

Book Review: Woody Guthrie, *House of Earth*

David L. Ulin

That fuckin' little bastard! In 17 verses he got the entire story of a thing that took me two years to write!" — John Steinbeck on Woody Guthrie¹

Woody Guthrie's *House of Earth* is a novel that shouldn't work. This (parenthetically) has nothing to do with why it went unpublished in his lifetime; there's no evidence that he abandoned the book, or left it undone. Rather, as editors Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp make clear in their introduction to the novel — which finally made it into print in 2013, forty-six years after the singer's death of Huntington's disease in 1967 — Guthrie's plans for it may not have panned out. "Why wasn't *House of Earth* published in the late 1940s?" Brinkley and Depp ask:

Why would Guthrie work so furiously on a novel and then let it die on the vine? There are a few possible answers. Most probably, he was hoping a movie deal might emerge; that took patience. Perhaps Guthrie sensed that some of the content was passé ... or that the sexually provocative language was ahead of its time.... Also, left-leaning originality was hard to mass-market in the Truman era, when Soviet communism was public enemy number one. And critics at the time were bound to dismiss the novel's enthusiasm for southwestern adobe as fetishistic.²

No, the reason *House of Earth* shouldn't resonate is that it's a novel that emerges from a theme. The story of a tenant farmer named Tike Hamlin and his wife Ella May, it was intended to illustrate a concept with which Guthrie had long been infatuated: the "utilitarian value" of adobe as building material, cheaper and more durable than wood. Guthrie apparently got the idea during a visit to Santa Fe. "The mud-daube adobe walls fascinated him (as they had D.H. Lawrence and Georgia O'Keeffe)," Brinkley and Depp report. "The adobe haciendas had hardy wooden rainspouts and bricks of soil and straw that were simple yet perfectly weatherproof, unlike most of the homes of his Texas friends, which were poorly constructed with scrap lumber and cheap nails" (xxi). Adobe was sustainable, in other words — and even more than that, it was egalitarian, a strategy by which farmers, tenant or otherwise, might gain some purchase over their lives.

There's a missionary zeal to such a notion, but fiction is not often (or especially) a missionary pursuit. At its most effective, it grows out of characters, situations — it is an art of narrative rather than one of theme. This is not to say that theme can't be part of it, for every great novel aspires to extend beyond itself. Think of *The Grapes of Wrath*, associated with Guthrie since he recorded "The Ballad of Tom Joad" in 1940, of which even John Steinbeck acknowledged, "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this."³ Steinbeck, however, recognized that the most effective way to do this was not by putting up a banner; his goal was not (entirely) social realism. Instead, he engages in human drama: the exodus from Oklahoma, the deaths and loss and degradation, the loyalty to family, and then, of course, that transcendent ending, in which Rose of Sharon redeems her stillborn child by nursing a starving man. "For a minute," Steinbeck writes:

Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There."⁴

And yet, Guthrie, too, understood the power of narrative to create context. His songwriting model is the story song — there's a reason Steinbeck said what he did about a novel in seventeen verses after hearing "The Ballad of Tom Joad" — and Guthrie brings a similar approach not only to his 1943 autobiography *Bound for Glory* but also to *House of Earth*. Because here's the thing: The novel does work, even if it shouldn't. It compels and engages us. This is not a function of adobe, which all these years later, comes off as a contrivance, a pipe dream, but of the connection between Tike and Ella May. Their bond, their marriage, is a powerhouse, real and lasting. We feel it from the moment we see them together, at their tenant shack "on six hundred and forty acres of new wheat land," a mile from Tike's family's dugout in the Caprock section of the Texas Panhandle. "Guthrie's treasured Caprock escarpment," Brinkley and Depp observe,

forms a geological boundary between the High Plains to the east and the Lower Plains of West Texas. The soils in the region were dark brown to reddish-brown sand, sandy loams, and clay loams. They made for wonderful farming. But the lack of shelterbelts ... left crops vulnerable to the deadly winds. Soil erosion became a plague, owing

to the misuse of land by Big Agriculture, an entity that Guthrie wickedly skewers in the novel (xvi).

That's useful information, but not the most useful information, which has to do with the electricity shared by this couple, whose love (and lust) for one another brings both to life in a way mere theme, or projection, could never achieve.

Guthrie makes this explicit in "Dry Rosin," the extended chapter that opens *House of Earth*. (The book is broken into four novella-length sections.) Here, Tike seduces Ella May — or is it the other way around? — playfully provoking her desire. "He took a step forward and caught hold of her hand," Guthrie observes. "She could measure the heat of his desire by the moisture in the palm of his hand. He tugged at her slow and easy and stepped backward in the path of the cow barn. 'Psssst. Lady. Psst. Lady. Wanta see somethin'? Huh?'" (22) The scene is remarkable, not only because it is sexually graphic, although this too is unexpected, but because of the depth, the acuity, with which he traces their bond. Tike and Ella May are equals in their relationship, both working the land of their small tenant farm and both alert to whatever fleeting consolations love allows. "He touched the tip of his tongue," Guthrie writes, his focus so intimate it transfers their longing, "to each of her teeth, one at a time and felt the vacant gums in two places where her teeth were out. He moved his tongue over the upper part of her mouth and as he did so he filled his mouth with saliva that she sucked into her mouth and swallowed" (26).

What makes such a moment so effective is its sense of reality — those missing teeth and shared saliva. This is how we love one another, vacant gums and all, which is the most important story told by *House of Earth*. Both Tike and Ella May have suffered for their marriage, she in giving up a life of privilege (her father is a wealthy landowner) and he in his despair at failing to provide well enough. "It's bad to be a dirt renter," Tike mutters. "Low as we could ever fall" (63). Still, Guthrie understands, at the heart of our humanity is perseverance; it's a source of not only solace but also dignity. "I can't go on, I'll go on," Samuel Beckett put it, and the same sensibility motivates Guthrie's narrative.⁵ "One year," he writes. "And what is a year? ... [A] year of work is three hundred and sixty-four, or — five, or — six days of the run, the hurry, the walking, the bouncing, and the jumping up and down the arguments, fights, the liquor brawls, hangovers, headaches, and all" (101). Struggle, in other words, is what defines us, if only because in our reaction to it we discover who we are. This is what happens in *House of Earth*, as Tike and Ella May battle to stay afloat, to maintain food and shelter, to carve out their own small space against the world. That only becomes more essential as the novel progresses and Ella May gives birth to

a son. “I guarantee you one thing right here and now,” Tike tells his wife and newborn child:

“Just as quick as this cold weather breaks, me an’ this little grasshopper here is gonna plow up some rooty sod an’ cut us some big thick bricks an’ build us a house of earth. An’ it’s gonna have walls so thick that they cain’t no wind get I, an’ cain’t no varmints crawl in, an’ cain’t no weather of no kind get in, an they damn sure cain’t no dern’d ole germs be a-bustin’ in an’ a-gittin’ onto me an’ a-keepin’ me separated fr’m my wife an’ my little grasshopper there. This is me tellin’ yoooo, all of yooo!” (202)

Here, Guthrie circles back to the novel’s theme, although he wisely finishes the story before construction can get started. Tike’s house of earth, after all, is more effective as symbol than an actuality — a source of aspiration, the substance of a dream. In that regard, it’s a classic Guthrie motif, with its egalitarian promise, its vision of a future that is better than the present or the past. Such is the promise also of Tike and Ella May’s baby, who, it is implied, may grow up to live in a world his parents can only imagine, in which hard work is rewarded, and “there is a way to come out of this mess, to build a better house, and not pick up and run away down the highway” (209). That’s a stirring sentiment, reminiscent in its way of Tom Joad’s famous speech in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

“Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where — wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beating up a guy, I’ll be there.... I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’ — I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build — why, I’ll be there.”⁶

Perseverance again, or commitment ... a connection to place, or roots, as a source of continuity. Or, as Ella May avers, speaking for herself and Tike, indeed for all of us, “I don’t know what shape it will take, work or fight, or burn or freeze or what, but I do know this one thing. I am put here to stay” (210).

Woody Guthrie, *House of Earth: A Novel*, edited and introduced by Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp. New York: Infinitum Nihil/HarperCollins, 2013. xliv + 234pp., ISBN 978-0-06-224839-8. Cloth, £25.99 / £14.99.

NOTES

¹ John Steinbeck quoted in Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: the Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004), p. 181n.

² Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp, "Introduction," Woody Guthrie, *House of Earth: A Novel*, ed. Brinkley and Depp (New York: Harper/Infinitum Nihil, 2013), pp. xl-xli. Further quotations from *House of Earth* are referenced parenthetically in the text.

³ Steinbeck quoted in Jackson J. Benson, *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 371.

⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 455. First published 1939.

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, ed. Laura Lindgren (New York: Grove Press, 2009), p. 416.

⁶ Steinbeck, p. 419.