

## The Solace of Open Spaces by Gretel Ehrlich

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In his famous canonical poem, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” William Wordsworth expressed his confidence in the healing powers of nature. But the scenery on the banks of the river Wye in 1798 appears to have been far more attractive than that of north central Wyoming where, during the six-month long winters, Gretel Ehrlich observes on the opening page, “The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space.” Yet as the title of her book indicates, she found “solace” in the wind-swept landscape near the Big Horn Mountains when she arrived in 1976 to shoot a film. After the death of her Welsh lover, Ehrlich returned to Wyoming to grieve and to rebuild her life. In the dozen essays that constitute this short book, Ehrlich reflects on the toughness it takes to live in the harsh solitude, some of which she experiences by going on drives with sheep herders. “Living with animals,” Ehrlich writes in reference not only to sheep and cows, but also to horses and dogs, “makes us redefine our ideas about intelligence” (64). More than most other writers in this series, Ehrlich balances her attention between the landscape and the people she meets, and she recounts her courtship with Press Stephens, who ran a small sheep ranch and to whom she was briefly married. Throughout the book we are aware of Ehrlich’s powers as the poet of this “unaccountably libidinous place.” For some readers, however, the most appealing moments may be those that appear in the form of aphorisms, the vulnerable (because they are so naked and open to attack), epigrammatic assertions that dominate the title essay; for example, “In all this open space, values crystallize quickly” (10). To the extent that this book amounts to a “gendered” account, it bears comparison (and notably, contrast) with Pete Fromm’s *Indian Creek Chronicles*.

### Author Information

Born in 1946 on a horse ranch near Santa Barbara, California, Gretel Ehrlich attended Bennington College and took courses at the UCLA Film School and at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She has been twice married and divorced. Her first two books were collections of poetry published by small presses, but the publication of *The Solace of Open Spaces* in 1985 brought her writing to the attention of a broad audience. Her nonfiction has been published in such anthologies as *Best American Essays*, *Best Spiritual Writing*, and *The Nature Reader*. Her novel, *Heart Mountain*, centered on the Japanese internment camp in Wyoming during World War II, appeared in 1987 and was praised for its “beautifully crafted prose.” In 1991 Ehrlich was struck by lightning while at her ranch in Wyoming and was severely injured. While undergoing treatment in California she worked on *A Match to the Heart* (1994), which deals with her struggle toward full recovery. Since then Ehrlich has traveled and written extensively, reflecting on her visit to China in *Questions of Heaven* (1997) and several trips to Greenland in *This Cold Heaven* (2002). Her children’s novel, *A Blizzard Year* (1999), has drawn high praise. A collection of short stories, *Drinking Dry Clouds*, connected with her novel *Heart Mountain*, appeared in 2005. Gretel Ehrlich is currently at work on a new novel. She divides her time between California and Wyoming.

## Discussion Questions

1. The West has evolved, some might say, into the kind of place Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* has implied it would: a place of solace, healing, and retirement. What do you consider to be the up and down sides of that state of affairs, assuming you agree with the premise? What contributions, if any, do you suppose have been made by this sort of book, or by books like Ivan Doig's memoir, *This House of Sky* (1978), or Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Direction* (1999)? Do you think the West, particularly the northern Rockies area, represents the last chance in the U.S. for people to deal wisely with the earth?
2. In the twenty years that have passed since the publication of Ehrlich's essays Wyoming has been opened to increasing development of various minerals, coal, and oil and gas. Does her lack of reference to that phenomenon compromise the value of this book? How do we balance this sort of well-written personal (perhaps "literary") response to place with the more fact-driven journalistic accounts that are driven by a clear premise or agenda?
3. Ehrlich's essays on Wyoming have been described as sensuous to the point of being sexual or erotic (note, for example, the last two or three pages). In fact, her own romantic relationships become part of the story in this book. Does this make the essays more appealing to you, or do you think she becomes too intimate, too personal, in her approach?
4. Connected with #3, does Ehrlich's approach seem to you to be distinctly "feminine," and if so, do you consider that to be problematic? One commentator has written, "Her desire to blur boundaries between self/body and the natural world is timely and of interest to critics." Do you think it is better to regard nature as an extension of self, or as "other"?
5. Ehrlich's connection with Wyoming may be more personal, even psychological, than environmental. She does not promote herself as a naturalist or ecologist. So why would we include this book in our examination of this theme? Does she advance any ethical view here, directly or indirectly? What are her most important and valid thoughts about open space?
6. Examine a few of the aphoristic one-liners in this book, like "The solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet" (6) or "Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are" (84). The title essay runs rife with them. Are some of these quotable assertions, for a variety of reasons, becoming less valid now than they once were?