



The stranger: A novel of the Big Sur

Lillian Bos Ross

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In the first novel of Ross' trilogy, a 19th-century pioneer couple struggles to carve out a life on the remote central California coast. Living in an isolated stretch of the Big Sur coastline in the late 1800s, Zande Allan sends for a wife to help him produce the sons he needs to run his growing cattle ranch. But from the moment Hannah Martin steps off the train in Monterey, he's disappointed: Hannah's older than her advertised 25 years, plain and soft; she's a sheltered girl from the Midwest with no idea how to get by on a rustic ranch as a "proper" wife. While Zande fights to increase his landholdings and stock in the inhospitable beautiful Big Sur area he loves, Hannah proves to be more than a match for his hardscrabble life. Now, if only Zande can overcome his misplaced pride that keeps them from becoming true partners. First published in 1942, Ross' novel is more than a pioneer romance. Ross lived on her homestead in the Big Sur area from 1923 until her death in 1959, and her novel has the realism of a documentary. As a character, Zande isn't sugarcoated; relentlessly honest, he's true to the mores of the time and his surroundings. He's chauvinist, racist, brutal and ruthless. But, determined and tough, he's also faithful to his own strict moral code. Like the feral grizzly bear he battles in the book, Zande is fascinating to watch. Ross' writing isn't the typical language of romance novels, either: Her prose is simple and spare. Zande's rough dialect, for instance, is essential to his complex character. Hannah is equally compelling; resourceful, proud and as steadfast as Zande, she likewise struggles with the everyday challenges of living in a land with no roads, no schools and no close neighbors, amid constant threats to their survival. A mesmerizing character study of a complicated man, a convincing portrait of an arranged marriage and a seamlessly authentic glimpse into the hard life of the coast's pioneer ranchers.

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