Strangers in the Forest

Carol Ryrie Brink

With a Foreword by Mary E. Reed

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Washington State University P
Pullman, Washington

Published in collaboration with the
Latah County Historical Society
Moscow, Idaho

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Strangers in the Forest

By Carol Ryrie Brink

*Buffalo Coat**
Harps in the Wind
Stopover
The Headland
The Twin Cities
Château Saint Barnabé
*Snow in the River**
The Bellini Look
*Four Girls on a Homestead***
*A Chain of Hands**

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and *Snow in the River* (1964). In 1993 the Washington State University Press, in collaboration with the Latah County Historical Society in Moscow, Idaho, reprinted the latter three novels, along with Brink's previously unpublished reminiscences about characters she knew in Moscow, *A Chain of Hands.*

Carol Ryrie Brink died in 1981 in San Diego. Her home town recognized her posthumously with the naming of a building on the University of Idaho campus in her honor and with the naming of the children's wing of the Moscow-Latah County Public Library after her.

Among Brink's contributions to Western American literature are her works about her native state of Idaho. In view of the relatively few Idaho writers of this period, that is of interest in itself. But there are more important considerations for recognizing Brink, especially her portrayal of a West between two eras.

Although many writers concentrate on a colorful pioneer period and the heroic feats of those who plowed virgin ground, opened the first mines, and platted towns, the chronicle of those who followed is certainly equally or more important. These were the people who established the libraries, invested their lives and fortunes in the new communities, and generally created civic life as we recognize it today. Brink's portrayal of the lives and experiences of men and women in an Idaho town during this crucial period of growth and maturing serve as an antidote to numerous works about the wild American frontier. In her three Idaho novels and *A Chain of Hands* she shows us a small town whose citizens had to weigh justice with empathy, who had to learn that the resources of the West were not entirely at their personal disposal, and who discovered that the promise of these new lands was at times ephemeral.

Acknowledgments

In 1987 the Washington State University Press and the Latah County Historical Society collaborated in the publication of two books, Richard Waldbauer's *Grubstaking the Palouse* and Keith Petersen's *Company Town.* The recognition those two works received, including awards from the American Association for State and Local History, the Idaho Library Association, and the Council for the Advancement of Secondary Education, greatly pleased both institutions and led the two to seek ways in which to collaborate again. This reprint of *Strangers in the Forest* represents another such venture.

Carol Ryrie Brink wrote more than thirty books for children and adults. Idahoans frequently point out that Ezra Pound was born in the state, although he left as an infant, and that Ernest Hemingway lived here for a while. Both writers were obviously accomplished, but neither wrote about Idaho. In seeking true regional writers—writers who knew the state and wrote about it—Idahoans have virtually ignored Brink.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Latah County Historical Society undertook several projects, including giving presentations about Brink throughout the state, with the goal of bringing recognition to this talented writer. Those efforts have largely been rewarded with renewed recognition for Brink in regional anthologies, with the recent publication of a biography of the author in Boise State University's Western Writers Series, and with the posthumous naming of two significant buildings in Moscow in Brink's honor.

In 1992 the Historical Society and WSU Press agreed to collaborate on a major publication venture that would bring back into print Brink's three adult novels about Idaho, *Buffalo Coat* (originally published in 1944), *Strangers in the Forest* (1959), and *Snow in the River* (1964). In addition, the two collaborated in the publication of Brink's previously unpublished reminiscences about characters she knew growing up in Moscow, *A Chain of Hands.*

This publication venture would not have been possible without the kind assistance of the Brink family, and we are indebted to Carol's son David and daughter Nora Brink Hunter for their encouragement and help.

The Latah County Historical Society has gained a national reputation for its publications program. Special thanks are due to its publications committee and board of trustees for their foresight in recognizing the importance

of regional publishing in general and Carol Brink's work specifically. I would especially like to thank our two longtime friends, Carolyn Gravelle and Kathleen Probasco, who maintained unswerving faith in this publication venture for almost a decade. I have greatly profited from their encouragement and affection for our native author. I also wish to thank Bert Cross, who supported this project when others became discouraged.

At the WSU Press, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends director Thomas Sanders; assistant director, Mary Read; editors Keith Petersen, Jean Taylor, Glen Lindeman, and John Sutherland; designer Dave Hoyt; and promotions coordinator Vida Hatley. All of them proved not only receptive but also enthusiastic when approached about a possible Brink publication project. We at the Historical Society want them to know how much we have appreciated their support and collaboration over the years.

Mary E. Reed
Latah County Historical Society
Moscow, Idaho

Foreword to the Second Edition

When Carol Brink was 15 years old, her aunt, Elsie Watkins, invited her and three friends to spend the summer at her homestead cabin in the Idaho wilderness. The cabin was 28 miles by packhorse after a train ride on the Washington, Idaho & Montana Railroad to Bovill and a horse-drawn-stage ride to Clarkia. Brink remembered being "wild to spend the summer there" after growing up hearing stories of Aunt Elsie's adventures. Years later, Brink came across the letters she had written to her grandmother from that cabin, and was surprised to find "how little they add to the wealth of detail which I remember." Indeed, it is this richness of her memories of that summer in 1911 that surrounds our senses with the presence of great white pine forests. Here under the lofty green canopy she brings to life an assortment of characters to whom we so avidly listen.[1]

Strangers in the Forest is the most complicated of Brink's trilogy of novels set in north Idaho. The other two, *Buffalo Coat* and *Snow in the River,* have also been reprinted in a collaborative publishing venture between the Washington State University Press and the Latah County Historical Society. Along with recreating the personalities and motives of the strangers who hoped to claim tracts of valuable timber land, the novel also chronicles the fruition of the conservation movement in setting aside wilderness areas and the beginning of a national forest service. Although Brink was normally a writer of memory, imagination, and emotion, this novel demanded considerable research into the establishment of forest reserves in the West under the leadership of the forest service's first director, Gifford Pinchot. She attempted to make the book as accurate as she could. When the *Reader's Digest* selected the novel for condensation, it received a note from the chief forester of the United States corroborating the facts and recommending the book. Brink was pleased with the official endorsement, as well as having her novel included in the *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* series. However, she remarked that at first she was afraid to look at the condensation: "They cut out most of the factual part of it, but kept all the romance."[2]

The premise for the plot of *Strangers* begins with the 1906 act of Congress that created a forest reserve system, passed in response to a rampant destruction and exploitation of natural resources. However, the act contained a great loophole. It permitted homesteading of lands within national forests if the homesteaders could prove that these lands were more suitable for

agriculture than as forest reserves. The lumber companies hurried to take advantage of this provision by helping to locate homesteaders on sections containing valuable timber. One such region was in north Idaho where the Weyerhaeuser conglomerate had decided to build a logging empire around its new town of Potlatch. Here the Forest Service under Pinchot decided to do battle, to investigate the homesteads, and then hold hearings.

The book's interpretation of the historical struggle between speculators and the government, through Pinchot and his men, was not entirely a product of research. Brink had personal experience with all types of speculators. Her stepfather, Nat Brown, dealt in timber lands. He was the son of C. O. Brown, whose interest in Idaho white pine had led him to convince Frederick Weyerhaeuser to purchase vast tracts of land in northern Idaho. Brink's mother, Henrietta, and Nat Brown had entertained Weyerhaeuser and his sons at dinner.[3]

Brink was also well acquainted with smaller timber speculators, because they included many Moscow women like her aunt Elsie. Elsie's father, Dr. William Watkins, had refused his daughter's request to become a nurse. She had no livelihood and continued to live with her mother after her father's death. The homestead was an opportunity to make money, but just as important it was "a chance to get out and do something and have some adventures."[4] These women and others laid claims to homesteads under the pretext of turning them into agricultural enterprises; upon receiving ownership, they could then sell them to the timber companies. The scheme was not as calculating as it might appear. In a time when most women could not make their own living, a homestead claim could be a means to financial security. The homesteads were not entirely free. The claimant had to prove up on the claim, which meant living there during the summer and spending some time on the land during the winter. This was not an easy task, for homesteaders on snowshoes followed a trail over a high pass that even horses could not navigate. In addition, the homesteaders had to build a cabin and barn, plant a garden, and in other ways carry out the pretense of making a self-sufficient home. For many, if not most, the connection to their claims was emotional as well. Although the homesteaders built cabins and barns, traveled back and forth to their claims, and tended their struggling gardens in this region of poor soil and short growing seasons, the government investigators concluded that the purpose of the claims was for speculation and not settlement. The homesteaders, including Elsie Watkins, lost their homesteads and their investments.

In *Strangers in the Forest,* Bundy Jones, a young forest ranger in the guise of a botanist, has the task of investigating the settlers' true intentions.

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Indeed, Brink had met just such a young man that summer of 1911, and she carried with her the suspicion that he was really working as an agent for the Forest Service. In the tension between the homesteaders and Bundy, Brink is able to present with understanding and empathy the interests of both. After all, she knew her aunt's great disappointment when the government disallowed the homesteaders' claim and put the land into forest reserve. As Brink recalled, "Aunt had put a good deal of time and money into the place and we loved the homestead dearly. Yet it was never really intended as a home, and it is a pleasure now to know that it remains unspoiled, virgin forest, part of Idaho's rich heritage."[5]

Brink portrayed Bundy Jones as the one person who belonged in the forest; the others were strangers who did not. Yet in the process of living in the wilderness, they learn much about themselves. The character least prepared for the tasks of creating a homestead, Meg Carney, learns the most from her experiences. She is modeled on Elsie Watkins, who, as Brink remembers, went into the forest as a "sickly, green, inexperienced girl," but by the end had matured and was "ready to cope with anything. She felt that she'd grown up."[6] Through Meg's character, Brink explores the thoughts and experiences of town women learning to live in rustic, isolated conditions. In fact, when Brink herself returned the summer of 1912 to her aunt's cabin, this time without her friends, she experienced "the most lonely summer I'd ever spent, and I wasn't very happy about it."[7]

Like Elsie, Meg discovered she could be brave, resourceful, and independent. At the government hearing to decide whether homesteaders would be allowed to take possession of their claims, Eye MacGillicuddy, the old-time forest ranger, defends Meg. His assessment of her reveals the changes Brink witnessed in her aunt: "She started out a wee bit of a lass that every misfortune happened to, but she's toughened up now. I seen her grow up. . .on that homestead. . .she walks trail the way a man does. . . . She's got her a sourdough bucket and she rustles her own wood. One winter they was lost in the snow, trying to get in there. She froze her feet and had to stay alone in her cabin whilst the cougars yelled outside. . . . Seems like she's earned her right to that homestead if any woman has."[8]

Meg's antithesis is another woman in the forest, Lorena Carney, who married Meg's brother. Lorena is a familiar character in many of Brink's novels, particularly *Snow in the River* and *Stopover.* She is the beautiful, restless woman who cannot be satisfied with her lot in life. Lorena wants the homestead for the money it will bring, and she despises her weak husband who has brought her to this crude cabin. Although Brink maintained that her restless women were fictional creations, most probably she modeled

them after her other aunt, Winnifred Watkins. The youngest of the three Watkins daughters, Winnifred was high-spirited, self-centered, talented, and adventurous. Like Winnifred, Lorena is full of ambition, and she disdains the mundane responsibilities of making a home and raising children. Of all the strangers, she is the most ambitious and the most articulate. Yet even here, Brink is able to show another side of a type of woman for whom she had little affection. Although her youthful poverty had taught Lorena not to depend on others, the birth of her child in the forest brings a tenderness. In one of the most poignant passages of the novel, Lorena holds the helpless, sickly baby, tears running down her cheeks, "not in anger, but in sorrow and pity for another life, for something outside herself."[9]

The character of Jeff Carney, Meg's brother and the nephew of the great timber speculator Ralph, is clearly fictional. Yet the link between him and Brink's stepfather, Nat Brown, raises interesting contrasts. Brink never admitted the true harm Brown caused her mother and herself, but it must have been a traumatic experience to exchange the kind and gentle Alexander Ryrie for this man who brought loud and frequent arguments, dissension, and finally her mother's suicide into her young life. In the novel, Jeff is almost the opposite, dominated by his wife and crippled by his lack of resolution and strength. Even though Jeff fails, the author reveals another side of his character, perhaps to soften what could have been her own judgment of her stepfather. Jeff Carney finally realizes that the only right course of action was "to pull out now and leave the forest as they had found it. He thought only that they had all been wrong to come here in the first place. . . . He remembered how the forest had first moved and delighted him when he came here as a boy. Yes, I am on the wrong side, he thought. I have sold my soul for a mess of pottage."[10]

Many of the characters in *Strangers* are based on people the 15-year-old Brink met that summer at her aunt's cabin, a testament to her keen powers of observation and recall, even at a young age. One of the central figures is the French Canadian lumberjack, Charlie Duporte. During that summer in the forest, Brink, her young companions, and her aunt had met a strange man suspected of murder. The unwritten law of the forest demanded that strangers be given a meal, and on their part, the strangers were required to fire a couple of shots about a quarter of a mile up the trail, signaling their arrival. "Silenced for once," Brink writes, "we girls sat in a solemn row on one of the bunks and watched the dark little French Canadian with the unsavory reputation putting away Aunt's homemade bread and dried-apple sauce with an honest man's relish."[11] From that brief but strong impression, Brink created in Duporte a resourceful man of the woods: strong,

masculine, and handsome. True to her ability to see both sides of a person, Brink gives him a tenderness as well, and he is the one character who truly knows how to meet a crisis, whether childbirth or a fire storm.

Other minor characters in the novel bring to life the history of the Idaho forests, like the lumberjacks who build Meg's cabin and barn and then quarrel over her in a rowdy fight, and the old forest ranger, MacGillicuddy, tight-lipped but devoted to his mongrel dog. The proprietress of the saloon in Cold Spring (Clarkia), Madame Pontarlier, is an intriguing portrait of the real French woman, Madame Pierre, the four high school friends had met on their way in to Aunt Elsie's cabin. When Elsie announced that she was taking them to call on the saloon keeper's wife, the girls were shocked and amazed. "But it seemed that Madame Pierre was a very proper person, and, as one of the few women in town, one to be reckoned with." What they found in the back of the saloon was "a little round French woman with expressive white hands and wings of black hair laid smoothly back on either side of her tranquil brow. . . . Madame was a genuine personality. In this tiny room behind a saloon on the edge of a rough Western frontier, she had managed to create an atmosphere of charm, respectability, and middle-class propriety. I am sure that the Saturday night revels of the men from the timber must always have been tempered by Madame's lace curtains and pink bows and her elegant sobriety."[12] Madame Pontarlier's room in the Cold Springs saloon follows the original model, but it also becomes the scene in which the strangers unknowingly reveal their own strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond the interplay of the characters and plot, the great western white pine forest of northern Idaho dominates the story. Brink advised young readers and writers to use all of their five senses in learning about the world. The young girl who listened so avidly to her aunt's stories about the cabin and then lived there for two summers was able to recreate this special landscape and open all of our senses to it. She takes us, as strangers, into a world of smell, sight, sound, taste, and touch. The novel begins as the stage travels through a meadow approaching Cold Spring. The young botanist, Bundy Jones, is drawn into this place, where the "thimbleberries, like miniature wild roses, bloomed, and there were some late-blossoming syringa and sweetberry honeysuckle to add heavy and lighter perfumes to the bracing odor of pine. The air was still and, beside the liquid odors of pine and syringa, there was a dry smell of dust and of horses. The stage seemed to be moving between green walls in a close opacity of summer."[13] When the homesteaders reach the heart of the forest on horseback, they enter another world of beauty. "The path was soft and deep in brown needles, and a palpable stillness was

only intensified by the snorting and blowing of the horses and the alien tinkle of pack bells. . . . The white pine grows straight and strong with a sturdy masculine upthrust that is suddenly crowned by a feminine delicacy of foliage. . . . Beneath interlocking boughs the sun is filtered away in an unseen sky, leaving a cathedral dimness under high groined arches."[14]

Like other western novels, the landscape of trees, water, and mountains dominates the characters and events in this one. Brink's time in Idaho encompassed an era of unusual opportunity for exploiting and experiencing a wilderness close at hand. The journey to Clarkia and then to the homestead was in reality a short distance, but it meant a transition from a town with all the accoutrements of western civilized life to a single-room cabin where neighbors were miles apart and a deep snow might mean starvation. This type of frontier was short-lived, and by the time Carol Brink had matured into a young woman, highways, logging roads, and hiking trails made this wilderness accessible to most travelers. Through *Strangers in the Forest* Brink offers us a penetrating insight into this brief period of time. The time was not always marked by pioneer courage or a restorative experience. Living alone in the forest could also exact a high price on the human psyche, and Brink was able to suggest what could happen to people living in isolation.

On their way to their claims the homesteaders come into a valley. The packer, McSweeney, fires a shot into the air to announce their arrival to the family living up the trail. As they approach they see a man and woman standing in the doorway. A small boy runs toward the pack train, shouting an excited greeting. "His arms were spread in an unconscious gesture of welcome. About his thin legs flapped a man's old overalls which had been tailored unskillfully to his size. He ran along beside the horses, leaping and shrieking with joy. The man and woman stood somber in long-held silence, like sleepers disturbed in a dream. . . . It was only when McSweeney held up a packet of mail for them that they came out of their sullen dream and began to smile and talk." Their paralyzing sense of lonely detachment then dissolves.[15] Brink's perspective as a woman from a period of rapid change shows us that the western landscape could be defeating as well as restorative. Through her skill as an author she creates this interlocking world of wilderness and human frailty that is firmly rooted in the history of north Idaho.

MARY E. REED
Latah County Historical Society
Moscow, Idaho
May 1993

Notes

1. Carol Ryrie Brink, *Four Girls on a Homestead* (Moscow, Id.: Latah County Historical Society, 1977), p. 5. The book is illustrated with Brink's sketches and photographs of that summer in 1911.
2. Transcript of taped responses to questions from Sam Schrager, June 1975. Available at Latah County Historical Society library, Moscow, Idaho.
3. Interview with Carol Ryrie Brink by Mary E. Reed, July 1981, San Diego, California, transcript of tape 4, p. 6. The tapes and transcripts of a series of interviews with Brink in July 1981 are in the collection of the Latah County Historical Society library, Moscow, Idaho.
4. Brink oral history transcript of tape 4, p. 5.
5. *Four Girls on a Homestead,* p. 33.
6. Brink oral history transcript of tape 4, p. 3.
7. June 1975 Brink transcript, p. 23.
8. *Strangers in the Forest,* p. 304.
9. *Strangers in the Forest,* p. 30.
10. *Strangers in the Forest,* pp. 256, 257.
11. *Four Girls on a Homestead,* p. 16.
12. *Four Girls on a Homestead,* pp. 8-9.
13. *Strangers in the Forest,* p. 2.
14. *Strangers in the Forest,* p. 68.
15. *Strangers in the Forest,* pp. 68-69.

Foreword to the First Edition

In the Panhandle of northern Idaho, there is a green and silent wilderness which few people know. The Clearwater River with its many branches and tributaries flows through it, drawing down turbulent waters from the snows that fall in the Bitterroot Mountains.

Much of the region is covered with Western white pine trees which stand straight, tall and close together. This seems a virgin forest in which a man-made history has no place. Yet Lewis and Clark journeyed through here in 1805 and returned by the same trail in 1806. The Lolo Trail was already worn deep in many places by moccasined feet before Lewis and Clark encountered its hardships. In 1832 John Work of the Hudson's Bay Company passed through the region with a large company of trappers and Indians. In 1854 Captain Mullan used the Lolo Trail while seeking a pass for a transcontinental road. In 1860 Captain Pierce discovered gold in the region, and for a time a surge of hopeful miners fanned out and prospected every major stream in the forest. In 1877 Chief Joseph led his people, two hundred and fifty Nez Percé warriors and nearly twice as many women and children, along the Lolo Trail in his attempt to escape General Howard and the United States soldiers.

But all these travelers were transients in the forest. They suffered hardships or defeat. Lewis and Clark found this one of the most arduous parts of their journey. Later, when Captain Mullan built a wagon road from the east, he chose a more northerly route that presented less difficulty. The gold rush was short lived and the prospectors soon sought other streams. Sometimes old mine shafts

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