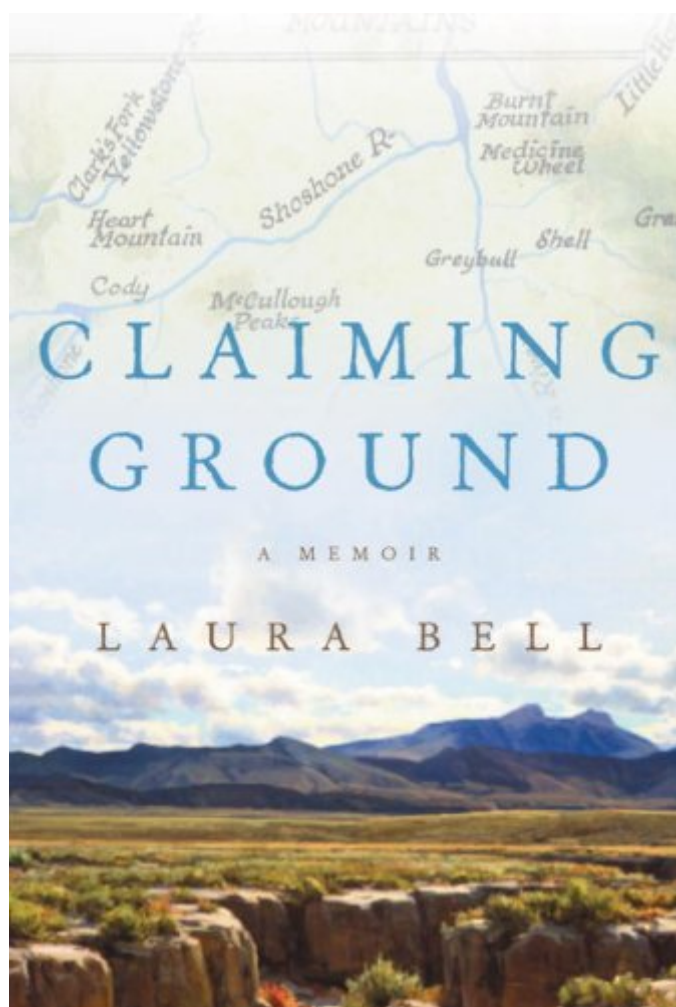


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Claiming Ground



Synopsis

In 1977, Laura Bell, at loose ends after graduating from college, leaves her family home in Kentucky for a wild and unexpected adventure: herding sheep in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin. Inexorably drawn to this life of solitude and physical toil, a young woman in a man's world, she is perhaps the strangest member of this beguiling community of drunks and eccentrics. So begins her unabating search for a place to belong and for the raw materials with which to create a home and family of her own. Yet only through time and distance does she acquire the wisdom that allows her to see the love she lived through and sometimes left behind. By turns cattle rancher, forest ranger, outfitter, masseuse, wife and mother, Bell vividly recounts her struggle to find solid earth in which to put down roots. Brimming with careful insight and written in a spare, radiant prose, her story is a heart-wrenching ode to the rough, enormous beauty of the Western landscape and the peculiar sweetness of hard labor, to finding oneself even in isolation, to a life formed by nature, and to the redemption of love, whether given or received. Quietly profound and moving, astonishing in its honesty, in its deep familiarity with country rarely seen so clearly, and in beauties all its own, *Claiming Ground* is a truly singular memoir. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

It takes a tough woman to live the life of a rancher/sheepherder. Laura Bell's memoir offers plenty of descriptions of such a brutally lonely and harsh life. The memoir starts out excitingly enough. Fresh out of college in 1977, she heads West with her sister for the summer, falls for one of the guys on an archeological team, and decides to move there to herd sheep. It's an interesting adventure. The prose is honest. There are pages of cold blowing winds, drunken men stumbling into camp, of bleating sheep and neighing horses and blue heelers who don't want to listen. Livestock and landscape dominate this memoir, as well as the sadness over the years of losing friends and family members. But somehow things started to unravel on page 95. The years go from 1979 to 1990. It's obvious the years of her marriage she mostly avoids, mentioning only that her husband had turned into an alcoholic and that is why the marriage faltered. This memoir left me with more questions than answers. Subsequent chapters intermittently fill in the gaps with small scenes with the two daughters from her husband's first marriage, one who later meets a tragic and sad end. The best parts of this memoir are the sad lines describing the deaths of loved ones, of ranch friends she meets in the late 1970s who up and die without her knowing it, to men who contract wound infections and pass away in the hospital, of other headstrong and independent women and of course the more intimate deaths of family members. It's as if Bell's entire life has been so sad (but it hasn't!) Perhaps Bell should have left out the years she spent in Utah working as a masseuse. She wanted to write so much about her life out West that this story turned from a memoir to a sketchy autobiography.

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