

Saturday, February 16, 2019

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FICTION

How The West Was Won?

Kevin McCarthy's Historical Fiction Pulls No Cowpunches

November 8, 2018 Michael Giltz

Westerns used to promise a simple tale of good versus evil. But that was a long, long time ago. Even way back when the best writers—like Elmore Leonard and Larry McMurtry—knew better. Today any author worth their salt knows if they're going to write about how the West was won, then they'll also be writing about how the West was lost.

Certainly Kevin McCarthy knows this well. He sets his new historical novel “Wolves Of Eden” just after the Civil War. The US military has pivoted from putting down secession to protecting settlers as they race out West for land or gold, and to hell with the Injuns in their way. Along for the ride are career soldiers and the poor bastards broken by the war or so used to violence they're unfit for civilian life. You'll find Irish and Germans and Italians and even a Jew or two, if you can imagine, not to mention Native Americans from various tribes.

McCarthy captures the sweep of the era, the malignant memory of the violent Civil War that has poisoned the men who fought in it and much more. But above all he juggles four men and two competing narratives with vivid style. In one, the Jewish Corporal Daniel Kohn finds himself burdened with caring for Captain Martin

Molloy, a drunken wreck of an Irishman haunted by his actions in the war. Kohn respects Molloy and can't bear to see the man committing suicide by bottle. Their superiors send them way out West to investigate the murder of a prominent citizen at Fort Kearney. Their job is to find someone—anyone—to blame for the death and bring them to heel.

At the same time, we read the diary of Michael O'Driscoll, held in the stockade for that very crime, though it's unclear if he committed it. Michael and his brother Tom (a once-handsome man disfigured in the war) were hoping to earn a few dollars, then quietly "resign" from the military and farm a plot of land. Things have not gone to plan.

McCarthy has "Deadwood"-style fun with the grim realities of life on the "frontier". Ethnic slurs fly about. It's a raw and vicious world as typified by the scout Molloy hires for the journey. "Jonathan" is a Pawnee who refuses to give his real name (they would butcher it anyway). He casually wonders if he should just kill these useless stragglers, but is happy to work alongside the white men if it means a chance to kill the Sioux, a people he hates with real passion.

It's a rich and compelling tale. McCarthy falters only in withholding two key bits of intelligence: how the citizen at the fort was actually killed and the dreadful act during the war that Molloy can't shake. Creating an unnecessary air of mystery does neither set piece any good. Far better is McCarthy's use of history. Here the real Battle of the Hundred-in-the-Hands of 1866 provides a good backdrop to the action, not to mention a great and terrible victory for Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians (Crazy Horse among them) who banded together to crush the white people once and for all. Or so they imagined. Michael O'Driscoll does begin to realize the soldiers really don't belong where they are. Even the grass seems to be whispering to him that they should go away go away go away. But that whispering is soon drowned out.

(W.W. Norton, November 6, 2018)

Tags: Kevin McCarthy, Westerns, Wolves Of Eden

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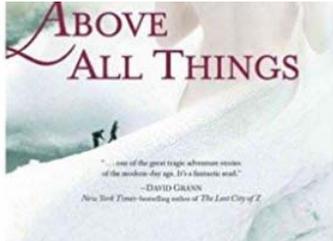


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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for many outlets, such as New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere

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