

## Review of Susan Feathers' *Threshold*

For many of us global warming is a fact we live with without having a clear picture of just how global warming works. And while we know the effects will dramatically change environments everywhere, we don't have a vision of what daily life might be like once the current levels of greenhouse gases multiply to immediate crisis proportions. Susan Feathers' new novel, *Threshold*, is a compelling account that fills in both of these gaps.

*Threshold* makes an enormous contribution to contemporary literature by teaching readers—in engaging and utterly consumable terms—about the physics of “the planet's human induced fever.” Susan Feathers stages the need to know as part of the narrative dynamic. Key characters—academics, school teachers, museum biologists—understand only too well the processes by which the earth is growing hotter, while others don't. The latter are in some cases too young or inexperienced to know; in other cases they're complacent or too far in denial to face them. Those who know teach those who don't. Through lively dialogues concerning, for example, how sunlight gets converted to electricity; or how oceans absorb solar energy; or how neighborhoods can set up electrical generating systems, we learn along with the characters. We're invited to go through the same processes of recognition and assimilation that the various students in the story experience.

*Threshold* begins with a map. The author's opening gesture to her readers is visual: she asks us to see the region and the particular places where her story unfolds. The map of the Madrean Sky Islands—the mountain range that spans the border south of Tucson—is the first indication that this environmental novel engages readers' senses as much as it emphasizes the scientific facts of climate change. The smells, sounds, tastes and touch of *Threshold's* landscapes evoke a sensory richness and a vivid drama of place.

The place Susan Feathers gives us is, literally, hot. You can feel the rising temperature and the parched bodies of plants, animals and humans trying to live with minimal water resources. In these bare, ever constricting conditions, Feathers' human characters—and the jaguar Duma—come alive on the page. I'll give one example here: an adolescent burdened with family and personal problems tries to keep from succumbing to gang pressures: *The heat bore down on Enrique as it bore down on the desert cities. It bore down without a cloud to cool burning skin.*

In a riveting, multi-stranded plot, *Threshold* translates the conceptual worry over climate change and into immediate, interpersonal dramas. In the process, Feathers dramatizes emotional response and avoids straight polemic. The veterinarian at a wild life center, after working to keep the animals and museum staff safe, is “tired and wary from her constant concern about the heat and blackouts.” (143) We meet people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and classes whose quotidian experience is intricately connected to shortages of not only cool air and water but food, economic stability, and security. The mayors of Tucson and Nogales juggle

politics against the needs of their constituencies; an academic water biologist monitors the world's shrinking aquifers and expanding oceans; a food bank manager sees his facility take on the gruesome task of body storage; a wild animal veterinarian risks treating the giant Duma's wounds, acquired when "the cat" wanders out of its homeland range in search of prey; Tohono O'odham elders retune ancient methods for desert survival; Native, Latino, and Anglo teenagers resist and pitch in on projects to manage the overlapping crises; gangsters take advantage of the situation; Border Patrol, local, and national law enforcement try to manage it.

I was especially taken by Susan Feathers' ability to evoke human-like agency in non-human characters. The most palpable instance of this is the marvelous figure of Duma, the giant albino jaguar. We follow his trajectory from childhood—his whiteness marks him as different and thus neglected by his mother—and hope for him as he makes his way down from the mountains to the borderlands where trouble is always brewing. We cheer him in the end after a dramatic rescue. The third person narrator wisely avoids trying to mimic animal perceptions in a realist mode but gives us just enough of foggy vision, keen sense of smell and fear to inflate Duma with character-like dimension and make him far more than an animal on the periphery of the story.

The desert itself emerges as another non-human, central character in *Threshold*. Feathers evokes its presence eloquently, particularly at night. A father and son, weary from mourning, retire for the night: "While Ed and Daniel slept, the desert came alive around them." A specialist at the natural history museum watches the dark come over the desert: "he could feel the quickening of the land as the sun withdrew its daggers of heat and light....he felt the movements of the nocturnal desert pageant taking stage again." He and his wife start to doze in the desert air as "The night lay quiet across the Old Pueblo."

In a novel about the threat of global warming, readers will watch with great interest to see how the writer pictures the shift from a present of warnings and predictions to a new present where the changes are dramatically in place. To avoid spoiling things, I'll just say that Susan Feathers manages this shift with great effectiveness. Towards the end of *Threshold*, the characters who have until this point struggled to prepare for the trouble are now actually living with it. The shift has happened quickly, and we get close-up, tangible pictures of what climate change means. Good story teller that she is, however, Feathers doesn't leave us in this darkness but takes us to a Day of the Dead celebration in Tucson's Old Pueblo. Picturing a more optimistic encounter with death, the characters sing, dance and take part in the familiar rituals. This closing image capitalizes on the buoyancy and spirit of hope we've seen in these characters throughout the novel as they try, convincingly, plausibly, and in ways that elicit great sympathy in readers, to make the best of a world gone dramatically too hot and dry.

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