

The Open Space of Democracy

TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS

Paintings by MARY FRANK

The Orion Society, \$8.00 paper, ISBN 0-913098-63-9;

187 Main St, Great Barrington, MA 01230

The *Open Space of Democracy* gathers three recent essays by acclaimed Utah nature writer and environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams. The lead essay, "Commencement," makes a case for individual participation in the political process in the post-9/11 era. "Ground Truthing" transports us to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which has long been the center of controversy vis-à-vis oil development on the coastal plain. The last work, "Engagement," considers democracy, freedom, and the home landscape in a personal sense. Taken together, the three essays attempt to address the author's immediate constituency—The Orion Society—as well as to reach out to a larger national audience. U.S. authors have long written about current issues of import. Thomas Paine's two influential works, *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Rights of Man* (1791), established the tradition of informed dissent and set a standard of literary and philosophical excellence that endures to this day. Subsequent writers, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Frederick Douglass, and more recently Gary Snyder and Ed Abbey, have continued to meet the challenge in this respect. *The Open Space of Democracy* is a part of this history and can only be fully understood and appreciated in this context.

The key choice Terry Tempest Williams makes, in the first essay, is not to dwell upon the terrorists who took the lives of nearly 3,000 people—to explore their backgrounds and examine their motivations—but rather to question the government that has tried to formulate a response to this new threat. Her political orientation naturally shapes that approach as well as the subsequent discussion. Having been raised in the Mormon faith, she is well aware of the dangers of a repressive hierarchy, a subject on which she has written candidly in her other books. As a result, Williams is concerned, above all, with internal machinations as distinguished from external dynamics:

How we choose to support a living democracy will determine whether it will survive as the beating heart of a republic or merely be preserved as a withered artifact of a cold and ruthless empire.

The French Nobel laureate Albert Camus is then quoted from an essay written during the Cold War: "Fear and silence and spiritual isolation must be fought today." In fairness, it should also be pointed out that Camus steadfastly opposed the terrorists who, even in the middle of the last century, were committing acts of violence in his native Algeria.

The second essay is the strongest of the book, for the author is at her best when writing about nature. Its theme may be summarized in two lines: "I thought I saw a musk ox across the [Canning] river. It was an empty oil drum." In observations such as this Williams laments the development of oil and gas resources on the Arctic coastal plain. It is important to note that, since the pipeline was constructed in 1975, the Central Arctic caribou herd, then about 5,000, has grown considerably

and not diminished, as was originally predicted. When I hunted there regularly a decade ago, while a professor at the University of Alaska, the daily limit was five caribou. The herd numbered about 20,000, and this was 20 years after the project was completed. The cause remains elusive. The fact remains that the Arctic constitutes a complex landscape, and one not easily reduced to simplifications. Taken in its whole, the essay is vintage Williams—crisp, tight, original prose inspired by direct contact with the wild.

The final essay takes us to Castle Valley, the desert subdivision outside Moab, Utah, in which Williams and her husband have lived for part of every year since 1998. The author sees the community, a mixture of

Mormons, non-Mormons, Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, attorneys, carpenters, climbers, artists, teachers, and old hippies

as a microcosm of America. This is most evident as she describes the effort of the local citizens to try to protect 3,600 acres of undeveloped land in the valley that is still vulnerable to the sort of residential development in which the author and her neighbors now live.

Many of us—and by "us" I refer to the writers of America—have tried to formulate a meaningful response to the events of our time, as Williams has in this book. Barry Lopez composed a collection of short stories, *Resistance* (see review in this issue); Wendell Berry and Rick Bass wrote essays for *Orion Magazine*. I wrote a short story entitled "Points and Lines" in my book *Another Country*. We each have tried in our own way, as guided by our experience and beliefs, to meet our artistic responsibilities. It seems to me, as I meditate upon *The Open Space of Democracy*, that what we should really do, if we deplore, for example, the preemptive invasion of Iraq, is to amend the Constitution to allow proportional allocation of electors by congressional district. The Electoral College, a historical relic of the colonial age, is how the will of the people, as reflected in the actual vote, was thwarted in the first place. The result was the unelected chief executive whose actions Williams deplores in this book.

Only by securing this goal—and it has bipartisan support—can democracy be preserved for our children. This is perhaps the most wonderful gift that a person of Williams' conviction and spirit could give posterity. In this way she, and her supporters, could ensure that the manifold tragedies that have resulted from the partisan intervention of the Supreme Court never occur again. Frankly, it is surprising that four years have elapsed since the debacle and no one has organized an effort in this direction. What the movement lacks is a dynamic and skilled leader, and perhaps Williams is just that person. ■

REVIEWER: **John A. Murray** is a contributing editor to TBR.