

BOOK REVIEW

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Hungry and Untamed: Exploring the Odyssey of Survival and Self-Discovery in Lauren Groff's *The Vaster Wilds*

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Groff, Lauren. *The Vaster Wilds*. Hutchinson Heinemann, 2023, pp. 256, £15.99, ISBN: 978-1-529-15291-3.

Lauren Groff's *The Vaster Wilds* presents an epic tale of survival and self-discovery in the untamed wilderness of early colonial America. Groff masterfully delves into the themes of servitude, identity, and power dynamics, weaving a compelling narrative that effortlessly bridges the historical past and contemporary sensibilities. The fiction chronicles the profound transformation of a young girl, who dares to defy the shackles of societal constraints and embarks on a perilous quest for freedom. Through harrowing trials and tribulations, the author paints a vivid portrait of the indomitable human spirit facing extreme adversity. *The Vaster Wilds* is a profound exploration of resilience, making it an exceptionally transformative and captivating journey for literature enthusiasts seeking a unique blend of history, survival, and self-discovery. The book exposes the reader to the harsh reality of early 17th-century America, specifically within the Jamestown colony during the infamous Starving Time. This historical backdrop was marked by famine, illness, and an overwhelming sense of despair that gripped the settlers as they struggled to survive in the fledgling English colonies. After consuming their horses, other animals, like dogs, cats, and mice, as long as they were available, they also resorted to consuming shoe leather. The dire circumstances led to accusations of cannibalism, with starving settlers resorting to

exhuming corpses from graves to satisfy their hunger (Jamestown Rediscovery). Groff's narrative draws from such actual struggles faced by early settlers, allowing readers to step into a world where survival is a relentless battle. In her struggle for freedom and self-discovery, this historical backdrop of hardship becomes a vivid canvas for the girl, acknowledged as Lamentations in the parish poorhouse, with her family name being Callat.

Groff's storytelling technique is masterful with alternating narratives that shift between the girl's perilous journey and her complex back-story. It demonstrates the author's skill in captivating readers on various levels. This storytelling approach not only adds a layer of suspense to the plot but also gradually unveils the circumstances that led the girl to escape the colony. Such storytelling encourages readers to engage in introspection and contemplation, prompting them to reflect on the past while resonating with contemporary sensibilities. Groff employs omniscient narration that provides a comprehensive and panoramic view of the protagonist's journey. This narrative approach allows readers to observe the girl's experiences from an external vantage point while delving deeply into her inner world. By adopting such narration, the author describes the nuances of her transformation, highlighting her resilience and evolving sense of identity. This narrative style facilitates a broader exploration of the societal and historical context, offering insights into the complex power dynamics and interactions that shape the girl's world. The reader is taken on an exceptional expedition into the wilderness alongside the girl whose origins are veiled in mystery. Her path to freedom is an arduous odyssey that paints a real portrait of the experiences of early settlers in America. As the narrative unfolds, we find ourselves deep within dense forests, witnessing her unrelenting battle against hunger and her gritty confrontation with the merciless forces of nature. Her passage into the vast wilderness is fraught with the perils of the untamed wild – from the lurking shadows of wild beasts to encounters with native people- such that she had not known before. "Into the night the girl ran and ran, and the cold and the dark and the wilderness and her fear and the depth of her losses, all things together, dwindled the self she had once known down to nothing" (5). This narrative, brimming with mystery and danger, is a testament to the protagonist's resourcefulness and sheer will to survive. The voice within her quivers: "I run toward

living, I run toward the living... Away from a certain wretched death, away from the devil that prowls invisible in the settlement" (9). Her only goal is to "live". In her determination to survive, she consumes whatever she finds along her path, like, raw fish, filberts, dried mushrooms, berries, female duck and her eggs, pigeon eggs, crayfish, bark of trees, and even soft mud. When there was nothing to be found, she extended her slumber to stave off the pangs of hunger: "her mouth moved in chewing and swallowing until, inside her dream, her appetite was contented" (20). There were times when her hunger was so intense that she attempted to eat the softer clumps of dried mud at the forest's edge, as they somewhat resembled mushrooms. Her sunken cheeks and bared teeth reflected her hunger, but her determination to stay alive remained indomitable. Groff emphasizes, "She was weak; she was deeply ill. But the place itself told that here she could live" (236).

Groff's vivid and visceral portrayal of the natural world as indifferent to human existence stands in stark contrast to early American religious views, where nature was seen as an extension of God. *The Vaster Wilds* offers a perspective of the wild North American landscape as mute and ungraspable, an ever-present backdrop that shapes the girl's unyielding journey toward uncertain freedom. Images of nature, including turbulent waters, untamed oceans, frozen fish, deceptive ice, and treacherous rivers, emphasize its harsh and wild aspects. While Groff occasionally portrays nature's beauty, her brutal depictions overshadow it, intensifying the hazards of the protagonist's journey. "In the bare light from the moon, the ice looked thick and welcoming, but ice was deceptive when covered with snow, and at the trail of winter, rivers went brittle, and she was sure there were places out there that could not bear her weight" (33). Thus, her writing evokes the untamed beauty and brutality of the wilderness, making it a character in its own right. The girl's interactions with the wilderness and its inhabitants, whether they are human or animal, encompass moments of awe-inspiring magnificence and agonizing brutality. The exploration of identity and power dynamics sets *The Vaster Wilds* apart from conventional survival tales. Groff delves deep into the girl's struggle to assert her identity and agency, shedding light on the societal constraints and servitude she escapes from. As the girl navigates the hostile wilderness, she simultaneously navigates the intricate terrain of her own evolving self. While

undoubtedly a gripping tale of survival, the fiction also serves as a meditation on the enduring human spirit and our remarkable ability to adapt and evolve. The girl's odyssey through the wilderness becomes a metaphor for the broader human experience, where survival often becomes a transformative journey. "She had once believed that in the deepest reaches of everything was a nothing where men had planted god; but now she knew that deeper within that nothing was something else, something made of light and heat... out of the light and heat all goodness poured" (244). Thus, one of the remarkable features of *The Vaster Wilds* is its profound character development. The girl's journey is not merely a physical one; it is a profound expedition into self-discovery. Her battle against the wild elements, solitude, and personal limitations leads her to uncover her true identity and untapped potential. Groff masterfully captures the girl's internal struggle as she undergoes a remarkable transformation from a servile, nameless individual to a resilient and self-empowered person. In line with Michel Foucault's insight that "Where there is power, there is resistance," the girl's liberation from servitude symbolizes her resistance to the power structure that held her captive (95). Her journey through the wilderness symbolizes her transformation into an autonomous individual who seizes control over her destiny. The power she once faced within the colony is transcended by her newfound power for self-determination and survival. This focus on character evolution enriches the narrative and elevates the novel to a level of storytelling that transcends the conventional survival narrative.

The language serves as an evocative and immersive vehicle that plunges readers into the physical and emotional world of the girl. Groff's writing effortlessly captures the sheer determination and persistent desire for survival that drives the protagonist throughout her journey. Her prose strikes a harmonious balance between lyrical beauty and unflinching realism, resulting in a narrative that is both immersive and intellectually stimulating. Her distinctive style excels in vividly depicting the harsh landscape in which the girl navigates, ensuring the empathy of the reader who feels the cold, the hunger, and the pain that accompany her on the troublesome journey. Groff through her rich, well-crafted narratives and masterful storytelling, makes *The Vaster Wilds* a work that not only deserves to be read but also savoured and discussed.

The Vaster Wilds reminds the reader of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) as they share a common backdrop of colonial America. While the former is set in the early seventeenth century during the struggles of the Jamestown colony, the latter takes place in the late seventeenth century, providing a glimpse into the evolving colonial landscape. Both novels explore themes of survival, resilience, and the challenges faced by settlers in the New World. However, they approach these themes in distinct ways. Both Groff and Morrison narrate journeys of escape, survival, and self-discovery respectively, taking young girls as their protagonists. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* delves deeply into the psychological and emotional aspects of her multiple characters while exploring issues of slavery, race, and survival in America's untamed wild, while Groff focuses on one girl. These two novels offer readers different perspectives on American history, both in terms of the timeframes they cover and the thematic richness they bring to the forefront.

Readers seeking a literary journey that transcends the boundaries of traditional survival narratives will be captivated by *The Vaster Wilds*. It beckons to those who relish stories of survival and resilience, particularly within the historical tapestry of colonial America. The novel's lyrical yet intriguing prose, which portrays the harshness and splendour of the natural world, will attract any reader who appreciates rich and evocative descriptions. The girl's journey through the wild, marked by physical survival and self-discovery, presents a complex narrative, underscoring the remarkable potential of individuals to shift from servitude to self-empowerment. Thus, the novel is an invitation to contemplate our journeys in the past and the present, and a testament to the strength that resides within us all.

Works Cited

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