



A difficult pioneer story

‘Answer Creek’ offers profoundly resonant questions

Last summer, my sister and I made a mad-dash road trip down the West Coast to San Francisco, then across the country on Interstate 80 to New York. As we zoomed across the Sierra Nevada and over Donner Summit, I tried not to think about the horrifying story I’d first learned about in elementary school: the ill-equipped wagon train that became stranded in the winter of 1846-1847.

The Donner Party tragedy is not something I’d typically choose to spend time mulling over. Yet, a new work of historical fiction by Ashley E. Sweeney, of La Conner, Washington, had me turning page after compelling page, becoming ever-more enmeshed in the tale of poor choices and bad luck that led to the deaths of about 40 members of the group.

Although most of the characters in “Answer Creek” were recreated from the historical record, Sweeney builds this story around the fictional character of Ada Weeks.

Ada was 11 years old when her parents died in a fire, and orphaned again at 19 when her adoptive parents drowned during the long journey from Indiana to California.

Taken in by an Irish Catholic couple, the Breens, Ada helps look after their seven children as they continue along the Oregon-California Trail.

The author unflinchingly details the hardships of this drawn-out journey as supplies diminish and fatigue grows. The pioneers respond in different ways. There are glimmers of compassion but, as the miles wear on, there are increasing flare-ups of dissension. Some bicker with their colleagues. Some beat their animals or their

wives. Some curl up and die.

Then, the men of the party take the fateful vote to follow an unproven “shortcut.” Instead of hastening their progress, the route sets them back by precious weeks. Just as they begin to tackle the eastern flanks of the Sierra Nevada, winter arrives with a fury.

The party becomes snowbound, and, as history shows, desperation sets in.

Throughout this journey, and within her straitened circumstances, Ada tries to envision a future for herself that keeps her putting one foot in front of the other.

That’s at first. Later she just hopes to cling to her humanity.

Ada “feels as if her heart is like the sky, pin-dotted with grief. She searches the heavens for a sign, a comet or a falling star ... She stands there through the night, waiting. Her body shakes. She watches the night sky until every last star closes up shop and goes home. There is no sign.”

But there is a future anyway, and Ada needs to move toward it with her head held high.

While “Answer Creek” probes pioneer history, it also led this reader to make connections with our current situation of challenges and deprivations, voting access and to consider how our actions might be regarded by future generations.

This novel offers profoundly resonant questions.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com.

This Week’s Book

‘Answer Creek’ by Ashley E. Sweeney

She Writes Press — 326 pp — \$16.95

“Ada Weeks is an unforgettable character, authentic and true. . . .”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author of

One More River to Cross

ANSWER CREEK

A NOVEL

ASHLEY E. SWEENEY

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING *ELIZA WAITE*