

About

VARIATION WEST

[Ardyth Kennelly's own description of the book—with a couple of spoilers deleted]

Set in Utah, Salt Lake City and other parts of the west, and extending over four generations, each with a hand in shaping whole areas of western life (from 1857 to about 1970), **VARIATION WEST** might be seen as a regional or “historical” or “pioneer” novel rather than just a novel, but I hope not. A lot went into it besides the attempt to illuminate yesterday's reality -- relations with ancestors and descendants, the formality of one age set off against the insouciance of another, the unease of cultural transplantation, and selected facts (from real life, personalities and events) that due to the needs of fiction had to be modified.

In Salt Lake City and elsewhere some people after they died came back as spirits. Not very scary, ghosts around there being but acceptable statements of the continuity of time and life. Actually, everything to most of the women there was an acceptable statement: that under her topsoil of Christianity and political aspirations, Utah's polytheistic roots went (and still go) deep, that the strain of hysteria so common in puritan stock was not dying out, that frenzy and muddle in menfolks was as natural as the gristle in their necks.

A big book like this would have been an acceptable statement, a big cast, many a youth and maiden appointed for parts. Of the latter, these became principal characters: an eclectic physician of women's ailments, a “famous” hairdresser from Australia, an actress-reporter and her beautiful daughter, related to fatal and dreadful happenings. But even the mere ceremonial walkers on and off in shawls and shifts were valiant, resolute in accepting what comes, little interested in political forms and as unaware of the psyche as we wish we could be, of the homeless and crazy on our streets.

The men desperately want to stand out. That's the difference between them and the women. Above their passion is an aura of absurdity, a haunting of regret and shame. By stagelight these characters strut their fifteen minutes: a charlatan doctor, a religieus, a rumbling millionaire, Brigham Young (come upon late, lying in state in the Tabernacle), a lover, husbands, warriors and lowly soldiers.

When the west's Hermetic books get written, the Mountain Meadows Massacre -- Mormons and Indians banding together to attack and kill a company of about 140 emigrants from Arkansas and Missouri, en route to California -- that inordinance will have a prominent place. For a long time their bones lay strewn about the landscape but then were gathered up and thrown into the defense pit they themselves had hastily dug. Twenty years later, John Doyle Lee, the supposed ring leader of that sharp assault of death, was stood up on the site and shot at sunrise. "Center my heart, boys," he said to the sharpshooters, "don't mangle my body." He wanted to look nice for the Resurrection.

Two of John Doyle Lee's 25 daughters by his 13 wives are the center and life of **VARIATION WEST**. None of his 25 sons have lines. Dry-eyed, they cart their father's corpse home to Panguitch.

An attempt has been made here to avoid what Nabokov called "impassioned and boring ethnopsychics," and I went easy on "monologue interieur" passages too, though Jeppe Casement, in Part 3, the New York composer of operas and "art" songs who during the Vietnam war came to Utah to give an opera-workshop, had to talk to himself for want of friends. And may I say? my massacre runs through the book not in the French "human document" style but like a frieze painted on the farther side of beyond, or Hindemith in the background turned down low.

Finally, that

"It's a very good world to live in,
To lend or to spend or to give in,
But to beg -- or to borrow --
Or to get a man's own
It's the [fuckinest] world
That ever was known!"

is likely true. But real westerners have never let that stop them. All they do when it starts to coming down is whatever is necessary.