

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES

# Couple Creates an Empire by Felling Trees and Anyone in Their Way

By Janet Maslin

Oct. 5, 2008

“Serena” is Ron Rash’s fourth novel. For those unfamiliar with the elegantly fine-tuned voice of this Appalachian poet and storyteller, a writer whose reputation has been largely regional despite an O. Henry Prize and other honors, it will prompt instant interest in his first, second and third.

It opens with a paragraph too good to paraphrase:

“When Pemberton returned to the North Carolina mountains after three months in Boston settling his father’s estate, among those waiting on the train platform was a young woman pregnant with Pemberton’s child. She was accompanied by her father, who carried beneath his shabby frock coat a bowie knife sharpened with great attentiveness earlier that morning so it would plunge as deep as possible into Pemberton’s heart.”

As that demonstrates, Mr. Rash throws a mean lightning bolt. He also carefully lays the groundwork for his larger story. A world of information is prefigured in those few sentences. We learn that Pemberton is a city-bred heir deigning to live amid country folk. We see that he has been unforgivably careless with the locals. (He cannot recall the pregnant girl’s name.) Immediately there is more news: Pemberton has just married the book’s title character, “an unexpected bonus from his time in Boston.”

Before his reader can wonder what kind of bonus Serena Pemberton is, Mr. Rash stages something quick and shocking: a fatal confrontation between the pregnant woman’s father and her callous seducer. Almost as startling as the outcome of the fight is the eerily calm way in which Mr. Rash describes it. And then, with the outraged father dead, Serena defines herself with a single gesture. She extracts the knife that Pemberton plunged into the man, hands it to his now-orphaned daughter, Rachel Harmon, and advises Rachel to sell it.

“That money will help when the child is born,” Serena says coolly. “It’s all you’ll ever get from my husband and me.”

With bone-chilling aplomb, linguistic grace and the piercing fatalism of an Appalachian ballad, Mr. Rash lets the Pembertons’ new union generate ripple after ripple of astonishment. Pemberton controls a vast lumber empire, and Serena quickly makes herself its regal overseer.



Ron Rash  
Mark Haskett

Soon she is touring the Pemberton fief astride the white Arabian stallion that was her wedding gift, and delivering pronouncements on how the workers ought to be treated. "Serena" takes place during the Depression. It greatly pleases Serena that labor is cheap and easily replaceable. And as for providing the men with such amenities as electricity, "they'll work harder if they live like Spartans," she says.

Mr. Rash creates an awestruck Greek chorus of Carolina highlanders to marvel at a tall, brisk businesswoman who seems to have stepped out of Ayn Rand's imagination. Among this novel's many wonders are Mr. Rash's fine ear for idiomatic, laconic talk and the startling contrast he creates between Serena and her new neighbors. The local lay preacher sees her as an omen. "It's in the Revelations," he insists. "Says the whore of Babylon will come forth in the last days wearing pants." When Serena makes herself even more frightening by acquiring a pet eagle to do her bidding, one local sage remarks, "I'd no more strut up and tangle with that eagle than I'd tangle with the one what can tame such a critter."

Serena has clear ambitions: to log the landscape bare, keep Pemberton land from being made part of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and move on to Brazil and its mahogany forests. Her inability to sleep well is not this book's only intimation of Lady Macbeth. In a novel punctuated by monstrous logging accidents, described with a minimalism that reflects the workers' terrible resignation, she schemes and thrives. But in her quiet, impoverished way Rachel Harmon is also thriving. More ominously for the Pemberton marriage, so is her illegitimate baby.

After a sequence in which Rachel, sick with fever, manages to rescue the little boy from the same illness by making an arduous trip to see a doctor named Harbin, the doctor comments: "You must love that child dear as life." Rachel's answer is one more reason "Serena" packs a plain-spoken wallop: "I tried not to. I just couldn't find a way to stop myself."

The child's survival is precarious. After all, this is a region where the Pembertons' cruelly indifferent doctor, to whom Mr. Rash gives the name Cheney, asks his employers whether each injured logger is worth saving. And the perils in this story are ratcheted ever higher as it becomes clear that the Pembertons will simply dispense with anyone who inconveniences them. To this end, and to heighten the novel's truly spooky underpinnings, Serena takes on a henchman named Galloway. An accident with an ax ("The blade's entry made a soft fleshy sound as Galloway and his left hand parted") somehow obliges both Galloway and his sightless, prophesying mother forever to do Serena's bidding.

"Serena" sustains its haunting power until it goes one little step too far. When it finally lets Serena give full voice to her ambitions, they do the book an injustice. "The world is ripe, and we'll pluck it like an apple from a tree," says the woman who has wielded such subtle power throughout most of the story. It is a backhanded credit to the author's portrait of Serena that no literal acts of greed and vengefulness do justice to the free-floating, otherworldly menace she has represented.

"Serena" is both drama and parable. The Pemberton-ravaged landscape comes to look like "that land over in France once them in charge let us quit fighting." And as the book's homespun philosophers try to name intangibles, like love, courage and air, they also grasp the universal, imperial darkness that the Pembertons' ruthless game plan embodies. "You can't see it no more than you can see air," Mr. Rash writes, "but when it's all around you sure enough know it."