Clarion Review

Fantasy

Bertilak of the High Desert
R. L. Sterup
Laundrew Press
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the best-known and most beloved of the Arthurian Legends. To modernize it and move it from fourteenth-century England to twenty-first-century Nebraska is no small feat of hubris, but it is one that author R. L. Sterup has accomplished with style and humor.

Purists, of course, will find much to grouse about in this cowboy version of of the Round Table tale, which is set in Cathar County and entitled *Bertilak of the High Desert*. Some may groan at a story where rancher Art Suhr, his daughter Gwen, her stepsister Morgan, a strapping cowpoke named Gowan, and a two-ton white bull called Mordred stand in for some of the most famous characters in English literature. Gowan's fiery steed is a "Ford 350 King Ranch Super Duty" pick-up truck with "blood red racing stripes." Camelot itself is a windowless concrete casino, and the Green Knight of the original story is a gold-digging, gambling, killing machine of a gigolo named Mr. Green.

Sterup pays homage to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by occasionally interspersing lines from the original into his own tale (although he does not indicate from which version or edition he quotes). He has jumbled up the characters a bit, and includes two versions of the famous scene where the Green Knight interrupts a feast and offers to suffer a blow if whoever strikes him will then stand to receive a similar response. In one version, Gowan knocks off Mr. Green's head with a solid punch and in the other he chops it off with an axe. In both versions, Mr. Green simply reattaches said head and calmly walks away, giving Gowan a year to set his affairs in order before he must stand and take what's coming.

Sterup appears to have taken great joy in reinterpreting a classic—sometimes a little too much joy, as he gives himself over to alliterations by the bucket full. For example, he writes: "The bearded bully belabored long in bold tones," and, a few lines later, "Tastelessly taking tool

from tunic to tinkle torrents on the tattered boots of an unfortunate few."

The hunting, questing, and seduction scenes of the original are recreated here, and Sterup has made his temptresses every bit as lusty as the original author penned them seven centuries ago. It is enough to make a reader smile and laugh or squirm or groan, depending on whether they view the reimagining of an old classic as sophomoric or comedic. Those of the former bent should take a pass on *Bertilak of the High Desert* and spare themselves the pain, while those of the latter bent will find much enjoyment in this cowboy Camelot of Cathar County.

Mark McLaughlin