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## Whatever Happened to Heathcliff?

By ANGELINE GOREAU;

H. *The Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights*. By Lin Haire-Sargeant. 292 pp. New York: Pocket Books. \$20.

SOME years ago, Jean Rhys had the interesting idea of rescuing Bertha Mason, the madwoman of the attic in "Jane Eyre." Departing from the figure Charlotte Bronte sketched only fleetingly, Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea" gave us a brilliantly poetic rendering of the trajectory that led to lock and key at Thornfield. In "H.: The Story of Heathcliff's Journey Back to Wuthering Heights," Lin Haire-Sargeant borrows another character from the Bronte repertory: Emily Bronte's Heathcliff, hero (or, as some would say, antihero) of her novel, "Wuthering Heights."

Ms. Haire-Sargeant's approach differs greatly from that taken by Rhys, however. "Wide Sargasso Sea," set principally in the recently emancipated West Indies, stands quite independently from "Jane Eyre," taking its inspiration and force from childhood memories of the lush tropical island of Dominica, where Rhys spent her early years.

"H." is much more directly tied to "Wuthering Heights," appropriating its central character and proposing to fill in missing information at the pivot of that novel's highly complex narrative. The interstice in question follows one of the original novel's crucial scenes. Catherine Earnshaw, unaware that Heathcliff is listening, tells Nelly Dean that to marry him would "degrade" her. He steals away, returning three years later transformed from waif to gentleman. In the meantime, Catherine has married Edgar Linton.

In her first novel, Ms. Haire-Sargeant offers to tell us "what Heathcliff had done in those years he was gone from Wuthering Heights" and, in so doing, explain his mysterious transformation as well as account for his equally obscure origins. Imitating the structure of narrative within narrative in Emily Bronte's novel, Ms. Haire-Sargeant frames the story of "H." with an encounter in 1844 between Charlotte Bronte and Mr. Lockwood, the narrator of "Wuthering Heights." Mr. Lockwood, whom Charlotte has never met before, just happens to have the manuscript of a letter forwarded to him by Nelly Dean, housekeeper of Wuthering Heights and Emily Bronte's second narrator.

The letter, purportedly written by Heathcliff to Cathy 60 years earlier, describes meeting a mysterious gentleman named Mr. Are after fleeing Wuthering Heights. For reasons he keeps to himself, Mr. Are takes Heathcliff into his employ and trains him in the arts of civility. When we discover that Mr. Are's home is Thornfield, his true identity becomes clear to the reader, but Heathcliff does not learn the truth about his benefactor until he meets Bertha Mason.

"H." ends with a confrontation between Charlotte and Emily, in which Emily informs her sister: "Some things cannot be directly explained. . . . Some stories can never be told. The heart of some stories can never be known. They can only be felt." This seems an odd conclusion for a novel in which a great deal of narrative energy has

been spent uncovering the reason for Heathcliff's famously inscrutable behavior. The fact that he comes from a dysfunctional family and learns the truth of his parentage explains everything.

One of Emily Bronte's great strengths as a writer was knowing what to leave out. She was, after all, a poet first. Heathcliff's unexplained absence from *Wuthering Heights* is an essential part of the novel's pattern: he reappears at the end of three years just as mysteriously as he first appeared in the household of the Earnshaws as an orphan whose origins were unknown, even to himself. The whole point is that Heathcliff is unknowable; he is nothing less than a force of nature.

We see Bronte's Heathcliff diffused through a screen of two narrators: the emotionally colorless Lockwood and the relentlessly pedestrian Nelly Dean. His direct appearances in "*Wuthering Heights*" are rare, and on only a few of those occasions does he speak at length. The Heathcliff Lin Haire-Sargeant gives us, on the other hand, runs on in a letter of 250 pages -- a letter he supposedly wrote while staying at an inn just a few miles from *Wuthering Heights*.

Where the original novel leaves the reader to imagine what Heathcliff's feelings might have been on leaving Cathy after hearing that it would "degrade" her to marry him, "H." runs riot: "I saw, as in a flash from the lurid heavens, my own hulking form . . . set beside Edgar's impeccable demeanor. Then indeed I knew the meaning of pain. As I stood in the quickening wind, I imagined thrusting that blond face into the depths of Blackhorse Marsh . . . crushing those pink ears in my hands till they wrung blood. My fingers ached with the pleasure of it! But it was I who was mired, in poverty and ignorance. I opened my mouth to the wind and howled. How could I shake off the filth that encumbered me? How could I free myself? Where was my hope?"

Heathcliff's extravagance in "*Wuthering Heights*" is firmly anchored in a wealth of details of commonplace Yorkshire life, but in "H." the Gothic is unrestrained. On occasion, the book reads as though magical realism had been unleashed on "*The Mysteries of Udolpho*." Events in "H." seem simply to accumulate, repeating what we already know about Heathcliff, until we come to the shocking revelation of his birth.

Taken as a parody of Gothic fiction, "H." might provide entertaining summer reading. But as an elaboration of Emily Bronte's supremely accomplished novel, it is likely to give offense. If you want to know more about Heathcliff, read "*Wuthering Heights*" again. The real proof of a great work of art is that it has more to give every time one returns to it.

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