



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#41

ROLVAAG'S GIANTS IN THE EARTH

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When Ole Rolvaag's novel "Giants in the Earth" was published in English in 1927, it became an overnight success. Never had a more fascinating and complete novel been written about immigration. It was selected by the Book of the Month Club that year and was later followed by two more novels which completed the grand epic about pioneers and new beginnings, homesickness and Americanization, the attachment to a heritage—and the abandoning of it.

Per Hansa is a main figure in the book. He is the ideal pioneer. Uncomplicated and forward-looking, he builds his South Dakota kingdom with invincible optimism. Here is a glimpse of him in Rolvaag's own words:

"He began building the house that same evening. 'You ought to rest, Per Hansa', Beret pleaded. 'Please use a little common sense.' 'Rest—of course. That is just what I propose to do.' 'Come along, now, all hands of you; you can't imagine what fun this is going to be...just think of it — **a new house** on our own estate. I don't mean that you've got to work, you know, but come along and watch the royal mansion rise.' They all joined in, nevertheless—couldn't have kept their hands off. It gave them such keen enjoyment that they worked away until they could no longer see to place the strips of sod. Then Per Hansa called a halt — that was enough for one day."

Per Hansa's wife, **Beret**, represents the problematic side of empire building— the distress of those who could not take root in new soil. Beret's homesickness and attachment to the values of the old world are as much a part of the immigrant story as the success and fulfillment. She resists the assimilation process, feeling that she has to hold on to her old way of life because this is the only way she knows.

A third figure in Rolvaag's great trilogy is Peder, son of Beret and Per. He represents the second generation—the immigrants' daughters and sons—the generation which had to deal with the mixing of the many national groups and the conflicts between them. The way Rolvaag and other prominent Norwegian-Americans saw it, the second generation was deprived of the steadying and direction-giving influence of their roots. They had to become Americans and abandon the culture and way of life of their ancestors.

Rolvaag felt that it was necessary for the immigrants to safeguard their own traditions and national character. His novels display the **loss** and **rootlessness** which is common among first-generation Americans. But he also told about the grandeur of the immigrant saga, looking beyond the mere economic aspects of accomplishment.

Although Rolvaag wrote about his fellow Norwegian-Americans in his great pioneer trilogy, Americans of all ethnic groups could relate to his story. Originally written in Rolvaag's mother tongue, "Giants in the Earth" was immediately recognized in the Norwegian literary world and was soon established as one of its great works. Still, the novel belongs to American literature, growing right out of pioneer life and pioneer toil. "**Giants in the Earth**" could only have been written on this continent and at a certain point in history. The problems that Rolvaag presents and discusses in his work can be recognized by anyone who tries to find a foothold in a foreign culture, but the book is first and foremost about the immigrants of THIS nation. In this respect, "Giants in the Earth" belongs to the American people.