



A Bowl Full of Nails

Charles Degelman

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Sensitive ruminations on one's place in the community and the world will resonate with independent spirits.

May 15, 1969: It's Bloody Thursday at People's Park in Berkeley, California, and street theater activist Gus Bessemer returns from his confrontation with the "pigs" with a butt full of birdshot and the need to skip town for a construction job a thousand miles away. In Charles Degelman's *A Bowl Full of Nails*, Gus is served the titular breakfast by his live-in girlfriend the morning after he announces his solo travel plans. Foregoing this iron-rich snack, he hits the road for a transformative year with a mother lode of independent spirits in Montgomery, Colorado.

Like its large cast of diverse characters, the novel is a *mélange* of genres. The plot is tie-dyed with elements of suspense, mystery, and bildungsroman themes and is splashed with portraits of counterculture types and self-reliant mountain folk. The author skillfully paints these short but vivid character descriptions to help sort them out among the complicated, felony-laced plot lines. With a population of only seventy-two, Montgomery sure has a lot of crime, and Gus is determined to figure out who the baddies are.

Our hero is also on a quest to figure out life's meaning ("All was lost in the hurricane of my revolutionary fervor"), and his evolving inner monologues punctuate the action, helped along by folksy, phlegm-ridden advice from a philosophical one-lunged miner, dictionary consultations with his landlady, and reflections about his dead father.

Degelman's prose is not all heavy pondering about one's place in the universe. There are the comic antics of his mutts Wooly and Zoom, "pain-filled recidivists" who keep learning anew that porcupines possess projectile quills, and who help Gus interpret the meaning of his *I Ching* readings: "Wooly pushed his pie tin under the stove. Zoom licked his balls."

A Bowl Full of Nails is a distinctive novel that evokes a time and place with rich dialogue and detail. Degelman has conjured up a blend of patchouli, Bob Dylan lyrics, Indian print textiles, and hippie slogans and set them down in a windswept patch of the Colorado Rockies, making for a textured and evocative book.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (Spring 2015)

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