

★ *A Wounded Deer Leaps Highest*

Charlie J. Stephens

Torrey House Press (Apr 2, 2024)

Softcover \$16.95 (176pp)

978-1-948814-98-0

In prose drenched with awe, Charlie J. Stephens's tender novel *A Wounded Deer Leaps Highest* takes a child's perspective on the pains of being poor in rural Oregon.

For eight-year-old Smokey, poverty is part of the landscape, just like the hazardous mushroom canning factory and the migrant tent camp outside town. Smokey's mother, loving but elusive, copes by welcoming abusive boyfriends into their home, leaving Smokey straining to be noticed. Both mother and child are hungry for affection; neither is quite able to fill the other's need.

Smokey's loneliness is magnified by the fact that they are biracial and blooming into queerness. Strangers struggle to gender them. Bullies, including adults, notice their difference and punish it. For Smokey, masculinity is a funhouse mirror. They grapple with the perceived dissonance of both fearing men and wanting to become one. It's a low background hum that colors their life, as do the ghosts of sexual assault and intergenerational trauma.

Claustrophobic interiors (Smokey's "bedroom" is a closet) contrast with the lush wilderness that, like safety, is often just out of reach. Smokey takes comfort in the borderlands of these frontiers and finds refuge in nonhuman features—in a backyard fig tree, in a family of raccoons.

For all the cruelty Smokey witnesses, empathy, too, thumps through the lines. Characters are extended grace even as they make mistakes. Beauty is noticed and remarked upon. There is value in this painful landscape for those patient enough to see it: "Sit still for longer than you think you're capable and this old world will present itself to you."

Knowing that children like Smokey are cast as furniture in the house of adult desires, immobile and without needs, the novel *A Wounded Deer Leaps Highest* begs us to take them seriously.

LUKE SUTHERLAND (March / April 2024)

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