Bloom's Literature

Brokeback Mountain

"It is a love story," remarks Annie Proulx in an interview with Sandy Cohen, "an old, old story." She has also said that she believes "the country is hungry for this story." After appearing in the New Yorker on October 13, 1997, and receiving an O. Henry Award the following year, Proulx's novella Brokeback Mountain became the final tale in her 1999 Close Range: Wyoming Stories and has repeatedly been dubbed the finest in the collection. It is a story of love between two cowboys who meet on Brokeback Mountain while working as sheepherders. It took Proulx twice the time to write it that she normally allows for a novel, "because I had to imagine my way into the minds of two uneducated, rough-spoken, uninformed young men, and that takes some doing if you happen to be an elderly female person" (Cohen). Conceivably, however, the story owes its success to her gender: As the author and critic David Leavitt notes, "Perhaps it takes a woman to create a tale in which two men experience sex and love as a single thunderbolt, welding them together for life; certainly Proulx's story is a far cry from such canonical gay novels as Edmund White's The Farewell Symphony or Allan Hollinghurst's The Swimming Pool Library, which poeticize urban promiscuity and sexual adventuring." The success of the story led to the award-winning feature-length film of the same title, starring Heath Ledger as Ennis Del Mar and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack Twist.

The story opens in 1983 with the middle-aged Ennis, who has a married daughter and is between jobs. As he awakens, he recalls his dream about Jack Twist and "the old, cold time on the mountain when they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong" (253). This Edenic rendering of the past contrasts directly to the cold, roaring windy day of the present and serves to "rewarm" Ennis. The story then reverts to 1963, the year the two 20-year-olds met each other and lived one summer of bliss on Brokeback Mountain before succumbing to the conventional world of marriage, wives, and children.

Their time on Brokeback Mountain, when they engage in a romantic sexual affair that they believe is invisible to the outside world, lasts for about seven pages; the remaining 22 pages invoke the increased misery and frustration resulting from Ennis's inability to agree to live with Jack. Brokeback Mountain thus looms in their imaginations as a metaphor for long-ago youthful happiness. These two rough-mannered high school dropouts, along with "the dogs, horses, and mules, a thousand ewes and their lambs," enter "the great flowery meadows and the coursing, endless wind of the mountain" (256). For a time, lost in nature, they confide in each other, respect each other's opinions, sing, care for the animals, and make love, Ennis telling Jack, "I ain't no queer" and Jack agreeing, "Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours" (260). The outside world is already against them, however, in the form of Joe Aguirre, their employer, who views their sexual antics through his binoculars and will refuse to rehire Jack when he reapplies the following year. Homophobic men will destroy all chances for Ennis and Jack to share a life together.

Off the mountain at the end of the summer, the two pretend that their parting means nothing, but Ennis actually vomits, feeling "about as bad as he ever had" as he drives off to begin married life with Alma Beers. After bearing two children, she persuades him to move into town away from the ranch work and horses that he loves. After four years, he is surprised by a letter from Jack—also married with a child—who proposes a visit. When Ennis sees Jack stepping out of his truck, a "hot jolt scalded" him and the two merge in a passionate embrace, unaware that Ennis's wife is watching them. This renewal of their affair results in Jack's proposal that if they could have "a little ranch together, little cow and calf operation, your horses, it'd be some sweet life" (268). As Leavitt notes, "What both men want, it becomes clear, is what Ennis is afraid to let them have: the steadiness of each other's companionship."

Indeed, Ennis does not want to be "like them boys you see around sometimes. And I don't want a be dead" (268). Ennis's father had purposely taken his nine-year-old son to see the bloody corpse of a homosexual who had been dragged, beaten with a tire iron, and castrated before he died. Likewise, Jack had been marked by his own father, who urinated on him to punish him for mild incontinence; during the act, Jack noticed that he was "different" in that he was circumcised and his father was not. Both Ennis and Jack are products of homophobic fathers, but whereas those taboos are firmly ingrained in Ennis, who limits his liaisons with Jack to once or twice a year, Jack finally, in frustration with Ennis's refusal to join him in their version of the American Dream, takes another lover and ends his life in a male American nightmare: As was the murdered homosexual Ennis's father had forced him to view, Jack, too, is beaten to a bloody pulp with a tire iron. When Ennis learns the news, "The huge sadness of the northern plains rolled down on him" (278).
Too late, Ennis visits the ranch owned by Jack's parents, the ranch he and Jack might have had to themselves had Ennis not been so stubborn. He realizes, however, that, like Alma and Jack's wife, Lureen, Jack's father is aware of his and Jack's homosexuality. In Jack's boyhood room, Ennis finds that Jack had fitted one of Ennis's old shirts inside one of his own and kept them together on a hanger. Ennis takes the shirts, buys a 30-cent postcard of Brokeback Mountain, and hangs them together in his trailer. As Jack had said to him at their last meeting, "We could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life. You wouldn't do it, Ennis, so what we got now is Brokeback Mountain. Everything built on that. It's all we got, boy, fuckin all" (276). And Ennis must survive with the knowledge of Jack's early demise, his own pent-up sexuality, and the belief that "if you can't fix it you've got to stand it" (283).

Annie Proulx sees Brokeback Mountain as a "reminder that sometimes love comes along that is strong and permanent, and that it can happen to anyone" (Cohen). When Proulx's story was transformed into a feature-length film, the script was written by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, and it garnered three Academy Awards in 2005: Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Original Score.

Further Information


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