riding a horse. Hinckley began to explore irrigation at age 9 when he was responsible for irrigating his father's grain and hay fields. The author discusses the 4-month period during which irrigation is performed and how the season will bear witness to as many as 200 dams, which are changed every twelve hours with repairs being made as needed.

Water is not as well received by the westerners as it is elsewhere. In the eye of a westerner, vast amounts of water mean one of two things - chaos or mud. While the rains bring flowers and lush forests to the other parts of the country, in Wyoming, it brings on more cabin fever. As the rains escalate, cowboys are limited to the work they can do and are sometimes confined to their homesteads. Hinckley explains how irrigation worked back in his day. Even though Hinckley is getting older and the man can afford to hire out the work, the aging rancher prefers to do it himself. Ehrlich compares water to mortality. "Cascading water equates loss followed by loss, a momentum of things falling in the direction of death, then life" (Page 83).

Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary and Analysis

Gretel Ehrlich met her new husband in Cody, Wyoming while at a John Wayne film festival. The couple was introduced by one of the festival's speakers. The pair ended up sitting next to each other at a showing of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance the next day and spent the entire evening together. Ehrlich refers to her as-yet-unnamed (thus far in the book) husband as being a "culture straddler" - one who could discuss ranching as well as medieval topics. Ten months later, the couple was married.

Ehrlich makes a comical reference to the care package newlyweds often receive at a local courthouse, filled with things like Midol, disposable razors, soap, shaving cream and Kotex. Ehrlich refers to this "Pandora's box of grotesqueries" as being a bleak symbol of marriage and what the couple had to look forward to: "blood, pain, unwanted hair, headaches and dirt" (Pages 86-87). One had to wonder what happened to cigars and champagne.

The wedding took place in winter on the spur of the moment. Ehrlich's parents were told to cancel their golf outing and make the trip to Wyoming. The snow was a hindrance and the author refers to it as a "walk-in wedding." As the couple stood in front of their witnesses, Ehrlich's dog laid at her feet as if to ask "What about me?" (Page 87). The author says there were three couples married that day. The reception consisted of ice skating and champagne, kept cold by sticking the bottles into the snow.

Although it was a happy time, Ehrlich felt a new sense of peace, one so pervasive that she was sure it was a premonition of death, akin to the feeling someone gets when all affairs have been put right. One year later while out riding, Ehrlich was struck by lightning. The author compares the experience to having one's teeth cleaned at the dentist - an experience you think you may not survive but after it's done, there is a feeling of cleanliness.

The couple bought what Ehrlich refers to as a poor man's Victorian, a cabin that had been papered using the editorial and classified sections of the newspaper. Ehrlich says that parts of the wallpaper are still visible. The house was built in 1903 when Billy Hunt, a Texan, met and fell in love with a local barmaid. Ehrlich and her husband moved to the house in February. By spring, they were ready to put up fences and clean up the area, enough to make it their own without overtaking the landscape. The author discusses the landscape, the caves that are as large as living rooms, and the creatures that inhabit the region from the songbirds and snowshoe rabbits to the mountain lions.

Chapter 10: "Rules of the Game: Rodeo"

Instead of jetting off to some exotic locale for a honeymoon, the newlyweds chose to go to a rodeo in Oklahoma City. Even a slew of blizzards couldn't keep them away. This

was no ordinary rodeo - it was the National Finals Rodeo, an event held every December. The event is referred to as the "World Series of Professional Rodeo." In other words, only the best of the best make it into the competition. Some of the riders are so devoted that they make it to as many as 80 rodeos per season, some attending 2-3 per day.

Ehrlich describes the format of the rodeo. The order in which the performers appear goes from bareback riders, steer wrestlers, team ropers, saddle bronc riders, and barrel racers. The finale is saved for the bull riders. Ehrlich compares the bareback riders' style as a "drunken comic bout of lovemaking" while her husband, an amateur rider, says it is more like "riding a runaway bicycle down a steep hill and lying on your back; you can't see where you're going or what's going to happen next" (Page 92).

The author describes each scene, from the graceful pas de deux of the team ropers to the actions of the classic saddle bronc riders. The barrel racing portion of the show is the only one in which women routinely participate. Ehrlich refers to the calf ropers as the rodeo's whiz kids, as they are required to be experts both on the horse and on the ground.

Bull riding is the only truly dangerous part of the rodeo. Unlike other animals, bulls jump around and exhibit erratic behavior, throwing the rider to and fro with no warning. If a rider falls off, the bull will immediately try to stomp on or gore the rider. The rodeo clowns are an indispensable part of bull riding, acting as a type of secret service men given the job of saving a cowboy's life.

Ehrlich compares rodeos to baseball. Both are beloved American sports. Rodeos have been around almost as long as baseball, with the first commercial rodeo taking place in 1895, in Lander, Wyoming. The event was held only 19 years after the formation of the National League. Ehrlich compares bull riding and other rodeo categories to ranch work. Even when it seems that the work is carried out by one individual, it is really teamwork that makes it possible to accomplish any task. Contrary to popular belief, westerners built their homesteads and businesses on the premise of honor and chivalry, not gun slinging. To this day, ranchers are polite and courteous to one another, not itching to draw down the first time some says the wrong thing.

Ehrlich also sets out to dispel other myths and stereotypes. Those unfamiliar with rodeos often misunderstand how it works, believing that the riders are often clumsy and the animals abused. Riders are highly skilled athletically and have a sophistication Ehrlich compares to Bjorn Borg. Animals are not coerced into bucking or acting wild; their breeding encourages them to behave that way. Horses love to buck. Also, a horse on a ranch works extremely hard while a rodeo horse may work only 4-6 minutes per day and lives the life of Riley for the rest of the time.

Chapter 11: "To Live in Two Worlds: Crow Fair and Sun Dance"

Ehrlich recounts an experience she had one June night. There was a hellacious storm with deadly lightning and torrential rain. Ehrlich was in the process of birthing a calf and

struggling hard to not slip in the mud. The birth was difficult and the weather seemed to be a harbinger of doom, and the calf was born dead. The next day, the traumatic incident over, the day was clear.

The author speaks of the natural rites of passage that take place on a ranch. For the fifth year in a row, Ehrlich helped her neighbors, Stan and Mary, move cattle through four pastures of 6,000 acres each. During the six-day trip, the herders tried unsuccessfully to stop a small stampede of 600 calves. The calves believed their mothers were behind them, instead of in front. The calves ran back to the pasture to find their absent mothers and the process had to begin all over again.

Ehrlich talks about her Indian neighbors, ancestors of those who originally settled the land. They include members of the Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Shoshone tribes. There were also tribes of the Kiowa and Sioux at one time. Ehrlich was invited to attend Sun Dance, the holiest ritual of the Plains tribes. The event, which is traced back to 1750 among various tribes, is not a rite of sun worship. Rather it is an inculcation of the sun's regenerative power that restores one's vitality, health and harmony. The event was suppressed by the U.S. government sometime in the 1880s and its resurgence was only recent.

Ehrlich details the happenings at the ritual and the campsites nearby. Crow Fair is a celebration that lasts five days. Because the Crows are nomadic, they do not hold fairs typical to American culture. Instead of celebrating agricultural accomplishments involving animals and food, Crow Fairs contain other celebrations, including all night dancing rituals. There are also drumming sessions and hand made items such as earrings and traditional Indian bead work.

Chapter 12: "A Storm, The Cornfield, The Elk"

Autumn announces the end of the rancher's year. The hay has been stacked; the animals have been weaned, shipped and/or sold. Once again Ehrlich has pitched in to help round up cattle on the Big Horns. This year there is a surprise storm that brings with it three feet of snow. There are anecdotes about cows running off, including one tale of a cow running into a church and being unwilling to leave. Fall is also the time when bull elk fight one another over their "harems." Ehrlich enjoys walking through the cornrows, comparing the field to torn parchment paper. To the author, autumn also teaches one that like the fruition of a season, it is also a type of death. Yet no longer is Ehrlich afraid, rather she embraces the circle of life.

Characters

Gretel Ehrlich

Gretel Ehrlich is an American author, poet, and filmmaker. In 1976, Ehrlich traveled from her native California to Wyoming to shoot a documentary for PBS. The documentary was to focus on sheep herders and their lives throughout the high months of the year. While in Wyoming, Ehrlich fell in love with the wilderness of the state, its primitiveness, and open spaces. As a result of this transformation and her introduction to the world of ranch life, Ehrlich began to write The Solace of Open Spaces in 1979.

While in Wyoming, Ehrlich tried her hand at many things from lambing to calving, branding, and herding animals across thousands of miles. Part of the reason for the stay in Wyoming was for the author to lose herself in the wide open spaces. However, the exact opposite occurred and Ehrlich found her true self in spite of her efforts.

Ehrlich survived hard times in Wyoming, particularly the death of her Welsh lover, David, who had been diagnosed with a terminal disease and died before his 30th birthday.

Ehrlich left Wyoming to travel but always returned. After getting married, Ehrlich and her husband settled in Shell, Wyoming. Ehrlich was struck by lightning in 1991, an event that should have killed her. After a long period of rehabilitation, Ehrlich began to work again and also to travel. The author's most famous travels have been to Greenland and China.

Ehrlich's latest book, THIS COLD HEAVEN: Seven Seasons in Greenland, was published in 2002.

John

Only referred to as John the sheepman, this character plays an integral part in both the story and Gretel Ehrlich's life. John was the first person to hire the author after she arrived in Wyoming. As a rancher, John had to tend to his biggest spring job - shearing sheep. The job was arduous and required 14 days of 14 hours per day, shearing thousands of sheep.

After a while under John's tutelage, Ehrlich decided to become a ranch hand. The hard work suited the author and John's help was instrumental. Throughout the course of the book, John would serve as everything from father to friend to confessor. It was John that always looked out for Ehrlich, even when she left Wyoming. The choice to leave Wyoming was necessary for Ehrlich since she had recently lost David, her lover. John never ceased keeping tabs on the author and eventually, was the one person that could convince Ehrlich to return home.

There is little said about John aside from his relationship with Ehrlich. It is known that he is a long-time sheep herder. There is never any mention of age or marital status, although one can assume he is single and may even be the one Ehrlich refers to as the "effeminate bachelor." There are also no physical descriptions, so the image of John is left entirely up to the reader's imagination. Even after Ehrlich married, she continued to be loyal to John and the other ranchers, proving her testament to loyalty and friendship.

Frank Hinckley

Frank Hinckley is a septuagenarian rancher befriended by Ehrlich. Hinckley is a bit mentally unbalanced but is by far the region's expert on irrigation.

Bob Ayers

Bob Ayers is the pro-union sheep herder that went to jail for shooting 6 cows.

David

David was Ehrlich's Welsh lover who died before the age of 30.

Ursula

Ursula is a young friend of Ehrlich's that attends the Crow Fair.

Ellen Cotton

Ellen Cotton is a female rancher who is well respected in the community.

Stan and Mary

Stan and Mary are long-time neighbors of Ehrlich's in Shell.

Cliff

Cliff is the auctioneer hired to sell off one of the oldest and largest ranches in the state.

Pete and Reyna

Pete and Reyna are ranchers from Arizona that moved to Wyoming for one summer.

Objects/Places

Wyoming

Wyoming is the main setting in the book, from the badlands across the Basin to Shell, where Ehrlich eventually buys a house with her husband.

Ehrlich comments a lot on the terrain, from the wide open spaces to the dry, arid valleys, rugged plateaus and red rock mesas.

In Wyoming, winter lasts six months out of the year. The author talks about how the long, frigid winters affect everything from the mental health of the residents to the health and survival of the animals. The temperatures can get as cold as -60 degrees, leaving vehicles disabled and ranchers all but trapped on their lands.

The descriptions of Wyoming are detailed and awe inspiring. The countryside covers 98,000 square miles, most of which is open space. Sagebrush covers 58,000 square miles of that land. The real Wyoming bears little if any resemblance to the image shown in the movies and on television.

There are only five settlements in the entire state that can be referred to as "cities." At the time the book was written, only 470,000 people lived in the state. The author says that the buildings tend to be low slung and "fugitive looking" while some of the towns are referred to as "trailer cities." Even the towns boast few people, from 2,000 down to 50 residents.

The author states that it can easily take 2-3 hours to get from one ranch to the next, a trip often made for dinner or some other social event to keep the ranchers from going stir crazy. Ehrlich speaks of one rancher with so much land, spreading across two states, that it is not unusual for him to put 100,000 miles on his truck without ever leaving the property.

Ranches

According to Ehrlich, Wyoming ranches are like towns in themselves. This is particularly true of those that have a large cache of employees, from house staff to ranch hands. The isolation factor means that each ranch must be autonomous in nearly every way. It goes so far as to have the ranchers speaking their own language, a brief, clipped style, one that often consists of as few words as possible. Verbs and adjectives fall by the wayside, as if using them would take up precious time better devoted to something else, such as a chore or important task. Ehrlich also comments on the ranchers' sense of direction, or rather, their inability to give directions that could be understood by outsiders. Of course it makes perfect sense to them, which is all that matters.

Cowboys are known to use phrases like, "Which one needs rode?" The author talks about a set of directions she once received during a sheep herding expedition. "Ride up to that kinda upturned rock, follow the pink wash, turn left at the dump, and then you'll see the water hole" (Page 6).

Ehrlich talks about settlements in the state, often referring back to the early 20th century and the homesteaders. In those days, ranch hands were known to survive by drifting from ranch to ranch.

The out-of-work cowboys were also the main means of circulating news. Because of this, any cowboy was welcome at a ranch despite his reputation. The ranchers were lonely and desperate for company, no matter what it may mean.

Leaving the ranch is often so rare that leaving can cause a sense of disorientation for the ranchers and cowboys. The author says that everything looks new and vivid in the nearby town. Ehrlich struggles with the need for human company and the need to isolate on the ranch.

Shell, Wyoming

Shell, Wyoming is home to Gretel Ehrlich, her husband, and neighbors Stan and Mary.

Lovell, Wyoming

Lovell, Wyoming is the town which Ehrlich traveled to for the shooting of the PBS documentary.

Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City is the site of the National Finals Rodeo, also known as the "World Series of Professional Rodeo." It is also the place where Ehrlich and her husband went on their honeymoon.

Cody, Wyoming

Cody, Wyoming is the town in which Ehrlich meets her husband.

Laramie, Wyoming

Laramie, Wyoming is the site of the state university.

New York City

New York City is a place Ehrlich visits often and where she was a former resident.

Crow Fair

Crow Fair is a five-day festival celebrating the traditions of the Crow tribe.

Santa Barbara, California

Santa Barbara, California is where Gretel Ehrlich was born and raised.

Themes

Death

One of the main themes in The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich is death. Death comes in many forms and is referred to in many ways, through actual deaths of people and animals to the transition of the seasons and various stages of life.

When Gretel Ehrlich ventured to Wyoming for work, the filmmaker also had the intention of spending those months in Lovell isolating herself from the world, wanting to get lost in the vastness of it all. Instead, just the opposite happened. The death of David almost destroyed Ehrlich who took two years before she could return to her new life in Wyoming. There were also deaths of others, from old timers to men whose hearts simply gave out. There were also the deaths of animals. Some animals died in childbirth or were stillborn, fell off cliffs or simply froze to death. As horrible as it seems, those deaths, like those of humans, are simply a part of life a rancher accepts easily because there is no other choice.

The weather is also used as a metaphor as well as a direct reference to death. The autumn is the end of the rancher's year and things are sold off or begin to die. The author is melancholy about the season, but at the end of the book, begins to see in death a type of purity and peace.

Isolation

One of the main causes of isolation in Wyoming is the weather. The weather changes in a flash and can wreak havoc on a ranch or herders and their animals. Another reason is that it can easily take 2-3 hours to get from one ranch to the next, a trip often made for dinner or some other social event to keep the ranchers from going stir crazy. Ehrlich speaks of one rancher with so much land, spreading across two states, that it is not unusual for him to put 100,000 miles on his truck without ever leaving the property.

Perhaps this is one reason why everyone in the region is friendly and neighborly, always ready to help or wave hello when spotting anyone on the road. Ehrlich paints a vivid picture of two ranchers stopped alongside one another on the road in their trucks, chatting and sharing a cigarette or coffee. Although many things have changed over the years, it is this type of camaraderie that remains the same and perhaps is the thread that keeps the lifestyle intact.

One problem with the isolation is that it often causes cabin fever, which can result in a type of madness. This madness can show itself in many ways. Some go into town and spend all their money faster than they can make it. Others gather for dances and socializing, although Ehrlich states that the local dancing halls had to be closed because of the fighting. It seems that for some ranchers, fighting is the only way to exorcise the demons created by being out of touch for so long.

Ranches

One of the main settings and topics in The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich is the ranch. In Wyoming, ranches are the backbone, and it would seem that without the ranches, the state would not exist.

According to Ehrlich, Wyoming ranches are like towns in themselves. The ranches can be viewed as their own society, particularly if they have a large cache of employees, from house staff to ranch hands. The long distances between ranches often cause a great amount of isolation, which means that each ranch must be autonomous in nearly every way. It also means that the ranchers create a condensed version of the English language—a brief, clipped style, one that often consists of as few words as possible. Verbs and adjectives fall by the wayside, as if using them would take up precious time better devoted to something else, such as a chore or important task. Ehrlich also comments on the ranchers' sense of direction, or rather, their inability to give directions that could be understood by outsiders. Of course it makes perfect sense to them, which is all that matters.

Ehrlich details many of the homesteads in the area and various settlements, many of which date back to the early 20th century. In those days, there really was nothing more than a string of ranches. The ranches supplied work for homesteaders, herders, cowboys, and even outlaws. Many ranch hands were known to survive by drifting from ranch to ranch. The out-of-work cowboys were also the main means of circulating news. Because of this, any cowboy was welcome at a ranch despite his reputation. The ranchers were lonely and desperate for company, no matter what it may mean.

Ehrlich also refers to the more modern style of ranching as well as those old timers, such as Frank Hinckley, who still prefer to do the work by hand, as if doing otherwise would dishonor the profession as well as one's ancestors.

Style

Perspective

Gretel Ehrlich is an American author, poet, and filmmaker. In 1976, Ehrlich traveled from her native California to Wyoming to shoot a documentary for PBS. The documentary was designed to focus on sheep herders and their lives throughout the high months of the year, which are June through September. While in Wyoming, Ehrlich fell in love with the wilderness of the state, its primitiveness, and wide open spaces. As a result of this transformation and her introduction to the world of ranch life, Ehrlich began to write The Solace of Open Spaces in 1979. Over the next five years, Ehrlich would record her experiences as a ranch hand and herder as well as a friend to others in the same occupation. Those experiences are what Ehrlich used to draw upon for the book, which was completed in 1985.

While in Wyoming, Ehrlich tried her hand at many things from lambing to calving, branding, and herding animals across thousands of miles. Part of the reason for the stay in Wyoming was for the author to lose herself in the wide open spaces. However, the exact opposite occurred and Ehrlich found her true self in spite of her efforts.

Ehrlich left Wyoming to travel but always returned, much to the relief of friends such as John the sheepman, who had been by the author's side since her arrival in the area. After getting married, Ehrlich and her husband settled in Shell, Wyoming. This book has a homey, subjective point of view, written from the perspective of the author. It is both a documentary and a memoir and thus is a blend of objective and subjective viewpoints.

Tone

The tone used in The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich is one of deep introspection, tinged with instances of melancholy, loss, and wonder. Ehrlich went to Wyoming to lose herself in the vast open spaces inhabited mainly by ranchers, herders, cowboys, and animals. The author was not prepared for making a life-changing decision, but the trip turned into her new home. Although Wyoming was much different from the other places Ehrlich had lived, including Santa Barbara, California and New York, as well as her stint at Bennington, there was something about the land that drew the author in and would not let go.

Life in Wyoming can be extremely difficult, yet the author seems to take to the challenge, finding that the often primitive conditions and lifestyles suited her. Stripped away were false pretenses and ulterior motives. The people in Wyoming were straightforward and although many said little, what they said counted.

Ehrlich found solace in her long trips across the state when she was alone with her horse and dog. There was plenty of time to think and reflect on the circle of life, a topic the author had extreme difficulty with, particularly after the death of her lover.

Throughout the book, the reader gets to experience Wyoming through Ehrlich's eyes, sometimes describing foreign scenes with wonder and at other times relaying stories that comfort and amuse. At the end of the book, it is clear Ehrlich's tone has changed. The author has stopped fighting so hard and has learned to appreciate the natural cycles of life all around her.

Structure

The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich is a work of non-fiction. The book is comprised of 131 pages, broken into 12 chapters. The shortest chapter is 4 pages in length; the longest chapter is 24 pages in length. The average length of the chapters is 11 pages.

The book was written over a period of five years, from 1979-1984. According to the author, it was written in "fits and starts" even though the original concept was to write a complete narrative in chronological order. In fact, the book began as a series of rough-edged journal entries sent by Ehrlich to a friend in Hawaii. The two women had an unusual bond. The woman in Hawaii had grown up in Wyoming and traded that life for one of academia in a more tropical climate. Ehrlich grew up in a more tropical region of California, an academic, who decided to give it up for the open spaces of Wyoming. The author uses the combination of those worlds to present a well-rounded look at her early years in Wyoming.

After the main part of the book was written, Ehrlich put the writing into chronological order as much as it was possible. The author admits that the book has an overlapping chronology, full of bumps where one might expect smooth roads, bends where one might look for a straight path. All in all, the reader is treated to Ehrlich's experiences in Wyoming as well as her own personal journey.

Quotes

"To live and work in this kind of open country, with its hundred-mile views, is to lose the distinction between background and foreground."
Chapter 1, Page 2

"Things happen suddenly in Wyoming, the change of seasons and weather; for people, the violent swings in and out of isolation."

Chapter 1, Page 5

"The formality that goes hand-in-hand with the rowdiness is known as the Western code. It's a list of practical dos and don'ts, faithfully observed."
Chapter 1, Pages 11-12

"A big ranch is a miniature society. Its demise has the impact of a bankruptcy in a small town: another hundred people off of work and a big chunk of the town's business is suddenly gone."
Chapter 2, Page 17

"It is hard to know who suffered more - the livestock or the ranchers who fed and cared for them."
Chapter 4, Page 42

"When I'm in New York, but feeling lonely for Wyoming, I look for the Marlboro ads in the subway."
Chapter 4, Page 47

"The cowboy is someone who loves his work. Since the hours are long - 10 to 15 hours a day - and the pay is $30, he has to."
Chapter 5, Page 50

"So many of the men who came to the West were Southerners - men looking for work and a new life after the Civil War - that chivalrousness and strict codes of honor were soon thought of as Western traits."
Chapter 5, Page 51

"Winter looks like a fictional place, an elaborate simplicity, a Nabakovian invention of rarefied detail."
Chapter 7, Page 71

"Westerners are ambivalent about water, because they've never seen what it can create except havoc and mud."
Chapter 7, Page 78

"The Crow crossed into this valley in the late 1700s and fought off the Shoshone to claim territory that spread between the Big Horns, the Badlands, and the Wind River Mountains."
Chapter 11, Page 119

"Autumn teaches us that fruition is also death; that ripeness is a form of decay."
Chapter 12, Page 130

Topics for Discussion

Beyond the need for isolation, what do you think was the main factor in getting Gretel Ehrlich to stay in Wyoming?

Discuss why you think Ehrlich never gives any significant detail about John the sheepman, who appears to be her closest friend. Also, why is Ehrlich's husband never described or mentioned by name?

How would a woman like Ellen Cotton be able to convince the ranching community that she was a capable rancher? How long do you think it would take?

Even after Ehrlich seemingly begins to recover from David's death, there seems to be a preoccupation with death. Explore Ehrlich's thoughts and various metaphors and references.

Discuss rodeos. Have you ever been to a rodeo? What are your opinions regarding the sport? Did you learn anything from Ehrlich's point of view as a rancher? Explain.

Examine Ehrlich's willingness to put herself into dangerous situations where she had little if any expertise in the activity. How would you have responded in the author's place?

Ehrlich talks about the Sun Dance and Crow Fair, two traditional gatherings of the various Native American tribes of the area. Discuss the importance of the rituals and the effect the government suppression had on the festivals and on the culture as a whole.

What path might Ehrlich's life have taken if she had not gone to Wyoming? How might the author's path have changed if she had not married?